
Haruki Kuou
Illustration by
konomi
6
Liar, Liar
The Lying Transfer Student
Is Accused by Defenders of Justice


6
Liar, Liar
The Lying Transfer Student
Is Accused by Defenders of Justice



CONTENTS

Liargil

The Lying Transfer Student
Is Accused by Defenders of Justice



Prologue
The Beginning of the End

Chapter 1
SFIA Kicks Off

Chapter 2
The Spear of Justice

Chapter 3
An Unexpected Traitor

Chapter 4
The Rapture

Chapter 5
Proof of Resolve

Epilogue
The End of One War, and the Beginning of Another









Liar, Liar

The Lying Transfer Student Is Accused by Defenders of Justice

Haruki Kuou
Illustration by konomi

6

YEN ON
NEW YORK

Copyright



Haruki Kuou

Translation by Kevin Gifford Cover art by konomi

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Liar • Liar Vol. 6 USOTSUKI TENKOSEI WA SEIGI NO MIKATA NI UTAGAWARETEIMASU.
©Haruki Kuou 2020
First published in Japan in 2020 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo.
English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo through TUTTLE-MORI AGENCY, INC., Tokyo.

English translation © 2025 by Yen Press, LLC

Yen Press, LLC supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact the publisher. Thank you for your

support of the author’s rights.

Yen On
150 West 30th Street, 6th Floor
New York, NY 10001

Visit us at yenpress.com • facebook.com/yenpress • twitter.com/yenpress • yenpress.tumblr.com • instagram.com/yenpress

First Yen On Edition: July 2025
Edited by Yen On Editorial: Christopher Fox, Anna Powers Designed by Yen Press Design: Liz Parlett Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.
The Yen On name and logo are trademarks of Yen Press, LLC.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Names: Kuou, Haruki, author. | konomi, illustrator. | Gifford, Kevin, translator.
Title: Liar, liar / Haruki Kuou ; illustration by konomi; translation by Kevin Gifford.
Other titles: Raiā raiā. English Description: First Yen On edition. | New York : Yen On, 2023– Identifiers: LCCN 2023015022 | | ISBN 9781975370596 (v. 1 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975370619 (v. 2 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975370633 (v. 3 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975370657 (v. 4 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975370671 (v. 5 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975370695 (v. 6 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975370718 (v. 7 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975370732 (v. 8 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975370756 (v. 9 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975370770 (v. 10 ; trade paperback) Subjects: LCGFT: Light novels.
Classification: LCC PZ7.1.K849 Li 2023 | DDC [Fic]—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2023015022

ISBNs: 978-1-97537069-5 (paperback) 978-1-9753-7070-1 (ebook)

E3-20250605-JV-NF-ORI

Contents

Cover

Insert

Title Page

Copyright

Prologue: The Beginning of the End

Chapter 1: SFIA Kicks Off

Chapter 2: The Spear of Justice

Chapter 3: An Unexpected Traitor

Chapter 4: The Rapture

Chapter 5: Proof of Resolve

Epilogue: The End of One War and the Beginning of Another

Afterword

Yen Newsletter



Hiroto Shinohara (Seven Star)
A new transfer student to Eimei School who's become the Academy's (fake) Seven Star. He has no choice but to keep lying to stay on top.



Shirayuki Himeji (Five Star)
Hiroto's utterly flawless maid who uses all sorts of unfair cheats. Leads the Company, the group helping Hiroto maintain his rank.



Sarasa Saionji (Six Star)
The Empress, an all-powerful (fake) rich heiress. Her real name is Rina Akabane. She goes to Ohga School and helps Hiroto with his schemes.

Noa Akizuki (Six Star)
The Little Devil of Eimei. Clever and cute, but vicious during a Game. She has a thing for Hiroto.

Shinji Enomoto (Six Star)
President of Eimei School's student council. Nicknamed the "All-Seeing." He's been friends with Nanase since they were young.

Nanase Asamiya (Six Star)
One of Eimei's three Six Stars. A beautiful and athletic young woman. Constantly bickers with Shinji.

Suzuran Kazami (Three Star)
A reporter for Libra who attends Ohga School. Often does commentary for Games on the island.

Seiran Kugasaki (Five Star)
Nicknamed "the Phoenix." Worships the ground Sarasa walks on. Attends Otowa School.

Senri Kururugi (Five Star)
Student at Tsuyuri Girls' Institute. Nicknamed "Hell's Priestess." She's capable of defeating her foes in one shot.

Toya Kirigaya (Six Star)
Shinra High School's Demigod Dictator. Winning is all that matters to him. Notorious for his underhanded moves.

Kaoru Saeki (Six Star)
A student at Suisei School in the Second Ward. Leads the Hexagram, an Academy-approved organization.

Tsumugi Shiina
A middle school girl who caused chaos at the May Interschool Competition. Currently in the custody of Eimei School.

Shizuku Minami (Five Star)
A student at St. Rosalia Girls' Institute who marches to the beat of her own drum. Formerly the best in the Academy, she now prefers to lie low.

Illustration by konomi



The Academy

The Academy (official name: Shiki Island) is a man-made island built at a point several hundred miles south-southeast of Tokyo Bay.

It is home to a single large city divided into twenty districts, with a total population of approximately one million (around half of which are students).

Touting itself as an institution for "educating true elites," it has countless numbers of great achievers among its alumni, thanks in no small part to the "Games" it encourages students to wage against one another.

• Illustrations by konomi

Prologue

The Beginning of the End

♭

This was back when I was still weak.

Nearly two years ago, I had someone I was close enough with that I'd call them my best friend. We were always together, every day was so much fun, and I didn't think I could ever be happier.

One day, though, all those feelings were suddenly betrayed. We didn't gradually drift away from each other or fall out of contact without realizing it—my friend walked right up to my face and said, "Don't speak to me again," "I've never once enjoyed being with you," "I just put up with you because I was lonely without friends," "I have lots of close friends now, so I don't need you suffocating me any longer," and… Well, a lot more things, too, I think, but I guess some kind of self-defense mechanism kicked in and blocked me from remembering anything else. But anyway, to sum it all up, I was far too serious all the time, and my friend had grown sick of it. It was something that had been simmering for a long time, but now she'd reached her limit.

I didn't think anything about that was particularly unusual, though. Everyone has people they get along with and people they don't; change is an inevitable part of any personal relationship, really. But…even knowing that, I still couldn't stop the feelings welling up inside me. I mean, she'd been in all my memories since middle school. Everything, from the photo folder on my device to the recollections in my own mind, had included her. She'd always been smiling and laughing with me… But if that smile was a lie, then what *were* my memories? Had every moment I'd felt joy and happiness actually been painful for her?

Just thinking about it made my heart feel like it would explode. I spent a long time not able to recover, closing myself off to the world.

But then…

"Hello. We are _____. The defenders of justice."

They saved me.

A justice-driven group that never stood for lies, deception, or any other villainous deeds. They were heroes to me. Every time they defeated another evil, I felt emboldened. It felt like I was being recognized and saved by this dazzling light… And it wasn't long before I began to feel something close to worship, wondering what I could do to be more like them.

I definitely have them to thank for saving me. Without them, I still wouldn't have gotten better, even now. They help the weak and stand up against the powerful. They really *are* defenders of justice.

Or at least…that was the fantasy I clung to for so long.

Chapter 1

SFIA Kicks Off

#

"These truly are some, uh…quite artistic scores."

It was after school one day in early July, and Shirayuki Himeji was sitting next to me, her silver hair shaking as she wrote in red pen.

Hearing this reaction, the gorgeous, red-haired, fake rich heiress sitting opposite me lifted her head off the hand it had been resting on. Sarasa Saionji put her hands on the table and leaned forward to see what was going on.

"You already graded it? Let me see… Oh, wow."

"Hey, you don't have to look so obviously disgusted…"

"Who *wouldn't* be disgusted with scores like these? Twenty-two in English, nineteen in math, thirty-seven in Japanese… Combined with science and history, you scored one hundred and sixteen points across all five subjects. You'd fail for sure if these were *real* exams, wouldn't you?"

Her ruby-red eyes narrowed as she gazed at me. Saionji was ruthless with her verbal attacks. Normally, this would develop into a malicious back-and-forth, but given the test results before me—something I couldn't fake at all—I didn't have a leg to stand on.

"You're really that bad at studying, huh? With all the Games you've been winning, I thought surely you couldn't be *that* stupid."

"Ugh… Well, what do you want from me? Ever since I moved to the Academy, I've been caught up in so many things that I haven't had any *time* to study. I don't know any of this vocab, any of these formulas… Nothing."





"Oh? You're talking like you *did* study a lot back on the mainland."

"…I apologize."

"At least you're honest… But you need to get it together, okay? I'm not holding this study session for you because I want to."

Saionji shook her head with a sigh, red hair shimmering as she folded her arms atop her chest.

That's right—my sworn enemy (at least on the surface), the Empress, was here to help me study. She has an unassailable reputation as a Game expert, but she's also the kind of incomprehensible genius who achieves perfect grades in all her subjects at Ohga. As a tutor, no one could be better.

"But it's so hard…"

I found myself looking at the ceiling, leaning back in my chair. I was grateful that she was holding this study session for me, of course, but I couldn't say I was really happy about it. After all, I've always had kind of an aversion to the very act of studying.

"I understand how you feel… But unfortunately, there's no getting around this."

Himeji, standing next to me, shook her head slightly as she seemed to read my lazy inner thoughts. She looked into my face with clear eyes as she spoke, wearing her usual maid outfit.

"The final exams for first semester are coming up in two weeks… And any student who fails even one class will lose the right to participate in the big summer-break event coming up."

A few days ago…

"That wraps up my overview of the SFIA summer event."

Himeji and I had been called to the provost's office at Eimei School, where we'd been given the rundown by Natsumi Ichinose. She was wearing a business suit and sitting on a soft sofa with her legs elegantly crossed.

SFIA, pronounced "sphere" and short for Summer Festival in the Academy, is the name of the large-scale Game I'd heard mention of several times during the whole DearScript thing I got involved in not long ago. Apparently, it's an even bigger event than ASTRAL, the

Game played in the May Interschools, and it has a huge impact on both individual and school rankings.

The reason for its size and importance has a lot to do with the event's format.

"I think the thing to focus on here is how everybody is allowed to participate. Unlike ASTRAL, where participants were carefully selected from each ward, SFIA is open to all the quarter-million students of high school age in the Academy. The event is divided into five knockout stages, with the number of students gradually being whittled down as it goes on."

"Right, Master. Also, if I could humbly add to the guidance given by Ms. Evil Vixen over there, due to its nature as a summertime event, SFIA is also notorious as a stage where new students can make a name for themselves. The majority of the current high-ranking students made their public debut around this time of the year."

"Heh-heh! Still as prickly with me as ever, huh, Shirayuki? Well, let me counter your additions with some of my own. As I said, this summer event is divided into multiple stages, but on three different years it was cut short before the final because only one school was left in the Game. For all those years, Eimei School was the winner."

"…O-okay."

That fierce smile from the provost overwhelmed me as she spoke. Apparently, Eimei once had a Seven Star known as the Devil, who guided them through a golden era where they ranked first for three years in a row. I've heard stories about this person before, but it really did sound like they were in a whole other league from the rest of us.

Come to think of it, Yuzu said the summer event always felt so anticlimactic because it ended so fast, hence why she'd been using DearScript to try to get high-ranking students from other wards to level up.

I quietly folded my arms as the thought crossed my mind. My big sister, Yuzuha Shinohara—or Yuzu—was the one in charge of DearScript. It was a series of Games where she'd pretended to be the childhood friend I was looking for. Although the whole thing had

ended with a megaton bombshell, it hadn't led me any closer to finding my friend. And what's more…it seemed highly likely that Yuzu was the Demon of Eimei everyone was talking about.

"Heh-heh! Well, *she* was kind of on another dimension. Things might've been more interesting if you and the Empress had been around back then… But oh well. Anyway, that's the event we're about to see kick off."

The provost smiled a little as she unconcernedly recrossed her legs, despite the short skirt she was wearing. Then she looked at me again, her eyes narrowed behind her glasses.

"So…you know, Shinohara, I think this event is going to be a tough fight for you. After you beat the Empress in DearScript, you now have four different Unique Stars: red, blue, green, and purple. There's no record of anyone on the island being a Seven Star with four Uniques, and to make matters worse, a Unique Star is the reward for placing first in SFIA, too. That means you'll have five Uniques if you win… If I was the provost of another ward, I'd do whatever I could to stop you."

"…Yeah, I'm sure."

Just being a Seven Star, or a Unique Star holder, was enough to paint a target on your back. I had both, and I also wasted no opportunity to stir up people whenever I could, so I was the one guy everyone was after right now. There was no reason whatsoever not to come after me.

"So that's why we're prepared to support you as best we can… But there's just one problem. A big one, in fact… Basically, Shinohara, SFIA is run by the Event Management Committee, which takes its orders directly from the Academy's Board of Regents. It'll be kicking off right after the start of summer break."

"Okay… And that's a problem?"

"Of course it is. That's why I'm bringing it up. If it's right at the start of summer break, that means it's after your first-semester finals, right? And on the Academy, the first week of summer break's devoted to remedial classes if you blow it in the finals… I'll give it to you straight, Shinohara. If you fail even one exam, you won't be able to participate in the summer event. Around here, we call that

‘losing in Stage Zero.’ And not to put too fine a point on it, but looking at your academic abilities, you’ll probably…no, you *will* fail something. Your grades in the Academy entry exam were pathetic enough as it was, and these tests are even harder.”

“What…?!”

The principal’s words, interwoven with a sigh here and there, made me sit up in my chair… So I *have* to pass all my exams to take part in this event? Is that kind of nonsense even *allowed* in real life?!

“W-wait a minute, Provost. So am I screwed beyond repair, or what? Can’t you use some of your provost powers or something…?”

“Heh-heh! Rather bold of you, Shinohara, wasting no time at all lobbying for a backroom deal. Yuzuha herself said you’ve always had a conniving mind, and I see she’s right… Of course, it’s not impossible. I futzed around with the numbers in your entry exam, too, remember.”

“So then…?!”

“But it’s different this time. As you know, on the Academy, all tests are administered and scored online through your device. For these finals, your pass-fail status—in other words, your eligibility for the summer event—is automatically sent to the Event Management Committee. In short, you can alter your scores all you want, but there’s no way to hide it if you fail. For this, at least, you’re gonna have to rely on your own brainpower to survive.”

“…”

This unexpected trial left me as dumbfounded as I was dejected. If the constantly self-aggrandizing fake Seven Star fails a class and can’t join a Game as big as this one, it’d be nothing short of a disgrace. Worst-case scenario, it could arouse suspicion and eventually unravel my lies.

But then…

“…Don’t worry, Master,” Himeji said kindly from beside me, standing with her hands held in front of her as gracefully as ever. Her silvery hair swung in the air. “Everything will be fine. By my name as your dedicated maid, I will not allow you to commit an error such as failing a class.”

“I-I’m so glad I can count on you! So what kind of secret plan do

you have in mind? Like, some way I can cheat without getting caught?"

"Yes…is the answer I wish I could give you, but Ms. Evil Vixen over there has implemented an extremely stringent anti-cheating system for Eimei. The Company knows all its facets, yet even with that knowledge, it'd be almost impossible for us to rewrite it without being discovered… So instead, we'll go for a straight-down-the-middle approach. From today until the end of your exams, I will be your maid and tutor, doing whatever I can to teach you what you need to know."

Her smile was soft, selfless, and without hesitation. Faced with it, I had no other choice but to stop resisting and slowly nod.

So here I was, spending my precious after-school time hitting the books.

SFIA, the big summer event, was coming up in two weeks, and I needed to score high enough in my exams to qualify for it. For someone like me who sucks at studying, that was a pretty tricky hurdle to make it over—but it's not like I needed to ace everything. I just needed to not fail. I had time and two supersmart people tutoring me. It wasn't too high of a wall to climb, what with all the help I was getting.

Saionji was here partly due to coincidence and partly out of necessity. We'd been bitching to each other about all sorts of stuff over the phone last night when the topic of the summer event came up. I was joking around about my exams, and she flew over here, practically sweating. "If you fail anything," she said, "then I'll look like a complete idiot after you beat me!"

I mean, not that that really matters to me…

Himeji was offering kind, methodical instruction, and Saionji's guidance was pretty easy to follow as well, even with all the whining in between. I took a glance at them both… It's been like this all the time lately. I needed to concentrate, but the moment I let my guard down, I could hear my sister speaking to me in DearScript again.

"Hiroto, that first love from childhood you've been looking for?

You've been reunited with her for a while now, you know."

It was a shocking bombshell from my sister, who had always loved picking on me. The revelation completely froze me up back then… But the meaning behind her words made sense. I'd met "her" after my sister had already moved to the Academy, but Yuzu would come back home during the longer school breaks a lot, so it wasn't too strange if she saw the two of us together at some point. That, and the fact that Yuzu is now part of the Academy administration, enjoying high-level access privileges to all the data in its servers. It couldn't be that hard for her to go back through her memories to figure out who my childhood friend was.

If Yuzu says I've been with her all along, then naturally, it's got to be someone I met on this island. Though, of course, just "meeting" someone doesn't really do a lot to whittle down the list of candidates.

The Second Quest of the Unique Star competition, the story I heard on the Ferris wheel about life back on the mainland… Maybe it's just a coincidence, but Himeji's and Saionji's stories both seemed kinda linked to things from my own memory.

That was the thing. From what they'd told me about their past, Saionji had studied under virtual house arrest since she was little, and Himeji was a shy girl who'd almost never gone outside. I, on the other hand, had known a girl just like that, whom I'd taken out and played with and stuff. Factoring in the timing of when they'd come to the Academy, it all linked up pretty well in both cases.

So is one of them my childhood friend? The first love I've been looking for all this time…?

Once I started thinking about it, it was impossible to use my head for much of anything else. Just looking at Himeji's profile made my heart pound. Saionji's sullen expression looked even cuter to me than usual. The way Himeji brushed her silver hair over her ears, the way Saionji's ruby eyes stared at me from close up as she leaned forward, leaving herself undefended…

"…Master, are you listening?"

"You better be taking this in, Shinohara."

…I-I'm listening! I am, really; it's just…!

What can I say, really? These stray thoughts attacked me at every moment the rest of the day, and it goes without saying that I made next to no progress in my studying.

#

Two weeks later, I'd somehow managed to pass my final exams—the biggest pressing concern—thanks to the help of Himeji and Saionji… Though, by "pass," I mean that my final scores had all hovered around fifty points. By the standards of the Academy, anything below forty is considered a failing grade, so I'd just barely scraped by.

Regardless, with the first semester now firmly behind me, the Eimei School—or really, all the schools on the Academy—were going on a long break beginning tomorrow.

"Okay! Now that the exams are over, why don't we go over next week's event?"

Shirayuki Himeji, in her familiar maid uniform, set down a cup of tea in front of me. She placed another cup next to it, gave a murmured "Excuse me," then sat down by my side. After taking a sip of the steaming tea, she turned toward me.

"SFIA is the largest summer event on the island, boasting some two hundred fifty thousand participants—in other words, every high school student in the twenty wards of the Academy. All students are allowed to participate provided they didn't fail any classes."

"Yeah, thanks for helping me dodge that…"

"No need to thank me. I was merely doing my duty, Master. Rina did most of the work, as you yourself did, putting in all that effort… But regardless."

Himeji gave me a breezy smile as she refocused on the topic at hand.

"As SFIA is a large-scale Game with a quarter-million participants, not everything is going to be decided in a single match. The Game is divided into five stages, with a hundred thousand people passing Stage One, ten thousand passing Stage Two, a hundred people

passing Stage Three, and so forth. The competition plays out between individual students, but the final battle is usually a team-based contest, so cooperation with your fellow students is essential."

"All right. So you're competing mainly for yourself, but it's still basically a team competition in the end. And whoever wins gets a Unique Star?"

"That's right, Master. Should you win, the orange Unique Star on offer at SFIA would be your fifth. At this rate, you becoming an *actual* Seven Star is no longer a fairy tale."

"Yeah… Which is why I'm sure people are gonna be more desperate than ever to stop me."

I lifted my right hand to my mouth, organizing my thoughts.

"By the way, what's the flip side of this? Like, what would happen if I lost? If it costs you a star, I'd assume a lot of students would refuse to participate."

"A very keen observation, Master. As you surmised, serious competition involving stars changing hands does not begin until Stage Four. The first three stages are a sort of warm-up, where you won't lose a star even if you get out. If you're good enough to appear in the inter-ward events, it's a given that you'll survive these. Losing won't cost any stars, but dropping out early will damage your reputation, so you will need to be careful about that."

"…Yeah, that makes sense."

I shrugged and agreed with Himeji's dispassionate advice. She was right. If I'm calling myself a Seven Star (whether it's true or not), trying to skirt competition was never going to be allowed.

"But it ain't gonna be that easy."

A listless voice that sounded like its owner had just woken up came from the device on the table. On the video chat was Kagaya from the Company. She was probably lying on the floor in some corner of her place, one knee propped up, with piles of crap surrounding her on all sides.

Kagaya looked at the files on another tablet in her hand as she continued.

"If it's the same as other years, they'll announce the rules for each stage just before each one begins—usually the day before.

Normally, that wouldn't be a problem, but in the case of Hiro here, you can't afford to lose, right? We all got a lot of prep work to do in not a whole lot of time, so we probably wanna get the advantage in each stage."

"What sort of advantage?"

"Well, Master, SFIA has what is called a high-ranking bonus. If you perform exceptionally well in a stage, you'll be awarded some sort of advantage in the next one. Your strategy, then, will mainly revolve around getting every high-ranking bonus you can…which for us, of course, means cheating our way to each one."

"…Ah."

I nodded back at Himeji as she smiled a bit. In other words, our plan for SFIA, this tournament where we won't even know the rules until the day before, was to tap into the Company's powers and cheat like mad to gain every edge available to us.

"But," Himeji said, her hair slightly shaking in the air, "since this Game involves most high schoolers on the island, we have to deal with a great number of uncertainties. The usual top players will all be there, along with some dark horses that might be hoping to use this event to make a name for themselves. That's why I think it's also time for the Company to improve its manpower."

"Improve our manpower? …Oh, you mean Shiina?" I murmured, nodding in agreement.

That's right. The provost herself had raised the idea of bringing Shiina into the Company. Tsumugi Shiina was a purehearted, reclusive genius who lived in her own fantasy world, and while she'd made a total mess of ASTRAL back in the May Interschools, her talent was beyond question.

"In terms of skills, I think she could contribute pretty much immediately," Himeji said. "We'll need to address her shyness at least a *little* bit, but even with that quirk of hers, she's more than qualified for the job. However, the one hitch is that we will need to inform Ms. Shiina of the truth behind at least some of your lies, Master."

"Yeah, that's the thing…," I said, scratching my cheek with a frown.

Of course, it only made sense to tell her. The Company is a team of people assisting me, propping me up as a Seven Star, even though I have no right at all to the title. Sharing my lies was a prerequisite to hiring her. Himeji and the provost had been with me since the beginning, and thanks to a series of coincidences, Saionji was now a coconspirator. But revealing my lies to someone else voluntarily? It was the first time I'd been confronted with that necessity since coming to this island—a very dangerous bridge to cross.

"I mean, we don't need to divulge everything, though, do we? I think it'd work if we phrased it along the lines of, like, me having this secret organization working behind the scenes to ensure my reign as a Seven Star continues. That'd hide the lie well enough, and I'm sure Shiina would accept it at face value."

"Perhaps… But that does not particularly hide the fact that it's a group meant to help you cheat, does it?"

"Well, no. But I really don't think she'll be morally opposed to that. She was cheating all up and down ASTRAL earlier. I think she finds it kind of cool to play the bad guy, even."

"Hmm… You may be right. That does seem like a possibility, thinking back on it."

Himeji nodded, a fingertip placed gently against her lips. We knew from past experience that Tsumugi Shiina was the sort of girl who got lost in her own imagination. The existence of the Company—a real-life secret society—was bound to pique her interest. Plus, it sounded like she wasn't much interested in being a full-time high school student anyway, so…

"…Yeah. Sounds like the benefits far outweigh the drawbacks. We'll face a lot more competition than usual this time, so we should probably have her join sooner rather than later."

"I agree," said Himeji. "Although, I'd be lying if I said I didn't have my personal concerns about it…"

"Like what?"

That sounded a little worrying, but the next moment, Himeji's expression was as cool as always, and she shook her head.

"No, never mind that, Master. I will contact Ms. Evil Vixen at

once.”

Then, about an hour later…

“Huh, what?! Really?! Are you serious?! Wowww!!”

Shiina, who’d come to my place after the provost reached out to her, was absolutely overjoyed by the news. Her mismatched jet-black and crimson eyes sparkled as she hugged me with one hand and clutched her Cerberus plushie in the other. Seeing Shiina looking up at me, her gaze glittering, Himeji sighed and let out a quiet, “I knew it…”

“Heh-heh! Wow, Hiroto! Thanks a whole lot! I love you!!”

“Why are you thanking me? You really like the Company that much?”

“Well, yeah! Having a secret society is cool, and cheating your way to victory seems like a lot of fun, and I’m blown away by all of it, but like, if I join the Company, that means I can play in Games with you, right? And I won’t have to go to school or become a student? That’s *soooo* great! …Is that why you invited me, though?”

“No, um, that’s just a coincidence…”

“Hee-hee!”

Shiina was completely oblivious to my excuses as she rubbed her head against me, and I gave up, flashing her a wry smile. Though, I admit, that idea *had* crossed my mind. Something illegal like this was the only way for a shut-in like Shiina to participate in a Game.

“Well, as jealous as it might make Shirayuki here, I guess this marks the new structure of the Company!”

Thus, with the start of SFIA breathing down our necks, we had a new member in our group.

#

“Ladieeeees and geeeeentlemen! At long last, it’s the day you’ve all been waiting for! Monday, July twenty-fifth, the opening day for the Summer Festival on the Academy! Are you all ready to rock, people? Are you all fired up for me?! Because from now until the end of the event, you’ll be so excited, so entertained, you won’t have a single

moment to rest! And I'll be along with you for the whole ride—Suzuran Kazami from Libra, providing commentary from start to finish!"

"""*Wooooooooooooooooooooooooo!!*"""

"Thanks a lot! I appreciate your support! Now, let's get this opening ceremony underway, shall we? First, I'll go over the rules for the event!"

"""*Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhh!!!!*"""

That morning, Himeji and I were having a slightly early breakfast and watching the opening ceremony streaming live on IslandTube from the First Ward's event hall. The girl jumping around onstage was Suzuran Kazami, a second-year student from Ohga who we've come to know a little bit over time. She has a boyish look, with hair sticking out of her baseball cap and an armband reading *Ace Reporter* around one arm. Between her hosting and refereeing duties, she gets a lot of screen time around here, making her more popular than a lot of actual celebrities on the island.

"It's finally starting…," I muttered to myself, licking my lips at the breakfast Himeji had made. It was the classic Japanese setup, with rice, miso soup, and grilled salmon—maybe not the sort of thing someone might typically have in a Western-style mansion like this, but still delicious.

Himeji nodded back, her hair swaying gently as she watched the same screen. "Yes. SFIA formally kicks off with this ceremony, then Stage One begins in about two hours. The rules are as we discussed last night."

She slid a finger right across her device. The projected screen showing the opening ceremony was shunted to the side, and in its place appeared a slideshow created by Himeji outlining the rules of Stage One.

SFIA Stage 1: Random Chase

Each player is given the IDs of ten devices, which serve as their

targets.

These IDs are assigned at random; however, none of them belong to students from the player's own school. The distance between the player and their targets is accessible in real time via their device.

"Capture" a target by taking a photo of them using your device's camera. Players who successfully capture at least one target within the time limit are allowed to advance to Stage 2. For the sake of privacy, photos taken as part of the capturing process will not be saved.

As mentioned above, Random Chase has a time limit. The event runs from nine AM to five PM on July 25, and capturing any target within this time frame will count as beating the Game. Players who catch multiple different targets will be awarded a high-ranking bonus in Stage 2 of the event, depending on the number caught (up to five targets). There is no penalty for being captured by another player.

Only one Ability may be installed on devices for this stage.

That was the long and short of it. In terms of format, it was pretty much a basic treasure-hunt type Game. You find a player carrying a target device, take their picture, and then you're done. Earning a high-ranking bonus looks pretty exhausting, but getting past Stage One itself doesn't seem too tricky. Between the large number of participants and the amount of movement that would be going on all across the island, the whole thing really did have much more of a festival atmosphere than the May Interschools.

"As stated in the rules," Himeji said, her clear blue eyes focused upon me, "Random Chase runs on a time limit, not a numerical quota. The expected win rate for this stage is forty percent—in other words, they're anticipating about one hundred thousand people

completing this Game. Given these rules, there aren't many ways to keep other players from capturing you, nor is there any real need to, so external interference is not a major worry. I believe a lot of students will be able to beat this stage without any sort of elaborate preparation. For these reasons, this stage likely functions more as a way to gauge how serious participants are about winning SFIA."

"Probably," I agreed. "You should be able to clear it if you give it any sort of a decent try, so I guess this is meant to filter out the casuals just playing for fun… But how's the high-ranking bonus going to work, then?"

"About that. An element of luck is involved when selecting an Ability…yes? However, that is not the case for you, Master. As you did in Ms. Shiina's debut match, you can simply overwhelm them."

Himeji had a bemused smile. True, at first glance, the Game seemed to involve a lot of troublesome details—but with the hack the Company was providing us, there was nothing tricky about it at all. All we would have to do, really, is work out the target IDs of the people we're chasing, find out where they're going, and get there before them. Naturally, everyone will be constantly moving around, so we won't be able to pinpoint people's destinations down to the millimeter, but if we could trace the *targets* of our targets, and then all *their* targets as well, we could use all that data to triangulate locations with pretty good accuracy.

"By the way, are we gonna have Shiina providing support all by herself today?"

"No, I think that'd be throwing her too far into the deep end. Besides, Ms. Shiina lives next door to the provost's office, and taking the required equipment in there is problematic for a few reasons. Today, she'll be working with Ms. Kagaya from here."

"Uh… Is that okay? I mean, it would be one thing if it was you, but Shiina hasn't properly met Kagaya yet."

"There is that, yes. Which is why, if it leads to problems, I'll have them communicate via their devices instead. That shouldn't impede the support they give you, Master… But either way, we're all a part of the same group now, so I personally hope we can all get along."

"…Yeah."

There was nothing to worry about, then. After one final check of the rules, we decided to get ready and head out.

#

About four hours had passed since SFIA Stage One: Random Chase began, and Himeji and I were making excellent progress in the Game.

"Nice, that's another one! Uh, that was Miss Maid's target, so you'll be up next, Hiroto! Hmm… Um… Got it! This way! Hiroto, turn right and run real fast!"

"Let's see… Hiro, you're going to the Second Ward next. You'll have to hurry a bit if you wanna make it in time."

"…The Second Ward? But the nearest ID looks like it's headed for the Fifteenth…"

"Not that guy—this *one! He's gonna spin around and zip back toward you, so he's the one you want! Get a move on!"*

"Hang on. Um… Oh, okay. It's not the guy you're talking about, but someone else is gonna be going right through the Second Ward, Hiro. It's kind of a complicated path, but you'll definitely run into him."

"Ohh… Okay. Thanks a lot," I said to the voices of Shiina and Kagaya in my earpiece.

Seeing how things were going, it was clear that Shiina's support was working pretty well for me. Her calculation and analytical skills were amateurish, but she seemed to have a knack for figuring out which target was moving where. It was almost like she'd picked up a sense for it playing video games. Her genius-level intuition meant she wasn't much help if you wanted step-by-step instructions, but Kagaya's interpretation of her insights helped make sense of things.

"I gotta say, Hiro, this girl is amazing. She didn't pay any attention to me at first, which kinda bummed me out, but when I gave her the map, her eyes just lit up!"

"The map?"

"Yeah, a map that shows the current location of all the players in

the Academy. Normally, we'd narrow the analysis down to just the current target, or at least the target's targets, but Tsum-Tsum here can keep track of everything just by looking at it. I can't believe it! She works so hard, and she's so cute, too."

"What does her cuteness have to do with anything?"

I shook my head a bit as I listened to Kagaya heap praise on Shiina… Still, a map that could continually update the locations of 250,000 people in real time? It took a crazy amount of skill to both make and use something like that. And thanks to that, Himeji and I had each caught one target and fulfilled the minimum requirement for beating this stage not even half an hour after it began. By now, the time was almost half up, and I'd already captured three people.

With all this time to spare, I took the opportunity to take in the sights as I walked around. It really *did* feel like an Academy-wide festival. Various stalls lined the main streets of each ward, and portable *mikoshi* shrines were being paraded around in certain areas by large groups of people. Other players were perusing the stalls as they pursued their targets, and everywhere you went, there was this electrifying feel of being in the middle of something huge.

"Ah… Fwaaah…"

But just then, I heard a drowsy-sounding yawn in my earpiece. I couldn't tell who it was for a moment, but the slightly panicked *"… Fwah?"* that followed was definitely Shiina.

"Ah, um, Kagaya…? If you, uh, take a nap right now… I mean, the Game's still…"

"Huh? Oh, it's fine, Tsum-Tsum, it's fine! You're really cute, so you can handle things by yourself without me. I'm just gonna have a little nap, okay? …Zzz…zzz…"

"…?! H-Hiroto! Kagaya's fallen asleep! She fell asleep hugging me! Wh-what should I do?!"

"Mmm… So smooth… And it smells so good…"

"…!!"

Kagaya seemed to be rubbing cheeks with Shiina and happily talking in her sleep, while the ever-shy Shiina gave muffled yelps as she tried to escape. Listening to all this through my earpiece, I had the sense I was eavesdropping on something less than appropriate,

and Shiina anxiously trying to keep her voice down didn't help matters.

"Uh, hey, Himeji, do you have any way to wake up Kagaya?"

"Ah yes… Let me take care of it."

Himeji nodded after considering my request for a moment, then put an earpiece on, lifted her hair over it, and spoke in her usual cool tone of voice.

"Ms. Shiina, this is Master's personal maid, Shirayuki Himeji. May I speak to you for a moment?"

"…! Miss Maid…? Wh-what's up?"

"In anticipation of something like this, I brewed some black coffee and put it in the refrigerator. One whiff of it should wake up Ms. Kagaya, so could you try that for me, please?"

"The fridge? Um, okay, sure!"

I heard a slightly violent-sounding rustle along with Kagaya's sleepy mumblings and assumed Shiina had escaped from her clutches long enough to reach the kitchen. After a few more seconds, I heard footsteps indicating that Shiina was coming back. Then…

"Hngh?! This eye-opening bitterness… Is this Shirayuki's homemade coffee?!"

"Wow, she really did wake up! Thanks, Miss Maid!"

"You are welcome. Ms. Kagaya is generally unable to take care of herself, but she's extremely capable, so go ahead and use as much of that as you need."

"O-okay. Um… Also…"

Shiina stammered something I couldn't quite make out. Himeji and I exchanged puzzled looks, waiting for her to continue, when we heard a quiet sound—a cute little rumble from her stomach.

"…! N-no! It's not what you think!"

She must have heard it herself, because she began to vehemently deny it.

"That wasn't me just now! It was my familiar Lloyd's stomach growling! It's not like I was so nervous about meeting a new person that I couldn't eat anything all day! And it's definitely not like I was so relieved she was super kind that I suddenly got hungry!"

"…Hee-hee. I see."

Himeji gave a gentle smile, hearing Shiina's excuse—or, really, her confession.

"Now, Ms. Shiina," she said, her silver hair swaying, "I know this is quite an imposition to ask while you're hungry, but would you mind taking another look in the refrigerator? I actually have a rice omelet in there for you on the second shelf from the top. Put it in the microwave for two minutes, and it should be ready."

"H…huh?! What did you say, Miss?!"

"…? I said, the rice omelet is—ah, I see… I meant to say that I have a demonic offering for you, drenched in fresh blood, on the second shelf from the top."

"A bloody offering?!"

"…"

I was pretty sure the "fresh blood" was ketchup, but if that got the point across to Shiina, then great. It sounded like she immediately heated up the rice omelet, and even just through the earphone, I could clearly picture the sort of expression she was making.

"Wowww…! You made this, Miss?! For me?!"

"Yes, of course. You are our teammate, Ms. Shiina—or should I just call you Tsumugi? Regardless, this is the least I can do."

"Teammate…teammate, teammate… Eh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh-heh!"

Shiina's voice had already been brimming with emotion, but it suddenly sounded like she wasn't able to contain her joy. The reaction seemed to come from the bottom of her heart, and Himeji and I couldn't help but smile.

But then…

Hmm…?

Ka-chak. I spun around, reacting to a faint noise that sounded like a camera shutter. There I saw a couple I didn't know, a boy and a girl pointing their devices in my direction. They must've noticed my gaze, because they sheepishly grinned at me, then went on their way.

Did I get captured just now? Wait, but…

I gently put a finger to my right ear, getting a slight sense that something was wrong… In Stage One, there was no penalty for being captured by another player. There was still a chance someone could use an Ability to attack me, though, so I was sure I'd asked the Company to keep a lookout for that sort of thing.

In response to my concern, Kagaya—who was now fully awake—murmured apologetically.

"Sorry, Hiro. Looks like those two didn't come up on the Company's search… They're probably using an Ability to avoid that sort of thing."

"An Ability to avoid searches? There's no point to that, though, is there?"

"*Not really. You're not penalized if you get captured, so there's no particular need to defend yourself. They don't seem to be high-ranking players, either… What's going on?*" mumbled Kagaya ominously.

"…"

Even Shiina, busy stuffing herself with that rice omelet in the background, seemed slightly disturbed. But there was no harm done, and no point thinking about it now that they'd already left.

Still, though, it felt like *something* was starting to move around me.

#

Despite this oddity during the Game, Random Chase proved to be no great challenge, thanks to the help of Shiina and the rest of the Company. By the time the end of the Game rolled around at five in the afternoon, both Himeji and I had captured five players, unlocking the best possible high-ranking bonus for Stage Two. Apparently, not a lot of players managed to do that, so it got reported on Libra's official channel and everything. (Though Saionji and Kururugi hit five people, too, of course.)

With the first stage of SFIA now behind us, around 40 percent of the 250,000-plus participants had made it to the next stage—

98,520, to be exact. The number had gone from six digits to five, but there was no doubt all the top-ranked players breezed through it just like I had.

And what's more…

"—Sorry, but I won this round."

I was already making good progress in Stage Two, Rate Radar.

The rules for this Game had only been released last night, and at first glance, it looked like a really simple one. Players bought weapons with in-Game currency, then competed among themselves to see who had the strongest one. The twist here, though, was that the "force" of each weapon didn't strictly depend on what you purchased.

SFIA Stage 2: Rate Radar

Each player possesses one or more weapons. Battles in Rate Radar are fought simply by comparing the strength of each weapon.

Weapons can be one of six types: sword, spear, hammer, gun, bow, or magic, and one of four elements: earth, water, fire, or wind. When purchasing a weapon, players are free to choose any combination of type and element they want (e.g. fire/spear, wind/bow).

At the beginning of the Game, there is no difference in performance between any of the weapons. Their strength is fixed, and each weapon costs 10 points. These "points" are Rate Radar's in-Game currency. Each player initially receives 15 points; however, players who captured more than one player in Stage 1 will be awarded 5 bonus points for each additional player captured.

When the Game begins, players purchase a single starting weapon. This is the moment when the "rarity" of the weapons is determined. The fewer weapons of a specific type or with a specific

element, the higher the rarity. This rarity also serves as the strength of a weapon (the rarer a weapon, the stronger it is). Thus, the power of each weapon changes based on the ratio of weapons held by all players.

Weapons can be sold and purchased from the Shop available on players' devices. The selling/buying prices are linked to their rarity in real time, so the rarer (stronger) a weapon is, the higher the price, and vice versa. Players can also spend 3 points to find out a weapon's current rarity and ranking (its strength compared to all other weapons).

As mentioned above, battles with players from other wards are conducted by comparing the strength of your weapons. Once players select the weapon they will use in battle (only one at a time), their current rarities are revealed, and the player with the rarer weapon wins. Each player begins battle with 5 HP; winning a battle heals 1 HP, and losing a battle costs 1 HP. The Game is cleared if your HP reaches 10 points, and failed if it reaches 0.

A maximum of ten thousand people can win Rate Radar, and once this number is reached, no one else can proceed to Stage 3. If this condition is not met by five PM, the Game will be paused and restarted at nine AM the next day. The first hundred players to beat the Game will gain a high-ranking bonus for Stage 3.

Three Abilities may be installed on devices for this stage.

So basically this was an arm wrestle between a huge number of people. You needed to use information about other players' battles and your allies to figure out whether your weapon was strong or not, while finding beatable-looking opponents to fight. If your weapon was too weak, you'd need to swap it for another one, but strong weapons wouldn't be cheap. On the other hand, if you had a weak,

common weapon, its rarity might go up as other players got rid of theirs.

"Hmm…"

Compared to Random Chase, it seemed like the strategy element had gone way up. For example, you could manipulate weapon rarities by colluding with students from your ward, and in addition to buying and selling weapons, you could also use the Shop to sell your own HP, literally chipping away at your life for a little extra money. I thought most people would want to use Abilities to check a weapon's rarity or work with friends to manipulate the market, but that felt like too cautious a strategy to me. It might guarantee a winning record, but it just wasn't fast enough. If I wanted that high-ranking bonus for Stage Three, I couldn't rely solely on battles I knew I'd win.

Which is why…

"You were right, Master… The most powerful weapons are ones with no element at all."

Yes. Here in Rate Radar, my strategy was focused around a special Ability called Erase. This allowed me to erase the data in a single specialized target, which in this Game meant the type or element of a weapon. Using it twice, I'd been able to create a one-of-a-kind "none/none" weapon, the rarest and most powerful of all. This, of course, was impossible under normal play conditions—in other words, without cheating. A weapon's type and element play an important role in the rules of the Game, so normally you'd never be allowed to mess with them. That said, I'd had the Company hack into this part of the code, then used *†Jet-Black Wings†* to stop it from displaying the weapon's name and strength.

I nodded back at Himeji. "Yeah, that's my fourth win so far. I have 9 HP right now, so the next fight should be my last. I haven't heard about anyone beating this stage yet, so I oughtta be able to snag the high-ranking bonus again."

"Yes. At this rate, we might be able to enjoy lunch back at home."

Himeji sounded relieved, and she glanced at the clock on her device. It read 11:42. We were going at a pretty quick pace, but there was no real need to rush this.

"…Whoa! H-Hiroto Shinohara?!"

So I decided to challenge a player I saw on my way to the train station. His eyes widened when he saw the strongest in the Academy before him, but he must've been pretty confident about his weapon, because he immediately smiled and took out his device. "You're gonna regret challenging me!" he said as he invoked some sort of Ability.

"Okay, okay, my tuuurn! I got this one, Hiroto! Um, your opponent's using the all-powerful Malevolent Flame Blade—which you *might call a fire/sword weapon! I think he's messing with the rarity to make it a whole lot stronger, but it'll never be as rare as a none/none, so you're a-okay here! There's no way you'll lose!"*

…Roger that.

I couldn't tell if Shiina was giving me advice or cheering me on, but regardless, I picked my attribute-free weapon and ended the match in no time at all. That was my fifth win, meaning I had 10 HP, satisfying the victory conditions. I'd need to wait for Libra to tabulate the official results, but I seriously doubted that a hundred people had cleared the Game before me.

But as I was thinking that…

"Are you Hiroto Shinohara?"

"Hmm?"

I slowly turned around, tentatively wary of the voice behind me.

Standing there was a girl I didn't recognize. She was wearing an Eimei School uniform, and judging by her slightly childish facial features and tone of voice, I was guessing she was a first-year student. What caught my eye the most was her long, flowing black hair, which fell past her waist and almost touched her thighs. She cut a sharp figure, had great poise, and, on the whole, was remarkably beautiful. Her lips were pursed in serious expression, too. Overall, she gave off a "class president" sort of vibe.

"Ugh…"

She took a small step back, hugging herself with her arms, then looked reproachfully at me from a short distance away.

"Wh-what are you doing ogling my body? I don't remember giving you permission to do that."

"…Do you always accuse everyone you meet of being a perv? You could at least tell me what your name is first."

"Oh… Right, perhaps that was my fault… Then let me start over."

Surprisingly enough, the black-haired girl admitted she was in the wrong. She placed her right hand on her chest, atop what appeared to be a star emblem of some sort, and executed a graceful bow. Despite her initial aggression, she was now being very polite.

"I am honored to meet you, Shinohara. And you as well, Himeji. I am Mari Minakami, from high school Class 1-A at the Eimei School. I wished to talk to you today because I have a question for you."

"Me? What, are you lost or something?"

"Nothing like that. Um… You're cheating, aren't you?"

"…Huh?"

I reacted a little too late to the fastball. I don't think my nervousness was showing on my face, but Minakami kept on going anyway.

"I had some suspicions before now, but after watching that match, I'm quite sure of it… You see, I've installed an Ability that lets me examine the rarity of weapons. According to that, the fire/sword weapon your opponent had just now was ranked first in rarity when you fought him. He was also using an Ability that further enhanced it, so he should've been able to win. However, he lost to your weapon, which is invisible to me. Don't you find that strange?"

"Oh, *that's* what you wanted to ask? Sure, maybe it looks weird from your point of view, but for all you know, I could've been using the same fire/sword weapon he had. Or maybe my Variable Control skill outclassed his in level. You ever think about that?"

"Yes, of course. But that's a deceptive argument, don't you think? What you bring up are mere possibilities. Wouldn't it be far more natural to simply assume that you're cheating instead?"

Minakami responded to my rebuttal with another shot, never abandoning her dignified stance. Her gaze was accusatory…or rather, showed her utter contempt of me. I didn't know what was going on with this girl, but it was clear she believed beyond a shadow of a doubt that I was cheating.

"…I hate lies," she continued quietly. "Lies, fraud, cheating—I

hate all of it. I mean, it's really bad to lie. There's nothing right about it. You shouldn't do it, right? I just don't understand why people allow things like that to go on… And you, Shinohara, you smell like a liar to me… It really is exactly like he said."

"…Who?"

"Our proud leader… You'll understand soon enough. I'm sure even *you* will."

With a snicker, Minakami took her device out of her breast pocket. She checked the time on the home screen, then turned her attention back to me.

"Right after this, Shinohara, at around noon, we're gonna see something pretty neat happen. You'll want to keep an eye on IslandTube."

"What, are you guys trying to set something up? Because I already completed Stage Two just now."

"Oh, that's fine. Besides, unlike you, we'd never do anything villainous… I'll see you in the next stage, Shinohara."

Minakami's attitude remained resolute as she wove those words, and then she bowed, her flowing black hair and the skirt of her uniform fluttering as she walked off.

Himeji let out a soft sigh as she watched her leave. Even Minakami's receding back conveyed her fortitude.

"Not very nice, was she, Master? Accusing *you* of cheating? Nothing could be further from the truth. It's mostly those of us in the Company doing the cheating for you."

"I think that probably amounts to the same thing in their eyes… But it's trouble, for sure."

I sighed as I looked toward the direction in which Mari Minakami had disappeared. Of course, this wasn't the first time I've been suspected. I was an instant Seven Star overlord the moment I came to this island, so I'd been a target of envy and mistrust practically from day one. But here I had a girl claiming to have some shadowy group backing her. And in a large-scale Game with a lot of potential enemies, having this extra stuff to worry about didn't bode well for me.

"And she said something was gonna go down at noon—"

"H-Hiro! Hiro! It's an emergency! Open up IslandTube right now!"

My train of thought was interrupted by the voice in my ear. Kagaya was pretty overexcitable by default, but she sounded almost panicked right now. She kept on saying "Just *do* it!!" to all my questions, so I opted to quickly switch apps on my device.

A moment later, I had the IslandTube feed up. It showed a male student wearing a uniform I didn't recognize, sitting calmly at a desk with a gentle smile. Behind him stood a quiet-looking girl and a much more muscular man. The girl had on the same style of uniform as the guy sitting in front of her, and taking a closer look, I saw they all had the same six-pointed star emblem on their chests that I'd seen on Minakami.

"An emergency broadcast…"

"…presented by the Hexagram?"

Himeji and I both frowned as we looked at our devices.

"Good afternoon, everybody."

The guy behind the desk began to speak, his voice just as soft as I'd expected based on his appearance. His eyes were narrowed at the camera, an easy smile on his face, and I could tell he had the sort of kind personality that drew people to him.

He continued smoothly, intermingling his speech with relaxed hand gestures.

"I would like to thank everyone watching despite this coming to you in the middle of Stage Two of SFIA. What I have to say won't take long, so I'd really appreciate it if you'd hear me out. If you don't know who I am, my name is Kaoru Saeki. I'm a third-year at the Suisei School in the Academy's Second Ward, and my rank is Six Star, which includes two Unique Stars. The Suisei School is not particularly active in event battles, so I think this may be the first time some of you have heard my name.

"Now, let me take the opportunity to introduce my group. We are the Hexagram, an organization officially sanctioned by the Academy. I, Kaoru Saeki, serve as its leader, and the nature of our business can be summed up in a single phrase: We are here to carry out justice."

"…Justice?"

I couldn't help but repeat the word. He's going on about *justice*? It's pretty unusual to hear someone use a word as trite as that outside of superhero comics. I guess Saeki was receiving feedback along those lines in the IslandTube live chat, because he smiled a bit as he looked at his device.

"Ha-ha! I see the comments are already pretty polarized. Yes, if this is the first you've ever heard of this, you might see it as worthy of ridicule. But to those people, I say to take a deep breath and look at what's going on around you… In particular, look at the reactions of the older students who were around to see last year. Doesn't that make you a bit more curious?

"Now, I promise you I am not saying this due to some half-hearted delusion. Since being formally recognized by the Academy, we have actually built up quite a list of accomplishments for ourselves. Last year, we exposed a group that was developing illegal Abilities on a schoolwide scale, rounded up certain people who were putting low-ranked students in debt and treating them like slaves, and exposed the fraud perpetrated by a certain Six Star. This was all the work of the Hexagram; you can look it up in the island archives later if you like. I believe these results make it clear just how seriously we take our claim to be on the side of justice."

There was no sense of urgency to Saeki's speech. His words *did* seem convincing enough on their own, and I glanced over at Himeji.

"Yes…"

She seemed to ponder something for a moment, then nodded, her silver hair swaying gently in the air.

"It's true. There have been a number of incidents in the past where a group calling themselves the Hexagram uncovered a serious crime. We haven't heard anything from them for a while, so I thought they disbanded, but…"

"Ahhh, right. I understand there were rumors we were no longer active, but I assure you they have no basis in reality. The Hexagram is simply an organization that makes a move only when necessary. And now, I suppose, is one of those occasions."

Saeki fell quiet, his eyes narrowing even more… I was starting to get a bad feeling about this. Well, not a *feeling*, exactly; after my

encounter with Minakami, it was more like a certainty. But there was no stopping this livestream now. Kaoru Saeki stared straight at me through the screen (or at least it felt that way) as he continued, a subtle smile on his lips.

"Now, to business. Let me get straight to the point—the reason we in the Hexagram have stepped in this time is to expose the fraud of Hiroto Shinohara, purportedly the strongest student of the Academy."

"…!!"

"…Ah yes, I can understand if some of you are stunned to hear this. But didn't all of you have at least a little bit of doubt? Shinohara had only just transferred to the island when he beat the undefeated Empress, moving up to Seven Star status that very same day—a feat that had never happened before in the history of the Academy. It was strange, without a doubt.

"So we decided to thoroughly investigate this situation. We examined every detail of the Fourth Ward Challenge Shinohara took part in, as well as the May Interschools and all the other Games he has participated in. After our investigation, we were convinced: Hiroto Shinohara is a cheater beyond all doubt. He is evil, and as defenders of justice, we must lay down our judgment upon this evil. All his victories, all his glories, are nothing but lies and fabrications.

"Of course, I'm sure many of you aren't ready to take me at my word. I fully understand that—which is why I have personally stepped up to ensure he is judged at this event.

"And now, I would like to address Hiroto Shinohara personally. We in the Hexagram are keeping a close eye on you, and trust me, we will not allow you to cheat your way through the SFIA event. If you are defeated—that is, if you lose because you've been denied access to your cheats—this would be the clearest proof of all that you've been relying on cheating from the moment you set foot on the Academy, wouldn't it? Naturally, if you prove capable of winning without these underhanded tactics, we will admit our mistake and give you a proper apology… But I don't believe that's what we'll see.

"Let me be very clear: Your cheating won't work on us, and during this multistage Game, your lies and fraud will be exposed for

all the world to see. This I swear by the name of the Hexagram."

With tens of thousands of viewers watching him, a faint, self-assured smile crossed Saeki's face. My mind raced as I heard this declaration of war handed down through my screen.

…So it's an Academy-approved organization that "carries out justice"? And they're taking action to expose my lies?! What the hell? I'm suddenly in huge trouble, aren't I…?!

I kept it cool on the surface, but I was already exploding with panic inside.

Chapter 2

The Spear of Justice

#

Kaoru Saeki's declaration of war, issued on the first day of Rate Radar, spread like wildfire across STOC and IslandTube. That much, of course, I'd expected. Hiroto Shinohara is undoubtedly the most talked-about player on the island right now, so if allegations of cheating start to surface, it's going to become the big topic of conversation.

Various opinions spread across social media: *I knew Shinohara was cheating*; *It must be pretty serious for the Hexagram to make a move, right? Not even Shinohara can survive this*; *I don't know… He didn't present any real evidence at all*; *Well, either way, Kaoru is soooo cool!* It was true that, given the lack of concrete evidence presented, these were all just suspicions for now. But thanks to Saeki's strangely convincing rhetoric and track record, the general vibe wasn't good.

So now SFIA was starting to be a lot less fun, but at least Stage Two, Rate Radar, ended without further commotion. I reached the victory conditions at noon on the first day, with Himeji joining me a couple hours later. The last of the winners wrapped up the Game right after the third day began. Two of us had no problems qualifying for the high-ranking bonus.

"Hmm…"

It was a few hours after the end of Rate Radar, and Himeji and I had been milling around at home since the morning. Now, though, we were looking at our devices in the living room, carefully going through the rules of Stage Three. There were still ten thousand participants left, but this was where SFIA really started to cut that

number down. Only 10 percent of the students in Stage Two made it to Stage Three… But only a hundred people—1 percent—would move on to Stage Four. Even for top-ranked players, it wasn't going to be easy.

Plus, as the rules showed, this Game presented some of its own unique problems.

SFIA Stage 3: Blank Code

Each player is assigned a "passcode" required to complete the Game. This passcode is a four-digit number, and the objective of Stage 4 is to correctly identify your number.

The first, second, third, and fourth digits of a given passcode will each be given to five students. This means that twenty players will have information to help you identify your passcode, chosen at random from students close to your own rank but outside your school. It also means each player will possess twenty digits for passcodes that are not their own.

In order to identify your passcode, you will need to negotiate with players who possess the relevant digits (shown on your device by specialized IDs). If you can convince them to give you a digit, you can execute a "trade" to exchange information between yourselves. A player can also verbally convey the number they have, but there is no guarantee it will be the truth.

Trades can only be carried out twice per hour. You can also engage in trades with members of your own school.

Blank Code ends when one hundred players have successfully worked out their passcodes. If this condition is not met by five PM, the Game will be paused and resume at nine AM the next day. You may attempt to guess your passcode at any time, but an incorrect

guess will result in elimination. The first four players to beat the Game will gain a high-ranking bonus for Stage 4.

Blank Code also features a point system to assist in negotiation. Players use points to negotiate with other contestants, and 10 points can be spent to reveal one digit of their own passcode only once during the Game. Players begin with 3 points, but those who earned a high-ranking bonus in Stage 2 will start with 7.

All digits held by players who either complete the Game or are eliminated are deleted and can no longer be obtained by other players.

Only one Ability may be installed on devices for this stage. Given the nature of the Game, no probability-changing Abilities are allowed.

"Hmm… This sounds really difficult."

"…Yeah."

Himeji and I both sighed as we browsed the rules again. We'd gone over them right after they were first revealed, but even now, our impression of them hadn't changed much. Blank Code, Stage Three of SFIA, was even more troublesome than it first appeared.

If you only looked at the basic rules, it wasn't that complicated. All you had to do was guess the four-digit passcode assigned to you. These digits are held by players in other wards, and you need to trade for them. After that, it would just come down to what Ability you had and how you used it.

"But these digits aren't gonna be easy to collect, huh? No one will give one to me unless I have a digit of theirs. Maybe we could offer more than one digit or try to pick up potential trade bait from other players… But all we'd be doing is shuffling digits around. It'd just keep going and going until someone else in Eimei has what I need."

"True. There's also the point system, which will smooth things over somewhat, but… Well, even if you take that into account, it'll be

hard to progress quickly in this Game. There'll be no end to the players trying to take advantage of us."

"Yeah. And if we keep wasting our time trying to make trades, they'll reach the hundred-person limit in no time, and we'll get booted out… Not to mention, it's gonna be a bit more difficult to use the Company to force our way through this time."

"Exactly, Master. It would be possible to extract your passcode from the Blank Code server itself, but since all probability-based Abilities are banned, we wouldn't be able to explain that away as you 'just being lucky.' Plus, after the Hexagram's announcement…it would be dangerous to try anything too flashy."

Himeji's voice remained calm. I wasn't sure how effective the Hexagram's monitoring was, but that didn't mean we could proceed worry-free. At the very least, we'd need to play it aboveboard for the time being.

I really didn't like the way this was going, though. As a (fake) Seven Star, I was already a player nobody wanted to see advance any further… And now the Hexagram's accusations had turned up the heat on me even more. It would no doubt be harder than ever to work out trades with other players.

"Hmm… Well, I guess I'll have to keep the Company's support to a minimum. That's really gonna suck, to be honest, but if people start suspecting every move I make, I'm done for."

"Very true, Master. For now, I will construct a list of IDs and the players they correspond to. You know most of the players with a similar rank to yours by now, so if we know who we need to deal with beforehand, it'll be easier to work out a strategy."

"…Ah right. That shouldn't raise any eyebrows, at least."

Himeji and I exchanged nods. Even if the Hexagram had swayed a lot of people into distrusting me, none of the top-ranked players would refuse a good trade because they didn't like me or whatever—especially if they'd already known my background and personality.

"But I'm still feeling pretty uneasy… Like, I really don't think this is a Game you can win solo. All of us from Eimei have to work together and circulate info around. We'll never make any effective trades otherwise."

"You might be right, Master. A single player only has the information for twenty people, but if the entire Eimei School works together, that'll make things hundreds of times more efficient."

"Yeah." I nodded slightly to Himeji, who was looking at me with those clear blue eyes, and reached for my device. "So let's get star—Hmm?"

Just as I did, it vibrated. Raising an eyebrow, I looked at the screen, which showed a brief message:

"To all Eimei students in Stage Three of SFIA, please gather in the main hall of the Eimei School at seven tomorrow morning before the Game begins. If you've read the rules, I'm sure you realize how essential schoolwide cooperation is in conquering Blank Code. I have a plan, and if you have even a little faith in the student council president you voted for, please make it known with your presence. I guarantee you won't regret it."

It was an invitation from Shinji Enomoto, president of the Eimei student council and a guy nicknamed the All-Seeing. It was such welcome news that I couldn't help but mutter "Nice" under my breath.

#

It was early in the morning of Friday, July 29. Stage Three of SFIA was just two hours away, but there were already hundreds of players gathered in the Eimei School's largest lecture hall.

"…"

The stares directed at me as I leaned against a wall at the far side of the room felt a little different from usual. That livestream was no doubt the reason, but there was no point dwelling on it, so Himeji and I let it pass without comment.

On the other side of the hall, looking down at us from a podium, was a young man in a crisp school uniform. He picked up his microphone and spoke in a calm, collected voice.

"First of all, I'd like to thank everyone for their cooperation. I spent a whole night planning this out, but that would have gone

completely to waste if not enough people chose to participate. Looking at the turnout, though, I think we've cleared that first hurdle, at least."

This was Shinji Enomoto, the Six Star student council president and member of Class 3-A at the Eimei School. He hadn't brought it up himself, and he might not even be conscious of it, but having so many people heed his summons on such short notice said a lot about how much the student body trusted him. According to Himeji, 97 percent of Eimei students who made it to Stage Three were in attendance. They all unconditionally believed Enomoto's plan would work out if they went along with it, so none of them had any reason to turn down the invite.

"…Fwaaah…"

Nanase Asamiya was there, too—the flashy beauty with short blond hair who was also a Six Star—but she hadn't said a word. In fact, she was yawning onstage, one hand on her hip. Only an ex-model could get away with a pose like that, in my opinion, but anyway.

"I called you here today to discuss our strategy for SFIA Stage Three, Blank Code. This Game is extremely difficult to progress through on your own. In fact, you're being asked to interact with many players to gain the information you're looking for. But since only a hundred players are allowed to complete it, there's no time to take it slow… That's why I have devised a system."

Enomoto paused long enough to pick up the device next to his mic. Skillfully operating it, he projected a large screen behind him.

"This is the Eimei Network. Created using an Ability called Cross Communicate EX, it is exclusively limited to Eimei students. Its function is to keep track of information across a number of registered devices. While limited to Eimei, it will let us search in real time to figure out who's in possession of which digits."

"…Wow. And what does *that* do for us?"

"Don't you even understand that, Nanase? As I just said, the only way to conquer this Game is to steadily exchange information with other players. With this system, we can quickly work out whether the Eimei School has information of interest to a certain player—in

other words, trade fodder they would want. This network is also set up to automatically perform trades among its members as needed for any situation. You can picture this system as all the Eimei students sharing a single giant deck of cards. You get it now?"

"Yeah, okay, fine… Seriously, why am I even up here…?"

Asamiya might be grumbling about it, but now I understood what Enomoto was trying to get at. The Eimei Network, a giant deck of cards… If we could freely access that much information, it would greatly reduce the possibility of anyone taking unnecessary detours.

"Very impressive. I'm sure other wards will come up with similar countermeasures, but I don't think many players could construct a system with so few flaws. One certainly sees why he was elected council president."

"…Yeah."

I had to agree with Himeji. It boggled the mind that Shinji Enomoto had been able to put something like this together in a single night.

"Oh… And one more thing."

Enomoto, onstage, was looking right at me from all the way across the hall. It was only for a brief moment, though, and he quickly turned toward the other students, looking totally worry-free.

"I know a lot of you must be concerned about the declaration-of-war broadcast made by the Hexagram two days ago. You know, the one about how Hiroto Shinohara's a cheater, and that they'd reveal it in this Game."

…?! Wait, what?! You're gonna take a dig at me, too, Enomoto?!

My heart jumped when I heard my name. I could hear the hushed conversations among the students and guessed at least a few of them were hesitant to join the Eimei Network because of my current situation. I could feel their eyes on me from all directions.

I didn't react, unsure of where Enomoto was going with this as he continued, his usual sour look on his face.

"To be honest, I cannot say how credible this claim is. Personally, having fought alongside him during ASTRAL, I do not believe any of it is true… Though, perhaps I am too biased to tell. But that doesn't matter right now. The problem is that Kaoru Saeki, the ace of

Second Ward's powerful Suisei School, is making these sorts of accusations in the middle of the major event of the summer. Shinohara is Eimei's best player, and now they've thrown suspicion at him at the worst moment imaginable. If you don't see any ulterior motive in this, then all I can say is that your brain must be on the same level as Nanase's."

"Hey! What's *that* supposed to mean?! I thought this was pretty fishy, too!"

"Uh-huh. You looked clearly convinced to me. But regardless, you can consider Kaoru Saeki's accusations an attempt to cloud your minds. A bit of psychological warfare to destroy Shinohara, and by extension, all of us here at Eimei. We absolutely cannot allow ourselves to become divided thanks to this infantile attempt at sabotage. I will remind all of you that SFIA is not the sort of event we can hope to win without Shinohara."

The words came freely from Enomoto's mouth. He was looking straight at me again, and then, his lips curling up a bit, he continued on in a joking tone.

"If we're all in the same boat anyway…we're better off trusting him than distrusting him, don't you think?"

"…"

Needless to say, I quickly regretted doubting Enomoto for even a second.

In the end, I don't know if it was Enomoto's speech that did the trick or not, but nearly all the players in the hall agreed to join the Eimei Network. That much was to be expected, I guess. They had nothing to lose, and even just joining this revolutionary system gave you a much better idea about how to clear the Game. They'd need to have a damn good reason to turn down this offer.

But just as Enomoto finished speaking, I saw the door at the back of the hall slam shut. I couldn't see who it was, but there were certainly at least some people who'd chosen not to join.

Anyway, as the students began to disperse…

"Sorry to make you come here so early."

Enomoto called out to me and Himeji, having come down from the stage with Asamiya. I was grateful beyond words for what he'd said up there, but I couldn't show any of that externally. Instead, I just smiled a bit.

"Hey, Enomoto. Thanks for earlier. I never thought you'd step up to defend me."

"If you're attempting to show your appreciation, you could at least call me *Mr.* Enomoto, you know. And as I said, I'm not defending you. All I want is for Eimei to win, and to do that, we're going to need everyone in the school to work together. I can't allow any internal strife to get in the way of that."

"Huh? What're you talking about, Shinji? Before this, you were acting all cool, saying, 'I'm his old war buddy,' and stuff. Just admit it to him!"

"…That was crossing the line, Nanase. Some things are better off unsaid."

"H-hey! Are you trying to scare me? Stop that!"

Enomoto put a hand on Asamiya's shoulder, attempting to intimidate her. Asamiya, seeing his face right up by hers, turned red, her bright blond hair furiously shaking.

Once they'd finished their usual back-and-forth, Enomoto turned toward me, looking miffed.

"Hmph… Ignoring Nanase's ravings for the moment, I think I've made my opinions about all this clear. I never had a rosy impression of the Hexagram in the first place."

"No? Well, good. I'd hate to have *you* hounding me, too. What about you, Asamiya?"

"Me? Well… I don't use my brain much sometimes, so like Shinji just said, I kinda believed a lot of it. Like, 'Oh wow, I'm amazed Shino's been doing something like that!' But we fought together in ASTRAL, right? And if it wasn't for you, Shino, we never would've survived long enough to win… So like, why would I start doubting you now, y'know?"

"…!"

She was playing with her hair the whole time, no doubt a bit embarrassed to be so honest with me. My eyes started to well up a

little, so I just said, "Okay," and looked away. Somehow, I felt much more reassured than I had before. It seemed the friends who had fought with me in the big group-based Game were more important to me than I'd thought.

Himeji, next to me, calmly bowed in reply. "Thank you both for believing in my master. I know full well that he has never done anything dishonest. I would like to say that everyone in our ASTRAL team is on our side now, but then I remember that Ms. Akizuki—"

"Hee-hee-hee. You rang?"

?!

As I heard that breathy whisper, a sweet smell tickled my nostrils. It shut my brain down for a moment, and I felt my left arm being yanked backward. Turning around, I saw a girl whose pushy attitude seemed to contrast with the hesitant way she held my hand. She had a wide smile on her face, which also looked slightly red. This was Noa Akizuki, a third-year student at the Eimei School, just like Enomoto and Asamiya. Her chestnut-colored hair was tied up in loose twin ponytails, and she had a small build and a cute, childlike face. It was surprising, given she was older than me, although her large breasts made quite a contrast with everything else about her. All in all, she was every bit the Little Devil, fully aware of all her natural "weapons."

"Morning, Hiroto! ♡ I haven't seen you all summer break. You weren't getting lonely, were you?" she asked, looking up at me through her eyelashes even more flirtatiously than normal.

"Uh… I mean, we're only a few days into summer vacation, and you haven't stopped messaging me this whole time. How lonely could I be?"

"Aw, *super* lonely! I always am if I can't talk to you every day, Hiroto! ♪ If Shirayuki wasn't around watching you, I'd take you back to my place, and then we'd… Hee-hee. ♡"

"…Excuse me, Ms. Akizuki. I am beginning to feel tremendously irritated for some reason, so will you please remove yourself from my master at once? If you could do it immediately and keep at least a mile away, that would suffice."

"Oh, sure! Come on, Hiroto, let's go on a mile-long walk, and

then we can make out all we want—”

“A mile away from my *master*. Not me.”

Himeji pouted slightly as she put her foot down against Akizuki’s constant advances. This, too, was turning into a regular thing between them.

Akizuki reluctantly let go of me, then giggled and put her hands behind her back. “But you know…it’s looking pretty tough for you, huh, Hiroto? You’ve got that group of weirdos bothering you.”

“Weirdos…? Those guys are pretty famous, Noa-chi. The Hexagram was all over the news last year, too, don’t you remember? They’re like a bunch of good guys who punished evildoers.”

“Oh, I know. But no matter how ‘good’ they are, if they’re Hiroto’s enemies, then that makes them mine, too. Like, they can go on about cheating all they want, but if they’ve got no proof, it’s nothing but a big inferiority complex, you know? It’s sort of like seeing the old me. *So* annoying! ♡”

“Ah, right…”

I felt like Akizuki was actually kind of making sense. She used to be so jealous of me because of her own inferiority complex, which was why she’d wanted to crush me so bad, as hard as that was to believe now. But at least I knew that Akizuki, just like Enomoto and Asamiya, didn’t doubt me at all.

Th-thank you, Eimei…!

The last few days of constantly searching comments about me online had been more psychologically damaging than I’d thought, so hearing all this encouragement was actually really touching.

“Hmm…”

But Akizuki wasn’t done yet. She rested an index finger on her chin, her voice taking on its usual sly tone.

“If anything, I’m more surprised that guy Saeki is participating in this event himself. People go on about how talented he is, but he pretty much never shows up in public unless he’s exposing someone like this. *And* he’s got two color stars, right?”

“Yeah. If memory serves, the effect of either of them hasn’t been publicly revealed yet… But if Saeki’s on the scene, it goes without saying that Suisei’s serious about winning this.”

"Oh, for sure. And you know the two people behind him in that video? One of them, the girl, her name's Akutsu from the Suisei School… You need to keep a close eye on her."

"No doubt," chimed in Enomoto. "And also…do you know about the St. Rosalia Girls' Institute in the Fourteenth Ward? They've been quiet on the Game front the past few years, but there's a player who's been really making a name for herself in the short time since ASTRAL ended. Shizuku Minami, a second-year."

Ohhh…!

I tried to keep calm hearing that name, but inwardly I could feel my cheeks twitching. Shizuku Minami—the blue-haired girl who'd faced off with Eimei during ASTRAL, then challenged Saionji and me in DearScript as well. She always seemed so listless and detached, and her Game performance and talent are both average at best…or so I thought. But apparently she'd been this unbeatable monster at the middle school she'd attended, where they had a similar Game-based system.

Now, though, she was keeping a low profile because she hated having the spotlight on her all the time. I figured that if I left her alone, she'd stick to her low-key high school life, but after her defeat at the hands of me and Saionji—or rather, being goaded by Yuzuha Shinohara, a devil who loved to cause chaos—I guess some sort of switch in her brain had been flipped.

"She went down to Three Stars after getting beaten in ASTRAL, but incredibly, she'd made her way back up to Five Stars by the time SFIA began. Can you believe that? And she was even one of the people to place in the top rank for both of the first two stages. Maybe you don't need to worry about her just yet, but she's still someone to keep your eye on."

"…Oh? You like girls like that, huh, Shinji? The complete opposite of me?" asked Nanami.

"I don't remember saying anything like that."

"Hee-hee! You don't have to get so jealous," Akizuki said. "We all know who the president's *really* given his heart to! ♡ But enough about that! I got someone else I'm real interested in, too! Misaki Yumeno, a Four Star from the Seventeenth Ward's Amanezaka

School. She put up an unbelievable number of wins in Stage Two!”

“Oh? Let’s see. Total wins… One hundred and eighty-seven?! Are you kidding me?!”

“Yeah, crazy, right? You beat Rate Radar once you hit 10 HP, so you’d never normally fight that much… But, like, every time she was about to beat the Game, Misaki would sell 1 HP to the Shop, use the money to buy more weapons, and just keep on playing. Apparently, she ended up collecting, like, twenty-four weapons! ♡”

“Whoa! Damn…”

Asamiya seemed genuinely shocked by Akizuki’s explanation. It *was* pretty insane… But that didn’t matter now. All the high-ranking players from each ward, Saeki and Yumeno included, were still in the running. That said, it only made sense for them to have won all the stages so far.

“Anyway, let’s stop chitchatting and get back to strategizing for Stage Three,” Enomoto said, shaking his head and steering the discussion back on track. “The Eimei Network I just announced is meant to facilitate exchange within the school and provide the information needed to make effective trades… But given the rush job that it is, there’s a little bit of a lag before trades are reflected in the database. I think I’m going to stay in the student council office and work on that until it’s more stable. I will, of course, continue with the Game in parallel.”

“Hmm…? You will? I can help, if you need it. I know you’re good at multitasking, but it won’t be easy beating Stage Three while doing upkeep on the server, will it, Enomoto?”

“Again, if you feel *that* bad for me, call me *Mr.* Enomoto. And while I appreciate the offer…”

Enomoto silently shook his head at my suggestion to help—or, I guess, to get the Company to help. I gave him a quizzical look back.

“…Well, all right, I’ll tell you now. The thing about Blank Code is that, due to how the game works, we have to choose carefully who we want to advance.”

“…We do?”

“Oh yes. Only a hundred players can survive Stage Three, which means that, at best, a small handful of students from each ward will

reach the next stage. Thus, it makes sense to ensure that only our best players make it through. And with the Eimei Network in place, it wouldn't be difficult to skew the data to help specific players win."

"Ah… Yeah, I guess not."

"Right? I don't want to call it 'selecting favorites,' but if I was forced to do something like that, the only person who'd have to answer for it afterward would be me, Eimei's student council president. In which case, Shinohara, you could make it through to Stage Four without— Hmm?"

Enomoto stopped his eloquent speech out of nowhere, as if he was distracted by something. Looking over, I saw that Asamiya next to him had grabbed his arm, forcibly turning him toward her.

"…that."

"*What*, Nanase? If you have something to say, speak up."

"I said, stop trying to act all cool like that!!"

There was clear irritation in Asamiya's voice as she jabbed an index finger in front of Enomoto's face, her golden hair fluttering gently. As Enomoto stood there, clearly perplexed, Asamiya fired a machine-gun-like barrage of criticism at him.

"Shino's offering to help you! Why are you just shooting him down?! And saying things like 'Only I can take responsibility' and stuff… It was the same with that speech, too! If you think you're, like, the star of your own movie or something, then you're *really* mistaken! That act is *beyond* lame, you know!"

"It's not lame, and I'm not mistaken. Everything I said is purely factual."

"Oh, so you're gonna play dumb, huh? After using me for years…?"

"…? Of course I did. We have a special relationship, Nanase, one that can't be compared to any other."

"Huh?! A…*special* relationship? Shinji, what do you mean by special…?"

"I'm talking about collective responsibility… Oh, but that might be too hard a phrase for you, huh?"

"Ugh! You're *sooo* annoying! You try to keep Shino and everyone out of this, but you just see me as your, like, accomplice or

whatever! God, Shinji, did those all-nighters you've been pulling mess up your head, or what?!"

"Not at all. I've been getting ample rest. In fact, why don't you take a short nap, Nanase? Stage Three is starting in an hour."

"Huh? Nah, I'm fine. I napped a little in your room earlier."

"Oh… That's right. You were leaning against me, comfortably snoring, even though you were supposed to be working. If you were *that* exhausted, you should've just slept in my bed."

"Y-you're wrong! I wasn't comfortable at all! You should be *happy* I was all over you like that!"

"Also, have you gained a little weight?"

"I have *not*!!!"

"…"

I maintained a vaguely cheerful expression, not really understanding the argument or flirting or whatever this was going on in front of me. Putting together what I heard, it sounded like Asamiya had stayed over at Enomoto's place… And well, it was probably best not to ask about it.

Anyway, thanks to our competent council president, the Eimei School now had a system in place to help us conquer Blank Code. Once the Game began, I'd need to reach out to players with the digits I needed, then search the network to see if we had any digits they wanted. I'd also get at least *some* Company support, so overall, it sounded like we had a pretty viable strategy in place.

But it's not like we're rock-solid or anything…

I brought my right hand up to my lips. I now had an efficient way to obtain "trade bait," but that didn't mean the trades would always be successful. And I might have to face some pretty direct interference as well. With the Hexagram piling on the allegations, I wouldn't at all be surprised if a lot of players attacked me with theft-type Abilities, for example. I planned to set Cancel Interference as my Ability, of course, but if I was subjected to concentrated fire like that, it'd only be a matter of time before I used it up.

Just as that concern crossed my mind…

"Goooooooood morning, everyone!!"

Suddenly, the door at the back of the hall opened, and a girl

came running in, full of enthusiasm. It was Suzuran Kazami, that boyish beauty, with a big, clunky camera around her neck. She made a beeline in my direction and, once she was close enough, shoved a mic in my face.

"Sorry to barge in, my Eimei friends! Shinohara, I'm gonna ask you straight out—what do you think of your current situation? The whole Academy's divided by the Hexagram's accusations. If you didn't do it, I want you to say so, on the record!"

"…Huh. Okay."

Th-they're here?! I get that Libra would wanna cover this story, but still!!

I calmly fielded Kazami's question, but on the inside, I was racking my brain for an answer. I had half expected it, but I wasn't excited to get hounded by Libra like this. One mistake here, and public opinion would sway even more toward the Hexagram.

That said…

Wait, maybe I can use this to my advantage…

Yeah. Maybe this wasn't so bad, after all. Libra was a huge media group, and its influence was certainly a threat… But use it right, and it could become a powerful weapon.

"Heh…"

So I decided to smile a little for the camera.

"It doesn't interest me or even matter to me if people believe Saeki and the Hexagram's allegations. But let me make one prediction—no matter how they try to mess with me, I'm never gonna lose this Game. If they wanna waste their time harassing me, then fine, but I personally don't recommend it."

"…! Are you saying you're going to stand up to the Hexagram?!"

"If that's how you want to take it, fine. Just let me say that I don't consider them a threat at all."

My tone of voice seemed to excite Kazami even more. That ought to be enough to plant the seeds anyway. If all that gets broadcast island-wide by Libra, a lot of players will take it to mean I'll be taking countermeasures against potential meddling—in other words, that I'd use an Ability of the same type as Cancel Interference. That alone would serve as a huge deterrent.

Now that I have all the pieces…it's just a matter of how fast I can beat this Game.

I gave a slight nod, steeling myself.

#

"…Oh? Is this ID yours, Seven Star?"

Just a few minutes after Blank Code, the third stage of SFIA, kicked off, I contacted Senri Kururugi—Hell's Priestess from Tsuyuri Girls' Institute in the Sixteenth Ward and someone I've come to know pretty well lately.

In this Game, players with the information you need are represented by special device IDs with no personal information attached. This means you'd kick off negotiations without actually knowing who the other person is, but thanks to the Company's research, I knew who all the IDs belonged to. So I understood in advance that I'd be dealing with Senri Kururugi…which meant my chances were pretty good.

If you see her on the battlefield, run away, as they say… But she's a pretty good person, at the core.

No, there was no doubting the serious threat she posed. Kururugi was a true berserker in battle, but that only applied when combat was the only option. In a Game like this where diplomacy was key, someone like her who was calm and rational (as long as trendy desserts weren't involved) was actually just the kind of opponent you'd want to have.

"Hey, Kururugi. Been a while, huh? Thanks for your help with Rainbow Pâtisserie a little while ago."

"No, thank you*. Without your help, I wouldn't have gotten my hands on that limited-edition cheesecake. That taste, that aroma, that texture… Just thinking about it makes me smile, even now."*

"That's great to hear. But let's talk Blank Code for now. I want to get right into negotiations with you. You got a digit I need, right? I wanna trade a digit of yours for it."

"…Oh? You already have something to trade with me? How'd you

do that?"

"That's classified, of course."

I smiled. No way was I gonna reveal it was all Enomoto's doing.

Really, though, this was far from a bad deal for Kururugi. The ideal trade in Blank Code was one where both sides got a digit they needed at the same time. It was still early in the Game, too, so there was no chance the digit you were offering was one your partner already had. In fact, the only real obstacle to making this deal was if Kururugi was suspicious of me…

"All right, dessert boy. I accept your offer completely."

"…Oh? That was fast? I won't comment on that nickname, though…"

"Yeah. I can't think of any reason to say no, really. I heard all about the Hexagram, of course… But those allegations are just so ridiculous. How could any dessert lover be a villain like that?"

All joking aside—at least, I'm pretty sure that was meant as a joke—Kururugi immediately gave her okay. When I checked my device a moment later, I saw that I'd received the third digit of my passcode—a 3, apparently. Having that, and knowing now that the Eimei Network was working as designed, I was hoping to wrap up this Game fast.

And so…

"…Yeah?"

The next person on my list was the Five Star from St. Rosalia who'd been attracting so much attention lately—Shizuku Minami, the girl with those languid eyes who'd once been the strongest in her school. I didn't expect things to go as smoothly as they had with Kururugi, but I'd met her before, at least. It should be somewhat easier to negotiate with her than a total stranger.

Recognizing her usual detached tone of voice, I pressed on, pretending not to know who I was talking to.

"Hello? This is Hiroto Shinohara from the Eimei School. Who's this?"

"Who, me? I'm Minami, the girl you've heard sooo much about… Super strong, so cute you just wanna eat me up, and popular on a scale not seen before in history. So what's a villain like you want with

me?"

I was effectively silenced by her casual accusation. I'm sure she couldn't see my reaction, but Minami just kept on going, sounding slightly smug.

"I always knew you were a bad guy… And it turns out I was right. The entire world can't stop talking about you…"

"…So you believe that crap from the Hexagram?"

"Hmm? I don't really care either way. Whether you're cheating or not, it's got nothing to do with me… I just feel a little better, seeing you in trouble and everything. That's all…"

"That makes you sound pretty bad yourself."

"Oh… Now I'm the bad one? We'll see about that… You're making me really angry, you know… But I'm also a little grateful, actually."

"You are?" I mumbled back.

"*Yeah*," Minami replied curtly. "*You reminded me of something…I hadn't felt in a while. Playing against you and the Empress was so much fun…"*

"…Oh?"

"*Yeah. So we don't need to trade. I'll give this to you for free… I have the first digit of your passcode, and it's a 5. You don't need to do anything for me in return… Just do as you see fit with that info…*," she said in her usual monotone.

Minami was being surprisingly generous. I had one digit from Minami's passcode, just like with Kururugi, but if I didn't have to give it to her, then that was the best-case scenario, right? I felt a momentary tug of doubt in the back of my mind, but then—

"Master, no. We have to be careful here."

Himeji leaned over from beside me and shook her head. Her cool blue eyes immediately snapped me out of it, and I went right back to negotiating.

"Minami, I know you've been kind enough to tell me for free and all, but I'd like to check the actual data, just in case. So let's just do a normal trade, okay? I have your digit ready here."

"Uh… Why? I already told you… You're going to let all my gratitude go to waste and—"

"Just do it, please."

"…Pfft."

I could barely hear her over the phone, but Minami reluctantly agreed. Her attitude concerned me, so I decided to check the data she sent me immediately after the trade was completed. It turned out my first digit was an 8, not a 5.

"…Hey, why were you casually trying to trick me, Minami?"

"What do you mean? I have no idea what you're talking about… I must've misread it… Hmm-hm-hm-hmm…"

"You're really not convincing anybody, you know. Honestly…"

I shook my head with a sigh. Minami was happily humming to herself (or at least that's what it sounded like), but eventually she said "*I'll see you in Stage Four…*" and hung up. She'd sounded calm enough, but those words definitely revealed the kind of fighting spirit she had.

"Whew…"

The data-collection process had gone relatively smoothly up to now, but in terms of players who'd eagerly agree to a trade with me, Kururugi and Minami were about it. There was only one other person on the list of folks I knew, but I really wanted to avoid him as much as I could.

Thus, after wrapping up with Minami, I attempted to negotiate with a few players I didn't know… But that just led to three failed trades in a row. All of them quickly turned me down, saying things like, "Who knows what kind of cheap trick you'll try." Just as presumed, even high-ranked players couldn't fully ignore the Hexagram's allegations. So there I was, left in the lurch while the Game proceeded without me…

"Hmm? So that's why you're looking so down?"

A few hours later, I was in my room video-chatting with a girl who'd contacted me just before the end of day one of Blank Code. I let out a sigh. My negotiation partner was Sarasa Saionji, the red-haired fake heiress. She must've been at home, too, because she'd fully done away with her "Empress" persona and was casually sitting on her chair with her chin resting on one hand. I was in my mansion

with the Company's firewall protecting me, while Saionji was also being defended by high-end security, so we didn't have to worry about someone listening in on our call.

Saionji stared at me through the screen with her ruby-red eyes.

"Sounds like you're in a lot of trouble, Shinohara. What on earth did you do to attract the Hexagram's attention in the first place?"

"I don't know… Or, like, they must've been suspicious of me from the start, right? Calling themselves 'defenders of justice' and all that."

"Hee-hee! True. It's the perfect organization to deal with a pathological liar like you."

"You're the last person I wanna hear that from…"

Saionji was joking, but I still shook my head in protest… This was kinda turning into the opposite of ASTRAL, wasn't it? Back then, someone had been going around as the "real" Sarasa Saionji and accusing the one I knew of being a fake, but *I* was the target this time. Though, well, Saionji and I are coconspirators in these lies we've got going, so if mine ever get exposed, she's going down with me.

"Hey… By the way, has the Hexagram messed with you, too?"

"What, are you worried about me? I'm doing just fine, thanks. I think every ward must have a system like this, but here at Ohga, we've got this 'community assistance' thing going. Thanks to that, I've already got three of the four digits I need. Once I wrap up this trade with you, Stage Three is over for me."

"…Really? Damn."

No longer surprised by her exploits, I gave a slight shrug.

Like I said before, it was Saionji who'd approached me with this trade offer—or, more accurately, she'd contacted a mystery ID about the fourth digit she needed, who just happened to be me. She didn't have any digits I needed, though (Ohga's system had given her one, but it was a duplicate of Minami's), so as an alternative, I agreed to give her the digit of hers I had in exchange for all seven of her points. Accepting this trade meant I'd let Saionji beat the Game before me… But even if I did nothing, she was bound to win it anyway. Better to just take my lumps and earn the points available

to me. Although I wanted her advice on the Hexagram and my current situation as well, that had pretty much been my main strategic reason for saying yes to her offer.

Looking at the screen, I saw Saionji sigh and pout as she propped up her head on one elbow.

"This Hexagram, though… They're trouble. Their leader, Kaoru Saeki, is one thing, but the two underlings behind him in the video are bad news, too, you know? Koto Tsuzuki, a Five Star from Ohmi School in the Tenth Ward, and Miyabi Akutsu, a Six Star from Suisei School in the Second Ward. This might even be a bigger crisis than ASTRAL was."

"Yeah… I think I can figure out a way past Blank Code at least, but Stage Four's gonna be the real problem. From that point on, everyone's gonna be betting real stars, and it's all gonna be power players, too. If the Company's restricted from making any big moves, it'll become a headache for me real fast."

"Yeah… But you know, Shinohara, if you really feel like you're at an impasse, you should try counting on me a little more, okay? I know you know this, but I'm your coconspirator now. I don't wanna wind up in a situation where I'm screwed and I don't even know it."

"…Yeah. I know."

I nodded, slightly embarrassed over Saionji's clumsy attempt at kindness… I know she said that, but her offer was best thought of as a last resort. I was already under heavy suspicion; if people found out how much Saionji and I were colluding, I'd never talk my way out of that.

"Anyway, the Hexagram's broadcast hasn't been a fatal blow to me so far. But if you could tell me when you get any new information, that'd help a lot."

"Roger that. Hee-hee! Being chased by a group of do-gooders… It's like something out of a movie, isn't it?"

"An action thriller from the criminal's point of view, huh? It's not like I'm *not* doing bad things, though…"

"Yeah, true… But I do have some good news for you, Shinohara."

Saionji's lips curled up a bit, her ruby-red eyes fixed on me. Then she lowered her voice, as if imparting a secret.

"So as you know, I've been pretending to be Sarasa Saionji since I enrolled at Ohga. I've been lying as much as you. I'm just an ordinary girl who's maybe a bit smarter than average, but I've been passing myself off as the heiress of the Saionji family."

"I like how you managed to talk yourself up in there. But what about it?"

"What about it? Well, that's 'bad,' too, isn't it? The daughter of the Academy's founder and current chairman is a fake! That's a crime just as monumental as yours, isn't it? But the Hexagram hasn't come after me at all. I haven't had the slightest bit of trouble from them."

"…"

"And I don't know if they just haven't realized it or if there's something intentional to it… But it shows that the Hexagram's 'justice' isn't so perfect."

Saionji smiled as she looked into my eyes. I didn't really have a clear path forward yet, but this was still encouraging news.

#

Saionji had managed to finish Stage Three of SFIA once I gave her the final piece of info she needed. The official announcement stated that she was the second person to beat the stage across all the wards. The only one faster, by the way, was Misaki Yumeno, a first-year at the Seventeenth Ward's Amanezaka School. She had already been attracting attention after storming through Stage Two, but now she was looking like a legitimate dark horse.

This meant that only two more high-ranking bonuses for Stage Four were left on the table. That's where I found myself on day two of Blank Code, still looking for someone to give me my third and fourth digits.

Next was ID number 07-499: Toya Kirigaya, the Absolute Monarch of Shinra High School in the Seventh Ward.

"It just had to be him…," Himeji said as she placed a cup of tea in front of me. I understood what she meant well enough. Kirigaya,

after all, is a battle-obsessed maniac, by far the most belligerent player I know on this island. His victory in ASTRAL resulted in his becoming a double Unique Star holder, which means I had to be even more wary of him than I was before.

"Apart from Kururugi and Minami, he's the only person on this list that I know. I still have two digits to figure out—I can't be too picky right now. I have all the points I need for the negotiation, too."

"I guess. Well…all right. Allow me to watch and observe over here, then." Himeji nodded slightly, her clear blue eyes betraying a hint of anxiety.

"Sure," I said, trying to reassure her as I reached for my device again. Slowing my breathing down, I took my time putting in Kirigaya's ID to make the call. After a few rings, he picked up, speaking in his usual tone.

"Ugh, what do you want? Who the hell is this? If you wanna negotiate with me, you better gimme your name and ward first!"

"Hiroto Shinohara, from Eimei. How's it going, Kirigaya?"

"Huh? Hyah-hah! Damn, this is your ID? Niiiice. Guess I'm as lucky as ever, huh?!"

"…? Lucky how? What's it matter who the guy on the other end of the line is?"

"Oh, it matters a lot, man. Knowing all the people I've pushed aside to reach the top is a huge motivation for me. Before now, I've been dealing with total wimps whose names weren't even worth rememberin'. I gotta net someone big for the finish, y'know? Otherwise, what the hell am I even doin' here, huh?"

Kirigaya sounded like he was really enjoying himself. Something about what he said gnawed at me, and my eyebrows raised slightly.

"The *finish*…? Should I take that to mean you're at least willing to discuss a trade with me? Because I figured you'd shut the door immediately once you found out it was me."

"What're you, stupid? Why would I waste an opportunity like this? After you set up this big, flashy stage for me, huh? You got a duty to entertain me, you know, so give it your all. If we're gonna fight, then the Game that's framing it doesn't matter to me. The next stage—Stage Four—that's when SFIA starts gettin' real."

"…"

"So no, I'm not gonna try pullin' some stupid trick to take you down…but the price's gotta be right. Something that'll satisfy me—something that makes me feel like I've made you surrender."

This was an audio call, so I couldn't see Kirigaya's expression, but his voice told me that he was grinning through all this.

"So you can spend 10 points to reveal one of your own digits one time in this Game, right? That's what I want. Gimme all 10 points needed for it. Then I'll tell you what your second digit is."

"…What, why? Can't we just trade the info like normal?"

"Quit playing dumb with me. What if you use somethin' like Display Bug to screw around with me? I'm tryin' to get rid of you at this point, remember. I got every reason in the world to attack you. So I don't want your info. I want cold, hard points—low risk and guaranteed to help me win."

"Well, even so, you're being a little too greedy. Knowing you, I'm sure you earned the high-ranking bonus back in Stage Two, right? Three more points is all you need."

"Uh-uh. That's not happenin'. I'm sure you were gonna use your own points to reveal the last digit once you're done dealin' with me, but that's not bringin' you down to your knees, the way I wanna see."

I shrugged silently and internally clicked my tongue at Kirigaya's keen observation. I'd had 7 points at the start of Blank Code, and with the 7 Saionji had traded me, that meant I now had 14. If Kirigaya started with 7 as well, he'd need 3 more to reach 10 and reveal one of his own digits. I figured, therefore, that this trade would be a win-win for us both…but I guess fighting to a draw didn't sit right with him.

I bet I could poke around Eimei's students to find guys who'd trade me info and points, but the Eimei Network's supposed to be about "equal exchange," so if I wanna make a trade involving points, I'll have to negotiate individually with each partner… Do I really have time for something like that?

My hand tightened around my device as I thought hard over it. There were two high-ranking bonus slots left in Stage Three—or

one, really, if Kirigaya finished the Game before me. Considering that I could only make two trades per hour, I really wanted to find a way to earn 6 points for myself, then come back to quickly close out this deal with Kirigaya…

"Hyah-hah! Hey, come on, Shinohara. I know you've caught the attention of some real shady characters, but if you're gonna let guys like that break you as their toy, then you don't even deserve to be my *toy, man!"*

Kirigaya's voice rang loud, like he was enjoying every minute of this, and he hung up on me without hesitation. The silence that fell was broken by Himeji, whose silver hair rippled like silk.

"All right, Master, I'll prepare some fresh tea for you… That was good to hear from him, though. I was considering what kind of cheat we could use if he made an outlandish offer, but unfortunately—or fortunately, I suppose—I don't think we'll need any."

"Hmm, you think? This isn't the toughest problem in the world… but I wouldn't count on earning that high-ranking bonus at this point. Not unless I get Company help."

"Yes, well, in a way, this *would* involve asking the Company to help. But it wouldn't involve cheating, at least."

I lifted an eyebrow at Himeji's somewhat contradictory statement. She kept her eyes on me as she gently placed a hand on her chest and gave a slight smile.

"You could use *my* points. I earned a bonus in Stage Two as well, so I have seven points, just like Rina. If I entrust them to you, Master, that will easily satisfy your needs."

"…Huh? Wait, but—Himeji, how will you reach Stage Four, then?"

"There is no need for me to… Listen, Master. As Mr. Kirigaya just said, the real SFIA battle doesn't begin until Stage Four. The fighting will be fierce, like nothing we've seen so far, and realizing this, it's clear that I am not strong enough for it. But I will continue to be of service to my master—not as a player, but as your competent personal maid and closest adviser."

"…!"

"So I will use this opportunity to bow out of SFIA. If it is not too much trouble, please use these points of mine."

Himeji's statement was heartfelt, with no lies or exaggeration. The feelings behind it were so pure they shook my heart. *Devotion* doesn't even begin to describe it, and all I could do in response was nod and say "Okay." …I suppose she'd planned to drop out at Stage Three from the beginning, seeing as how she hadn't made any trades at all in the past day and a half and had been preserving her points the whole time. All so she could donate them to me.

No way I can let myself lose now…!

I covered my face with my right hand, concealing my expression, and steeled my resolve once more.

So after completing the trade with Himeji, I now had 21 points. I could fulfill Kirigaya's demand and still have enough to reveal my final digit all by myself. So I contacted him again, and he laughed in my face as we completed the trade we'd arranged earlier. The second digit of my passcode was a 1, it turned out, and I wasted no time promptly paying 10 points to reveal the fourth as well. At long last, I had my full passcode.

"The passcode's 8136… And we're done."

The moment I typed it in, the words STAGE 3 COMPLETE flashed on the screen, accompanied by a sound effect like a jail door being unlocked. The Game was complete, and while the Hexagram had put a stop to my cheating, I'd found a way through.

I wouldn't have had any complaints if I'd also managed to earn that high-ranking bonus, but…

"One moment, Master. Allow me to check the overall rankings," Himeji said quietly as she worked her device. Libra was constantly updating their Game rankings, so she didn't need to hack into anything to get that info.

"I'll read the rankings from the top. The first person to complete the Game was Ms. Misaki Yumeno, a first-year student at the Amanezaka School. The second was Ms. Sarasa Saionji, Empress of the Ohga School. Next was Toya Kirigaya, the Absolute Monarch of Shinra, and… Oh?"

"…? What's up, Himeji?"

"Oh, um… Well, the final person to gain the high-ranking bonus

was Mr. Kaoru Saeki of the Suisei School. He slipped into fourth place a hair's breadth ahead of you, Master."

"Wha…?!"

My eyes widened at this slight disturbance in Himeji's report. He'd got me good, it seemed. Saeki probably had an Ability that monitored my progress. Maybe it was just a coincidence, but at most, it had only been a couple of minutes between Kirigaya winning and me following suit. Logically thinking, this was probably a deliberate move to slip in ahead of me. Kaoru Saeki, top player for Suisei in the Second Ward and leader of the Hexagram…had figured out his own passcode long ago, then waited until I had mine before typing it in. In manipulating the rankings like that, he was establishing a clear hierarchy between the other players.

That's how badly he wants to crush me…?!

I clenched my fists and gritted my teeth. Seeing things work out exactly as my opponent wanted was incredibly frustrating. But there was no changing the results now. For the first time in this event, I'd missed my chance at a high-ranking bonus—but as I stewed over that, my device vibrated in my pocket. Looking at it, I saw the name of Shinji Enomoto on-screen.

"Hello? It's me, Enomoto. I saw that you cleared Stage Three just now. I had wanted to contact you a little earlier, but I didn't want to interfere with your tactics. Is now a good time?"

"…? Sure, it's fine, but…did something happen?"

"Yes. And it's not particularly good news. In summary, I won't be making it to Stage Four."

…Huh?

Enomoto's shocking confession made me lose my train of thought. It took me twice as long as normal to wrap my head around what he'd just said—and then, at long last, I asked him a question.

"What do you mean…? You being eliminated is kind of a huge deal, you know."

"Hmph. To tell the truth, an unknown force has been trying to gain unauthorized access to the Eimei Network since yesterday evening. Leaving it unaddressed could result in a full takeover of our

system, so I'm afraid it requires my full attention for the moment."

"…?! That's what it was, huh…? Well, why don't you just shut it down, then? You've already done more than enough for us. And I'm sure the high-ranked players can make do without it—"

"No, we can't. With Nanase and Akizuki, at least, their whole strategy rides on the presence of the Eimei Network. If I shut them out—as well as all the other Eimei hopefuls—so I alone could advance… Well, it's just not possible for me, neither emotionally nor strategically."

"Yeah, maybe not…"

"See? All this means is that I'm taking myself off the board to strategize a little earlier than I did in ASTRAL. I happen to be good at providing support, too, so I can fight well enough even if I'm not on the main stage."

Oh man, are you serious? Enomoto's gone…

This unexpected turn of events left me speechless. First Himeji, and now our fellow ASTRAL teammate Enomoto was opting to bow out. I could understand both of their motivations well enough, but still, it brought home to me just how steep a challenge SFIA actually is.

"Now, Shinohara…"

Enomoto spoke up again, his voice slightly lower.

"I called it an 'unknown force' just now, but I have a pretty good hunch about who we're dealing with here. The ones trying to interfere with the Eimei Network are most likely the Hexagram group."

"?! …Are you sure?"

"No, there's no solid evidence. If it really is the Hexagram, I'm sure they'll cover their tracks too well to be detected anyway. But…in the Game last year, too, Eimei was stripped of their victory because of the Hexagram's wrongful 'justice.' It was such a blow to the confidence of our ace at the time, she never participated in the public Game scene again. That's what convinced me—there's nothing just about them. Not at all."

"…!"

"And that's why… If this was just some pranksters, I could leave

them alone well enough, but if it's the Hexagram, it's time we sat down and dealt with it. That's what I'm going to devote my time to. Our most efficient strategy here is to look ahead to the final stage, not just focus on the problem in front of us. I didn't have that luxury last year…but this year, I know someone else I can trust with the Game itself."

Enomoto's words made me fall silent. The concerns Saionji had told me earlier were now coming to the surface. The Hexagram, this evil-defying legion of justice—they weren't quite as squeaky-clean as they led everyone to believe. There was no telling what they might be hiding from the world.

I smirked at my device.

"Well, all right, Enomoto. Feel free to leave the Game to me. And at the end of SFIA, it's gonna be Eimei standing at the top."

LNN – Librarian News Network – Special Bulletin

SFIA: One Explosive Event After Another!

Highlights from the Action Up to Stage 3

SFIA, the blockbuster event that lights up the Academy every summer, has already seen intense drama in its first three stages! Here's a recap of the biggest news so far!

Suisei Stages Full-On Assault!

Although they hardly ever participate in interschool battles, the Second Ward's Suisei School (school ranking: 2) has publicly declared war on Hiroto Shinohara alongside the Hexagram, the defenders of justice led by the charismatic Kaoru Saeki (third-year, Six Star). Saeki's second-in-command, Miyabi Akutsu (third-year, Six Star), along with Hexagram members from other wards like Koto Tsuzuki (third-year, Ohmi School, Tenth Ward, Five Star), will be joining him as they fulfill their public vow to catch Shinohara. The move marks a new, more public presence for the Suisei School that's sure to attract serious attention.

Spring Champs Eimei Rocked!

The Fourth Ward's Eimei School (school ranking: 5), winners of the May Interschool Competition in the spring, has been buffeted by one problem after the next. With the Hexagram accusing the strongest student in the Academy, Hiroto Shinohara (second-year, Seven Star) of cheating, the entire island has grown divided over whether his talent is on the up-and-up. What's more, Eimei's student council president, the "All-Seeing" Shinji Enomoto (third-year, Six Star), as well as Shinohara's personal maid Shirayuki Himeji (second-year, Five Star), both bowed out in Stage Three. Shinohara's still in the Game, but SFIA is bound to test the true talent of the Eimei School before it ends.

New First-Year Stars Catch Everyone's Attention!

Up-and-coming first-years always have a tendency to stake their claims to future glory in the Academy's summer event. Momo Asuka (first-year, Ohga School, Third Ward, Four Star) already drew heavy attention at the May Interschools, but she's far from the only one making headlines: Misaki Yumeno (first-year, Amanezaka School, Seventeenth Ward, Four Star) has fended off the Empress twice to finish on top in Stages 2 and 3; Mari Minakami (first-year, Eimei School, Fourth Ward, Three Star) has drawn attention for her hidden skills and as the younger sister of a past famed talent; and even Sana Nitta (first-year, Azuminodai School, Twentieth Ward, One Star), has made her presence known despite her low rank, so stay tuned!

Chapter 3

An Unexpected Traitor

#

In the end, Blank Code—Stage Three of SFIA—wrapped up on the third day after it began.

Libra had already published a list of everyone who advanced to Stage Four on its official channel—exactly one hundred people, as announced. Some schools didn't see any of their students make the cut, while others saw nearly ten people get in. Clearly, the level of cooperation between students from the same ward had made a big difference in the final results.

From Eimei, four people advanced to Stage Four, myself included. Nanase Asamiya and Noa Akizuki, both part of our ASTRAL team, made it through, which is great…but our last member was Mari Minakami, which I wasn't so excited about. The Five Star upperclassmen were all gone, and instead we had this Three Star first-year from the Hexagram with us, which was a drag. Still, no one should be blaming themselves for failing to make the cut. After all, we'd gone from a quarter-million people to a hundred—0.04 percent.

Even with those odds, though, the big movers and shakers from each ward had proven worthy of the challenge. Saionji, Kugasaki, Kirigaya, Kururugi, and Minami had all advanced, which was expected. And just like Himeji warned me, a lot of first-years were also starting to catch people's attention. Minakami was far from the only dark horse here—there was also Momo Asuka from Saionji's school, and Misaki Yumeno, who was still something of a mystery. As for the Hexagram itself, a decent number of members, including Saeki and his two top officials, had made it to Stage Four. With stars at stake from now on, there was no doubting that the battles would

quickly heat up in intensity.

"Hmm…"

So that's how things stood. And on the night Blank Code came to an end, we all gathered in the home theater at the back of the living room of my house to go over the rules of Stage Four, due to start in two days.

There were four of us here. Himeji was serving tea and snacks in her maid outfit, while Kagaya, sporting her usual sweatsuit and unkempt frizzy hair, was sitting cross-legged on the carpet. The final member, Tsumugi Shiina, the gothic-Lolita fantasy girl, was sprawled out on the sofa, snoring contentedly with her head on my lap.

"…Now, don't you think I have a right to be jealous? Of both of you?"

"Oh, uh… Um…"

Himeji was pouting just a little bit, her silver tray held against her chest…but I wasn't in this position because I wanted to be. The moment I'd arrived with Kagaya, Shiina had jumped at me, then eventually fallen asleep in my arms.

I was avoiding eye contact with anyone, trying to play it off like an uninvolved bystander, but Kagaya was grinning at me, her gear spread out all across the carpet.

"Aw, chill out, Shirayuki. She can't help it! That girl's been working nonstop since the event began. She's having *way* too much fun with the Game to sleep at all. It's so cute, isn't it?"

"Yes, and I do appreciate that. But her head is in his lap, you see? She was hugging him as if it were completely normal a moment ago, too. I fear she might be starting to get a little *too* close to Master. And…if I may be completely honest, I would have preferred she hugged *me* instead of my master. She could have rested her head on *my* lap, too."

"Mmm, but she's already asleep… Oh, then, Shirayuki, why don't you try touching her cheek real quick?"

"…? Well, all right…"

At Kagaya's urging, Himeji approached me, not sure what to make of the offer. "Excuse me," she whispered as she quietly bent down and gently let her gloved hand touch Shiina's cheek.

"Mmm… Hee-hee-heeee…"

I could feel Shiina shift position slightly in my lap. She probably wasn't conscious enough to realize it, but she was rubbing her cheek against Himeji's outstretched hand, and Shiina broke out in a contented grin.

"…! Th-this is…"

"…See? Yeah, it's real dangerous."

"It is. Who *is* this girl? She must've put all her points into the 'cute' stat. She's so soft, and smooth, and sparkly… Oh no, she's going to lead my master away from the path of righteousness!"

"No, she won't," I muttered to myself with a sigh. I looked at Himeji, who was still stroking Shiina's cheek as she said something like that… I have no objections to the claim that Tsumugi Shiina is way too cute, but she's cute in a way a much younger sister might be. It wasn't romantic, by any means.

Though, in terms of age, we're only two years apart… Wait! Ah, no, no, no!

I shook my head to get rid of the impure thoughts that had momentarily flashed through my mind. Perhaps sensing the jostling, Shiina let out a vague "Mmmph?" sound in her sleep and put her arms, covered by the gothic-Lolita dress, around my waist to avoid being shaken off. It was just… I dunno. Hard to keep my mind stable, I suppose.

Regardless, this was everyone joining in today's strategy meeting. After taking a quick look at the list of participants in Stage Four, I took another look over the rules.

"Stage Four of SFIA is known as Dropout Tamers, or DOT for short. This is a team battle loosely modeled on *Werewolf*."

Her silver hair gently swaying, Himeji had approached the large screen in the wall opposite the sofa and begun to lecture in her usual cool tone of voice. Werewolves made it sound rather ominous, but this wasn't some horror Game we were about to play. Instead, Himeji was talking about a genre of analog games that's grown popular over the past few years.


FWEHHH
POKE
POKE
RUB
RUB
Zzz

Tracing the origins of the game, it first saw commercial release in the US or somewhere similar under the name *Are You a Werewolf?* The game divides players into a "villager" team and a "werewolf" team, and the werewolves kill one villager per night. To avoid being killed, players use the daytime phase to discuss who the werewolves are, and the player they nominate is then burned at the stake. This cycle repeats, with the villagers trying to find the werewolves as quickly as possible and the werewolves trying to murder as many villagers as they can without being caught.

The keys to this game are making educated guesses and telling convincing lies. If you're a werewolf, you have to act like you're not and try to turn suspicion on someone else instead. Of course, you might not be the only person lying, so you also need enough insight to call these lies out when you hear them.

"So does Dropout Tamers play out in the same way?"

"Yes, Master, your understanding is correct. Take a look at this."

The screen suddenly switched to a stylish title logo, along with the rules presented in bullet points.

"Let's begin with the premise. DOT, the fourth stage of SFIA, is a Game played by teams of five people. However, unlike ASTRAL, where teams were based on your school, the teams for Stage Four will be picked at random from the remaining players. The groups will be announced tomorrow morning, and apart from no team having multiple members from the same school, the selection will be completely random."

"…I see. So it's a team Game where you're grouped with players from other wards… Sounds tricky."

"Mmm, maybe," said Kagaya. "You can't really trust your teammates at face value. Some people might just want to drag you down instead of trying to beat Stage Four…"

"Indeed. You must remain on high alert at all times. That being said, the players assigned to your team are your friends, according to the rules of DOT. You all work under the same victory conditions, and you'll be working through the Game together… Which brings us to the main issue."

Himeji waved her hand at the screen. The rule list suddenly went

dark, and what jumped out next was a more familiar sight—a bunch of monsters, the sort of fantasy creatures you see in manga and video games.

"The primary objective of this Game is, in essence, to collect the 'familiars' you see here," Himeji continued coolly next to the grotesque images. "These familiars are scattered across the island, and it's the players' job to physically travel to their location to obtain them. Teams win in DOT by collecting all the familiars in the list provided to them."

"Hmm… So the lineup that you need to win is decided from the start? Like, 'you need to collect this one, this one, and this one to win'? And if it's all on a team basis, too, does that mean different teams have different familiars to collect?"

"That's correct, Master. The victory conditions for DOT—that is, the types of familiars that must be collected—vary from team to team. All familiars are assigned a 'class' based off their rarity and strength…"

At a glance from Himeji, text appeared on top of the images of the familiars.

- **Class S Familiars:** The rarest type. Only one exists in the entire Game.
- **Class A Familiars:** Extremely powerful. Four types exist in the Game, with only one of each.
- **Class B Familiars:** Reasonably powerful. Ten types exist in the Game, with three of each.
- **Class C Familiars:** Found everywhere. Exist in essentially infinite types and numbers.

"Now, it seems that each team will be tasked with collecting three types from Class B, two types from Class A, and that one type from Class S. If you complete the list, then all members of the team advance to SFIA's Final Stage. The DOT Game continues until at least sixteen people advance."

"Sixteen out of a hundred, huh? …Wait. *Sixteen?*"

I'd been going along with Himeji's explanation so far, but that slight discrepancy made me raise an eyebrow.

"That's kind of weird, isn't it? If DOT's a team Game and each team has five people, shouldn't the number of player slots be a multiple of five?"

"That would normally be true, yes, but there's another element to this Game—the part similar to *Werewolf*, as I mentioned: traitors and elimination votes."

"Traitors and elimination votes…?"

"Yes… As stated, all five team members are given the same victory conditions, and if they complete them, they all advance to the final round of SFIA. But that's not the whole story. Each team also has one player assigned the role of 'traitor,' who is assigned familiars that only *they* have to collect in order to win. If the team completes the shared list, then they advance, but the *traitor* is eliminated from the Game. On the other hand, if the traitor meets their victory conditions before the rest of the team, then the traitor alone advances, and all the *other* members are eliminated."

"Ah, I see. Hence the *Werewolf* connection. We know there's a traitor on our team, but we don't know who—and the other four teammates don't know what familiars the traitor needs to find. So trying to figure that out is a big part of this Game."

"It certainly is. The other *Werewolf*-like element is the elimination vote, which is basically just like it sounds. Dropout Tamers is held daily from nine AM to five PM, and after the end of each day, there's the 'night' phase, if you will. During this phase, all players must vote for one person to be eliminated from their team by midnight. The player who receives the most votes will be kicked out of the Game, and any familiars they collected will disappear from the team's resources."

"…Oh? So you can't be eliminated fighting other teams? Just if your teammates think you're the traitor?"

"Correct, and this strategic element is one of the most vital elements of DOT. One person is eliminated from the team every day,

although it seems that if the vote ends up in a tie, then nobody will be eliminated. Therefore, the assumption is that teams won't have a full set of players by the time they complete their familiar list. Hence why having sixteen people in the Final Stage isn't particularly strange, after all."

"Ah right…"

I nodded in agreement with Himeji.

"So how do we collect these familiars…?"

"Well, there are two main ways. One is via quests. When Stage Four begins, there will be people called Quest Guides in various locations across the Academy, and if you complete the quest they assign you, you'll be rewarded with a familiar. The other way is through either combat or negotiation. You can either ask another team to give you a familiar you need, or you can seize it by force. Those are the main ways."

"Combat, huh…? And we use familiars to fight?"

"You guessed it, Master. As you said, combat in DOT involves having your familiars fight one another, like a few video games I could name. Each team chooses one familiar to fight for them, and the owner of that familiar becomes the 'main player' who controls the battle."

"Ah."

"Then all the team members, including the main player, choose a command to use in the fight. This command is, in essence, an order you give the familiar. These come in two types—base and skill commands. Base commands include things like stat buffs and debuffs that are available to everyone, but skill commands are the individual Abilities of the familiars themselves. Because of that, you can only use a skill command if it belongs to a familiar in your possession."

"Hmm… Okay."

So the main player deploys the familiar they'll use in battle, and then the whole team chooses commands to support that familiar. Skill commands are treated as being possessed by individual familiars, so if you want to increase your choice of Abilities, you'll need to catch a lot of them.

"Once your commands are picked, battle begins. The main players from both teams choose a command from the ones the team chose and apply it to their familiars, then each familiar attacks once. They have four stats: ATK or attack, DEF or defense, SPD or speed, and LP or Life Points. The damage dealt is calculated by subtracting the defense of the defending side from the attack of the attacking side. If either side's Life Points hit zero, the battle ends, but if not, the main players pick from the remaining commands and the battle goes into the next turn. Once the fight is over, all the familiars used by the losing team in battle—including those whose skill commands were used in battle—are forfeited to the winners. Yet, on the other hand, you won't lose any of the familiars you put into battle as long as you aren't defeated."

"…Mmm. I think I get the main gist. The flow of the battle itself isn't all that complicated."

"No, it's not. And because of that, it's quite easy for traitors to sabotage their teams if they want. For example, they might deliberately choose a skill command that will put their side at a disadvantage if used, or they might let the enemy seize a familiar they need to win the Game… It'll be the traitor's job to do all that and make it look natural."

I quietly thought this all over, including Himeji's observations.

There were a few other minor details to work out, but the general rules of Dropout Tamers were something like this: Players from multiple wards form teams that have to collect a given set of familiars to win the Game. However, each team has one traitor with different victory conditions from the other four. This traitor secretly interferes with the team's progress, since a team win in this stage means a loss for the traitor. It's the team's job to eliminate this traitor through the nightly voting. It certainly did seem to combine *Werewolf* with monster-collecting games.

What we're doing is pretty simple…but I think it'll actually be a real big challenge. It's nothing but high-ranked players here, joining teams and suspecting each other…and being able to vote people off the team, the Hexagram's accusations are gonna work against me. Even without that, there are people in my own school who'd like me

out of the picture. I'll need to come up with a proper plan…

I unconsciously bit my lip. I'd need to work with the Company to pick my Abilities, of course, but I'd also need to work closely with the other Eimei students who'd made it into Stage Four. If possible, it'd be best to have Enomoto assemble all of us tomorrow.

"Right. That should be a good place to end things today—"

"…Fweh?"

Just as I was about to wrap things up, I suddenly heard a slight mumble. I looked down to see that apparently Shiina had woken up. She rubbed her eyes with the sleeve of her dress, scoping out the room as she remained mostly draped over my body. Then, as she grew fully awake, her eyes began to sparkle at me.

"Hiroto, Hiroto! When's the strategy meeting?!"

"…Sorry, it just ended," I murmured, giving her a wry smile. But she was up now, so oddly enough, we wound up playing a four-player game of everyone's favorite console kart racer. It was such a normal, peaceful moment that I won't go over all the details (though, it goes without saying, it was super fun).

#

It was now around ten in the morning on August 1. At my summons—or, really, at Enomoto's—the Eimei School students filed into the council room.

I was more than familiar with most of them by now. In addition to Himeji and me, there was the old ASTRAL team of Enomoto, Asamiya, and Akizuki. Enomoto and Himeji were already out of SFIA this year, though, so this wasn't strictly a player-only meeting. The biggest change of all, though, was the final person. She walked into the room behaving like the perfect example of what every student should strive for in poise. Her long, flowing black hair, reaching down to around her thighs, swayed gently as she gave us all a dignified bow.

"I'm glad to meet all of you. My name is Mari Minakami, and I'm a first-year student here at Eimei. I know I still have a lot of room to

grow and mature, but I'll do my best for you, so thank you in advance for your help!"

Mari Minakami, the first-year, placed her right hand on her chest as she spoke, like she was giving an oath or something. We'd already known at the end of Blank Code that she'd advanced to Stage Four, so I guess she hadn't been joking around with that declaration of war, after all. She might be a valuable asset to Eimei, at least, but she clearly hated me, and the Hexagram group she belonged to was starting to make some shady maneuvers, too. I had to be wary of her for a number of reasons.

Regardless, Asamiya was the first to respond to Minakami's greeting.

"Mari, right? Okay, I memorized it. I'm Nanase Asamiya in third year! I'm pretty immature, too, compared to all these guys, but lemme know if you have any questions, okay?"

"Sure! Thank you very much, Asamiya!"

"Aw, thank *you*! You're such a sweetie! Do you think I could call you Marie from now on?"

"Ah… Yes! Of course! It's an honor having a senior give me a nickname!"

Minakami's face lit up with joy seeing Asamiya take a shine to her. I guess she isn't this totally straitlaced girl, after all, but someone capable of honestly expressing her emotions as well. (Either that, or she just saves all the 'tude for when she's talking to me… Not that I really mind, though.)

"Hee-hee! Okay, I'm up next! ♪"

As soon as Asamiya finished talking, Akizuki spoke up, leaping up off the sofa and nimbly putting her hands together with a smile.

"My name is Noa Akizuki! I'm Hiroto's…um, I mean, I'm Eimei's top idol! ♡"

"Oh, I-I've heard all about you! You have lots of fans in my class, too."

"Hee-hee-hee! Wowww! ♡ But then, I'm so cute, it's only natural, ain't it? ♪"

Akizuki gave a brief chuckle and smiled smugly hearing Minakami's response, then cast a glance in Himeji's direction… But

that exchange lasted for just a moment, and she quickly turned back toward Minakami with a raised eyebrow.

"I was just thinking… You have an older sister, don't you, Mari? A third-year at Eimei?"

"Oh, yeah, I do!" Minakami immediately replied, nodding emphatically. "Are you a friend of hers, Akizuki?"

"Sure am! ♪ Mayu's absent from school a lot, so we haven't gotten to hang very much, but we chat a lot online! ♡ She's actually told me some stuff about you, too."

"…! What did she say about me?!"

"Yeah, she's always talking about how proud she is of her supercute, talented li'l sister! ♪ Head of her class from the start, a potential future candidate for student council president, and a sure winner in the school beauty pageant… I thought she was exaggerating a bit at first, but maybe not, actually! Though, you're still just a *liiittle* behind me. ♡"

Akizuki accentuated her point by letting out a sly chuckle and poking her cheeks with both hands. Minakami nodded back, her face still quite serious.

"Yes, I know you're far more popular than I am, Akizuki. But hearing my sister said all that… It makes me a bit happy. She's such an amazing person, too."



"She is?"

"Oh, right, you've never met her, Shino."

Asamiya raised an index finger in the air.

"Marie's sister, Mayu Minakami, is, like, a total genius. She just sees the world differently from all of us, or… I dunno, she finds the answers to things in a totally different way. Anyway, it's amazing. I think she's got a one hundred percent winning record in Games, too."

"…Really? That *is* amazing."

That amazing stat made my eyes open wide. Then I remembered that Mayu Minakami *was* a name I'd heard before. She'd been listed as "one to watch" alongside Enomoto and Asamiya in the Fourth Ward Challenge back in April, and she'd also been picked to serve as our sixth member during the May Interschools. I'd never had any direct contact with her, but she must've been one of the Eimei School's hidden geniuses—and Mari here was her sister.

"Hee-hee…"

Minakami was clearly enjoying all this praise for her older sister, evidenced by her huge smile. But Enomoto was frowning slightly. He was sitting next to Asamiya, a little distance away from Minakami, with his arms folded.

"Hmm," he began, sullen as ever. "I'd like to say, though… Personally, I wish she would make more of an effort."

"You do?"

"Yes. Mayu's performance is a sight to behold, certainly, but that's only true when she bothers participating to the end. Otherwise, she either forfeits or abandons all her Games. In SFIA this year, too, she was eliminated in Stage One because she didn't even bother to leave her home. She's the kind of talent I'd kill to have in this room with us… For that reason, I have to say that her younger sister is far superior."

He didn't say it out loud, but Enomoto's light shake of the head made it clear how much he thought Mayu was wasting her talents. That was how highly he regarded Mayu Minakami, just as we'd seen back during ASTRAL. The lazy, natural-born genius of an older sister—and the serious-minded, honor-student-type younger sister. Their

personalities were complete opposites.

Just then…

"Hmm… I'm afraid I can't let that go unchallenged, Enomoto."

Minakami had been listening to Akizuki and Asamiya with a big smile so far, but now she looked a little peeved as she approached the table we were sitting around, her shoes clicking on the floor. Placing her hands gently on the table, she leaned forward to confront Enomoto.

"If you compare me to my sister, you'll find that Mayu is superior in every single category. However, your choice of words almost sounded like you were treating her like a fool just now."

"…That wasn't my intention."

"No, Enomoto, it doesn't matter what your intention was. What you were doing was berating my sister behind her back, wasn't it? People call that gossiping, you know, and that's not a good habit to have. In fact, it's completely unjust!"

"Ngh… Uh…"

This extended storm of valid arguments—or maybe his own realization that he'd been talking out of line—led Enomoto to mumble "…Sorry" to Minakami. Hearing this, she smiled and bowed.

"Well, if you're willing to apologize, then there's no problem, of course. And I apologize for mouthing off to you."

"Nah, that was totally Shinji's fault. He's got, like, no tact at all… But *wow*, Marie! I don't think I've seen anyone apart from Shino beat Shinji in an argument."

"Thank you, Asamiya. But that wasn't really an argument at all. I was simply following my own sense of justice…as a member of the *Hexagram*!"

If this was a manga, there would be action lines firing out from Minakami's face right now. Such was the force behind this statement. I thought I saw Enomoto's face twitch again when she said that magic word, but Minakami kept on going, a look of obvious pride on her face.

"Yes, the Hexagram, the legion of justice officially sanctioned by the Academy! You're familiar with them, right, Asamiya?!"

"Well, as much as anyone else, sure. They cracked open that

whole ‘illegal Ability’ case last year…”

“Right! I was in my last year of junior high back then, and not to get too personal, but I’d been dealing with a lot of grief. It was so painful, I felt like my heart was going to break at any moment…but then I saw the IslandTube coverage about that case, and the Hexagram… And it made such an impact on me! It was just astounding. I thought *Wow, there really* are *awesome people like that out there! This is who I wanna be someday!*”

It sounded like she believed that from the bottom of her heart. Minakami lifted her hand to the emblem on her chest as she stated her resolve to us, her voice sincere and resolute. Then, once again—or, really, for the first time since coming into the room—she turned toward me and Himeji.

“So I hope you’re ready to face justice, Shinohara…and you, too, Himeji. I might still be a neophyte in the ways of justice, but my seniors in the Hexagram are the best there are! If you want to apologize for your actions, now’s your chance!”

“You say that, but neither myself nor my master have anything to apologize for. Or should I apologize for my master being too strong in battle?”

“Not likely. You need to come clean about all your lies, your cheating, your villainy, and bow your head to the student body! I’m sure that only then will you find forgiveness. So…? What do you think? Can’t you see how wonderful that would be?!”

“Not really. Or at least, not right now,” replied Himeji.

“Agreed. Also, Minakami, can you stop talking like I’m guilty until proven innocent about all this?”

“I can see you’re both quite stubborn… But fine, if that’s what you want.”

Minakami fell silent and shook her head, her black hair gently flowing behind her. Then, her gaze openly challenging my integrity, she pointed an index finger at me and crowed like some great superhero.

“I’ll say it again: In this Game, I’m going to make you reform your ways!”

#

"Hmm… I think this is about all of it."

A few minutes later, having gotten through introducing ourselves to Minakami, we decided to move on to the main topic at hand—namely, our strategy for Dropout Tamers. To kick things off, Enomoto was projecting the list of basic rules he'd compiled on a screen behind our table. I had already looked them over, but put simply, these were:

SFIA Stage 4: Dropout Tamers (DOT)

DOT is a team-based Game, with players randomly split into teams of five. The object is to meet the victory conditions assigned to each team—which, in this Game, means collecting the familiars assigned to them.

Familiars are categorized by rarity—S, A, B, and C. Rarer familiars are stronger but are also more difficult to obtain. There is a single Class S familiar, four types of Class A familiars (one per type), ten types of Class B familiars (three per type), and countless Class C familiars. Teams must collect six familiars in all—one Class S, two Class A, and three Class B.

Each player begins DOT with one familiar, assigned at random and generally Class B or C. The four top finishers in Stage Three will be given an A-class familiar to begin with as their high-ranking bonus. Familiars of Class A or higher have unique moves in addition to the "skills" described below.

Familiars are mainly obtained by completing quests or seizing them from other teams. Many quests are dotted around the island, with the more difficult ones offering higher-rarity rewards. However, it is not possible to obtain a familiar if its maximum allowable

population has already been reached. (e.g., There can be only one of each type of Class A familiar, so if someone already has a certain type, it is no longer available as a quest reward.) Furthermore, if a player beats the Game or is eliminated, the familiars they had in their possession will become available as quest rewards.

Battle rules: During battle, both teams select one familiar to use. The owner of that familiar serves as the main player for the fight. After both teams select their familiar, all players on both teams choose a command (see below). Once this is complete, the battle begins. The main players of both teams choose one command from the list available and apply it to their familiars, which then attack once each. If one side's Life Points (LP) reach zero at this point, the battle ends; otherwise, the battle moves on to the next turn. At the end of battle, the winning team can obtain all the familiars used by the losing team during combat. The main player alone can also invoke preinstalled Abilities that directly affect combat.

There are two types of commands, base and skill commands.

Base commands: commands that all players possess. They cannot be seized from players, and their effects raise or lower a familiar's stats by 1 point.

Skill commands: commands that invoke the skills of a familiar. These are more powerful than base commands, but since they are linked to a familiar, they may be stolen from you if your team loses.

Every team has one "traitor." This traitor is given a list of familiars to gather that is different from the rest of their team. If the traitor can gather all of them before the team completes their list, the traitor advances to the Final Stage and the rest of their team is eliminated. If the team completes its list first instead, the traitor is eliminated.

Elimination vote: DOT is divided into two phases—daytime, from

nine AM to five PM, and nighttime, the rest of the twenty-four-hour period. The Game is played only during daytime, but each night, players must vote by midnight for the player they want to eliminate from the team. This is called the elimination vote, and the player that receives the most votes within their team is eliminated when the Game begins again the following day. (The eliminated players are announced at six AM.)

Three Abilities may be installed on devices for this stage; however, traitors may install four.

"Wow…"

Mari Minakami, sitting diagonally to my left, let out a sigh of astonishment as she looked at the slide. Despite their argument a moment ago, she was now giving Enomoto a polite, respectful look.

"Very impressive, Enomoto. I can't believe you put together such a comprehensive slideshow just one day after the rules were announced… No wonder you're the president of Eimei's student council. It's certainly inspiring *me* to work harder."

"…Mmm. Well, if you like it, that's all that matters."

Enomoto, not altogether displeased by Minakami's honest praise, replied bluntly with a nod. It elicited a slightly miffed "Hmm?" from Asamiya, who squinted at Enomoto, not liking the friendly attitude he was showing Minakami.

"It's all about the little details with you, huh, Shinji? How long did it take you to make this anyway?"

"Oh, it didn't take that much time. I was wrapping it up while I was explaining the rules to you last night, Nanase. If anything, *you* were occupying all my time."

"I… Well, that's because you keep treating me like such an idiot, Shinji! If you prepared this slideshow from the start, I would've understood it all just fine! Also, get some damn sleep for a change!"

"Don't worry. I'm receiving the minimum amount I need… And why do you think I bowed out of SFIA in the first place, Nanase? No matter what you say, I'm going to give you my full support in this

Game.”

“…! Come on, Shinji… That’s exactly the thing with you…”

Asamiya turned away to hide her reddened face, using one hand to furiously play with her hair. Enomoto, on the other hand, frowned a bit, as if wondering what he was being accused of. Then, giving up, he shook his head and turned back toward us.

“Now…given this Game, it’s not possible to cooperate with our fellow Eimei students as much as in ASTRAL. It takes the form of a team battle, but in practice, it functions more like a single-player match. Yet you still need to actively share information with each other—quest strategies, rewards, who should be in possession of each familiar, who the traitors might be, and so on.”

“Right, yeah.”

“Hmm. So for this stage, I think we should use this student council office as the Eimei School’s home base for all data processing. We’ll relay news from Libra and analyze what Shinohara and the other players give us, and if we discover anything useful, we’ll report it immediately. To more effectively share this, I’d like to see all of you back here during the night phase, after the Game ends for the day.”

“Understood, Enomoto!” Minakami replied snappily.

Enomoto’s request had mostly been aimed at the four people playing in Stage Four. Considering his suspicion of the Hexagram, he might’ve also meant it as a slight warning, but that didn’t seem to concern Minakami at all. Regardless, Akizuki and Asamiya nodded their agreement as well, so Enomoto’s plan was passed unanimously. Once it was time to get down to business, Himeji was the first to cut in with her cool, reserved voice.

“Now… What are all your teams like? Do you know if you’re the traitor and what kind of players you’re teamed up with? Because that’s going to affect our strategy a great deal.”

“Yeah, true, we need to talk about that, too. You’re always so smart, Yukirin.”

Asamiya was the first to respond, and she pressed a button on her device to project her team information screen.

“So,” she said, twirling a lock of blond hair around one finger, “I’m

not a traitor—I'm a proper team member! And I'm on a pretty dangerous team, too, with two Six Stars and three Five Stars. The main one to watch is… Hmm. Probably the Phoenix, huh?"

"The Phoenix… Oh, Kugasaki's on your team? Wow. I don't envy you."

"Yeah, but I probably have it even worse."

"…? You do, Akizuki?"

"Heh-heh… Yeah, almost certainly. One of 'em I don't know real well, but the others are all notorious top players. Hell's Priestess from the Sixteenth Ward. Not to mention Miyabi Akutsu from the Suisei School in the Second Ward. She's one of the Hexagram's top people, right?"

"Yes, she is! She's so strong, and kind, and reliable in a pinch that people call her Kaoru's right-hand woman… I'm so jealous you get to play a Game on her team!"

"Hmm. Jealous, huh? We're not really *friendly* teammates, though. I feel like it's gonna be trouble with a team full of powerhouses like this…but anyway, the Empress is also on our team! ♪ Your fated rival, huh, Hiroto? ♡"

"Rival…? That's not how I see it."

In terms of our standings, that's exactly what she was, but I denied it to stay in character.

Having finished introducing her team, Akizuki glanced at me for a moment. Before I could figure out why, she turned toward Minakami, her voice as sly as always as she put her right index finger to her cheek.

"And also, I'm the traitor! ♡"

Huh…?

That was a little surprising. The fact that she was a traitor was one thing…but should she really be telling us? We'd just been talking about how there was a Hexagram official on her team, so if Minakami contacted Akutsu, Akizuki would be found out and eliminated the very first day. But then again, maybe that was why. If Akizuki was kicked off after day one, it'd prove beyond a doubt that Minakami was leaking information. Maybe this was her way of seeing where Minakami's loyalties lay—with her Eimei classmates or with

the Hexagram.

In response, Minakami said, "Oh… You are, huh? Boy, that's rough. I'll have to make sure I don't blab about it…!"

She put her hands to her mouth, a serious expression on her face. I could immediately tell that Akizuki was more relaxed now. She must've decided that Minakami was "safe," so to speak, and I agreed with her. Mari Minakami just didn't seem like someone capable of lying so brazenly.

But even discounting that, Akizuki's got Saionji, Kururugi, and a top-ranking Hexagram member on her team—and she drew the traitor card? That's not gonna be easy for her…

I quietly shook my head as I thought it over. Akizuki's no pushover, of course, but it's fair to say she was coming in with a big disadvantage. Being a traitor was enough of a handicap, but she was being asked to trick a team that seemed virtually untrickable to me. I worried that her time in the Game would end before she could really stir the pot at all.

But anyway…

"Um… Is it my turn?"

Minakami, seeing that Akizuki was done, quietly spoke up. She looked pretty happy with herself, like she was itching to go next.

"Because *my* team is really awesome! I've got two Hexagram members with me, in fact! One is Koto Tsuzuki, an executive member in third year… And as if *that* wasn't enough, I've got our leader Kaoru with me, too! Being able to play a Game with these people… This alone makes joining SFIA worth it to me!"

"A team with the Hexagram leader and one of his top executives, huh? What do you think of that, Minakami?"

"Huh? I already said: It's great. It's not every day a coincidence like this happens, right?"

"A coincidence? …Hmph, okay."

Enomoto sounded like he wanted to delve into that topic, but Minakami appeared so sincere that he abandoned the idea.

Minakami gave him a questioning look, then turned her gaze on me.

"So what about you, Shinohara? I'm sure you'd make a great

traitor, considering what a liar you are…”

“Whether I would or not, I’m a regular member, sadly. Here’s my team lineup.”

I projected the screen on my device. There, the names of all five of us were displayed in the order of our wards:

Keiya Fujishiro—second-year, Ohga School, Third Ward, Six Star
Hiroto Shinohara—second-year, Eimei School, Fourth Ward, Seven Star
Shizuku Minami—second-year, St. Rosalia, Fourteenth Ward, Five Star
Kanade Yuikawa—third-Year, Ibara School, Fifteenth Ward, Five Star
Sana Nitta—first-year, Azuminodai School, Twentieth Ward, One Star

“…Whoa. Looks like Hiroto’s team is full of troublesome people, too! ♪”

Akizuki gave me an inscrutable sort of smile as her eyes ran down the list. She was right. People call Keiya Fujishiro the Final Weapon of Ohga, and Kanade Yuikawa is at the top of Ibara, although I don’t remember much about him apart from how breezy he is—and how annoying. Then there’s Shizuku Minami, the lazy genius who DearScript had just awoken. I wouldn’t want to cross any of these players if I could help it.

“But…a One Star? Funny to see someone like that.”

Asamiya was the first to bring up the question on all our minds, leaning forward a bit from her seat as she pointed at that unfamiliar name at the bottom of the screen—Sana Nitta, a first-year student at the Azuminodai School in the Twentieth Ward.

“It certainly is,” said Himeji softly, nodding. “Ms. Sana Nitta. I was curious about her as well, so I did a little research. There is nothing particularly notable about her background, but considering how far she’s advanced here in her first year, chances are she’s got some

kind of exceptional talent that's not reflected by her rank."

"Yeah. A super-dark horse, maybe."

Asamiya gulped nervously. And yeah, if a One Star first-year made it to Stage Four among all these seasoned fighters, there's no way she's some normal player. I'd need to watch out for her as much as all my other teammates—maybe even more so.

"Anyway, I think that's all we need to share. We're now going to work out a strategy taking everything into account… But looking at the DOT rules, we need to focus on not being suspected at all. Whether you're a traitor or not, that still holds true. No matter what your position is, if you're voted out, you've got no further recourse."

"No problems here, Shinohara. I'm in the Hexagram, you know, and a defender of justice would never tell lies. And I just *know* everyone will believe in me, too!"

"I love hearing that confidence from you, Marie. As for me… Well, I kind of get nervous easily. I'm afraid I'll screw up somewhere, to be honest."

"Hee-hee! You're so honest, Miya. Good thing this is exactly the kinda stuff I'm best at! ♡"

"Yeah, I'm sure you'll do great, Akizuki. You're the traitor, so job one for now is to remain hidden, look for chances to sabotage things, and try to cast suspicion on someone else. If you can find someone to attract elimination votes away from you, then perfect. What'd be even better is if the votes are spread out enough that nobody's eliminated before the next day… But the normal team members have to figure out who the traitor is, and while you'll have the numerical advantage at first, you could be uncovered in no time if you're not careful."

"…He's right. You know, for a liar, you have some pretty good insights, Shinohara." Minakami nodded earnestly as she lobbed that bit of casual criticism my way.

After working all that out, we decided to discuss our general strategy. Asamiya planned to install combat-oriented Abilities and try to gather a whole lot of powerful familiars. It was the brute-force approach, but it also made sense here. In this Game, a player's familiars are lost when the player is eliminated and go back into the

general spawning pot for quests, so your teammates will hesitate to kick you out if you have a lot of important familiars.

Akizuki's strategy as a traitor was very different, of course. Confusing the team was her primary objective. It seemed she had a few sabotage-type Abilities she could potentially tap into—such as Misfire, which would randomly change the votes each night, or Tryst, which let her contact traitors on other teams. As for Mari Minakami, all she said was "I'm going to fight head-on."

Well, then…

Dropout Tamers—the fourth stage of SFIA—was fast approaching.

#

"…Hello and welcome, every-nyan! This is Suzuran Kazami from Libra! One week after our brilliant opening ceremony, the Summer Festival on the Academy has finally reached Stage Four, the semifinals! Anyone who's seen the list of remaining players knows, but we're seeing a great mix of players for this round, from the kings and queens of each ward to the next generation of aces—and even some up-and-coming dark horses! It's the best combo you could ask for, and pretty soon, this battle's gonna burn hotter than the sun in summer! Get ready…and don't take your eyes off your screens for a single moment!"

It was Tuesday, August 2, shortly before the fourth stage was set to begin.

I was in the First Ward, waiting for my teammates in front of a train station. Dropout Tamers' daytime phase lasted from nine AM to five PM, just like Stage Three. You were free to spend those eight hours any way you wanted, but each team was assigned a fixed starting point on this first day… And that's where I was.

And also…

"Testing sound… Can you hear me, Master?"

"Yeah, loud and clear."

As usual, in my right ear, I had Shirayuki Himeji, who was

supporting me instead of playing in Stage Four. Lately, I've started to feel lonely without her by my side…or maybe it just feels like something's missing anyway. I dunno. But even if Himeji was here, the rules of DOT dictated that we were unlikely to share a team, so really, I think Himeji made the right call.

"*Thank you, Master*," she continued in my earpiece. *"From this point on, the Company will provide you support for DOT. Kagaya will be examining participant information in detail, Tsumugi will be analyzing Game data, and I will move around as needed and listen in… Or should I say, spy on each team. If there is anything you'd like to know, just ask."*

"Okay, thanks. But you know, my teammates—Fujishiro especially—are all really sharp, so I might have to turn off the audio on my earpiece sometimes. If I do, we'll switch to messaging."

"Very well. It's certainly better to be safe than sorry; however, we will need to discuss what to do if you and Ms. Minami disappear somewhere together—"

"…That's not going to happen."

I smiled at Himeji's hesitant concern, unsure whether she was joking or not. But just then…

"Well, well! If it isn't Hiroto Shinohara, the guy in all the news right now!"

He was already being too dramatic for my tastes. That was enough to identify him, but I still turned my head a bit—and sure enough, a familiar-looking guy was standing there. He was handsome, with a relaxed vibe, an easy smile, and a tall, slender figure. Kanade Yuikawa, a Five Star from the Fifteenth Ward's Ibara School. With a faint grin, he brushed his bangs back as pretentiously as possible.

"Looks like I've been beaten to the punch, huh? I wanted to be here first so I could greet everyone. I'm the only third-year on the team, after all, which makes *me* the most suitable candidate for leader."

"Oh? Well, sorry to get in your way."

"No, no, you don't have to apologize. I'm much more magnanimous than *that*, you know. But it's a strange twist of fate,

isn't it? We were so hostile to each other in the May Interschools, and now we're joining hands here in SFIA!"

Yuikawa spread his arms out wide, flashing his unnecessarily refreshing smile at me. He was already starting to grate on me. He'd been busy trying to regain his popularity after it hit rock bottom in the wake of ASTRAL, but judging by his sparkling demeanor, I guess the effort had paid off.

Regardless, he was now smiling and giving me a furtive look.

"And who knows? Maybe *that* win was all cheating, too… But what's the truth of it anyway? Was the Hexagram right about you, perhaps?"

"I dunno. Like Saeki said, the results of this Game will prove it one way or the other."

"Ah yes! Well, I look forward to it. Of course, I've been recruited by the Hexagram myself, but naturally, I turned them down. I'm not a peon who'd ever work below someone else, yet I'm still quite impressed they had the foresight to invite someone like me in! By the way, are any of our other teammates here?"

"Hmm? No, you're the second one. It starts in twenty minutes, so I think they'll be here any moment— Oh, here we go."

Before I could even finish answering Yuikawa's question, I saw a guy come out of the station and turn toward us. This was Keiya Fujishiro, and he looked just as much of a delinquent as ever, with dark-blond hair, a totally worn and rumpled Ohga School uniform, and enough piercings and necklaces to make him literally gleam. One glance at me, and he began speaking in a low voice, perhaps wary of the Hexagram's vendetta.

"Damn, you guys are early… You two have fought before, but once we're all here, we oughtta share our names and schools again, huh? I hate talking to someone when I don't even know their name."

"Yes, that's not a bad idea, Fujishiro. But don't you think it's bad manners to start bossing people around as soon as you show up? *I'm* the oldest student here, so I ought to be in charge of this team."

"Sure, whatever. But if you ask me, someone that intent on playing the big man on this team immediately looks suspicious. I dunno if you're the traitor or not, but you better start watchin' your

mouth real close."

"Uh… Aw, come on, Fujishiro. I know I'm strong in a Game, but there's no need to be *that* wary of me, is there? I'm just volunteering to lead us because I'm the most suitable person for the job, you see."

"…"

Fujishiro shot me and Yuikawa a withering look but relented without another word. Those had just been a couple of light jabs, but the hunt for the traitor was already beginning… Or the quest to frame someone else as the traitor, maybe. Any passing gesture or statement ran the chance of making people doubt you.

It's not like I thought the Hexagram's video wouldn't affect people at all…but it said in the rules that the traitor was picked at random. I'll just have to push my way through whatever doubts people have.

I thought this over as I waited for the rest of our team, but no one else showed up for the next fifteen minutes. The Game was starting soon, and if a team didn't have all their members assembled in time, they would be penalized with not being able to move for an hour. But just when Yuikawa was starting to look genuinely irritated…

"…Sorry, did I keep you waiting?"

Right before time was up, a girl finally appeared. She had no sense of urgency, and her quiet voice had no intonation at all. She was a second-year student wearing the elegant uniform of the St. Rosalia Girls' Institute of the Fourteenth Ward, a white hat perched on top of her short blue bob cut. Her long bangs cast a shadow over her face, which was so attractive it would take your breath away if you got a good look at her. Yet her sleepy eyes and generally drowsy vibe detracted from it a little.

"Hmm…"

Shizuku Minami turned her blue eyes on us all, then let out an audible sigh that was almost theatrical in its despair. For some reason, she started walking slowly toward me.

"I can't believe this," she said, sounding incredibly disappointed. "There was the name of this girl I don't know on the list, so I got all excited… But then I show up, and who do I find but a wannabe

ladies' man, a delinquent, and my stalker… This has to be a scam… Can I go home?"

"Of course not. And I can't vouch for the other two, but *I'm* definitely not a stalker."

"That's a lie… You've been following me around for the past month, and you no doubt engineered the hack of the century to land on the same team as me… How could I not feel endangered? I only give my body over to cute girls… That's it…"

"You don't have to be so guarded. I swear I won't attack you."

"…Hmm? Even though I'm so cute…? Even though I'm in the prime of my life…?"

"Your mood swings are as impossible to follow as ever, aren't they…?"

Sighing at Minami's quizzical face, I turned on my device just in time to see the digital readout on top of the screen turn nine o'clock. Flashy fireworks were going off all across the island, signifying the start of Stage Four in spectacular fashion. Looking at Libra's live feed, Kazami had already begun her mile-a-minute commentary of the proceedings.

"…Well, here we go," Fujishiro muttered, leaning against a nearby wall.

Dropout Tamers, the semifinal round of SFIA, allowed players to do whatever they wanted after this point. I hoped to get us moving with quests and combat and so on, but—

"Ugh… What's her deal anyway? Showing up late on the very first day…"

Yuikawa was impatiently tapping his foot on the ground. The four of us had all arrived on time, but our fifth and final member was a no-show, even now that the Game had already begun. She wasn't any top ranker familiar with events like this—she was a first-year student, and a One Star, no less. None of us knew her, and none of us had her contact information.

I bet I could get it from Kagaya, but I'd hate having to explain to everyone why I had it…

I bit my lip at this unanticipated hurdle. We'd already received our one-hour penalty for not having our entire team together in

time, and once that was over, we could leave her behind and finally get started. Beginning this Game one member down was a handicap I wanted to avoid, especially considering DOT's apparent strength.

"Okay, so since we're stuck here, why don't we see which familiars we have and come up with a plan of attack? We can introduce ourselves to each other while we're at it. If our last teammate doesn't show up by the time the penalty's over, well, so be it—it'll just be us four."

"…Sounds reasonable to me. I'm cool with it."

"Mmm, yeah… Honestly, if someone's gonna mess up the team dynamic *this* early, I'd just wanna cut her out right now. But if you're cool with waiting, then so am I."

"I'm fine with anything…"

But just as Minami was shaking her head, trying to wish all of this away, someone walking down from the main street interrupted her. She was a small girl wearing a baggy summer coat over an unfamiliar-looking uniform and a hood over her light brown hair. I couldn't be sure, but it seemed like she was our elusive fifth teammate.

"…"

She walked up without saying a word, then lifted the edge of her hood a bit and eyed us one by one, as if searching for something. The first impression I got was that she was extremely suspicious of us all. She didn't seem remotely interested in opening up to any of us, nor frightened.

But then, after examining us, she finally spoke up.

"…Sana Nitta. Good to meet you."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!"

The curt greeting didn't exactly impress Yuikawa. He pointed a finger at her, not letting the aura of rejection that surrounded her bother him at all.

"Hey, you're late on the first day and you're not even apologizing? How inconsiderate can you get, huh? You're lucky that everyone here is as forgiving as *I* am, because if this was any other team, you would've been kicked out a long time ago!"

"…So what? If you want to kick me out, do it."

“Wha…what’s with that insolent attitude?! We’re a team, you know! You don’t think you can win this Game on your own, do you?!”

Yuikawa’s questions were making him sound like a lecturing dad. Nitta, meanwhile, was as curt as ever.

“Nah. It doesn’t matter anyway. I’m not even interested in this Game.”

…Not interested?

That comment concerned me. It was such a strange thing to say. Any first-year who’d made it this far wasn’t just an average player—people were even calling her a dark horse. So how could she not be interested in this?

“Y-you…”

Yuikawa was still looking to lecture Nitta some more, but then Minami stepped in.

“Don’t be a bully. She’s cute enough that we should give her one or two free passes… I hereby find her not guilty. In fact, the leader (lol) should take full responsibility for this…”

“What are you talking about?! And you didn’t just add *lol* to the word *leader*, did you?!”

“…? Wow. Paranoid much…?”

Yuikawa stuck his finger in her face as Minami shook her head without concern. I suppose she found Nitta attractive enough to take her side or something. At least it would help spread Yuikawa’s anger around a little.

…Huh?

As I watched them, my eyes suddenly met Sana Nitta’s. She’d been staring at me for a bit, and she must have noticed me looking back, because she swiftly pulled down her hood. Based on that reaction, it didn’t seem like her staring at me had just been an accident. I still had no idea what she was up to, but I gave her a faint smile.

“Anyway… We’re all here now, so how about we start strategizing?”

Half an hour into Dropout Tamers, we were taking advantage of the one-hour shutdown caused by Nitta's lateness to check on each other's "starter" familiars.

As stated in the rules, all DOT players were given a free familiar to start off with. The four top winners of Blank Code were each granted a one-of-a-kind Class A familiar, while the rest of us had been randomly assigned a B-or C-class one. In addition to rarity and type, familiars also had individual stats and intrinsic skills, but we agreed not to tell each other about those right now. We had no idea who the traitor was yet, so revealing everything didn't seem too wise.

Considering that, here's what we all knew about our current forces:

- Keiya Fujishiro—familiar: Skull Knight (C)
- Hiroto Shinohara—familiar: Fairy (C)
- Shizuku Minami—familiar: Sixth Seduction, Succubus (B)
- Kanade Yuikawa—familiar: First Brimstone, Hellhound (B)
- Sana Nitta—familiar: Mithril Golem (C)

"…Okay. Two Class Bs and three Class Cs?" I mumbled to myself as I compared our five familiars.

We were never going to get a Class A familiar, so as far as initial hands go, it didn't seem that bad. The draw was random, after all, and we could have been dealt nothing but Cs. Thinking about it like that, I really couldn't complain.

Yuikawa, looking at his device, gave a satisfied nod.

"Pretty nice. Off to a good start, I'd say."

"…Huh? Too soon to say that, ain't it?" Fujishiro growled in a low voice, projecting his team information screen for us. "There ain't no point just checking our own resources. We can't determine their value until we figure out our victory conditions—where we're goin' and stuff."

"Huh? Oh right, yeah. That's exactly what I was about to suggest, actually."

"What a worthless leader…," murmured Minami.

"Wha—?!"

But by the time Yuikawa overreacted, Minami had already lost interest in him, so it went nowhere beyond that. As I watched them go at it, I checked the victory conditions for our group—Team VI.

Team VI Victory Conditions

If the following are in the hands of the surviving members, all members of Team VI except for the traitor will complete Stage Four and advance to the final stage.

- *Class S: Divine Messenger, Archangel*
- *Class A: Western Guardian, Byakko; Northern Guardian, Genbu*
- *Class B: First Brimstone, Hellhound; Third Gale, Hanuman; Ninth Thunderbolt, Anzu*

"Okay, one S-class, two A-class, and three B… Whoa! Ha-ha-ha! Look, Shinohara! We've already got one of these—my Hellhound! Wow, I really *do* have it. And what about you, Shinohara? Yours is just a mob—er, I mean, your C-class familiar isn't too useful, huh?"

"…Guess not."

I shrugged as I looked over the details of the Fairy I'd been given. I only revealed the rarity to my teammates, but even her stats were pathetic. She had a 1 for ATK, DEF, and LP—the lowest possible value—although it seemed like her SPD was pretty high to compensate. She'd almost certainly land the first attack in a battle, but since damage is the difference between your ATK and your opponent's DEF, nothing my Fairy unleashed was going to hurt at all.

"Well, it's random, so there's nothing I can do about that. But if *you* got one of the six we need, don't let anyone take it, okay?"

"Hey, who do you think you're talking to? I'm the best the Ibara School has to offer. If you think I'm about to make a mistake like *that*, forget it." Yuikawa smiled smugly and combed back his bangs.

"Let's hope so," I replied, before turning back toward Minami and

Fujishiro. “So that’s how it is right now. Like Yuikawa said, we already have Hellhound, so we only need five more familiars… And out of those, it seems like there’s a special way to get the Class S one. It looks like there’s a multistep S-class quest we gotta complete —finish one requirement, and the next one opens up, and eventually we’ll get awarded the Archangel.”

“Yeah,” said Fujishiro. “We gotta keep that in mind at all times… But in these early stages, we’re better just focusing on normal quests.” Arms folded, he cast a sharp gaze at the rest of us. “To collect familiars, we gotta either complete quests or fight people. But we don’t have any great resources right now, like extra familiars we can exploit for their skill commands, so any fight right now would be a coin flip, or even worse if we take on an A-class. That means quests come first. We gotta build our familiar library and power ourselves up for battle.”

“Yeah, I agree. And the first mission we’re given in the S-class quest is to complete one normal quest, actually. The question is: Which one should we pick?”

I looked down at my device.

The main screen of the Dropout Tamers app showed a list of the familiars in your possession, and you could swipe that away to bring up a map of the entire Academy. Tap the screen again, and it showed a close-up of the First Ward with several flag icons on it. I projected it for everyone to see.

“You see the flags on the screen? Those are the locations of the guides who give out quests in DOT. Each quest has a difficulty level, too, and the higher it is, the better the reward… In other words, the stronger the familiar we can get. The exact details aren’t revealed publicly, though. We won’t know the difficulty level or reward until we reach a guide, either.”

“Hmm? So for now…should we wipe them all out?”

“You don’t have to put it so violently, Minami. We *could* just take all the quests we see here, which *would* boost our power, but not all these quests will be useful. That wouldn’t be the most efficient way to go about this.”

“…? So what do we do?”

"Easy. We have five teammates, and I have to assume at least one of us has an exploration-type Ability installed."

With a subtle smile, I looked at Yuikawa, Fujishiro, and Nitta in turn.

"So can whoever has one step up for the team? Because if you're hiding it, and we find out later, that's some real *traitor* behavior, you know."

"…Tch. Fine," Fujishiro finally relented. "If you're gonna insist, I'll lend you this—Wide-Range Search. It'll show the difficulty and reward for each quest on the map."

"Oooh… Perfect. Our *true* leader comes through…" Minami clapped her hands, her face as expressionless as ever.

Fujishiro clicked his tongue a second time, then used Wide-Range Search. The moment he tapped his device, all the flags on the map turned red, indicating they had been "investigated." Now, you could just tap any flag to read all the details about that quest. It was a really useful Ability, just what I'd expect a Six Star to have.

Now it was time to split up and start selecting quests.

"This one rewards just a single C-class familiar… So does this one. The whole area here is kind of sparse loot-wise."

"Hmm. I see a tougher quest here… A chance at a B-class familiar. Wanna go with this…?"

"Nah, no way it's possible for us yet. With our current strength, we'd get our asses kicked."

"Oh… Too bad. How about this, then? The reward is C-class familiars for the whole team…"

"…Yeah, that's better. Pretty smart choice, coming from you."

Fujishiro nodded quietly at the quest Minami pointed out, and Yuikawa said, "No complaints here!" flashing a breezy smile for no reason. I was okay with it, too… But we had one teammate who gave us no feedback at all.

"What do you think, Nitta?"

"…Sounds good."

She gave me a curt sort of reply, like I'd expected. Once again, I couldn't really see what was on her mind, but I didn't think we had time to worry about that anyway. For now, it was time to get moving

with this Game.

"Okay, it's ten AM now. Let's get moving."

Having served our penalty, we decided to head out and tackle some quests.

We'd come to a remote part of the First Ward for our quest.

The quests in Dropout Tamers were generally provided by a "quest guide," meaning that instead of visiting a certain geographical location to start, it began by talking to the right person. Since the whole Game was being streamed on IslandTube, the quests were periodically shuffled between guides.

Which brought us to…

"Welcome, Team VI. I'm Sigma the quest guide, and this is a combat-style quest. You'll fight a simulated battle against the familiar I unleash, and if you win, you'll obtain the reward. Do you accept the challenge?"

"Yes, thank you, my lady," Yuikawa replied for us.

The quest guide, Sigma, was a woman sitting on a park bench reading a book. She quietly nodded with a meek smile.

"Very well. Then allow me to go over the details. In this quest, you are tasked with defeating my C-class Great Eagle. Your main player will be selected at random, and that person will then choose a familiar from their inventory to use in battle. Once everyone selects their commands, the battle will begin."

"Huh. So this is kind of like a combat tutorial?"

"That's right. The main player is chosen at random, and I am choosing the five commands myself… But otherwise, it's no different from a normal battle. Keep in mind that if I beat you, you'll lose any of the familiars you used."

"Okay, I got you. I'm a quick learner, you know."

Yuikawa nodded, looking satisfied with himself as he brushed back his hair.

The next moment, Sigma—still sitting on the bench—held out her right hand. As she did, a colorful wheel projected above her palm and began to noisily spin around. It soon slowed down, and once it

stopped, the needle was pointing at the space labeled *Sana Nitta*.

Minami sighed and turned her blue eyes toward the other girl.

"Too bad… I wanted to try it, just a little. Good luck, Nitta."

"…Yeah."

With a quiet sigh of her own, Nitta stepped forward. The next step was to choose a familiar, but since she had only her initial one, that phase ended automatically. The real choice to make was with the commands. Dropout Tamers offered two main types of commands: base commands available to everyone that strengthen or weaken their target—and skill commands that tap into the skills of the other familiars you have. These are more powerful, but we risked losing more familiars if we were defeated, and that was too big a risk to take for now. Better to just play it safe and use the base commands.

"…All right. Everyone has entered their commands, so now we will begin combat."

Like a symphony conductor, Sigma raised her right hand—and at once, a Great Eagle, larger than a grown man, appeared above her head. A high-pitched screech rang out, and the wind from its huge wings swept across our faces. We all knew it was an augmented-reality theater piece, but it was still quite impressive.

"…"

Nitta, on the other hand, was standing with her hood up, not at all intimidated by the ferocious-looking eagle. She was using the Mithril Golem, which was currently poised in front of her, as if protecting her. It was at least ten times larger than the Great Eagle—in fact, it very well might have been taller than the length of the park we were in.

Behind Sigma and Nitta was a floating display showing their familiars' stats and commands.

Quest Guide: Sigma **Familiar Used:** Great Eagle (C)

Familiar Stats: ATK 4, DEF 2, SPD 3, LP 3

Set Commands: Speed Up *Life Up* Attack Up *Defense Up* Defense Down

Team VI: Sana Nitta **Familiar Used:** Mithril Golem (C)
Familiar Stats: ATK 3, DEF 4, SPD 2, LP 4
Set Commands: Attack Up *Defense Up* Defense Up *Defense Up* Speed Down

"Combat will now proceed as follows," Sigma said gracefully, gesturing at the Great Eagle behind her to stay in place. "First is the Order Phase. Both tamers will select a command from their set list and apply that effect to a familiar. Next is the Battle Phase. The familiar with the higher speed attacks first, followed by the other. Simple. However, the hit rate of an attack is based on your respective speeds—to be exact, it's your speed divided by the opponent's speed. If an attack hits, the damage is calculated by subtracting the opponent's defense from your attack. LP represents the life force of a familiar, so the battle ends if either runs out."

"…Wait, one quick question. I can see that commands like Attack Up and Defense Down correspond to strengthening and weakening a familiar, but how long do their effects last? Do they only work for the Battle Phase that comes right after?"

"Good question, Hiroto Shinohara. The answer is no. Unlike skill commands, which are single-use and last for just one turn, all base commands are permanent. That's the first advantage those commands have."

"Wow, I see…"

I nodded, satisfied by Sigma's response. If the base commands' effects continue into the next turn, that's one more thing we have to think about. We'll have to carefully build up our strength considering the stats and set commands on both sides of the battle, while making sure we don't sabotage ourselves.

"*But it looks like we're in the clear this time*," Himeji, who must have been watching on her device, whispered through my earpiece. *"Nitta's Mithril Golem has 4 defense, and Sigma's Great Eagle has 4 attack. She has Attack Up and Defense Down in her set commands, but Nitta can use her pair of Defense Up commands to cancel them out. If you do that in the first two turns, the Great Eagle will have no*

way to damage the Mithril Golem.”

Right, yeah… That shouldn’t be a problem.

I internally agreed with the calm voice in my ear. In a normal battle, Abilities would be on the table as well, but we were dealing with a quest guide this time. There was no need to factor in the unexpected, so this should end pretty quickly.

“Now, let’s move on to the Order Phase of turn one. I will use this.”

All the commands displayed behind Sigma turned dark for a moment, then one of them floated forward face down. I figured both commands must be revealed at the same time, but Nitta hadn’t chosen one of her own yet.

“…Dude, don’t just stand there like an idiot! If you don’t know, then—”

“It’s not like that.”

Fujishiro, unable to bear it any longer, tried to speak up…but Nitta, hood pulled down over her face, shook her head and cut him off. She fell silent for a moment, hesitant, but then selected a command. Her menu animated the same way as Sigma’s, her chosen command floating out in front of her window.

“All right. Let’s begin the Battle Phase, then.”

Sigma snapped her fingers. At that moment, the two chosen commands simultaneously flipped over, revealing themselves.

For starters, Sigma had chosen the Attack + command. A red effect shimmered over the Great Eagle’s body, and a +1 was added to the ATK stat displayed behind her. Counting the base stat, her familiar’s ATK was now 5.

On our side, Nitta had chosen the Defense + command, sticking to a textbook strategy. She’d come up with the correct answer in the end, and in front of her, a defense-boosting blue effect shimmered over the Mithril Golem…

“”…Huh?””

…or it should have, but instead it was absorbed by the Great Eagle.

Then, before any of us could react, the attack-and defense-boosted Great Eagle let out a cry and soared into the air, swooping

right into the Mithril Golem. The damage was only 1, but the Golem was driven one step backward. It tried to fight back with a haymaker punch, but since its ATK was equal to the eagle's DEF, it didn't do any damage.

"Nitta…? What the hell are you thinking…?"

After a moment of stunned silence, Fujishiro was the one to finally comment on her abnormal behavior, but Nitta had already chosen her next command. Both sides opted for Defense Down in turn two, but now both debuffs were applied to the Mithril Golem, cutting its DEF down by two. Then the Great Eagle struck again—and the blow to the golem's now-fragile frame did three whole points of damage. That took its LP exactly down to zero, and the mithril sloughed off the golem's body, reducing it to a mere pile of rubble.

Which meant…

"…That is the end of battle. The quest guide team is the winner, so I will now confiscate the Mithril Golem you used in combat. Um… You can challenge this quest as many times as you like, so let me know if you want to try again, all right?"

Sigma, looking a little flustered at this unusual ending, bowed and sat back down. Her Great Eagle, doing lazy circles in the sky, quickly disappeared.

"…Ha-ha!"

Nitta, looking back at her stunned team, gave us a supremely vague smile. It was hard to gauge the meaning behind it. Was she looking down on us? Had she given up? Was she trying to act tough? She walked back to us, her footsteps weak as she held her left arm tightly with her right hand. Then she said in her gravelly voice:

"Yes… That's right. I'm the traitor on this team."

"…?!"

I unconsciously clenched my fists. That's about all the outward emotion I expressed, but my mind was bursting with questions. My thoughts ran in circles, unable to accept the reality in front of me.

The traitor… The traitor?! What's she talking about? I was

wondering what kind of hidden talent this dark horse might have, but…what the hell's going on?!

So from the very first day, Dropout Tamers got off to a pretty rocky start.

Chapter 4

The Rapture

#

"Wha…what d'you mean by *that,* huh?!"

We had just been insta-defeated in our first quest on the first day of Dropout Tamers, and now we were angrily confronting each other in a corner of the park. I was not terribly surprised it ended up like this—just a moment ago, before our very eyes, Sana Nitta had basically self-destructed. After debuffing her own familiar and buffing her opponent's, she'd been defeated without dealing a single point of damage, losing her Mithril Golem without even putting up a fight. Nothing could have disrupted our team any worse than that.

"What kind of a battle was that?! And you're the *traitor*? Did you just say you're the traitor?!"

"…Who cares? Like, does it even matter?"

"…! I'll be damned. We were tricked, after all. So it wasn't Shinohara pulling our strings—it was *you* from the start!"

Yuikawa walked up to Nitta in a rage. Nitta, on the other hand, had fully regained her composure, that pensive look during the battle nowhere to be seen. But once again, a girl with sleepy eyes and blue hair stepped in between them.

"Stop… It's not nice to terrify a little girl. I'm going to fine you five million yen…"

"What?! Quit talking nonsense! You're every bit a victim here, too! Why are you defending her?!"

"Because Nitta's cute, and you're not… It's the natural way of things. Whether Nitta is a traitor doesn't matter. It's not even a topic for debate…"

Minami shook her head, her hair bobbing slightly. Yuikawa was

about to break into another tirade, but Minami, anticipating it, continued speaking calmly.

"Besides… If Nitta *is* the traitor, then it's good for us that we discovered it so soon, right…?"

"Wh-what?"

Yuikawa's voice rose in bewilderment for a moment, but then he reluctantly nodded.

"Well…yes, you *could* think of it that way. We know that every team has one traitor, so maybe sacrificing a C-class familiar to find them out wasn't such a bad trade-off…"

"Exactly… So it's actually a *good* thing. Nitta did something good, which makes her a good person. You should apologize to her right now… On your knees…"

"Oh yeah, sure. Sorry I hurt your feelings jumping to conclusions — No way, this is nuts! I didn't do anything wrong! It's all *her* fault!"

"…"

"Can't you say something, at least?!"

Nitta stared coldly at Yuikawa as he played right into Minami's games. Yuikawa still had a lot of problems with all this, but he finally just muttered, "*Damn* it!" and clammed up. I'm sure he didn't have a change of heart, though. By this point, he was ready to all but execute Sana Nitta.

Well…clearly, what Nitta did was detrimental to the team. If she's not the traitor, then I don't understand why she'd do something like this.

I quietly thought this over. Really, if you gave it some contemplation, any player who obstructed their teammates like that had to be a traitor. But still, I couldn't help but feel that it was too dangerous to conclude Nitta was our traitor based solely on that one piece of information.

I mean, what kind of traitor would declare it out loud like that? She'd do a lot more damage if she quietly sabotaged the team over an extended period of time, like Akizuki was planning to do. But here's Nitta, turning traitor in the most obnoxious of ways and even confessing to the deed. Was there some meaning behind that act…?

Maybe I was being a little cynical, but it certainly seemed like the

most natural way of looking at this. Dropout Tamers, after all, was a pretty complex Game. It might seem like a straightforward team battle at first glance, but since each team's players all came from different schools, there was a good chance they'd act against the team's best interests even if they were *not* a traitor. With all these intertwining motivations, it was just too early to name a traitor definitively.

"Hmm…"

I don't know if Yuikawa reached the same conclusion, but in the end, he decided not to change his stance on Minami or Fujishiro, either. Basically, he couldn't be too sure who the traitor was, but he wanted to keep them under observation for a little while longer. The problem was that leaving Nitta alone could lead to even more damage soon…but Yuikawa had a solution for that.

"I happen to have an Ability called Seal. It's so cool and elegant that of *course* it's a perfect match for the best from Ibara. It lets me temporarily remove a target player from interacting with a Game. This way, if I use it to target Nitta, she won't be able to participate as the main player or in the command-selection phase."

"…Oh? That's a weirdly perfect Ability for this situation, Yuikawa. I guess you originally intended to use it on an opponent."

"…Oof. Your mind works fast, Seven Star."

Yuikawa nodded, not so smug anymore. Thanks to that Ability, though, Nitta wasn't going to join us in quests or combat for a little while. Using Seal on a teammate is an unusual move, but it made sense if you thought about it as us keeping a traitor in check.

With Nitta's potential rampage averted, we returned to Sigma and took on the same quest again. This time our main player was Keiya Fujishiro, the Final Weapon of Ohga, and he struck down Sigma's Great Eagle with predictably perfect gameplay, ending the battle in just two turns.

"…I lose," the quest guide said, smiling softly at us. "You are a strong team, indeed."

"Hee-hee! Aw, you'll make me blush…"

"Why are you acting all embarrassed, Minami? You didn't even *do* anything!"

"Like I need *you* telling me that…," she said, brushing off Yuikawa. "But listen, quest lady, I wanted to ask you something earlier… What'd you mean by the 'second one'?"

Sigma raised an eyebrow at the vague question, but Minami kept going.

"You said earlier that the permanent effect of base commands is their 'first advantage'… You wouldn't have phrased it that way if there wasn't at least one more advantage… So what is it?"

"…That's very clever of you to notice," Sigma responded with a nod.

She then told us about chain commands, one hidden feature of DOT. It was definitely something worth hearing about, so we discussed it for a while around the bench with Fujishiro and Yuikawa.

"…"

Meanwhile, Nitta, her hood over her face, looked down quietly biting her lip.

#

"Following the S-class quest, next we need to have a real battle," Fujishiro said, projecting the screen of his device.

Now that Sigma's quest was over, we were headed for the train station to move to a different area.

"To be exact, we have to engage another team in a fight and win against them. Another tutorial mission, I guess. It must be set up so you learn all the rules on the way to getting that S-class familiar."

"Yeah, but even with the C-class familiars we got in that quest, considering the hour of time we lost, it's still too early to attack other people. We should at least wait until we're a little stronger."

"That sounds pretty wimpy, coming from you…but you're not wrong. Our team's probably toward the bottom in terms of strength right now," Fujishiro said, nodding quietly.

He might have a bad mouth, but he truly was the Ace Behind the Curtain for Ohga, calmly analyzing the current situation for us.

"Okay, so then next, we'll try a slightly harder qu— Hmm?"

As we were strategizing on our way to the station, all our devices suddenly beeped a sharp warning sound, and an alert reading *Another Team Approaching!* appeared on Fujishiro's projected screen. We couldn't see them, but they must have been pretty close.

I touched my right ear—a signal that I was requesting information—and Himeji immediately replied.

"That would be Team XII… They started from the Second Ward. They belong to the following schools: Shinra, Seventh Ward; Kagurazuki, Ninth Ward; Ohmi, Tenth Ward; St. Rosalia, Fourteenth Ward; and Soken, Nineteenth Ward. You wouldn't know any of them, Master, but their average rank is 4.8."

That's really high…!

Maybe I shouldn't be so surprised, but that meant nearly all the team members were Five Stars—another sign of just how high-level the fight was here in the semifinal.

"Tch… Okay, time to vote."

Fujihiro's attention was already away from his blaring device.

"No matter how you slice it, they're comin' for us. We don't know what they want, but if they ask for a fight, the Game rules say we can't turn 'em down. But the only way to send a request is if you're within ten yards of the target. We still got plenty of time to make a run for it."

"I don't see that as an option. Running is the absolute *least* suitable plan of action for someone like me… But just so I'm clear, how would we escape them, exactly? If they want to fight us, simply running won't be enough to lose them, I don't think."

"Are you really that stupid? I ain't asking everyone to run a marathon. Look, as far as DOT's concerned, a team needs to be at least two people. I'm sure there are exceptions to that rule… But regardless, that's something we can take advantage of."

"…? Uh, how?"

"Huh? Do I really have to spell it out—?"

"You're saying we should split up five ways, right? If we're all moving separately, they can't send the request, since there's no 'team' to send it to," I said quietly, picking up Fujishiro's explanation where he'd left off.

It *did* seem like the best move for us right now. We'd fan out, lose the team approaching us, then regroup. It seemed like a pretty foolproof way of avoiding combat in DOT.

However…

"I'm sorry, but that won't work…"

Just when our plan was almost set in stone, Minami denied it out of hand. When I turned back to ask her why, I saw a strange sight.

""…""

The ever-silent Nitta was tightly holding on to Minami's hand, and Minami was returning the favor, not looking all that unhappy about it. The sight caused my mind to freeze for a moment, but I soon understood. Nitta was probably trying to stop Minami from moving away from her…thus foiling our "fan out and regroup" strategy and preventing our escape from Team XII.

"Hee-hee… Nitta is all mine. Mutual love… Mutual affection…"

I doubted Minami was unaware of Nitta's intentions, but she didn't seem interested in breaking free of her grip. The sight made Yuikawa turn visibly paler.

"Wh-what kind of crap are you pulling now?! That's a traitor move! If you two stick together, we won't be able to avoid fighting them! I wanna get *out* of here!!"

"…? Running away is such a bother… All we have to do is win. Am I wrong?"

"…! No, but…!"

"Then be quiet… I'm busy getting my fill of Nitta here…"

I don't know if that counted as refuting Yuikawa's opinion, but it sure stunned him into silence. A moment later, Minami began intertwining her fingers with Nitta's. As for Fujishiro, he'd probably given up on trying to escape the moment this conversation started. He let out a sigh, his fingertips pressed to his forehead.

And so—

"…Yo, are you guys Team VI?"

We encountered them less than a minute later.

The first to speak was a party-boy type with long dyed-brown hair. He must've been the leader, because the rest of the team was standing behind him, watching how things went down. I recognized

the St. Rosalia uniform one of the girls was wearing, which elicited a little "Ah" from Minami, and the girl bowed in return. They must've recognized each other, at least. Perhaps they'd met up at a pre-Game strategy meeting, like what we'd staged at Eimei.

Regardless, the brown-haired guy kept going.

"Yeah, so I'm Toshimitsu Komaba, third-year Five Star from the Kagurazuki School. I'm in charge of Team XII here, and your leader's…the Seven Star, right?"

"I'm not the leader, exactly, but I'll talk with you. Stage Four started just a few hours ago, you know. What would you want from us now?"

"Well, we're kinda in a hurry, you know? This is a great chance to crush someone like you, so…yeah, my heart's about to jump outta my throat here, man. Plus, if I defeat you, I'll become a 'defender of justice' like the Hexagram, maybe, huh?"

Komaba chuckled maliciously, an expression that said all I needed to know about his personality. He smirked and held up two fingers.

"So I'm gonna give you two options. The first is a trade. Provide the resources we want, and we're all good. You give us all your familiars…and in exchange, we'll give you a single C-class Slime. Not a bad deal, huh?"

"I dunno about that. If you're serious about it, I think you need to get your head checked."

"Ha-ha! Oh, I'm *totally* serious, man, trust me! Listen, Shinohara, we've beaten four quests and two other teams in battle. We got more familiars, and *better* ones than you. And don't try to escape halfway through, either, okay? 'Cause I'll take you for everything you got and doom your entire team! That's your second choice, by the way."

Komaba was defiantly, belligerently egging us on. I took it in stride, but inwardly, I wasn't liking this much.

Ugh… If the terms were better, I'd totally agree to a trade…

In Dropout Tamers, it was perfectly fine to make an opponent give you familiars in exchange for letting them go without a fight. However, that only applied if both sides agreed to it. Expecting to take all our familiars and give up just one C-class familiar was asking

way too much. Which made the first option not even worth considering.

"However, there is little doubting that they have an abundance of resources. Almost three times as many familiars as your team, in fact. Plus, Mr. Komaba probably has access to B-class familiars… So I'm afraid you cannot even serve as the main player against him, Master."

…Yeah, good point!

I mentally held my head in my hands as I listened to Himeji's voice. She was right. In this Game, if you initiate a battle, your team's free to pick any familiar you want… But if you're attacked, you can only choose a familiar of the same rarity or better. If you don't have a suitable one, the attacking side apparently gets to choose which familiar of yours they'll go up against.

With that in mind, me and my two C-class familiars couldn't help in a fight against Komaba. In fact, only Yuikawa and Minami among our team had B-class familiars at all. It'd have to be one of them, but…

If Nitta isn't the traitor, it's highly likely it's actually one of them…

I didn't want to think about that possibility. It was the worst-case scenario, really. For the traitor, this battle was a great chance to (1) lose while making it look unavoidable, and (2) give away a rare familiar to keep us from winning. The traitor would be just as far away from winning, but it'd still be a pretty advantageous situation for them.

But well…if we were at this point now, I might as well take a chance.

"Minami."

"Ah! …H-how do you know my name? Are you a stalker…?"

"Are you gonna do that every time, or what? Look, can you fight this battle for us?"

"Wha—?! Hold up, wait a minute, Shinohara. *I've* got a B-class familiar, too. You think that stumpy li'l girl is more trustworthy than *me*?"

"Calling me stumpy is going *way* too far… I look amazing when my clothes are off, you know. As you well know…"

"I don't. Yuikawa, the B-class Hellhound you own is tied to our victory conditions, so we gotta avoid any possibility of it being taken, all right?"

"Well, if you say so…"

Finally persuaded, Yuikawa reluctantly backed down. Now we just needed Minami's okay. The three of us looked in her direction. Her hand was still clutching Nitta's. She was the Sleeping Lioness, a second-year at St. Rosalia Girls' Institute in the Fourteenth Ward, pretending to be a plain, mild-mannered girl to hide all her natural talent…and now she was staring straight back at me. She shook her hair a bit, her expression blank.

"All right, then. This'll probably be over fast…so forgive me if it's not all that exciting."

We were stationed in the traffic circle in front of the First Ward Central Train Station, and the battle between Komaba of Team XII and Minami of Team VI was already attracting a large crowd. This was one other unique trait of SFIA; being held during summer break and broadcast by Libra, you could easily travel to any battle you saw on the stream and watch it live if you wanted. Some players even had dedicated fans following them all over place, like pro golfers on an eighteen-hole course.

"…Peace!"

The amount of attention focused on Shizuku Minami, in particular, was staggering. St. Rosalia Girls' Institute didn't make island-wide news all that often, and now one of their students was in the semifinal. Between that and her rapid promotion to Five Star, Minami's hidden talents were clearly bubbling up to the surface, making people across the Academy reevaluate their opinions of her. That lazy, sleepy attitude, combined with her natural beauty, was undoubtedly another attraction.

As Minami looked at the audience with a bored expression, her opponent Komaba shouted out to her.

"Hey! You're Shizuku Minami from the Fourteenth Ward, right? … Guess you're pretty popular, huh? Too bad you're gonna lose

miserably in front of so many people."

"Mmm… Well, you don't have to be so jealous. With *this* many people, at least *some* of them have to be your fans, too… About two percent, to be exact, I think. So good luck…"

"…Tch! You're really annoying, you know that?"

Her provocation made Komaba frown a little.

"I'm gonna wipe that smug look off your face—we're obviously gonna win anyway," he declared, taking out his device. "Come, Leviathan! I wanna see her face bathed in pathetic tears!"

The next moment, with an intense, low rumble, a long, twisting water dragon burst out from the center of the traffic circle. It was Second Torrent, Leviathan, a B-class familiar under Komaba's control. A huge amount of water swirled around its massive body.

"Mm…"

Even faced with this enemy familiar, Minami's expression didn't so much as twitch. She lazily waved her right hand to the side—then, a moment later, came the faint sound of footsteps. A woman with wings and a long tail appeared next to her in an extremely revealing outfit. It was Sixth Seduction, Succubus, another B-class, and her enticing, evocative body made the audience erupt in gasps and cheers.

"Hee-hee… By the way, this is what I look like naked. Just a little trivia for you…"

Minami was addressing us for some reason. We pretended not to hear her.

Regardless, now that both familiars were out, all five of us (Nitta excepted, thanks to the Seal) could choose commands. We had obtained new familiars in the previous quest, so we had more skill-based options now, but Minami asked us to choose certain commands for her, saying she wanted to "try a bunch of stuff."

Probably what that quest guide told us earlier. And yeah, if we can catch our opponent out with that, we oughtta be able to win easy… Guess I'll prepare for that.

I reached for the device in my pocket. Minami's strategy was, to put it simply, an advanced application of the base commands, requiring no skill commands at all. This kept damage to a minimum

should we be defeated… And if we did get beaten, we could issue another challenge that we should be able to win.

Soon, all the commands were set.

Team XII: Toshimitsu Komaba **Familiar Used:** Second Torrent: Leviathan (B)

Familiar Status: ATK 5, DEF 3, SPD 4, LP 4

Set Commands: Attack Up *Attack Up* Void Cannon *Constrict* Charge

Team VI: Shizuku Minami **Familiar Used:** Sixth Seduction, Succubus (B)

Familiar Status: ATK 3, DEF 4, SPD 5, LP 5

Set Commands: Speed Up *Life Up* Defense Up / Defense Up

"…Hmm. A lot I haven't seen before," Minami said quietly as she looked at the list of commands behind Komaba.

"Looks like it's time for me to pitch in," Yuikawa said smugly, brushing his hair back. "Activating the special Ability Basic Analysis… Mmm, yes, I see. Void Cannon is a skill command provided by the C-class familiar Lich. It's a move that skips your normal attack and instead preemptively deals three damage to the opponent regardless of their defense. Construct is the Leviathan's skill command. This skips your normal attack, too, but it sets a trap that deals one damage to your opponent every turn. Finally, Charge is a command from the C-class familiar Minotaur that doubles the attack of your familiar for one turn… Heh! How do you like my espionage skills, huh? You see how qualified I am to be leader?"

"His Abilities make him more suited for a support role than a leader… And really, I wish he would stop taking over my job like that."

I heard a slightly annoyed voice in my ear speaking over Yuikawa, but I couldn't really help Himeji. The Company is supposed to be top secret, after all, and if Yuikawa had the Ability to look up all that info, I didn't have to bother Himeji for it.

Now that we knew the effects of all the commands, I sized up the battle once more. They were both B-class familiars, but Leviathan's stats were probably better suited for combat. If you have a bunch of powerful skill commands, a high SPD would let you attack first, which was useful…but right now, having a high ATK and DEF meant a lot more. That, and our opponent's skill commands were a major threat.

We could've picked Attack Up as well, so it's not like we can't hurt him…but we're talking 1 damage at most per turn. It would take four turns to whittle down Leviathan's LP…but there's no way we'd last that long. Are we really gonna be okay…?

The more I looked at it, the more uneasy I felt comparing our respective hands.

But Minami hadn't reacted much, and she quickly chose her command for the first turn. Seeing that agitated Yuikawa.

"D-don't you need to think about it a little more? You can't be so casual like that… It's on you if we lose, okay?!"

"…? No matter who it's on…I'm never losing to someone like this. It's fine…"

"Wha…? Y-you think so? Well, I wouldn't lose, either, but I'm just worried about how other people would handle this, okay? Don't get the wrong idea!"

"…? Oh… Well, okay."

Minami nodded slightly with a puzzled expression. Then she looked at me, smiled a little, and turned back to face Komaba. Our opponent was clearly irritated; he must have heard our conversation.

Then, at last, the battle began.

"First, I'll use Defense Up to reduce damage… My Succubus's defense gets plus one. Your normal attacks won't hurt her now…"

"That trick means nothing to me! I'm using Constrict! That means I don't get to attack normally this turn, but I'll trap you in water that continuously deals one damage at the end of each turn!"

"Roaaaaaaarrrr…!!"

Answering Komaba's call, the Leviathan in the sky writhed and flailed. A giant whirlpool appeared around the Succubus standing next to Minami, wrapping itself around her bewitching limbs.

"Ngh… Ah!"

"Whoa… What a perverted attack… Is this the sorta thing you're into? Or are you just playing to the audience?"

"Sh-shut up! It's *your* fault for picking a Succubus!"

Minami's emotionless, raised-eyebrow act was making Komaba a tad impatient. But that was the end of turn one. In the ensuing Battle Phase, the Succubus's SPD gave her the first strike, but her ATK stat was the same as Leviathan's DEF, so no damage was done. The Leviathan's regular attack was skipped thanks to the skill command's effect, but instead, the water constricted around the Succubus, who took 1 point of damage.

In the second turn that followed, Komaba chose Attack Up, and Minami went with Defense Up again. With these effects applied, the Leviathan's ATK went up to 6, but so did the Succubus's DEF, so neither side landed damage with their normal attacks. Constrict was still active, though, and as the Succubus cried in agony within the raging current, her LP went down to 3.

"Ah-ha-ha!"

Komaba seemed to be enjoying every minute of this.

"I told you my team would dominate! Look at the difference in strength! You should've surrendered when I gave you the chance!"

"…? I don't understand what you mean. The battle isn't over yet…"

"What? Didn't you notice? I have Void Cannon in my hand. That's a skill command that deals 3 damage regardless of your defense! If your LP is 3 or less, say good-bye to your human rights!"

"Hmm…? But the Succubus is probably a demon, not a human… She doesn't need human rights… I don't think…?"

"I *think* I made my *point*, God damn it!!"

Minami's cool, collected tone had finally made Komaba lose his temper. To the audience, he must've looked completely wrapped around Minami's finger…but he wasn't wrong, either. If things continued this way, Shizuku Minami would lose in the next turn.

"It's all right…," Minami quietly began to speak. I don't know if she was talking to us, the audience, or just to herself, but I could hear it. "There's no need to worry… I'm not going to lose on purpose

again.”

“…”

The simple, dignified statement, delivered in her usual monotone, caused a visible stir among the audience, even if they didn’t know what it meant. This was someone Yuzu praised as being a “real talent,” a girl who, in the past, had put up a record on par with the Empress. Now, Shizuku Minami, the Icy Blade of St. Rosalia, silently bared her fangs, no longer pretending to be what she wasn’t.

“Tch… What are you blabbering on about? I don’t know what kind of alleged new talent you are, but you’re done for… Void Cannon!”

As promised, in that fateful third turn, Komaba chose Void Canon, a powerful skill that ignored the DEF stat and dealt 3 damage as a guaranteed first strike. If it worked, the Succubus’s LP would immediately hit 0.

“Mm… Okay, then I’ll do this.”

Meanwhile, Minami had chosen to use Life Up, a base command that only increased her target’s LP by 1. It made Komaba audibly laugh.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha! An LP boost is the best you can do? That’ll let you escape Void Cannon, but did you forget about Constrict?! Three plus one equals the afterlife for you. Get her, Leviathan!”

“Grorrrrrrrrrrhh!”

The water dragon twisted in the air, confident of victory in Komaba’s hands. It soared into the sky, water spraying around it, as a bluish-white ball of energy formed in its mouth. It was a guaranteed first strike—faster than the SPD of the Succubus—as the Leviathan unleashed a merciless, DEF-ignoring blow.

At that moment, most people present were convinced that Minami had lost. But then—

“…Activate Ability: Transform,” came a gentle whisper.

In front of the frozen Komaba, the Strength Up command displayed behind Minami dissolved into static. An instant later, the static cleared, revealing another command: Attack Up.

“Transform is a special Ability reconfigured by myself… A convenient move that takes one thing and turns it into another with similar properties. Using this, I’ll turn Life Up into Attack Up.”

"…! W-well, so what?! All that does is deal 1 damage to me. It'd make more sense for you to boost your LP!"

"No, it wouldn't…"

Minami looked behind her. Before we knew it, a change was taking place. The commands Minami had issued in turns one, two, and now three, were shining white and overlapping to form another command—something completely different.

"Base commands have two advantages," she began as everyone watched in awe. "The quest guide lady told us earlier. One is that the effects are permanent… Most skill commands are one-off attacks, but base commands last forever…"

"…? Everyone knows that. But even so, skill commands are a lot more—"

"But that's not all. The second advantage is the one that really matters. You can put them together in a chain. The word *command* means an order you give something—but in fighting games, a special move is activated by inputting a series of commands. It's the same here… Likewise, base commands can be combined into sets of three or more to create chained commands. The chains and their effects are undisclosed to the public, so nobody knows about them yet, I don't think… But I *also* have my Mind Reader Ability activated."

Her tone made it sound so pedestrian, but by the time Minami was finished, the three glowing commands behind her had reconfigured themselves into a new "chain" command. And the chain that resulted from Defense-Defense-Attack was:

"Spiral of Hatred… It reflects the opponent's attack."

"What?!!"

It was timed almost perfectly with Komaba's shout—a shield resembling a rune-carved magic circle appeared in front of the near-death Succubus, swallowing up the ball of energy directed her way. The next instant, it reflected the attack, almost like we were watching everything in reverse. It landed for 3 points of damage, with DEF ignored, and the Leviathan had no way of avoiding it. Its body, once calmly bobbing in the air, now whipped around violently.

Minami brushed her hair back as she looked on, showing no particular reaction.

"Now, victory is mine…"

"H-huhh?! What're you talking about? My Leviathan hasn't lost yet!"

"But you have one LP left and no way to boost your SPD… So the Succubus is guaranteed to go first next turn. And with the effect of Attack Up, she'll strike for one damage. And that's it. It all adds up. Change my mind…"

"…Ah…ah… *Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!*"

Komaba collapsed to the ground, his eyes wide. As he declared his surrender, the audience around us erupted into cheers.

#

The Game proceeded much more smoothly for us after that, and before long, the first day of Dropout Tamers came to an end.

By the time five PM rolled around, we had two combat victories and six quests completed. With our defeat of Komaba and Team XII, we had won our first battle against another team, completing the second step of the S-class quest. The next step was to build a collection of at least twenty familiars teamwide, and by the time we completed a few more quests, we found ourselves well past that number.

Just to clarify something: although Dropout Tamers is technically a team battle, team members treat their familiars as their own personal property, since we're all from different schools. This brought up the question of what happened if you beat a team with a powerful familiar—which member of your team would get to claim it? However, Himeji had already explained that to us at yesterday's strategy meeting.

"To avoid conflicts like this, the Game has introduced a 'contribution system.' In DOT, which teammate chose which commands during battle is not revealed, since that could be used to identify the traitor. However, it is kept track of internally, and based on this, a contribution score is calculated to figure out how great a role each player had in the victory.

"Rewards for successful combat and quest completion are distributed in the order of players' contribution scores. The player with the highest score gets to choose a reward first, followed by the second, and so on. The reward-selection screen only appears for you when you have the right to a reward, and it doesn't tell you how other players ranked or what they picked.

"Naturally, if there are more team members than familiars seized, only players with the highest contribution scores can obtain the rewards. That's why, even though you have a traitor on the team, they won't necessarily be able to drag you down at every opportunity."

Thanks to that system, the B-class familiar Leviathan was awarded to Minami after our Komaba battle. If you're fighting properly, the main player in a battle is most likely to notch the highest contribution score, so I'd call this suitably fair.

As far as other notable resources go, there was the other Hellhound I got—the same as Yuikawa's—which I earned by being the main player in our second battle. That, and the Ninth Thunderbolt, Anzu, we got for beating a tougher quest we tackled just before the end of the day. My Hellhound's an extra, basically, but Anzu is one of the familiars we need to conquer this Game. All in all, it was some pretty good loot for the first day.

But that wasn't the end of day one, of course. In fact, the next phase could almost be called the "main event" of Dropout Tamers.

"Well, I suppose it's 'nighttime' now."

It was five fifteen PM on the first day of SFIA's semifinal, and we were all checking our inventories when Yuikawa finally brought up the subject like the leader he thought he was.

"Now we have to do the elimination vote—a cruel system where the player who receives the most votes is kicked out of the Game. Normally, I think there'd be a lot of arguing and blame-slinging over this, but I think it'll be a pretty easy vote today. The traitor's already clear as day to us all."

Yuikawa looked straight at Nitta as he maintained his authoritarian tone, while Nitta looked at the ground.

Yes, the elimination vote was the biggest, most vital aspect of Stage Four. When it's night, the *Vote* command appears on our device. Each player must use this to choose who to remove from their team before midnight. You're free to discuss votes and make deals with your teammates, but like I've been saying constantly, all of your DOT teammates are inherently the enemy. There was no easy way to trust them, so we all agreed to vote individually.

"Heh… Well, nice knowing you, Nitta. Have a good night, at least."

With those parting words, Yuikawa gracefully left. I stood there quietly, arms folded, as I saw the back of Nitta's head also disappear off into the distance.

Well… Yuikawa's right. Any sensible person would conclude that Nitta's our traitor. It's not impossible to think that Yuikawa's deliberately overreacting in order to frame Nitta, but that's about the only alternative theory I can think of. Nothing Minami or Fujishiro did was fishy at all.

I kept quiet, my thoughts swimming in circles… To be honest, this was a pretty difficult choice. Nitta's behavior seemed like an obvious trap to me, but on the other hand, if we lost Minami or Fujishiro to this vote, it'd be a huge blow to our chances, triggering major delays in our current resource gathering.

"…Hey, Minami, did you decide who you'll vote for?"

So for some reason, I decided to ask Shizuku Minami, who was just standing there, scrolling on her device right next to me. She might try to lie or deceive me, of course, but even so, her answer would provide a good reference. Fujishiro, who was still with us, lifted his head as well, perhaps curious about what the Sleeping Lioness had to say.

"Mmm… Pretty much…"

With our focus on her, Minami's hair softly swayed as she nodded.

"I'm going to vote for our worthless leader…because he picked on Nitta so much. Whether you believe that…is up to you."

"I see."

I nodded at her usual matter-of-fact tone. Minami was promising to vote for Kanade Yuikawa, and that sounded reasonably credible to

me. If she'd said Nitta instead, it could lead to suspicion that she was lying in order to keep Nitta from being voted out, but there was little merit to her nominating Yuikawa and then voting for someone else.

That left Fujishiro's vote in question.

"…Sorry to disappoint ya," he said, hands in his pockets and leaning against a nearby wall, "but I ain't gonna tell anyone. I respect the way Minami's thinkin' here, and it's a strategy that might work, but I'm not gonna say anything. Whether you trust me or not, there's no such thing as an out-and-out ally in this Game. The only thing I'll believe in is my own answer."

"…Yeah, fair. And that's fine, of course. I don't feel like telling you all, either."

"What? …Why do *I* have to be the only one to say it?" Minami asked. "If you don't tell me, I'll cry and scream about being sexually harassed by you… First cheating, now harassment… You're gonna *love* tomorrow's LNN broadcast…"

"Wait a sec! I'm not telling because I haven't decided who I'll *vote* for yet. Let me repay you some other way."

"Some other way… Okay, walk me home, then. I have no idea where I am right now… At this rate, I'll have to sleep on some park bench. If I get sick, it'll be all your fault…"

"…I'm sure as shit not wasting my time looking after her. *You* take her back, Shinohara."

"…? You're going home alone, this late? …Meeting your girlfriend?"

"…! Sh-shut up. We're not even a couple yet," Fujishiro responded with an inscrutable expression.

Minami gave a light round of applause at this unexpected answer. Judging by Fujishiro's reaction, I guessed that things were going pretty well with Yuuka Mano, the girl who'd expressed her feelings for him through DearScript. Maybe that urban legend about Café du Chocolat was true, after all.

So after a long day, we all headed back home.

“Hmm? …Oh, Shinohara. You’re back?”

It was past seven in the evening by the time I returned to the Fourth Ward, after dropping off Minami at the Fourteenth. Himeji was waiting for me at the station, and we both headed straight over to the Eimei School.

Enomoto and the two other DOT participants (minus Minakami) had gathered in the student council office and were sitting in front of a few monitors analyzing something. Enomoto didn’t waste time with greetings, instead interrogating us about the state of our team and thrusting a thick set of reports outlining the events of today into our laps.

“Hmm…”

According to the data, day one of Dropout Tamers saw every team steadily build up their forces. A lot of C-class familiars with useful skill commands were being discovered, and most of the B-class ones needed for victory conditions had been obtained by one team or another. With the A-class familiars pretty well spread out, there was no chance of any team winning immediately, but depending on how tomorrow worked out, it was possible one team might satisfy the victory conditions by the end of the day. The “chain” system revealed to the public by Minami was also starting to be recognized as an important strategic element.

“Looking at all this, I’m sure it’s going to be a giant melee tomorrow.”

Enomoto, noticing that he had our attention, picked up his can of coffee and moved to the table where we were looking through his report.

“You’re making progress on the S-class quest, so I’m sure you know this already, but the next step calls for you to win seven or more battles against other teams. If you finish that, it’ll lead to a combat encounter with the Archangel, the Game’s one and only S-class familiar… So your chance of obtaining that directly correlates with how fast you rack up those wins. Every team’s going to be focused on battle, of course.”

“Yeah. I guess the number of resources we built up on day one will affect a lot of things, huh?”

"It seems so, yes. And with your team… Well, from what I've heard so far, I think you're doing all right so long as you can do something about that One Star."

"Yeah, that's the vibe I'm getting, too. It'll depend on how tonight's vote works out, but if Nitta survives, she'll still have that Seal on her, so we're safe for now. As for the other teams…"

I slowly turned my gaze to the left, where I saw Akizuki. Normally, she'd be giving me a sly smile right now, but instead she had her arms splayed out across the table and was looking up at me with a scrunched-up face and tears in the corners of her eyes.

"Oooh, Hiroto… I'm a little tired. If I could get a hug, I'd feel a lot more energized."

"Oh? Well, if you insist, Ms. Akizuki. Allow me to hug you as hard as I—"

"Ah! Not *youuu*! Honestly… Hee-hee! You're so possessive, Shirayuki! ♡"

"…I don't know what you mean."

This enigmatic battle of wits was taking place with me in the middle. It was par for the course by now, and I waited for it to settle down before I spoke to Akizuki.

"Anyway…you were the traitor, right, Akizuki? On a team with Saionji, *and* Kururugi, *and* a Hexagram official. Did it wear you down?"

"Mmm, maybe a little. Nobody's gonna notice as long as I don't do anything weird. And they're all so good we didn't have any trouble making progress, but…"

"But?"

"…But the Empress is just, like, *sooo* amazing. I wanted to use my position as traitor to mess things up, but then she used this Ability called Cooperation EX, and that took nearly every move of mine off the table. Like, she'd just be standing there smiling all cute, and it felt like she was seeing through me the whole time… So yeah, Kururugi and Akutsu are real good players, too, but in terms of who's scariest, it's probably the Empress by far."

"Hmm… Yeah, I'll bet. They don't call her the Empress for nothing."

"Totally. So all I could really do is ensnare this teammate of mine and make him do my bidding. That, and I purposely let a rival team seize this B-class familiar with a really strong command and pinned the blame on him. ♪"

"…You're pretty scary, too, Little Devil."

"Hee-hee! ♡ Aw, thanks for the praise, Hiroto! ♡"

Akizuki gave me a broad smile, swinging her legs happily. After a little while, she spoke up again, as if she had just remembered what she'd been saying.

"Anyway, that's how today went for my team, y'know? Then we did all the voting together, so I'm pretty sure nobody's gonna get kicked out today… But it's kind of going *too* smoothly, which isn't great for a traitor like me. The Empress started with this familiar called Suzaku, and its intrinsic Ability's super useful, so we've been gathering resources like mad. Plus, it's one of the familiars our team needs to win, so if we can find another A-class, we're, like, more than halfway there. I mean, I'll try as much as I can to prevent that, though… ♪"

"…Yeah, good luck with that," I replied with a nod. The way Akizuki put it, I didn't like her chances…but all that could be said was that she'd had awful luck.

"So how'd it go with you, Asamiya?"

"…Hweh? Uh, me?"

After hearing about Akizuki, I decided to ask Asamiya next. She was sitting next to Enomoto, the thick report spread out in front of her. She'd been too busy reading all the text to notice me at first, but then she looked up, her golden hair swaying.

"Well, it's going pretty great, actually! The Phoenix—Kugasaki from the Eighth Ward—pretty much declared himself our leader. You know, he's real charismatic…but he's a lot more than that, too. I mean, the face, the cape, the laugh—it's all pretty freaky, but he's actually a nice guy. I think he really helped us bond as a team!"

"Hmm. It's not like you to rely on someone else so much, Nanase," commented Enomoto. "I'm sure the Phoenix must be sick of you by now."

"A-as if! I mean, I was *the* most active team member today, no

matter *how* you look at it!”

“Yes, thanks to the support *I* gave you. Don’t let it go to your head, Nanase.”

“Uh-*uhhh*! I could’ve held my own just fine, thank you very much! Also, you’re putting me in serious danger whenever you talk into my ear, so can you hold back on that a little, huh? It felt like steam was about to come out of my ears!”

“Steam out your ears…? I don’t know what you’re going on about, but what do you want me to do?”

“Well… I dunno, use a voice changer or something. *Pfft!* No, I can’t even…”

“Can you stop saying and imagining weird things around me?”

Enomoto frowned, his arms crossed. I had to admit, it’d be pretty funny to hear him speaking in a high-pitched or deep bass voice from my device.

Looks like she’s doing okay, though. As I thought, the Game’s really gonna kick off on day two…

I put my right hand to the corner of my lips as I thought things over. I had some internal squabbles to deal with today—mainly involving Nitta—but with the S-class quest, we couldn’t waste time on that tomorrow. From here on out, we needed to start seriously thinking about how we were going to win this thing.

…Oh. That reminds me…

“And also, Shinohara…”

The moment my thoughts shifted to the one girl who wasn’t here, Enomoto spoke up like he was reading my mind.

“Like I told you,” he softly said, his eye on the door, “I’m looking into the Hexagram alongside our Game analysis. We knew getting any information through official channels was a nonstarter, so I’ve been contacting all the ex-Academy students who left the island for one reason or another. That helped us gain a better grasp of things… But they really *are* up to no good. Even more so than I thought.”

“…Yeah? What do you mean? Aren’t they supposed to be ‘defenders of justice’?”

“I told you they weren’t. I already mentioned Eimei’s former ace…

And yes, that's just my own personal take on it, but there's more. Apparently, the Hexagram has a system where your star rank goes up merely by being a member of their organization. Can you believe it?"

"…What? Why? Like, automatically, or what? How's that even possible?"

"It's not, usually. But Kaoru's not your usual player. He's got two Unique Stars, and one of them—the rust-colored one—lets him take stars from people in Games even if they're ranked lower than him. Saeki can amass star after star and pass them out to other people, like company promotions. It's limited, though, because there's only so many Five Stars and up allowed at once."

"Yeah, but like…"

"I know. We still don't have the whole picture. In order to pass out stars, Kaoru Saeki would have to be defeated by a fellow Hexagram member, which means he should have lost his Unique Stars long ago. There's probably still a lot we don't know about this… But the circumstantial evidence is starting to pile up, isn't it? And I also heard this—supposedly the Hexagram holds its own battle events from time to time, giving out huge rewards to the winners. Most of the players are low-ranking One Stars living in debt because they can't pay back the Academy what they owe after losing a Game. The Hexagram frame it as providing relief to people like that, but… Well, for every winner, there's a loser, too. And you should know what happens to the losers, Shinohara."

I was silenced by Enomoto's gaze. If the players didn't receive "salvation," they'd be burdened with even more debt, and nothing they could pay back too easily. Then what would they do? The answer was already clear.

"Their stars get taken by the Hexagram—by Saeki… Yeah, normally, a One Star player doesn't give up their star if they lose, but with Kaoru's Unique Star…"

"Exactly, Shinohara. Players who lose in these battles either get their stars taken on the spot, or they're forced into indentured servitude by the Hexagram. The latter, in most cases. Having zero stars means immediate exile from the Academy, after all. If that's

the threat you face, you pretty much have no choice but to obey."

"…That's so harsh."

"It sure is," Enomoto said, nodding with a frown.

Just then, I heard a voice in my earpiece, adding to the gloom.

"Hey, Hiro, sorry I took so long! I know it's late, but right now seemed like a good time to chime in. I think I've uncovered a bunch of stuff about Sana Nitta, the first-year from the Twentieth Ward's Azuminodai School!"

I quietly focused on Kagaya's voice. Something about her excitement, or impatience, told me this was important.

"It turns out she's exactly that! One of the Hexagram's slaves, like the president over there was just talking about! She lost a Game right after joining her school, then wound up getting deeper and deeper in debt, so she tried turning to the Hexagram for help…but sadly, it didn't work out well for her there, either. That was probably a frame job, too, it looks like…

"…Or, really, it might all be an act put on by Hexagram. Like with all the stuff it was caught up in last year. They're not just at all, y'know? They're totally evil. And they've been reaching out to top students from lots of different wards since before SFIA began, so this runs deep.

"But hey, Hiro, you haven't voted yet, have you? Whatever you do, don't vote Nitta out! I'm sure she pulled that stunt on your team today because the Hexagram ordered her to do it! That's how Eimei's ace got creamed last year. If she drops out of this, it's gonna be awful for us; I'm sure of it…!"

Kagaya's new information left me more than a little shaken, but on the outside, I remained calm and gathered my thoughts… It made sense. If Sana Nitta was a slave forced to do the Hexagram's bidding, her being in Dropout Tamers was a deliberate ploy by the Hexagram. If we kicked her out of the Game, we could be playing right into their hands.

Having reached that conclusion, I silently looked up. Himeji looked worried next to me, so I relaxed my expression slightly to reassure her and spoke up.

"Well…anyway, even if the Hexagram's evil after all, there's not

much we can do about it right now. We'll stay on our guard, but it's not like we've got—"

"…Wait a minute, Shinohara!"

At that moment, the door to the student council room opened with a quiet click, revealing a girl with a strong-willed expression and long black hair down to her thighs. It was Mari Minakami—and her pout revealed how obviously frustrated she was right now.

"What are you talking about? The Hexagram is evil? That's completely impossible. You shouldn't take out your irritation on other people just because they're about to uncover all your misdeeds!"

"…You heard all that, Minakami? I wasn't talking about you behind your back or anything. We were just speculating and talking about how we need to watch out for them."

"Yeah, and *I'm* saying I don't like it! You can say whatever you want to about me as a newcomer to this school, but I'm not going to put up with you belittling everything the older members of the Hexagram have achieved…!"

She stomped right up to me, bringing her scowling face close to mine.

"I demand an apology! I was saved by the Hexagram's justice, remember. If it wasn't for them, I wouldn't be here right now. Are you going to call *that* evil, too, Shinohara?!"

"Of course not. I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings. But I have to say, right now, I'm not gonna apologize or take back anything else I said."

"Wha—?"

"Also," I said, cutting her off, "not to change the subject, but do you know Sana Nitta?"

Minakami sounded pretty annoyed about my attitude by now, but she was still honest enough to give me an answer.

"Of course. She's part of your team, right? …What about her?"

I fell silent. Minakami didn't sound like she knew where this question was going—and for all I knew, maybe she *didn't* know Nitta beyond that. She was part of the Hexagram, but not at all related to the more "evil" parts Enomoto had been talking about. And if Minakami is that sincerely devoted to the Hexagram—if she's hoping

to bring about true justice, and if that's causing her to be used right now—that was a bit too cruel.

"…?"

My thoughts raced as Minakami looked on quizzically.

#

"Right…"

Once we finished discussing all that, I headed home with Himeji. It was around ten PM by the time I was done eating dinner. It'd be another early morning tomorrow and I didn't want to stay up too late, but I still had a couple of things left to do.

"Hey! Hey, Hiroto! Hey!"

Tsumugi Shiina was right next to me in the middle of the sofa, her eyes gleaming as she carried on. She was in her usual gothic-Lolita outfit, her oddly colored black and red eyes looking up at me. Her shiny black hair and the smell of her shampoo pressed up against me.

That's right. Just as Kagaya was looking into Nitta for me, I was having Shiina analyze everything she could about this Game. And based on that, I was now making a few key adjustments to my strategy.

"Look at this! It's a list of all the familiars in your team's possession, plus their skill commands! See this one here? It's exactly like one of the familiars I had down in the underworld!"

"Wow… Really? But how did you befriend someone this large?"

"Hee-hee! That's easy! My demon eyes have the Charm effect, you know!"

"…Oh. Very convenient."

I think it was a different skill the last time we had this conversation, but it wasn't nice to nitpick.

So instead, I dove into the data Shiina had found for me—the familiars of my team members and the skill commands of each one. Sometimes, familiars were far more useful for their commands than their actual fighting ability, so I wanted to check over all of this

sooner rather than later.

A few choice finds included:

Demon's Pact: Possessed by the B-class Succubus. Allows you to drain your DEF, SPD, and LP as much as you want, double the points lost, then add them to your ATK.

Abyssal Pyre: Possessed by the B-class Hellhound. A group attack that strikes all familiars involved in combat for 2× your ATK. However, if it misses against any target, all damage is reflected back to your familiar instead.

Constrict: Possessed by the B-class Leviathan. Skips the regular attack for that turn and summons a trap that deals 1 damage at the end of every turn.

There were loads and loads of commands, some of which I was already familiar with.

"The B-class familiars have way more useful skills, huh? A lot of them come with drawbacks, but they're flashy and superstrong, too."

"Yeah! Oh, but there are some pretty powerful C-class familiars, too! The Lich and its Void Cannon are C-class, for example. And I like your Fairy a lot, too!"

"My Fairy? Why's that?"

"Because it's really, really fast!"

She sounded very happy about that. And yeah, Fairy—the familiar I started with—was all about speed. She'd always get the first strike against almost any foe; that's how dominant she was there. Every other stat of hers was 1, which meant she hadn't seen much use today, but under the right conditions, she might get her time to shine.

Anyway, now I had the info I needed about our current familiars.

"Next we need to work out what Abilities to fit into our strategy…"

I switched screens on my device to a list of Abilities I'd brought into Dropout Tamers.

My first was Inferior Copy, the Ability granted by my purple Unique Star that let me "copy" the data of my choice. I'd chosen

that Ability first, hoping to use it on familiars and their commands. The problem, though—or I guess the thing I needed to think about, was this *other* Ability in my slots. Predict Behavior and **** were listed on the screen. **** was an Ability that had been conceived by Shiina and developed by Kagaya; it was a pretty bold rearrangement of Predict Behavior, the skill from my green star. It could read not only my opponents' actions but also how the Game itself would play out, then reflect that information on another Ability. It required Predict Behavior to be installed as well, so it took up two slots, but I couldn't ask for a more flexible tool, really.

While I had the chance, I really wanted to install something that'd pack more of a punch in battles for me, but…

"…Well, ideally, you'd want an Ability that works well with chain commands."

Himeji quietly offered this suggestion as she brought us some tea. Once she placed everything carefully on the table, she took a look at Shiina, still sticking to my left side like glue, and opted to sit down on my right side instead. It felt like she was a little closer than usual as she flicked her hair aside.

"Chain commands are an element not discussed in the main rules. From what I could see in today's gameplay, they seem far more powerful than any of the skill commands by themselves. To be exact, we saw Spiral of Hatred, a move that reflects damage, but there are a variety of other powerful effects, from high-end damage that ignores defense to guaranteed evasion of attacks. The Company is working on analyzing these, and I think we can provide you with a list of moves and how to activate them tomorrow."

"Okay… Sounds great. That'd be really useful."

I nodded at Himeji. If I could aim for the exact chain commands I wanted, making full use of them would become a standard strategy of any battle. Along those lines, it was becoming clearer which Abilities would be most effective. I would work out exactly how Predict Behavior and the blank slate that was **** function in due time, but they would truly begin to shine in tomorrow's battles.

"By the way," Himeji softly said, "it's almost eleven PM. Have you

decided who you'll vote for?"

"…Oh, right."

She was talking about the topic I'd discussed with my team before we split up today. The elimination vote was one of Dropout Tamers' main features. I had until midnight to cast my vote, so I didn't have much more time to agonize over it.

"Fwaaah…"

Shiina, leaning all over me, was starting to get drowsy. Himeji lowered her voice to a near whisper.

"As Kagaya said earlier, there is no way we can allow Ms. Nitta to be voted off. However, that leaves us with no other clear candidate to vote for, so I think your strategy will involve having nobody leave the team instead."

"Yeah. If two or more people are tied in the vote, they both get to stay. So that means either everyone receives one vote, or two people receive two votes."

"Exactly. But in order to aim for that, you need a perfect understanding of how everyone else will vote. We know for now that Mr. Yuikawa will vote for Sana Nitta and that Ms. Minami will vote for Kanade Yuikawa; however, as to the rest…"

"Mmm, well, we can narrow down Nitta's vote, I bet. If the Hexagram's forcing her to drop out now, she's not going to vote for the obvious suspect and add to their number of votes. And looking at how the Game worked out today, I think Yuikawa's the second most suspicious member after Nitta…which means Nitta *wouldn't* have voted for him. Since you can't vote for yourself, all we know for sure is that Nitta and Yuikawa are both gonna receive one vote."

"…Right, that's true."

Himeji nodded, a white gloved hand on her lips.

I decided to think a little about Fujishiro, the last member to consider. He'd probably also realized that Nitta wasn't all that she seemed and that keeping her on was a smart idea. If we were no longer sure who the traitor was, the ideal result for day one in his mind would be nobody getting voted out… And *that* means he and I can work together on this a little.

"It'll be hard to engineer everyone receiving one vote if we don't

know who Nitta's voting for. But it won't be hard at all to have two people receive two votes. If Fujishiro and I vote for Nitta and Yuikawa, it'll work out two-two-one no matter who Nitta votes for—and that's the draw we want."

"Certainly. The question is who Mr. Fujishiro will vote for…but I imagine it'll be Mr. Yuikawa, in the end. For Mr. Fujishiro, losing Ms. Nitta will be much more of a blow. Mr. Yuikawa is more important in terms of firepower, of course, but now that you have a Hellhound as well, losing him won't be as lethal a blow."

"Right. So I know I'd be breaking my promise to Kagaya, but…"

I tapped the screen of my device. If Fujishiro was voting for Kanade Yuikawa, that meant I needed to pick Sana Nitta, after all. I needed to vote for the one girl I least wanted to lose in an effort to keep everybody on the board.

And so the long night of *Werewolf* came to a close.

"I never thought I'd be seeing *your* face again today…"

It was nine AM the next morning, and Yuikawa sighed as he watched Sana Nitta approach the meeting point. She was on time today, at least, for day two of Dropout Tamers.

The results of the votes were announced a few hours ago. Of the twenty teams in the SFIA semifinal, six were starting day two with their full lineup, nine teams had either misread the situation or been tricked into kicking out a member who *wasn't* the traitor, four teams had successfully eliminated the traitor from their ranks…and there was also one very unusual case.

Our Team VI was one of the six that still had their complete member roster. The exact vote results weren't released, but I'm pretty sure it had worked out as I'd predicted.

"…Well, whatever, I guess."

Nitta, her hood pulled down over her head, coldly stared at the sarcastic Yuikawa…but she looked a lot paler than she had yesterday. Surviving another day probably wasn't on her agenda. Her head was tilted down a little as she nervously clutched her left arm.

I couldn't tell if he noticed her reaction. Yuikawa gave a disgruntled shrug.

"Hmph… Well, look, I'm not going to drag this on forever. Really, the problem doesn't involve you at all. Why did some of you *not* vote for a player who openly admitted she was the traitor?"

"…Huh? Well, lemme ask you this, man. Why're you thinking she's the traitor based solely on what you know so far? You never considered for a moment that this might be a trap?"

"…?! A-a trap? Of course I thought about that. But nobody else is suspicious at all—"

"Well, if we're talking *suspicious*, you're not exactly *un*-suspicious, you know? And I'm not even talking about my stalker, and that delinquent…"

"Ugh… A-all right, I'll drop it, okay? But just *know* you'll be out of this game tomorrow morning!"

Perhaps he realized the wind was blowing against him, because Yuikawa turned his back on us in irritation.

"Okay then… Let's recap our situation right now."

Sensing it was time to move on, I took my device out of my pocket. Yuikawa sniffed at this as he combed back his hair, and Fujishiro silently turned toward me, all of them showing their agreement in their own unique way. (Minami, by the way, was right next to me, blithely staring at my screen.)

"The four A-class familiars have been spread among four different teams since we began yesterday. They're in the possession of Saionji, Kirigaya, Saeki, and Yumeno. Everyone's got to be gunning for them, but I haven't seen anyone make a move yet."

"Seems tough… But if we start seeing action around those familiars, we could see a team break through pretty soon, don't you think? We might see the S-class familiar for ourselves before too much longer."

"Yeah. So considering that, the first thing we need to shoot for is the A-class familiars we need to win. We'll need the S-class one as well, but I don't mind if we have to seize it from someone else in the end. What matters are those Class A ones…and there's something else we need to think about."

"Something else? …What to talk about during our victory speech, maybe?"

"You're that sure we're going to win…? Well, no, not that. Something more basic: how we should attack teams that're more powerful than us."

I brushed aside Minami's joke and got down to business. She pouted for a bit, but it didn't seem to bother her for too long.

"How to attack them…? Or, to make it sound cooler, a 'strategy'… That sort of thing?"

"I don't know if that makes it sound any cooler, but pretty much. It'll take more than just blindly fighting other people to seize an A-class familiar and keep it safe from others, right? We didn't flush out the traitor in last night's voting, so if it *isn't* Nitta, that means we might have at least *two* people not playing for the team, so to speak."

"That's a good point…but what do you mean by 'at least'?"

"I mean exactly that. Taking into account the S-class quest, we're gonna see some big moves in Dropout Tamers today. I'm sure at least one team's gonna earn a trip to the final stage, and we might see traitors make a name for themselves, too. And the more slots get filled for the final, the more people will start putting loyalty to their *schools* ahead of that to their teams. Like, thinking that it doesn't matter if they're eliminated as long as they can help out their friends. So what I'm looking for is a strategy that lets us win without any big problems, even with those potential question marks."

I brought the terminal in my right hand up to eye level. A certain Ability name popped up on everybody else's screens.

"An Ability… Fragile Covenant?"

That's right. This was the effect I'd worked out with the Company last night using the **** clean-slate Ability, which leveraged Predict Behavior to provide me ultimate freedom.

"So listen. This Ability takes the core tenet of DOT—that someone among us is a traitor—and turns that whole idea on its head. Put simply, it's a pact that prevents members of Team VI from using skill commands. As long as we all stick to it, all the base commands will

give buffs of plus two, rather than plus one."

"…Too long. I can't remember all that. Ten words or less, please…"

"Uh… I can't compress it *that* much. Basically, we can only use base commands, but it boosts their effect a lot. If a skill command is chosen, it'll be sealed, but if three or more people select a skill command at the same time, the Fragile Covenant is broken."

"Oh… I see. And that way, I can preserve my Seal?"

"Yeah. A lot of skill commands have negative effects, so if the traitor among us starts to act out, it could end very quickly for us. But if we only have access to base commands, that can't happen, right? We can simply apply the buffs to our own familiars and the debuffs to our opponents'."

"…Not bad. It's not a bad idea, but after we worked so hard to earn those skill commands, aren't we just penalizing ourselves if we shut away access to them? 'Cause there's always a chance *you're* the traitor, and if so, it's nothin' but a big risk. Like, is there even any guarantee that we can only win with base commands?"

"Oh, sure. Like you saw yesterday, this Game supports chain commands that only activate when you string three or more base commands together in a set order—and since they're all made up of base commands, they can be powered up with Fragile Covenant, too. Now, Minami has the Mind Reader Ability, and I'm also using a research-type Ability, so we know how to activate any chain command we want. Plus, our stat buffs will all be doubled, so I don't really see it as *that* much of a handicap, y'know? And even better, if we're not using skill commands, we don't stand to give up as much if we lose."

Fujishiro closed his eyes and crossed his arms. His body language seemed to say, "I'm cool, so *you* guys talk it out." With a Six Star like him giving his approval, Yuikawa and Minami agreed without much further hesitation. Nitta was silent but eventually nodded as well, and so the Covenant was passed by unanimous decision.

"Now that that's done, we just need to decide which familiars to try to capture…"

I looked at the team info screen on my device. To recap, the

familiars we needed to qualify for the final stage were the S-class Archangel, the A-class Byakko and Genbu, and the B-class Hellhound, Hanuman, and Anzu—six in total. We already had two of the B-class familiars, so our main goal today was to capture the A- and S-class ones.

Next, I looked into who was currently in possession of those A-class familiars. Genbu was owned by Toya Kirigaya, who wasn't teamed with anyone from Eimei, so I didn't know much about what he was up to Game-wise. If he had an A-class familiar, though, he was gonna be a tough opponent to fight.

Byakko, on the other hand, belonged to Misaki Yumeno, the first-year from the Seventeenth Ward's Amanezaka School. She had scored the most wins in Stage Two and was the first to beat Stage Three, garnering her tons of attention—but she was going even crazier here in DOT.

Earlier this morning, when Himeji and I were looking over who'd dropped out of the Game so far…

"And finally, we have Team X, the one Misaki Yumeno belongs to. That's the real outlier of the Game so far—all the members other than her have been eliminated… That's right, all four of them. I believe that Ms. Yumeno is using some sort of Ability like Disperse that takes the target's 'state' and infects others with it. If I had to guess, she correctly predicted who'd receive the most elimination votes, invoked Disperse on that person, and spread the 'eliminated' state to the rest of her team…while protecting herself with Cancel Interference. A true dark horse. What a terrifying first-year she is."

I had to shake my head a bit.

Kirigaya and Yumeno are both real bad news…but we need their A-class familiars if we want to win this. They're gonna be hard to overpower as it stands now, so the longer we wait, the tougher it'll be to deal with them. We better strike early—especially at Yumeno.

She was already making a legend for herself… But on the other hand, two of her Ability slots were occupied by Disperse and Cancel Interference. We also vastly outnumbered her, so I still thought we had a decent fighting chance.

So we opted to start off the day setting our sights on Yumeno's

Byakko. But these things never go as planned, of course—and the moment we went on the move, we had a combat encounter with another team. We managed to fend them off, luckily, then loaded up IslandTube to figure out where Yumeno was, when—

"Well, well."

I heard a voice from somewhere as I was looking down at my device. It was only two words, but the tone indicated just how defiant and composed she was. Even without turning around, I could easily picture her luxurious red hair dancing in the wind—the classic look for that fake heiress.

"Why are you trying to target other teams, Shinohara? I have an A-class familiar, too, you know… Hee-hee! Are you afraid of me, maybe? If so, that's a surprise to see from you."

Sarasa Saionji, the almost-undefeated former Seven Star Empress of Ohga, had a feckless smile on her face, as usual. Her crimson eyes were fixed upon me as she held her arms loosely over her chest.

"…"

Before I could respond to her provocation, I noticed the four teammates standing behind her. Two of them I knew well. Noa Akizuki was gleefully waving both hands at me, her twin ponytails shaking around in the air, while Senri Kururugi was in full Hell's Priestess mode, her eyes sharp and a wooden sword at her waist.

Noticing my gaze, Kururugi smiled a little. "We meet again, young man. Perhaps this is the hand of fate at work."

Can't say I'm all too happy about it…

Everyone runs away from this girl in battle, so seeing her act so belligerently with me was far from welcome. I was barely managing to keep it together on the inside, so I focused my attention on the other two members.

Miyabi Akutsu, Six Star from the Second Ward and part of the Hexagram's administration, was staring right at me, as if observing my behavior. She didn't say anything in particular, though.

"Uh, hi… Ha-ha-ha."

On the far end was a male student wearing the same Shinra High School uniform as Kirigaya. He looked like he didn't want to be here

very much, and compared to all the powerhouse girls on this team, he seemed kind of flaky and forgettable. I didn't have much info on him, but the other four alone provided more firepower than they could have ever needed.

"Huh…?!"

Still, I shoved my right hand into my pocket, my shoes tapping on the ground as I advanced toward Saionji. Once we were close enough to easily reach out and touch one another—a good range for sneaking private messages in between our trash-talking for the public audience—I smiled a bit.

"Who's afraid of who, huh? What do I have to be afraid of? I've never lost before. The fact is that we're not after your Suzaku—we need Genbu and Byakko. Plus, my Eimei classmate Akizuki's on your team. I've got no reason to be aggressive toward you."

"Hee-hee! Genbu, huh? Then I think you *do* have a reason to fight me…and don't forget, *you* have Fujishiro on *your* team. But I'm not going to hesitate. Because even if I take your familiars right now, I'm sure Fujishiro will find a way to win this stage in the end. Should I take *your* attitude to mean you don't think the same about Akizuki?"

"Oh, great, more of your twisted logic? …Akizuki's strong. Probably up at the top of all Six Stars. But Dropout Tamers isn't a Game where good stats guarantee you a win, is it?"

"Aw, hee-hee-hee! Thanks for all the praise! ♪ Much appreciated, Hiroto! ♡"

"…Hmph. You hardly ever praise *me…* I'm putting my foot down. I'm done talking, and don't you dare expect me to let you get away!"

Saionji sounded genuinely angry for some reason. The battle request from her team came immediately afterward, and since we had no way to avoid it, the fight was quickly underway.

…?! Whoa, she's really gonna attack us?!

I'd been hoping to settle this peacefully with a trade or something, but while I kept calm on the outside, I was internally panicking. This was just a single in-Game battle, so there was no risk of our lies being exposed if one of us lost, but we still had to choose our actions carefully.

Saionji, however, didn't seem to get that memo. She was standing tall before me, brushing her red hair back and giving me a menacing smile.

"Hee-hee! I'll go ahead and reveal to you that I'm picking my A-class Suzaku for this fight. He's got some lovely skills, and since *you* don't have any A-class guys, I can even dictate what familiar you're gonna use against him. And I pick your B-class Hellhound—that's the final piece of our puzzle, *and* it'll be our seventh victory. We'll be just one task away from beating the S-class quest."

"…Wait, what? So you already have your second A-class familiar?"

"Sure do! I *told* you you've got a good reason to fight me. I don't have it personally, but we just acquired the A-class familiar Genbu in a trade with Kirigaya. It seems like that trade allowed him to complete his traitor checklist and win his way out, but… Oh! Actually, I have a message from him for you. He said, 'It's no fun beating you like this, so I better see you in the final stage once you're done cleaning up the trash.'"

"…!"

I couldn't find the words to respond to Saionji's stunning news. Instead, I put a finger to my earpiece, and shortly after I received a whispered reply.

"Confirmed… Rina's telling the truth. Just a short time ago, Mr. Kirigaya temporarily obtained the A-class familiar Suzaku, enabling him to meet all the victory conditions. He's the first player to complete Dropout Tamers."

Himeji confirmed that this wasn't a lie or ruse…but now it was even trickier to read Saionji's true intentions. It sounded like she seriously wanted to take my familiar away from me, but—

Wait… Is that *what she's thinking…?*

My eyes instantly widened slightly as I realized that was the complete opposite of what I'd been thinking earlier.

One thing to remember is that it's impossible for multiple teams to win at the same time in this Game. For example, between us and Saionji's team, the familiars we both needed were apparently the S-class Archangel, the A-class Genbu, and the B-class Hellhound. There were multiples of each B-class type out there, but if Saionji

and I both wanted to reach the final stage, one of us needed to win first and release our familiars back into the pot for quests. It didn't matter which of us did it first, but it had to be one, then the other—not simultaneously.

…Now I get it. Well, cool. Whoever wins right now, no hard feelings, then.

Saionji put a graceful hand on her hip. Then, at last, the battle moved to the prep stage. Team III was using Suzaku, and its main player was Saionji, of course. Deploying an A-class familiar came with a big risk, but there wasn't a trace of doubt on her face. My team, meanwhile, was stuck with the Hellhound she'd picked for us—but since both Yuikawa and I had one, we were allowed to choose who'd serve as our main player. Yuikawa, full of his pointless confidence, was all set to claim his spot, but…

"Let me do it."

"Huh?"

"The battle… I want to fight the Empress. I can use the Transform Ability to turn my Leviathan into a Hellhound… Okay?"

Now, oddly enough, Minami was stepping up as a third candidate. For a moment, it looked like Yuikawa would protest, but he kept quiet and let Minami have her way. I guess he must've been picking up on the oddly charged atmosphere around her, that aura we'd detected before whenever she got serious. A glimpse of her intensely sharp talent was enough to make your entire body shiver.

She can transform familiars, too, not just commands? If it's that useful an Ability, I wish she could have saved it for later, but we might as well let her have her fun.

So I gave the nod—not because her overpowering gaze defeated me or anything, though.

"…Thanks," Minami replied, before walking in front of us.





Saionji wasn't sure what to make of it. "…Hmm? I was expecting Shinohara…but it's you, Shizuku?"

"Yes. You're facing me… I've always wanted to battle you. You're really my kind of girl, you know… And if I win, I want you to let me do *all sorts of things* to you."

"Oh? I'm flattered that by how passionate you are… But I'm not going to lose, so I can't make any promises like that."

"You're flattered? Oh… Well, if I lose, I'll let you do all sorts of things to me instead. That way, we're even…"

"…Hee-hee! You're as twisted as ever, Shizuku. But all right. I'm ready for you."

With a sly, elegant smile, Saionji brought her right hand up, activating the AR on her device and summoning the legendary divine beast Suzaku above her head. A vibrant, otherworldly glow shimmered across its body—probably a symbol of its A-class status. Between its dazzling color and dignified, imposing movements, it was the perfect familiar for Saionji.

"I'll take you up on that offer, then… Let's go."

A breath later, Minami summoned her own familiar—the B-class Hellhound, emitting a loud howl at Suzaku up in the sky. Then all fell silent for a moment as the battle kicked into action.

"…!"

Minami seemed to have the advantage at first. Her strategy was quite simple—buff her familiar over and over to power it up. That was pretty much it. Having all her base commands doubled by Fragile Covenant worked greatly in her favor, and her own two Abilities meshed perfectly with that.

"Simple is best, as they say…"

Although Transform was a kind of ranged attack, she wasn't using any other special Abilities—just the all-purpose Variable Control alongside Recycle, which let you invoke an Ability more times than usual. However, thanks to fine-tuning how these Abilities worked with each other, she had created a sort of perpetual motion machine. Variable Control boosted her base commands, Recycle recharged the number of Variable Control uses she had, and then the cycle began again. Looping these effects together led to

tremendous results, and if she hadn't tapped into this during the Komaba battle, I guess she hadn't been quite *fully* serious about that fight, after all.

…Oh? But wait…

I felt like I'd picked up one other crazy fact about Minami's strategy…but first, here's the status of both familiars at the end of turn two:

Team III: Sarasa Saionji **Familiar Used:** Southern Guardian, Suzaku (A)
Familiar Stats: ATK 7, DEF 6, SPD 9, LP 8 (+1)
Unused Commands: Attack Up *Void Cannon* Self-Inflicted Trap

Team VI: Shizuku Minami **Familiar Used:** First Brimstone, Hellhound (B)
Familiar Stats: ATK 4 (+27), DEF 5, SPD 5, LP 5 (+22)
Unused Commands: Defense Down *Life Up* Speed Up

…I almost had to laugh at how powerful this setup was. A simple, normal attack dealt 25 points of damage to Suzaku in one hit. If Saionji hadn't used the damage-canceling command Iron Wall on her second turn, this fight would've been over long ago. Plus, these base command buffs were permanent across the entire battle, and now that Iron Wall was a thing of the past, there was nothing in Saionji's hand that could resist the Hellhound's firepower. Plus—and I think this was Akizuki trying to pick something "traitorous"—that Self-Inflicted Trap command immediately reduced Saionji's DEF to zero if she was forced to pick it.

"Hee-hee…"

But even so, Saionji stood strong across from Minami, smiling that same fearless, self-assured smile. There was no doubt about it: She was hiding something.

"Turn three…is going to end things. And I'll be the winner…"

"Oh, what a coincidence, Shizuku. I completely agree with you."

Minami declared her victory with her usual blank expression, and

Saionji simply accepted it, her smile as defiant as ever.

So the Order Phase for turn three rolled around, with Minami looking every bit like she was right. Using her two Abilities, she enhanced her Speed Up and applied it to the Hellhound, easily surpassing Suzaku's SPD stat. Plus, now that she had chosen three consecutive base commands, the corresponding chain effect also activated. Life-Attack-Speed resulted in the command Suicide Strike, which consumed half your LP but dealt massive damage proportional to your ATK, bypassing all defensive effects.

However—

"Activating the Ability Swap. I will forcibly swap the command I selected this turn with another one in my hand."

Saionji brushed aside her glorious red hair… This was an Ability that let you peek on what your opponent would select, then let you reselect your own command. It worked in a very different way to our Fragile Covenant, but Swap could also give unparalleled strength in combat—and since you could switch your chosen command to whatever you wanted, it was easy to counter any potential traitor-driven sabotage.

"Now I'll change my Self-Inflicted Trap command to something else… I think I'll use Suzaku's skill command Purifying Flame. This cancels all buff and debuff effects on the target familiar, returning the Hellhound's stats to their initial values."

"…! Oh no… I worked hard to grow it into a big, strong dog… Too bad…"

"Hee-hee! Well, I'm still not done yet. Did you notice, Shizuku? With all the buffs removed, the Hellhound's LP is back to its original value of five. From there, I'll use the chain command Suicide Strike to cut its Life Points in half, so it'll have three left… And I *still* have Void Cannon in hand, which bypasses all defenses and deals a guaranteed 3 damage."

"Ah…b-but…"

"No buts. And no way to come back from this, either. This is exactly what I've been aiming for from the start."

"…!"

Minami's overwhelming advantage had been turned around in just

one turn, and she stared wide-eyed for a while. I'm sure it came as a shock to her… But then she bit her lip in frustration and turned her back on Saionji, not saying another word. I guess that was her way of admitting defeat. There certainly wasn't anything she could do about it now.

"This…is so frustrating…"

And so the battle between the former best in her school and the undefeated Empress ended in a total win for Sarasa Saionji.

#

"Hmm…"

It had been an hour and a half since our skirmish against Team III, and Minami was still sulking about it… Well, not that the look on her face changed that much or anything, but the air around her was heavy. She had joined our battles against several other teams over the past ninety minutes, but she had acted like this the entire time. Having her own strategy turned against her must have been a painful experience.

"No," she muttered. "It's not just frustrating… It was a huge loss of resources, too…"

Yes, as stated in the rules, A-and S-class familiars have their own intrinsic Abilities in addition to their skill commands. Suzaku's is called Requisition, which seizes all resources, benefits, and other things earned by the defeated opponent for a certain amount of time. It was a pretty cruel intrinsic Ability to have, really, and because of that, Minami didn't receive any familiars from the other battles she took part in today.

"…"

At least we didn't have to worry about Requisition any longer, though. Just five minutes ago, we received word that Saionji's team had successfully obtained the S-class familiar and advanced to the final stage. After Kirigaya, a traitor, had been the first to beat Stage Four, Team III was the first team to advance in the traditional fashion. It also meant that Akizuki was eliminated from SFIA, but

there wasn't much helping that. If it wasn't for her sabotage, Team III might've completed Stage Four on the first day.

Regardless, thanks to that, the familiars from Saionji's team (including their two A-class ones) were available as quest rewards once more—as well as Archangel, the reward for beating the S-class quest. The only thing we'd really lost fighting Saionji was a single Hellhound, so you could say we still had a fighting chance.

"Hrmm… You're not allowed to get ahead of me…"

From Minami's point of view, though, Saionji beating Dropout Tamers ahead of her was repulsive. I'm sure she wanted a rematch with her immediately.

But just then…

"Excuse me, Master, it appears you have one DOT player approaching at high speed. The ID marks them as being…from the Seventeenth Ward?"

The Seventeenth Ward? …A-Amanezaka?!

My eyes opened wide at Himeji's slightly nervous-sounding report. If an Amanezaka student was going around by herself, it could only be one person—Misaki Yumeno, the first-year with the A-class Byakko familiar, and the one who'd torpedoed all her teammates on the first day.

…! What now? Fighting for Byakko is exactly what we're looking to do, but if she's coming for us, she must have some motive for it…

"No, Master, it's fine. There's no need to worry. She's already here."

"Huh?"

Just as Himeji whispered that in my ear, I heard the footsteps of someone running at breakneck speed approach from far away. We had no time to prepare as she came to a hard stop in front of us, sliding a bit in her loafers. Her skirt kicked up into the air from the momentum. She had short, light-pink hair and a small build. She hid her face a bit with her right hand, as if striking a pose, and said:

"I have appeared!!"

"…"

"Now, here we go! The ultimate confrontation with the final boss, Hiroto Shinohara! He's eyeing me up and down with that aggressive

gaze of his, but I brush it off with my breezy smile and draw my weapon!”

“…Is that a weapon? It looks like a device to me.”

“My device is my greatest weapon of all! A single, perfectly honed blade! It is time to fight me, Shinohara! I’m pointing an accusatory finger at you!”

Her grandiose manner of speech threw me for a moment. I was overwhelmed by the sheer energy behind it, and it took me a moment to catch my breath.

“Ugh… Well, I don’t mind a fight, but how about you introduce yourself first? This is kind of sudden.”

“Ah! As the protagonist of my own story, I didn’t think there was any need to introduce myself! I regret this terribly. My name is Misaki Yumeno! A first-year at the Amanezaka School! My hobby is daydreaming, and my special skill is being able to dream about things I like!”

Misaki Yumeno, the pink-haired dark horse, was bursting with energy as she spoke. She clearly wasn’t your typical young girl, and it looked like I was her one and only target. With a face that was almost rage-inducingly cute, Yumeno continued to throw down the gauntlet.

“Shinohara, I want you to fight against me, please! Because the only one who can stand in the way of my glorious path, my wondrous story, is *you*, the final boss!”

“I don’t know what that ‘protagonist’ and ‘final boss’ stuff’s all about, but are you sure you understand what’s going on here? It’s one person against five, and in Dropout Tamers, each team member gets to choose a command. You realize that you’re at a huge disadvantage, right?”

“I predicted you’d say that many pages ago! But that’s not a problem, because my third Ability is Overboost—the less of an advantage I have in a given situation, the stronger I get! And now that all my teammates are gone, my situation couldn’t *be* much worse, so something like picking five commands all by myself is child’s play! And I also have an intrinsic skill, thanks to my A-class familiar. Byakko’s Roar is a support Ability that further enhances the

effects of skill commands! So I'm doing totally fine right now, thanks!"

"…Oh? So you were planning to go it alone from the start?"

"Of course I was, Shinohara! Don't tell me you don't know the rules of *Werewolf*! If there's a one-to-one ratio of werewolves and villagers, the werewolves win; if all the werewolves are killed, the villagers win. But as the protagonist *and* a villager, I can just defeat everybody else to win! And then I'll be surrounded by a halo of light!"

Yumeno looked like she was ready for a fight…and I can't say her thinking was completely faulty, either. Getting rid of your teammates means never having to worry about a traitor, which didn't seem like a wholly illegitimate strategy. But coming up with that idea and actually implementing it are two very different things. You'd need to have a screw or two loose to try it for real. Then again, everybody in Dropout Tamers was capable enough to rank in the top hundred out of 250,000 students, so you aren't going to find any "normal" players to start with.

"…All right. Sounds good, then."

With a fearless smile, I quietly took out my device in front of Yumeno…

"Could you wait one moment, please?"

I was interrupted by a strangely familiar voice. It was calm and gentle, but it still set off loud alarms in my brain. I swallowed a bit as I quietly turned around.

Standing before me was a group of four people—or I guess, looking at the way they were clustered, it was more like one man and a group of three. The man was clearly the leader, and now he stepped forward and smiled at me. He'd been discussed countless times on the Libra feed for the past ten days, a completely pure saint whose very existence was associated with justice.

"Kaoru Saeki," I said.

He seemed to hear me, but it just made his smile widen. Then,

eyes still narrowed, he continued in his soft tone.

"…I invoke the Ability No Game. This skirmish between Team X and Team VI is hereby shut down. You will not be able to battle each other for the next hour."

"Huh…? Why'd you do that?! I know that kind smile of yours is really convincing and all, but I am firmly opposed to this! Grr!"

"Sadly, opposing me will not change matters… I really can't have you giving your Byakko away to him, you see. That alone would throw our plan completely off the rails."

The man slowly shook his head as he spoke. Then he looked over to us—or at me, I suppose—and smiled broadly, his arms spread out in a theatrical gesture.

"I believe this is the first time we've met in person, Hiroto Shinohara. My name is Kaoru Saeki, a Six Star from the Suisei School…or perhaps I should introduce myself as a player from the Hexagram, the defenders of justice. I'm here to punish you for your wrongdoings."

#

It was just a few seconds since Kaoru Saeki, best of the Second Ward's Suisei School and leader of the Hexagram, had burst on the scene, but already the air around us was charged with tension.

Misaki Yumeno was the most clearly defiant among us all, her light-pink hair shaking as she leaned forward menacingly. She gave Saeki her most enraged look possible.

"Ngh…! Stop keeping this story going without me, the protagonist! And what do you mean using No Game, huh?! I have to defeat Shinohara! If outsiders like you try to rain on my parade, they're gonna pay for it! Grrrrrr!"

"I apologize for taking the wind out of your sails, but it makes me terribly upset to be described as an outsider. I'm part of Dropout Tamers, just like you, I'll have you know… And I'm worried that Shinohara, the greatest villain of our age, will receive Byakko from

you. You're very likely to lose to him, after all."

"Wha…? You can't just say that! Knock it off already!"

"That's what I would advise *you* to do right now, Yumeno. If your actions assist Shinohara on his way to victory, that's clearly an evil act, isn't it? We in the Hexagram condemn all types of evil…so I will be taking *that* for the moment."

Saeki made a small movement with his arm. At that moment, one of the men behind him stepped forward. This was the muscular Koto Tsuzuki, a Five Star from the Ohmi School and one of Saeki's Hexagram cronies. He raised his own device, and out of nowhere, a smokelike effect rose up and enveloped Yumeno's device. The moment it did, Byakko, the white sacred beast in her possession, appeared even though no battle was taking place—and it was sucked into Tsuzuki's device, as if trapped in the smoke.

"…Capture complete. Thank you, Koto."

Saeki smiled, having closely watched the whole thing play out.

"This is our second A-class familiar after Seiryu, isn't it? And we already know where Genbu respawned, so obtaining the third should be simple enough. I'd like to collect them all…but Suzaku might pose more of a challenge."

"You're trying to get all the A-class familiars…? But that's my exclusive right as the protagonist! And you can't just go 'capturing' things like that! It's no fair!"

"There's no rule that says you can't take someone's familiar without a fight, is there? I wish you'd stop acting like I'm cheating or doing something untoward. If anything, Yumeno, I want to give you a chance here. You almost committed the crime of handing an A-class familiar over to Shinohara. As punishment, I have taken Byakko off your hands, so you have now atoned for your crime. I hope you will refrain from doing it again in your future Games. On the other hand, if you wish to continue complaining, I have my own ideas—"

"…Run, Yumeno."

"Huh?! B-but…!"

"Just do it!"

Yumeno flinched for a moment at my gruff voice, but then she heeded my advice.

"Screw the Hexagram!" she yelled over her shoulder as she left. "What kinda legion of justice *are* you, huh?!"

…Anyway, that should take her out of the picture for now. I don't know what Saeki had been planning to do to her, but I doubt it was anything pretty.

Saeki sighed as he watched her disappear from sight at high speed.

"Oh, she's gone? I was hoping to hear her atone a bit more. Well, let's wait a bit before we decide what to do with her. It was only an attempted crime, after all."

He stopped speaking and turned his body toward us, his eyes narrowed as before. His smile was friendly, but there was a sort of mindless serenity to it that unnerved me.

"…!"

I could also sense Nitta, standing a little way away from me, silently screaming in response. She'd pulled her hood down too far to see her expression, but she was unconsciously edging away from Saeki with what seemed to be a combination of fear, awe, rejection, and submission.

"Well," Saeki continued softly without acknowledging any of it, "now that things have finally calmed down… Are you making good progress in the Game, Shinohara?"

"I wonder about that myself. I just had someone butt in and take an A-class familiar from me, so…"

"Ha-ha! Well, I don't think that's the only reason for your misfortune. This time, you see, both us and everyone watching the Libra stream are personally monitoring you. Can you blame them for thinking you're not doing well because you've lost access to your usual cheats? And in fact, five people have already beaten you to the punch and advanced to the final stage. Are you okay with that? Should a Seven Star still be here?"

"You think you're gonna rile me up like that? Winning Stage Four early doesn't give any high-ranking advantage. Whether you're first to quality or sixteenth, it's the same thing."

"Heh-heh… Yes, of course. Assuming you actually manage to qualify, that is."

Saeki smiled at Nitta, who shrank back again.

Kagaya was right, of course—Sana Nitta was an assassin of sorts, sent by the Hexagram to rub me out. If I'd let her be eliminated from the Game, it would've likely put us in a critical situation… And if that had prevented me from winning this stage, people would think it was because I'd been stripped of all my cheats. It was a nefarious move, nothing at all to do with justice… But on the outside, it probably *did* look like the good guys winning the day.

So the self-righteous leader of the Hexagram thinly smiled at me again.

"As you see, there is no need for us to get directly involved with you. Once this Game reaches its conclusion, it will be crystal clear who's in the right."

"Yeah? You're a pretty hands-off defender of justice, huh?"

"I'd prefer to be described as efficient. And of course, I'm not just going to leave you alone. In fact, I have a proposal for you."

Saeki took a device out of his breast pocket and peered at the screen for a moment. Then, with a shrug that seemed to say "I give up," he looked back at me.

"Say, Shinohara, you have two B-class Hellhounds, right?"

"If you mean that as a question, there's no guarantee I'll tell the truth, and if you're asking for a confirmation, you're just wasting your time."

"Ha-ha-ha! Not feeling cooperative, are you? The latter is the correct answer, by the way; I just wanted to enjoy speaking with you a little, is all. Regardless, those Hellhounds are B-class familiars, which means there are three of them in this Game. But you have two of them, and the other one is in the hands of Misaki Yumeno, that girl from earlier. If the Hellhound that Minami created via her Transform Ability earlier had been revived, we could have gone to fetch it, but unfortunately, it seems to have disappeared once Team III wrapped up DOT."

He showed me his device. So that's what he was checking on? I guess his team was looking for a Hellhound, and the only people in the Game in possession of them right now were us and Yumeno. We had a monopoly on them, basically.

"So we'd like you to give us one of those familiars. We won't ask you to give it up for free, of course. We have a few B-class duplicates of our own, and you're free to pick whichever one you like. If you agree to this, we'll let you off the hook. For *now* anyway. Your other crimes can *never* be forgiven, unlike with Yumeno. Does that sound like such a bad deal to you?"

"…"

I glared silently at Saeki's gentle smile. He thought he was superior to me, and that's why he was offering this deal… Then, suddenly, I felt a hand grab my shoulder from behind.

"Wh-what're we gonna do, Shinohara?! Because count me out of *ever* trying to antagonize the Hexagram! If they're willing to let us go for just one B-class familiar, don't you think we should say yes to that?"

"Absolutely not… Are you kidding me? What are you, stupid?"

"Stu—"

"…I wouldn't go so far as to call him stupid, Minami, but you're right. Think about it, Yuikawa. They're powerful enough to have two A-class familiars and more B-class dupes than they can count, yet they've gone to the effort of approaching *us*? I don't know what their exact plan is, but whatever it is, they need a Hellhound for it. If they *don't* get one from us, they can't continue with that plan."

"Yeah, I'll bet. Ain't no way we're givin' them a Hellhound, Yuikawa. If you got a problem with that, then you're *beyond* a traitor."

"Wha…? N-no, it's not me! I mean, it'd be great if we didn't have to give up anything at all here, but…"

"Then it's settled," Fujishiro said bluntly.

Nitta's lowered gaze didn't reveal whether she agreed… Or really, I think she would've collapsed from fright by now if she wasn't clinging to Minami. But even if she *had* raised an objection, we had a majority now. Team VI had just decided to fight.

"Okay… You hear that, Saeki? I'm not looking for a fight, but if you want it, you got it."

"…All right, then. We'll settle this in combat. But I will not serve as the main player here. Instead, I'll give that spot to a promising

first-year from my team…and a fellow Hexagram member."

"A fellow…?"

It was only then that I realized she was missing. Saeki's narrowed eyes seemed to confirm my suspicion. With a pretentious whirl of his arm, he snapped his fingers—and then I heard firm footsteps behind me.

I turned around, my premonition feeling like a certainty.

"Well, Shinohara, here I am…as promised."

There stood Mari Minakami, her long black hair swaying in the air.

It was the middle of the second day of SFIA's semifinal, and I was facing off against Mari Minakami, a first-year from my school.

"Well, Mari, he's all yours. I truly wish you good luck in this engagement. Please do your best…and make sure not to disgrace the good name of the Hexagram."

"Never, Kaoru! I'll try my best to live up to your expectations!"

Minakami seemed genuinely happy to hear that and bowed deeply toward Saeki. He rewarded her with a dignified, elegant smile, satisfied by what he saw. Then, taking one more glance at me, Saeki slowly left, probably going to capture that A-class familiar he didn't have yet. Two teammates, a boy and girl, followed after him.

So we were facing off against Minakami and another male student—Koto Tsuzuki, a macho, athletic-looking guy who'd been standing behind Saeki in that first video of his. He was one of the Hexagram's higher-ups, but right now, he was acting as more of an observer than anything. He just stood there a short distance away, his arms folded, not bothering to say anything to us. The only resistance we were facing here was Mari Minakami, the Eimei first-year.

Which meant…

They're trying to take Minakami and me out at the same time? Oof. Saeki was aiming for this all along, wasn't he?

It was only now dawning on me, but it was too late to do anything about it. I shook my head to mentally reset.

"Hey, Minakami. I know you and I don't really get along, but I didn't think we'd end up fighting each other. You know it's not a great idea to fight players from the same school, right?"

"Of course I know that. But I have a mission—I'm trying to help rehabilitate my fellow upperclassman. Kaoru entrusted me with that incredibly important mission, and even if it presents certain issues, it's nothing I can't overcome!"

"Even if it damages Eimei down the line? It'd be one thing if I was the only guy left, but Asamiya's still in this Game, too. You realize that fighting me is basically the same as dragging her down, too, right? Because we kind of saw you as allied with Eimei, you know."

"…! I—I am! But I still believe in my own justice!"

Bringing up Asamiya's name made Minakami flinch for a moment, but with a shake of her long, flowing black hair, she banished any regret from her mind. She must really think I'm "evil," or else someone had made her believe it. There was no shaking her of that conviction, and she didn't have the slightest intention of compromising.

"Okay, we'll fight, then. But what's your plan, exactly? You've got one other teammate here, but everybody else is gone. Are you gonna use an Ability to make up for being outnumbered, like Yumeno earlier?"

"No, nothing like that. I'm here because I want to settle matters with you, and you alone. Thus, I propose a special rule set for this battle. We'll make it a one-on-one match, with each player selecting one familiar and one command. The battle will last just one turn, and whoever deals more damage to their enemy familiar in that turn is the winner. As for the reward… How does taking the familiar of your choice from the opponent's deck sound?"

"…Interesting."

I brought my hand to my lips as I thought over the proposal. Dropout Tamers has pretty well-defined rules for how battles work, but we had some wiggle room to modify them if both sides agreed. What Minakami suggested was a kind of bare-bones version, you could say. The players, familiars, and commands were stripped down

to the absolute minimum, and the battle turned into a contest over who could deal more damage in one shot. A one-turn lightning round, if you will.

"*…That doesn't seem like a problem to me, Master*," whispered the voice in my earpiece. *"Setting it to one turn might be Ms. Minakami's way to prevent you from invoking chain commands, but if no other players are involved, then no one will notice if the Company plants a cheat into this. I think that no matter what Ms. Minakami picks, we can replace it with another command."*

Oh… Right, yeah. But…

I glanced at Minakami as I listened to Himeji's guidance. This was a girl who'd worked herself up into a frenzy trying to expose my cheating. It wouldn't surprise me if she had an Ability that would penalize me if I tried to lie or cheat in this match. If she was on the lookout for something like that, I'd have to win this battle without any underhanded tricks.

So I decided to check my device again. I had more familiars now, but Hellhound was the only B-class one. As Himeji advised, we couldn't string base commands together for a chain move, and if I used a skill command, I'd have to break Fragile Covenant during this fight. That Ability was a pretty big mismatch with our current needs.

This is a one-on-one fight, so losing Fragile Covenant won't matter, since the traitor can't interfere anyway. But I'd really like to keep it going for after this… Oh, wait a minute.

Then my wandering gaze stopped on the name of a certain familiar… I *did* have this one, didn't I? It was a C-class mentioned in passing at yesterday's strategy meeting. Its highly asymmetrical stats had kept it from being a serious candidate for battle up to now, but under these alternative rules, it might be just the thing for me. In fact, I might be able to dominate Minakami with it.

"You're looking more confident now, Shinohara. Do you have your cheats in place?"

"Hmm? …Oh yeah. Well, whether I'm cheating or not, I'm ready to beat you, Minakami. Let's get this started," I said, just as I finished making my choices.

The next moment, our familiars materialized next to us in AR

space. The graphics were as impressive as always, and I heard a few people oohing and aahing in the audience…but it didn't take long before the wonder was replaced by doubt and concern. Both of us, after all, made some very unusual selections.

Team IX: Mari Minakami **Familiar Used:** Western Guardian, Byakko (A)
Familiar Stats: ATK 6, DEF 8, SPD 7, LP 7

Team VI: Hiroto Shinohara **Familiar Used:** Fairy (C)
Familiar Stats: ATK 1, DEF 1, SPD 15, LP 1

"…?! Wait, wait, wait…!"

Next to Minakami was a ferocious white tiger, while by my side was a small, insect-like creature flitting around in the air. Yuikawa was pointing at our familiars, looking about ready to lose it.

"Byakko? *Byakko?!* That makes no sense! This was supposed to be a one-on-one fight between the two of you! So why do you have access to a familiar captured by that guy over there?!"

"It's a part of our strategy. We're using an Ability, and that's all I'm going to tell you!"

"Nngh… Well, fine, then! But what's up with *you*, Shinohara?! It's a short battle with no chain commands, and you choose *that* weakling?!"

"Weakling, huh? Well, if that's how it looks, just keep quiet and watch, Yuikawa. Things are gonna get real interesting, real quick."

I kept facing Minakami as I spoke. The commands we selected were floating in the air, face down. This was a lightning round, so there was no need for further psychological warfare. The winner would be decided the moment the cards were revealed.

"Looking pretty relaxed there, Shinohara," Minakami said quietly, her long black hair swaying in the wind. "Should you be? You won't be able to win unless you start cheating pretty soon… And if you lose, I'm gonna make you confess to every lie you've told us."

"Sure, fine. I'm not lying about anything, and I'm not gonna lose,

either. Or…really, if you're talking like that, you invoked an anti-cheat Ability of some sort, didn't you? So now you're panicking because it's not activating, and I'm looking super-relaxed."

"…! No, I'm not panicking. After all, you're a liar. A bad guy who made it to where you are because of all your lies. There's no way our justice would lose to someone like you!"

With those caustic words, the commands flashed into view.

First to reveal itself was the skill command Minakami had chosen: Deal with the Devil. Belonging to the B-class familiar Succubus, it reduced the LP, DEF, and SPD of your familiar as much as you wanted, then the total amount was tripled and added to your ATK. This effect was more powerful than it looked in our initial research, perhaps because of Byakko's own intrinsic Abilities. The LP reduction isn't treated as damage, either, so under our current rules, it was pretty much her ideal move.

Meanwhile, on my side of the field…

"…Speed Up?"

That's right—I'd opted to use the Speed Up base command on my familiar. Thanks to the Fragile Covenant, that added +2 to my SPD stat…but it still looked like a pretty wimpy move compared to Deal with the Devil. I mean, I still had virtually no ATK.

"Wh-what's going on?" Minakami asked, confused as she compared our two commands. "Buffing your speed at this point? And why a base command when chains aren't even possible in this fight? This isn't like you at all, Shinohara!"

"Not like me? What kind of image do you have of me anyway? It's a pretty straightforward choice, isn't it?"

"Mmph… Well, I'll tell you right now—I've invoked the Ability Iron Justice, which immediately removes a player from a Game if they do something that goes against the rules. If you're trying to trick me somehow, don't bother, all right?"

"You keep on accusing me of that stuff, but unfortunately, I've never done anything like that, all right? Or really, if such an alleged cheater is riding high as a Seven Star, doesn't that bring the whole star-hunting system into question? Like, how fragile *is* it, even?"

"Th-that's why we, the Academy-sanctioned Hexagram, are here

to keep a close eye on it—but *hey*! Don't change the subject, Shinohara!"

Her black hair shook briskly as she challenged me with her gaze.

"…Well, I'll just *win* then, okay? With Deal with the Devil, I'll sacrifice 6 Life Points and 6 Speed from Byakko, then add three times that to my Attack. That gives me an Attack of 42, which means I hit your familiar for 41 damage."

"Yes, that's how it would be calculated. But before that…"

I smiled a bit as I silently pointed above my head, where all the stats of my Fairy familiar were projected. It had been up there the whole time, but now one of the stats was slowly blinking.

"You see the Speed up there? One of a familiar's core stats? It doesn't get talked about much unless it's a close battle where who goes first makes a difference, but it's surprisingly important. You see, in addition to turn order, speed is also involved in whether an attack hits. In this Game, the system figures out if your attack hits by dividing your speed by your opponent's. The higher this percentage is for you, in other words, the more likely it is to hit… And the lower it is, the more likely it is to miss."

"I know that, but… Huh?"

"You see now? I'm sure you knew that fact, but probably *not* how it's applied. You usually don't see fights between familiars with big speed differences, so few people have actually seen an attack miss before. That, and a lot of skill commands, like Void Cannon and Constrict, don't factor speed at all into whether they succeed. So there's really no need to go crazy with your speed—and in a fight where you're competing to see who can land the bigger blow, nobody's gonna be selecting skill commands like that. Now…take a look up there. My Fairy's definitely C-class, but her speed is off the charts. Apply Speed Up to it, and it goes to 17—way higher than any A-class familiar. *You* just drained Byakko's speed down to 1 thanks to your Deal with the Devil. Now, what's the chance of Byakko hitting with its attack?"

"One divided by seventeen… Around six… Six percent?!"

Minakami's stunned eyes shot wide open as she reached that answer. She was right. Thanks to that yawning difference in speed,

Byakko had a less than one-in-ten chance of striking my Fairy. It'd certainly insta-kill her if it hit, but if not, it would be meaningless.

"…B-but!"

Despite her obvious frustration, Minakami still held her head high. She pointed a finger at my Fairy's stat box.

"Okay, maybe you'll avoid the attack, but your Fairy's attack is still lower than Byakko's defense! You can't land any damage on me!"

"Yeah, fair. So what happens then? Does this end in a draw?"

"A draw…? Wait, is *that* what you were aiming for? Well, sorry, Shinohara, but it'll go into sudden-death overtime. The command you selected will be continually applied each turn, and our familiars will keep fighting until a winner's crowned. So it's pretty much over, isn't it? Because I'm bound to get lucky and hit you sooner or later, but you can *never* damage me!"

"…Oh, I don't know about that."

Minakami was ready to declare victory, but I just flashed a breezy smile at her.

"We're playing a bare-bones version where you can only select one command. But in sudden death, we'll see a second…and a third turn. And *that* means chain commands suddenly become possible again."

"…! S-so you picked the Fairy…so you'd have more turns to work with?!"

"You got it. And Speed-Speed-Speed results in Lightning Speed, which lets you move faster than the wind to dodge attacks and pierce through your foe, bypassing its defense. Of course, if Byakko can hit before then, you win, but since I'm adding another Speed Up every turn, your chance of landing a hit will go down after every turn… So well, good luck, I guess."

With a bold grin, I confirmed that Speed Up was selected for my second turn. Minakami, meanwhile, had Deal with the Devil activated again, and so we entered the Battle Phase. My Fairy moved first with her unbeatable SPD, but her 1 ATK didn't damage Byakko at all. Byakko's attack, meanwhile, worked out just as expected, slicing through thin air. The extra Speed Up was only worsening its chances.

Then, on turn three, my three Speed Up commands chained together to form Lightning Speed, just as expected. There was a much different-looking aura around my Fairy now as she plunged hard into Byakko's side, landing a single, bladelike slash on it. Byakko attacked…and missed.

"…!"

As she witnessed this, Minakami on the opposite side fell to her knees, as if she'd been knocked over. Her long black hair flew up into the air, telling the whole story about the shock she was facing… I suppose Kaoru Saeki had convinced her to believe deep down that I *was* a nefarious villain who'd risen to the top through constant, malicious cheating. That's why she was so unable to accept the reality that she lost, even though Iron Justice didn't trigger at all. It was an impossible situation, and it shook her to the core.

Seeing the state Minakami was in, I was about to call out to her when—

"Good work, Mari."

"…! K-Kaoru…?!"

Suddenly, a screen projected itself between Minakami and me. It showed Kaoru Saeki, smiling gently. I imagine Tsuzuki, the Hexagram official still watching us from afar, arms crossed, chose this moment to link us up. Minakami quickly rose to her feet and bowed as low as she could at the screen.

"I'm sorry…! I… I'm afraid I lost to Shinohara…"

"Yes, Koto told me. He was always going to be a tricky foe."

"I have no excuse… But I swear I won't lose next time! I could challenge him again this afternoon—"

"Again? Oh… No, you don't have to do that."

"…What?"

"There's no need for a rematch. After all, your role in this is over."

Saeki quietly held up his device. The screen displayed not his stats, but his team information screen. For some reason, there was a B-class Hellhound on it.

Minakami watched on, mouth open in confusion.

"The Capture is complete. You see, while you and Shinohara were fighting, Koto was secretly working. His target wasn't Shinohara, but

Yuikawa. We knew he possessed a Hellhound, so we took the opportunity to seize it from him."

"Wha—?! Wh-when did that happen…?!"

I heard Yuikawa's panicked voice behind me. I guess it wasn't a bluff, then—they really had stolen it. That super-important B-class familiar, the missing piece from their "plan" or whatever, had fallen into their hands all too easily.

But…

"W-wait, Kaoru."

Minakami had taken a few staggering steps forward. With a frightened (or maybe pleading) expression, she addressed the on-screen Saeki.

"Um… I took on this battle because I thought I could expose Shinohara's lies by defeating him. I wanted to win for the sake of the Hexagram's justice. But was my 'role' *not* that? Was I just a decoy to buy time?"

"…? What a strange question, Mari."

With every fiber of her being, Minakami was wishing for him to deny it. Saeki gently smiled at the question, his narrow eyes focused on Minakami. And with that peaceful face—a face that would make anyone want to do his bidding—he continued in his usual tone.

"Well, of course you were. Neither I, nor Koto, nor the other members expected you to win that battle. Your role was to keep your fellow Eimei School student pinned down for long enough for us to Capture the Hellhound, and you fulfilled that role very well. Now you've done your job. You are of no further value to us."

"…Value?"

"Ha-ha! What, you still haven't noticed? When you asked to join the Hexagram, we approved because you're Mayu Minakami's sister. You offered us a certain value as a go-between with the hidden genius of Eimei as we attempted to recruit her. But Mayu Minakami was more set in her ways than we thought, so we decided to give up on her. After that, you had only a small amount of value as Hiroto Shinohara's classmate, and you demonstrated that value well, helping us obtain the Hellhound. Truly wonderful work… Oh, but if you're afraid Shinohara's going to take Byakko from you, there's no

need to. Your 'key' has been temporarily disabled, so you won't be able to access any of our resources for the next few hours. Sorry about that."

"…!!"

Minakami had no response to Saeki. How could she? This was about the worst possible news imaginable to her, and it made her collapse in a daze. Her emotional capacity had already reached its limit, preventing her from arguing back, crying, or screaming in despair.

"…How awful."

I heard a terribly cold voice through my earpiece. Himeji sounded like she was seething with anger, more than I'd ever heard from her before, and I couldn't help balling my hands into fists… Really, this was just too much. I wasn't pretending to be a superhero. Minakami and I were pretty much on opposite sides, but that didn't make this punishment any more acceptable to me. To her, Kaoru Saeki was a symbol of justice, someone worthy of respect after he rescued her. If that savior was being *this* cruel to her now, you could imagine what'd come next. It'd break anyone's heart.

No… He knew all that, and he did this anyway. So he could cut off Minakami and prevent her from ever recovering… That bastard…!

I felt sick to my stomach at that thought, and I decided to take a step forward. I wasn't overtly trying to protect Minakami, but it still caught Saeki's attention. Then, trying to keep my emotions as subdued as possible, I lowered my voice.





"Hey, Saeki. It's just as I thought, huh? That dirty sneer's the *real* you, isn't it?"

"Oh, come on. All I'm saying is that in order to destroy evil like you, we need to make some sacrifices. I'm sure someone like her, who's truly just, understands."

"Yeah? Because it looks to me like you just betrayed someone who really trusted you and plunged her into despair."

"Ha-ha! You're far too kindhearted, Shinohara. If things weren't like this, I would love to have a cup of tea with you sometime, but—oh, don't give me that look. I'm just joking."

I glared at Saeki for trying to evade my accusation. He shook his head and broke into a smile.

"*Well, then*," he muttered, changing the topic, "*I suppose we're set now. Since we've gone through all this trouble, why don't we let everyone else in on the action, too? Koto, can you connect this video chat to the IslandTube feed?*"

"Sure."

The large man nodded and started working the device in his hand. I didn't see any change around us, but I suppose Saeki's video was now being broadcast across the island.

"*Hello, everyone*," he began after a quick check of his device. *"This is Kaoru Saeki of the Hexagram. I apologize for interrupting SFIA and Dropout Tamers, but please give me a moment of your time.*

"I would like to announce that we have brought a certain special Ability into this Game. Called Limited Sharing, it's been created using the Unique Stars in my possession. Its effect is somewhat complicated to explain… But to sum it up, it creates a sort of storage warehouse in virtual space that only certain people have access rights to. Cloud storage, if you will. Players who have one of the keys created for this storehouse can access it, depositing or withdrawing familiars as they please. If someone gains a powerful familiar and puts it in there, anyone with the key can use it… And of course, it'll count as part of your team's victory conditions if needed, too.

"Currently, we are in possession of three A-class and ten B-class

familiars, all stored using Limited Sharing. We have yet to locate Suzaku, unfortunately, but that is not a critical concern. Once we place the final piece of the puzzle—the S-class Archangel—into the virtual storage space, everyone who has a key and doesn't have Suzaku as part of their victory conditions will be granted a spot in the final stage. We're calling this process the Rapture.

"Beating the stage this way is a bit different from the usual team structure, of course. We'd be winning as part of a fictional team whose members all share the same key. Even if a traitor wins as well, that won't affect us at all, so please don't worry about that."

He still had that gentle smile, but what Saeki told us was outrageous. Maybe his treatment of Minakami prevented me from thinking clearly, but honestly, it all sounded like a bunch of crazy talk. Limited Sharing would let you create a fictional team of people with keys, sharing in a single virtual storehouse of resources. That was why Minakami had access to Byakko—and how they were so efficient at collecting familiars. There were probably other Hexagram members scattered across the other teams, not just Saeki and his two officials—and through the Rapture process he described, they could all advance to the final stage.

I was growing more impatient by the moment, but Saeki continued in his graceful tone.

"However, our goal in the Hexagram is not merely to win this event, but to also expose Shinohara's wrongdoing. Allow me to discuss that for a minute as well.

"After we complete Stage Four, the Limited Sharing storehouse will be transformed into a sort of 'prison,' and all the familiars trapped inside will no longer be able to be withdrawn—they won't go back to being quest rewards once we're finished with the Game. There are multiple B-class familiars, yes, but by doing this, all the A-class familiars, with the exception of Suzaku and the lone S-class Archangel, will no longer be possible to obtain.

"This is just a little trick, of course, something a real *Seven Star could circumvent without a problem… So perhaps Shinohara could see it as us giving him a challenge."*

Saeki narrowed his eyes. Then he reached for his camera,

adjusting the angle a little—and now the screen showed a beautiful angel bound to a large cross, yet still retaining her mystical, divine air.

"Now for the final touch. Can you see this? This is the S-class familiar Archangel. I'm sure many of you know that after seeing the epic battle with the Empress earlier, but let me give you a recap.

"In actual fact, we have already completed the final step of the S-class quest—namely, defeating the Archangel itself. However, since we lacked all the other pieces we needed, we had to wait until now to reveal this. Without those, I didn't think our final push would have the public impact we'd hoped for. Ha-ha!

"Now then, it is time for the angel to bring about the Rapture. All players who come into possession of a key are hereby invited to the final stage unconditionally. As for everyone else… Well, I suppose you could cling to the faint hope that Shinohara truly is a Seven Star and cheer for him like your life depends on it."

Saeki held up the device in his hand, raising it toward the Archangel. A pale blue light spread out, enveloping her entire body, and a few seconds later, she was sucked into his device. This marked the completion of the S-class quest…and the final piece of the puzzle for Saeki's Limited Sharing.

"Now…have fun struggling against me, Shinohara."

With that final diss, the screen went blank—and at the same time, I could hear a flurry of noise from my earpiece. My team was probably checking to see who'd won the Game through the Rapture, but there was no way all the slots for the final stage could be filled up that fast…

"…Oh? Ohh…?"

But then, Yuikawa—staring at his device in a daze—let out a strange cry. He kept staring for a while… But then a joyous smile began to appear on his face.

"…What is it, Yuikawa?"

"Heh…heh-heh… Ah-ha-ha! Wow, you didn't get one, huh, Shinohara? I guess I'm one of the chosen ones, after all!"

"The chosen ones? You mean…?"

"Yeah! The key Saeki was talking about is showing up on my list

of familiars! S-class, A-class, B-class… Wow, I really *do* have everything except Suzaku in here! All the victory conditions!”

“…You’re gonna fall for that? I thought you turned down the Hexagram when they recruited you.”

“Well, yeah, but if *this* is what they’re offering, how can I say no? If they want my help, they got it!”

I’d stopped paying attention to Yuikawa halfway through his verbal victory lap. It was just as I thought. They were couching it in all these fancy terms like Rapture, but basically, this was the Hexagram letting their allies (or anyone with their backing) win the stage, and shutting out everyone else. I didn’t have any way to know how loyal Yuikawa was to them, but either way, how could he turn it down?

…Right after that, I heard Himeji’s voice in my ear, a bit more rigid than usual, like she was suppressing her emotions.

“I’m sorry this took so long, Master. After the Rapture that just took place, the number of players who meet the victory conditions—that is, those who hold a key to Kaoru Saeki’s Limited Sharing and don’t need Suzaku in order to win—and have cleared the game is four in total. These are Kaoru Saeki himself, Kanade Yuikawa, Ako Ishizaki, and Soma Yanagi. The four of them all belong to different teams, and they all have connections to the Hexagram. The two teammates who joined Mr. Saeki earlier did not have a Hexagram emblem on their chest, so I doubt they were told about the keys or the Rapture… It’s certainly a good thing Suzaku hasn’t been caught yet. If all the familiars were in their hands, Dropout Tamers likely would have ended right then and there.

“Also…among the players who meet the conditions described earlier, two are still in the Game. They have a key and likely don’t need Suzaku to win… But for some reason, they haven’t left Stage Four yet. One of them is Mr. Koto Tsuzuki, the Five Star Hexagram executive from the Tenth Ward’s Ohmi School. If he was the traitor for his team, his victory conditions might differ from Kaoru Saeki’s, but either way, he remains in DOT.

“The second one…is Ms. Mari Minakami.”

“…!”

Reading between the lines of what Himeji was saying, I fell silent, biting my lip… If Minakami satisfied all the conditions, she should've cleared the Game already. But then Saeki's words came back to me. Something about "temporarily disabling" her key, right? Now it made sense.

So Minakami's been…

It seemed now that she had been completely discarded by the Hexagram.

"…"

I stared at her, slumped to the ground in defeat, and squeezed my right fist tight.

SFIA Stage 4: Dropout Tamers—Progress Report

Advanced to final stage:

- Toya Kirigaya
- Sarasa Saionji
- Senri Kururugi
- Miyabi Akutsu
- Mitsuru Fuwa
- Kaoru Saeki
- Kanade Yuikawa
- Ako Ishizaki
- Soma Yanagi

Remaining slots: 7

STOC Timeline / IslandTube Comments Reactions to the Game So Far

11:37 Whoa! We finally have a winner! The first one out!

11:37 Kirigaya was the first out, huh? He's so awesome

11:38 He was the traitor, just like we figured

14:22 Saionji won!

14:22 Wow, you can actually beat the Archangel? She looked so strong

14:22 Can you even imagine a lineup like Team III losing at all? It's like a cheat code

14:22 Nah, the team doesn't have anything to do with it. My goddess could never lose a challenge like this

14:22 Hi, Kugasaki

14:23 Kururugi sure put up a fight, too. And that Akutsu (?) girl. Suisei's got the juice

14:23 I feel really bad for Noa, though

15:11 Whoa, what's going on? Is this Saeki?

15:14 Whaaaaaaaaaaaaaat??? What the hell is this?!!!!!

15:14 Damn! The Hexagram's serious?!

15:14 They're like a car with no brakes, just flyin down the street

15:14 Those Suisei guys are crazy… This is who they got coming out of the woodwork now? Way too powerful

15:14 So is this it? Round 4's over?

15:15 The whole rapture thing's so shocking, I'll only be able to sleep at night from now on

15:15 It's hilarious that Yuikawa somehow managed to win. But Shinohara's totally dead now…

Chapter 5

Proof of Resolve

#

Day two of SFIA's Dropout Tamers was finally about to end.

After Saeki's Rapture, the Game pretty much ground to a halt. And of course it did—not only had a bunch of slots for the final stage been filled, but Saeki's Limited Sharing had just locked up a bunch of familiars, including most of the ones people needed to clear the stage. What was there left to aim for, really? Even if we went through the steps the S-class quest required, the Archangel was in prison. And even if we fought other teams, it's not like any of them had A-class familiars to take.

"This is bad…"

Even the normally chill Minami was frowning and kicking her legs around.

We were all seated in an outdoor café not far from where we'd fought Minakami. Except for Yuikawa, who'd wasted no time ditching us after winning the Rapture lottery, all the members of Team VI were at a round table, staring at each other. Minakami had wandered off not too long after that fight, and I was kind of worried about her, but Himeji was keeping tabs on her without me even having to ask.

As for Sana Nitta, the other victim of the Hexagram, she had been silent for a good while. She didn't have to put on a brave front now, so she looked much paler, clearly frightened of Saeki. All her anger at the Hexagram was bubbling up to the surface.

"…Well, let's recap our current situation."

Keiya Fujishiro spoke up first after an extended period of silent contemplation. His fiendish eyes swiveled around, looking at all of us

one by one before he kept mumbling.

"So with the Rapture the Hexagram pulled off, we have practically no way to win this Game. I wanna hear your takes on it."

"Mm… I hate that guy. I'd take the stalker and delinquent here any day…"

"Yeah, thanks. But I'm not talkin' about that. Are we screwed or not? That's what I wanna know."

"…? Well, that's easy. Of *course* we're not screwed."

Minami's short hair bounced a little as she tilted her head, her voice full of confidence.

"Yeah, I agree," I said with a nod. "Saeki's Ability is a real Game-breaker, but I don't think it's a lethal blow. I'm totally sure we have a chance at a comeback."

"Oh? How come?"

"Two reasons. One, the Game's still ongoing. If this was *really* beyond salvaging, the admins would've stopped it, right? Then they could just run the final stage with the nine people who made it in so far. And two…"

"…Koto Tsuzuki is still here."

Minami, as emotionless as ever, gave the second reason before I could.

"That macho guy," she said, staring at me with her blue eyes. "One of the top-rankers of the Hexagram… Him still being here is the strangest part of all… You know they'd want to have him for the final…"

"Yeah, exactly. It could be that he's still here because he was his team's traitor and has to collect Suzaku, but I don't think that'd be reason enough to simply abandon him. He's got some other role here."

"A role, huh? …Well, the obvious thought is that it's got somethin' to do with Suzaku. They haven't been able to find that A-class familiar, which means at least a few people are still stuck in here. I don't think they would've left seven slots free otherwise."

"Yeah. It'd make sense if Tsuzuki's job is to obtain Suzaku and help the remaining Hexagram members still here reach the final stage. And if so…or even if that's not true, really, Saeki's 'prison' was

set up from the start to be breakable, right? If it wasn't, then Tsuzuki himself wouldn't be able to make it into the final, and I really doubt that's how they designed it."

That seemed like a reasonable summary of our thoughts. Whether it was a perfect answer or not, that was likely the gist of it. The presence of Koto Tsuzuki, heavy hitter for the Hexagram, indicated to us that there was still a way to beat Dropout Tamers.

"But the question is…what *kind* of route's left for us?"

I leaned forward a bit as I thought, then surreptitiously put a finger to my earpiece… If I wanted a breakthrough, I needed more details on Saeki's Abilities, so I'd asked the Company for an analysis a little while ago.

The first to respond to my tapped signal was Shiina, who sounded pretty excited.

"Hiroto, Hiroto! Analysis complete! That guy's Ability might be superstrong, I think. So, like, Limited Sharing is a way to define conditions that… Um, what was it again?"

"Right, right, just let Kagaya lay out the details."

"…Hi, Hiro! How ya doing? Like Tsum-Tsum was about to say… You know how Saeki is a double Unique Star holder, right? So in addition to taking stars from lower-ranked players, he's got another Unique capable of something big, okay? He mentioned it a little bit in that stream—the pink star, which has an Ability called Define Conditions."

"…?"

"Basically, it's a Unique Star that chains together conditions and results—like, if this happens, then do that. That's what he used to construct Limited Share, which is a kind of cloud storage that's locked down once the Rapture takes place. Pretty neat, huh? It's not just *a storehouse—his Ability can create all the conditions needed to transform it whenever he needs to. And that's just one example of how you can use Define Conditions…"*

Kagaya was sounding more businesslike than usual. It made sense, as shocking as the news was. No wonder this was all going his way—Saeki had had a Unique Star capable of that much all along. There was a certain limit to the Abilities that Define

Conditions could bring about, but you couldn't ask for much more freedom. The prison was full of familiars rated B and up, and it was all made with an Ability derived from that star.

So is there a way to break in…or to return the prison to its original "cloud storage" state?

My thoughts began to run deeper in response to this new information. But it was still a pretty tough problem. With the Hexagram's eyes on us, attempting a movie-like breakin was far too dangerous… But then again, this whole line of thinking kicked off because we wondered if Tsuzuki wanted to advance to the final stage. The Hexagram *claimed* to be for justice, at least, so I doubted they'd adopt a strategy based on screwing people over that much.

"…"

I glanced at Nitta, sitting off to the side a bit in front of me.

Now that we had reached this point, I found myself thinking more and more about Sana Nitta—the first-year from the Twentieth Ward's Azuminodai School. There was no doubting the fact that the Hexagram ordered her to join us. She'd received protection so she could keep winning up to Stage Three of SFIA, and there was no way she had been assigned to our DOT team by coincidence. What if Saeki had used Define Conditions to its full capacity and given her an Ability along the lines of "if the next Game is team-based, assign her to Hiroto Shinohara's team"? Maybe that was the case.

But did they push her this far through the Game only so they could crush me…? No, there has to be something else. To borrow Saeki's phrase, she has a "role"—one only she can carry out… Hang on.

The thought that occurred to me then seemed absurd. I couldn't be 100 percent certain, and it'd normally seem beyond impossible… but if this scenario happened to be true, it explained everything.

"…Hey, Nitta?"

I twisted my body a little to face her, choosing to cut right to the chase.

"Listen, I want you to come clean, all right? Can you tell me what you're hiding? The mission or whatever those guys gave you? Because it might be the key that gets us out of this."

"…No way. There's no way I'm helpful… And even if I could help you, why should I bother?"

"Why? Well, that's a question you could ask yourself. I mean, they treated you like crap, didn't they? Why don't you ask *us* for some help? Why're you keeping quiet and giving up? Because that's not gonna change anything."

"…! What would you even know?"

"A lot, actually. I know about your background, and I know how dangerous the Hexagram is, too. That's why I'm asking you to get on board with us. Maybe you've given up in the face of the Hexagram's overwhelming power, but do you *really* understand the person you're looking at right now? I'm the best in the Academy. Don't treat me like some wimp."

"…!"

I was trying to sound as strong as possible, and Nitta leaned back a little in response. She thought about it for a bit, looking ready to burst into tears at any moment, then took out her device. Her choice of response was to project a screen with exactly what I asked for—a list of the Abilities she had installed, or was made to install, for this Game.

Along for the Ride: If you are disposed of as a traitor, the target player (Hiroto Shinohara) will lose a colored star and its associated effects.

Elusive Elation: If you are still in the Game and the target player has met the victory conditions for Stage Four, that person will be eliminated from SFIA instead of advancing to the final.

Compensation: If Stage Four ends and neither of the above conditions are met, you will lose one star. The effect is triggered even if you are a One Star.

"…Tch. Makes my damn skin crawl."

"Yeah… It takes a lot for me to agree with a delinquent, but this is just awful…"

One look at the Abilities Nitta showed us was enough to make

Fujishiro and Minami see red. Instead of saying anything else, Minami stood up, strolled around the table, and gave Nitta a big hug from behind.

I couldn't blame her for reacting that way. These Abilities, likely created by Saeki's Define Conditions, were custom-made to be as vicious as possible. If Nitta was eliminated from the Game, and even if she avoided that and advanced past this stage, I was doomed to lose a star. If she decided to abandon her role and flee—well, *that* route was explicitly blocked, too.

"…See? I told you," Nitta said, gauging our reaction as she remained in Minami's arms. "There's no way I could help you. Whether you're a Seven Star or the strongest in the Academy, you're just no match for the Hexagram. You can't *do* anything about this. So just—"

"I can't?"

I grinned as I interrupted her. There was no doubting the pure malice behind the Abilities that Nitta was loaded up with. They were vile, yet still…

"Because it's all exactly what I imagined and expected… So yeah, I think I can work something out."

""""…Huh?""""

As I made that fearless declaration, the electronic bell rang to indicate the end of day two of Dropout Tamers.

♭

"…Haah…"

My body felt heavy.

Today's Game had ended before I knew it. I hadn't even noticed. Ever since the Rapture, I'd lost all sense of time…and of everything else, too.

I leaned against the nearest store window to catch my breath, closing my eyes like I was ready to go to sleep… This was probably me trying to escape reality. Somewhere in my mind, I was still rejecting the message I'd received a few hours ago—the only

guideline I had to work with right now.

"Trust everyone in Eimei…?"

…That's right.

The message had come from the best sister in the world, the genius of Eimei, Mayu Minakami. I didn't think any of my disgraceful behavior had been streamed live anywhere, but that message she sent me sounded like she'd seen everything I'd done.

This was my beloved sister talking to me. I felt like I should listen to her…but not enough to actually do it. I had already been betrayed twice, abandoned, so why was I trying to cling to someone so stubbornly? Even if this was Mayu's advice, I couldn't just nod and say yes to it. I was afraid of being abandoned again.

"But it was really me who betrayed the older students…"

The words slipped out of my mouth… That was it, the thought bouncing around the back of my head somewhere. Shinohara said that I was "allied with Eimei," but I'd flatly denied it. I'd taken Kaoru's words as truth, and—without any evidence—I'd accused Shinohara. I'd berated him. I'd pushed away the hand reaching out to me. There was no way I could face them again after that… I just wanted to cry. I could no longer cling to my own beliefs. I wanted to throw it all away…

"…Are you okay with staying like this?"

Just then, a voice I recognized broke me out of my selfish despair. A cool, clear, cute voice. It was Shirayuki Himeji, Shinohara's personal maid.

"Because if you run away now, you'll never able to come back. It means you'll have to continue running for the rest of your life. I am not your maid, but I recommend you avoid that choice as much as possible… If you *do* decide to run, however, then please take care of yourself on the way home."

Himeji bowed deeply, her expression calm and still. She didn't look angry at all…so I decided to venture a question.

"Himeji… How can you stick with Shinohara all the time?"

"Why? Well…because I am Master's maid."

"I—I don't mean it like that… I mean, he might be a liar, right? Anyone can be. Aren't you afraid of that? Even if I'm having fun, and the person I'm with is smiling at me, there's no guarantee it's genuine. You never know when that smile will turn into a scowl… You never know when you'll be betrayed."

"…I see. This is the question you're asking yourself?"

Himeji put her right hand, covered in a white glove, up to her lips. Shinohara had that same habit, too. They've probably been together long enough that one of them infected the other with it.

"I can say for sure," she said, her beautiful, clear blue eyes still on me, "that my master would never betray his friends. But if you want a more direct answer for your present situation, Ms. Minakami… Well, the most important thing is what *you* want to do."

"…Huh? Me…?"

"Yes. Ms. Minakami, you've been deceived by the Hexagram for an extended period of time. They've used you, toyed with you… Don't you resent that? Don't you want to fight back?"

"Fight back…? But…"

"Because I, personally, am quite angry about this. You may not like me very much, but to me, you're a first-year I care very much about."

"…!"

She gazed right at me as she said it. And maybe my own desires were getting mixed in, but she didn't seem to be lying at all.

"I'll ask you one more time, Ms. Minakami. Is running home to cry what you want to do? Running from reality? If that's what you want, then that's perfectly fine. But our Game isn't over yet… So why don't you fight with us?"

Her words seemed softer than before. And in response, I…

#

It was a little past six thirty by the time I made it back to the Eimei School.

Reading the faces of everyone in the student council room was a pretty easy task. Enomoto was looking even more displeased than usual as he tapped away at his keyboard, and Asamiya was biting her lip hard to suppress her emotions, but I could see how red her eyes were. Even Akizuki, who usually never stops smiling, was in a big huff.

"We're all gonna help you, Hiroto," she said, not a trace of sly sarcasm in her voice. "I promise!"

Minakami hadn't shown up yet, by the way. Considering her current position and state of mind, I probably shouldn't expect her to…but we would just have to trust in her and wait. Himeji was with her, at least, so she wasn't in any physical danger. She just had a lot to work through mentally.

Then…

"…Yes, that *is* a reasonable way of thinking."

Enomoto was the first to respond when I told them about the conversation I'd had with my team. He was sitting next to Asamiya, his arms crossed and a serious expression on his face.

"As long as Koto Tsuzuki is still in this, we have a chance to meet all the victory conditions. That much I'm certain of. But what do Sana Nitta's Abilities have to do with that? Because it sounds like those Abilities are all squarely targeted at you, Shinohara…"

"Right? Like, she can make one of Shino's Unique Stars disappear? That's pretty nuts, isn't it? I've never heard of an Ability that can just take 'em away like that before."

"…Yeah, good point."

I tried to sound upbeat in response to Asamiya's quiet tone. It was beyond "pretty nuts," actually. It'd mean all my lies would be exposed and I'd become a social pariah. But anyway…

"But that's not the most important thing. Nitta's Ability can make the effects of Unique Stars disappear. And Saeki's Limited Sharing—and the current prison—are all powered by Uniques, too, right?"

"Yeah… Wait, you mean…?"

Akizuki's eyes widened, like she'd just realized something. She leaned over toward me, her chestnut-colored pigtails swaying gently.

"Are you saying Tsuzuki is planning on somehow stealing Nitta's

Ability to undo the prison? He's gonna erase the effects of a Unique Star to turn it back into regular cloud storage?"

"Exactly. And we can probably guess how he can steal Ability effects, too: Using an intrinsic skill that takes the resources, earnings, and everything else from a defeated battle opponent for a limited time. We saw it in action today."

"…Suzaku!"

"Right," I said with a smile.

I was talking about Requisition, the intrinsic skill of the A-class familiar Suzaku. It was meant to help players steal useful things from their opponents, but there's nothing preventing you from stealing harmful things, too. For example, maybe it could steal the effect of "removing Unique Star effects" that Nitta had pointed in my direction, then apply that to a Limited Sharing key to unlock the prison… The logic was a little convoluted, but the general flow made sense.

"So in short, the Hexagram's plan is twofold. If Nitta defeats me, then great—but even if she doesn't, they can use Limited Sharing and the Rapture to pack the slots for the final with Hexagram members. That said, they couldn't obtain Suzaku, so it didn't go entirely according to plan. So instead, Saeki decided to use Suzaku and Nitta as a 'Plan C.' First, he'd turn his virtual storehouse—that didn't contain Suzaku—into a locked prison. While it's shut down, Tsuzuki would obtain Suzaku, and once everything was ready to bring about the *full* Rapture, he'd use Nitta again to unlock the prison. Whether Nitta's Ability set eliminates the Limited Sharing entirely or just the prison aspect of it, I'm honestly not sure, but if Saeki's pursuing this strategy, I bet he'll want to do away with the storehouse entirely."

"I—I see… Boy, Shino, you're really smart, huh? Like, would anyone else be able to read that far into it?"

"I could."

"Shut up, Shinji. That's because you're abnormal," Asamiya snapped at Enomoto, her golden hair whipping around behind her.

"Um… So anyway, as long as *we* can secure Suzaku instead, we can break the prison, right? But if we do that…we're gonna have to

fight Tsuzuki at some point."

"Yeah, there's no avoiding that."

I nodded in response to Asamiya's muttering. If you consider the reason why Koto Tsuzuki, the Five Star third-year student and Hexagram executive, is still here in Dropout Tamers, we were all but doomed to encounter him on the way to finding Suzaku. That was a fate we couldn't even try to avoid—either we defeat Tsuzuki, or we have no way to win.

"We've already identified Tsuzuki's battle Ability," Enomoto suddenly said, operating his device. "It's called Hollow Creator, and it lets him create a fake familiar with the stats of his choice. These familiars don't count as fulfilling your victory conditions, but they're more powerful than their real versions in battle. That means you're probably going to face a powered-up version of the Archangel when you fight him."

"The Archangel…? The strongest familiar? Akizuki, you fought her in a quest, right?"

"Yeah. She's *real* strong. Her stats are high, but she's got a 'healing' intrinsic skill that refills all her Life Points every turn. We managed to beat her, but that was just a quest. If Tsuzuki gets to execute a command alongside her attack, that's gonna be pretty hard to top."

"But not impossible, right? Hollow Creator is reasonably powerful, but the effect only lasts about an hour at most. If we can hold out for that long, we've got a chance."

"…Ah. I see what you mean."

Now that I'd heard Enomoto explain that, I really felt like we could do it. There was a way; we just had to figure it out.

"But…it'll take more than just Suzaku to get things to play out like I described. We also need a key to Limited Sharing. It's that key that we have to apply Nitta's Ability to if we wanna cancel out the prison."

"…? But aren't the keys all carried by Hexagram members?"

"That's correct. And just two of them are still in DOT and belong to people who know us… Koto Tsuzuki and Mari Minakami."

"…Oh. Right, yeah."

Akizuki nodded, understanding what I was getting at it.

Minakami's key was only *temporarily* shut down—Saeki probably didn't have any way to destroy it remotely—and it likely worked again by now. We definitely needed her help if we wanted that key. In other words, we'd need her back.

But if she doesn't show up here today, I guess that's the end of it…

I looked toward the entrance to the student council room. There was no sign of anyone coming in. If Mizukami was still depressed and rejecting everyone who approaches her, she wasn't likely to snap out of it overnight. In fact, the longer it went on, the harder it would be for her to open that door and come inside. Asking her to trust us right now would take a lot of courage.

But she was the only one who could turn the tables for us.

"Mm… Well, back to what we were just saying. We have to beat Tsuzuki either way, so I want to figure out a method to defeat Hollow Creator and the Archangel…"

I was shaking my head gently, but just as those words left my mouth—

"…Excuse me!"

The door made a *click*, and it was flung open, revealing an out-of-breath girl who ran in. Her long, flowing black hair framed her grave expression. Everything else about her looked normal, but she must have unbuttoned her uniform a bit in the summer heat, because her collarbone was glistening with sweat and her cheeks were flushed. It was more than a little alluring, frankly, but I wasn't about to bring that up now.

Seeing the approving glances from Enomoto and the others, I stood up on behalf of our group and quietly walked over to her.

"Well, Minakami…are you prepared to join us?"

From now on, it was Eimei against the Hexagram. Siding with us would mean turning her back to the justice Minakami had believed in for so long. It would mean entrusting her fate to us—a couple of random seniors from her high school. I was asking her, as harsh as it

was, if she really had the resolve to commit to this.

"…Yes, of course. I'm scared that I'll be double-crossed, but I realized that I can't just run away forever. Or I guess…I've been taught that."

But Minakami wasn't wavering anymore. She didn't evade my question. Instead she nodded firmly at me, and her face tensed up a bit. It almost looked like she was about to cry, but I'm sure it was just her attempt at a friendly smile. Maybe it was a clumsy attempt at one from a villain, but either way, Minakami the freshman held the most important "key" to Eimei's comeback victory.

"Please, Shinohara. I… I want to fight alongside you all!"

Her tone was clear and determined.

#

It was the third day of SFIA's semifinal stage, and thanks to our thorough discussion and advance arrangements, we once again avoided losing anyone in the elimination vote. Team VI's full roster was gathered in a corner of Ward Zero at the start of the day.

Our strategy meeting in the student council room last night hinged on one important question: How are we gonna find Suzaku in the first place? If there was any info on a relevant quest or the like, it was completely hidden from the public. Even Kagaya couldn't figure out anything.

So I slipped out of the room and used my device to ask a certain well-placed source (i.e., Saionji).

"The quest where you get Suzaku? Of course, I know it. It's kind of a unique one, because normally you can't find it unless you either have the Archangel, or you've possessed Suzaku at some point in the past. You won't find it shuffled around with the other quests at all.

"Lemme send you its location real quick… What? No, it's nothing like that. I have my slot for the final round, so now it's your turn to join us, isn't it? If you drop out, it'll cause lots of trouble for me, too.

"…How can you repay me? Well…do you think you can you find a

way to sneak me into your strategy meetings?"

…So with Saionji's almost too-eager help, we had Suzaku's location. But if we took on this quest that had been hidden up to now, I was sure Koto Tsuzuki and other influential players would try to get in our way. It was bound to be an uphill fight… So we took our time to come up with a set of potential strategies.

"A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Team VI. Are you taking on the Suzaku quest?"

It was less than an hour into day three of Dropout Tamers by the time we reached the quest guide Saionji had told us about. This one was named Delta, and she was down on one knee bowing to us in the most superficially polite way possible. We nodded in response to her question, and she went straight into her spiel.

"Very well, then. I will now explain the quest to obtain the A-class familiar Suzaku. The nature of it is quite simple—all you have to do is show Suzaku that you are of suitable peerage."

"…Huh? What d'you mean? Tell us *how* exactly."

"At once. Suzaku is a legendary bird of divinity, and the 'peerage' it seeks among its companions involves dominating force. For example, if you are enough of a legend to have the Archangel in your possession, I will gladly give you Suzaku right this minute. If you are not, however, then you must at least defeat me, its trainer, before I can feel safe entrusting Suzaku to you."

"Oh…? So as long as we beat you, that's all that matters?"

"In the simplest of terms, yes."

Delta nodded. I hadn't asked Saionji about the details of the quest, seeing as she'd been hoarding Suzaku since the start of the Game, but apparently, this was a combat-type one. Just beat the quest guide, and you'd earn that A-class familiar.

If it was as simple as that, it'd be child's play, but…

"A visitor?"

Delta had her head bowed, but now she looked up. I turned around to find three players I knew.

"Zooooooom… *Skreeech!* I've arrived in style! I was stopped in

my tracks yesterday, but today I'm gonna win this match, Shinohara! Now I'm winking at you, my snaggled canine tooth gleaming in the light!"

The first was Misaki Yumeno, the first-year from the Seventeenth Ward's Amanezaka School. I was wondering why she had both eyes tightly closed, but I guess that was her attempt at a wink.

Slowly approaching from behind Yumeno was Koto Tsuzuki, the now well-known Hexagram officer. He was a muscular Five Star, and we now knew his mission was to obtain Suzaku and ferry all his cronies over to the final stage.

"Nice work, Hiroto Shinohara. Kaoru was right… He said if we followed you, you'd lead us right to Suzaku. So thanks for that… But it belongs to the Hexagram now. Just hand it over to me peacefully."

Tsuzuki sounded pretty calm for now. I had never heard him speak at length before, but his voice was as deep and rumbling as his appearance suggested. I didn't sense any hostility or ill will, but I couldn't deny the feeling that he was looking down on me. The third member, standing beside him with her lips tightly pursed, was Mari Minakami. She just stared at the ground, not even looking at us.

Their other two teammates didn't seem to be here. I'd heard that Team IX pretty much fell apart after the Rapture yesterday, which only made sense. After *that* whole thing, most people would want to steer pretty clear of Hexagram members like Tsuzuki and Minakami.

Well, here they are…

I shook my head in disbelief at how they'd just happened to show up right now. Everything was going as predicted so far, for the most part. I couldn't speak for Yumeno, but Tsuzuki had to be watching our movements to some extent. If he didn't butt in now, he'd lose his biggest chance yet.

After thinking that far, I took my eyes off Minakami and called out to the two others.

"Hey! You both stalking me or what? Because if you're trying to loot my prize, that's pretty rotten of you."

"What are you talking about? Suzaku is just a nice little bonus. A coincidence, really! The lone final boss I've had to beat since ancient times is *you*, Shinohara!"

"…It's *not* a 'nice little bonus' to me, but I don't believe stealing is morally wrong in this Game. How about you, Shinohara?"

"Nah, of course not, but…" I turned back toward Delta, the quest guide. "How should we handle the quest now? Does my team get to go first, or do we all go at the same time? Or if the idea here's to show off our strength, I could prove it by beating these guys."

"…Ah. A good idea." Delta gravely nodded at my proposal. "In that case, Shinohara's Team VI will engage Tsuzuki's Team XI and Yumeno's Team X at the same time. If your team beats them both, I will consider you worthy of Suzaku. However, if Tsuzuki and Yumeno defeat Team VI, I will entrust Suzaku to them instead."

"Cool. That keeps things easy. But if we're all fighting at once, we'll need two main players. I'll take on Tsuzuki, and as for Yumeno…"

"…?! W-wait a second, Shinohara! Why are you ignoring me, the protagonist, in favor of everybody else? Don't neglect me! I'm about to cry, you know!"

Yumeno—who'd been paying more attention to this conversation than I'd thought—came up to me. But just as I was about to respond, Fujishiro stepped forward, raising his arm between us.

"Tch… You've been yelping for far too long, you wimp."

"Gah! Wimp! You called me a wimp! I—I won't stand for this, you blond freak! All *you* are is a warm-up for the final boss!"

"So what, huh? If I'm the second-to-last boss, *you're* just a villager picking herbs in the first town. Shinohara won't need to bother—I could bury you without breakin' a sweat."

"Arrrrrrrrgh! Now I'm angry! *Really* angry! Let's fight!"

Fujishiro's well-honed trash talk instantly attracted Yumeno's aggression. He gave me a "This what you wanted?" kind of look, and I replied with a thankful nod. And so the undercard was decided. Yumeno was a dark horse gathering a lot of buzz online, but Fujishiro was Ohga's Ace Behind the Curtain *and* their Final Weapon. I couldn't think of anyone more qualified to watch my back.

"Phew…"

My shoes clicking against the ground, I turned away from Fujishiro and back toward Tsuzuki. This was the big moment—the

one that'd decide how Dropout Tamers turned out. If we won, we'd have all the pieces we needed to turn this around… And if not, well, that didn't really matter. I was just about done with suppressing my emotions at this point.

So…

"Bring it on, Hexagram. Your way of doing things has been pissing me off for a while now. Hope you don't mind if I take out my stress on you a little…"

I smiled as menacingly as I could, my eyes narrowed.

#

We'd found ourselves in a double battle against Yumeno Misaki and Koto Tsuzuki over the A-class familiar quest.

I squared up with Tsuzuki, keeping an eye on Fujishiro and Yumeno off to the side. We were fighting at the same time, but there was nothing too strenuous about it. Fujishiro was the main player in our fight against Yumeno, and I was up against Tsuzuki, so all we had to do was select familiars and commands like usual. Fujishiro had already outlined which commands he wanted me to select for him, so I was free to concentrate fully on Tsuzuki, my own opponent.

Things kicked off with selecting a familiar. Here, I went with my old, reliable C-class Fairy. Speed was her specialty, and she'd completely shut down Minakami's Byakko yesterday. All her other stats were crap, but still, she struck me as the ideal familiar for my strategy.

So what about Tsuzuki?

"…Activate Ability: Hollow Creator."

The words rumbled out from his large frame, and in an instant, a dark, malevolent-looking whirlpool appeared behind him. It was a familiar, I think, but all of its displayed stats were question marks, which only added to the mystery. It didn't stay that way for long, though. The stats slowly came into focus—first the LP, then the ATK—the vortex changing shape with each one.

"Now…lend me your power, Archangel."

"…!!"

The moment he said it, the shapeshifting vortex suddenly began to emit a divine light. Once all the stats were visible, Hollow Creator sprang into action, re-creating the familiar those stats belonged to—the Archangel, with her beautiful wings. The holy messenger of the heavens smiled as she prayed, hands clasped, above Tsuzuki's head.

Immediately after, both of our stat sets were on display.

Team VI: Hiroto Shinohara **Familiar Used:** Fairy (C)
Familiar Stats: ATK 1, DEF 1, SPD 15, LP 1

Team IX: Koto Tsuzuki **Familiar Used:** Divine Messenger, Archangel (S)
Familiar Stats: ATK 15, DEF 18, SPD 12, LP 25

…What kinda monster is this?!

I heard about this from Akizuki, but seeing the stat difference for myself made one of my cheeks twitch… I was completely outmatched. SPD was my only advantage, and even *then*, it was pretty close. That was the difference between the S and C classes, I suppose.

"…Good luck on your trip to the underworld…"

Minami, as usual, was saying some pretty inauspicious things in her monotone. I think everyone watching the live feed thought the same thing.

Still, we knew at yesterday's strategy meeting that Tsuzuki would bust out the Archangel. So after taking a glance at Minakami (still bent over, looking at the ground behind Tsuzuki), I gave a slight smile and made a suggestion.

"Hey, Tsuzuki. This is a pretty big match, so why don't we adopt some special rules for it?"

"Special rules…? Like what, exactly?"

"Like rules to speed things up. In a normal fight, when both teams exhaust the commands they picked at the start, only then can

you add in some more, right? So if one team's got fewer people than their opponent, all they can do is have their familiar do a basic attack until the other side runs out of commands. Instead of that, how about we have it so if one side runs out of commands, they get to add more to the list right at that point? You have fewer people, so I think that'll do nothing but help you."

"…? It doesn't sound like you benefit from that at all."

"Don't be so sure. I'll just go ahead and admit it; I'm trying to wear down your Archangel over time and make Hollow Creator time out. And if you think about it, the more time you're wasting selecting commands, the better it is for me, right? I think the pluses and minuses are pretty clear, but how about you? Battles don't usually drag on for twenty, thirty minutes anyway, so… Not a bad deal, right?"

Tsuzuki fell silent after hearing my proposal to the end. He was probably weighing the two points I'd mentioned in his mind. Considering the strength of his Archangel and the state of our teams, the scales would probably tip slightly toward him accepting these rules… But Minakami said he was a very cautious person. That was how Koto Tsuzuki had become a top-ranking member of the Hexagram, after all.

Hence why he said:

"…Analyze it, Minakami. Everything about that rule, from start to finish."

Instead of giving it the nod straightaway, he barked orders to Minakami behind him. Her shoulders jumped for a moment at the sound of Tsuzuki's voice, but she replied with a quiet "okay" and looked down at her device. This was only natural, in a way—no matter how loyal she was to Eimei, Mari Minakami was generally incapable of lying. That was her personality, or her creed, really. It had nothing to do with being abandoned by the Hexagram or not being their ally. She had sworn to herself that she would never tell a lie, and of course, Tsuzuki knew that.

"…Confirmed. This won't be a problem, Koto."

As she spoke, she raised her face slightly, and Tsuzuki looked into her eyes, trying to work out if she was telling the truth. Finally, he

gave a decisive nod.

"All right, then. I accept your offer, Hiroto Shinohara. Let the battle begin."

"Hah! Okay. Bring it."

I grinned at Tsuzuki's grumbled declaration of war as I selected my first command. My choice was the base command Speed Up. Fragile Covenant boosted that to +2, but the Archangel's SPD wasn't exactly low, so I couldn't expect my Fairy to dodge the next attack. Tsuzuki, on the other hand, was playing it cautiously, using the skill command Defensive Function as he attempted to deliver a killer blow.

"…Activate Ability: Inferior Copy."

But just before that, the Ability I had been carefully preserving until now took effect—Inferior Copy, powered by my purple star. Since it could duplicate things, it gave me three copies of Speed Up, which produced the chain Speed-Speed-Speed. That generated Lightning Speed for me on the first turn, the same command I'd used against Minakami, which let me dodge my opponent's attack and bypass their defenses to land a blow. Of course, the Fairy could only deliver 1 damage to the Archangel, but this was a good way to play it safe while boosting the SPD of my familiar.

"…"

A hint of irritation crossed Tsuzuki's face.

From that point forward, my strategy could be described as "evasive dive-bombing." I'd keep evading enemy attacks with the Inferior Copies I made of Lightning Speed, and when a sure-hit strike came flying my way, I'd compensate for it with Life Up. Thanks to the Company's assistance, I could see all my opponent's commands, too, which ensured I made no mistakes in my command choices.

"…!"

But that didn't mean I had time to relax, because the longer the battle wore on, the larger Inferior Copy's use limit loomed in my mind. My Fairy's SPD was over 60 by this point, which gave her a pretty good chance of dodging attacks even without a chain-command boost… But in terms of LP, *maybe* she could hold out

against one of the Archangel's normal strikes. Even worse, the Archangel had an all-powerful intrinsic heal after every turn. I could chip off damage with Lightning Speed, but it wouldn't build up.

This exchange of attacks continued for a few more turns before Tsuzuki, glaring at our battle, quietly spoke up.

"…Can't you give up already, Shinohara? You can't just dodge me forever. You said you'd do that until my Ability wore off, but it hasn't even been fifteen minutes so far. Do you really think you can hold out that long?"

"Who knows? I won't know unless I try, huh?"

"Well, I do, because Kaoru entrusted me with this role. I don't think I'm that strong myself, but *his* strength is for real. If he declares you to be evil, you probably *are* evil, and if he says he'll punish you, you can expect it to happen. So, Hiroto Shinohara…this is where your destiny ends."

"Kaoru, Kaoru, Kaoru… How can you still call yourselves defenders of justice if you side with *that* piece of trash? Is this your idea of a joke?"

"I can't speak for anyone else, but to me, Kaoru Saeki is justice itself. I have no doubts that the Hexagram is a just organization… But stop obviously trying to stall for time, Shinohara. That copy Ability of yours doesn't have too many uses left, does it?"

"…"

I shrugged a bit, my face fearless as ever, as Tsuzuki struck at my greatest worry in that quiet voice of his. He was right—Inferior Copy wasn't going to last much longer. My opponent was precise and deadly with his command choices, and they were wearing me down more than I expected.

Damn it… It should be coming soon, but…

I began to feel a little concerned as I picked Speed Up yet again. Based on the stat difference now, the Archangel had around a 20 percent chance of hitting—a pretty delicate line to toe. If I wanted to be sure my Fairy dodged it, I'd need to completely exhaust Inferior Copy sooner or later.

What do I do…? What do I do?!

But as I hesitated for a moment, the Archangel was ready to

attack. I no longer had the time to intervene with any Abilities. If this hit, it would finish off my nearly dead Fairy for good…

"Special command: Reflect!"

But I heard a familiar voice, and just then, a giant wall appeared in front of my Fairy, letting her deflect the incoming attack. None of the damage got through, of course.

Tsuzuki's brow creased a bit…and at the same time, a blond-haired girl ran up to my side and raised her device in the air.

"Sorry to keep you, Shino! I know I'm kinda late, but I got a lot of useful commands for you, so how about we join in, huh?"

The Golden Demon was ready to fight—and fight hard. It was Nanase Asamiya, the Eimei Six Star, who'd used the Reflect skill command to cut off Tsuzuki's strike. She wasn't acting alone, either—her teammates were also nearby, devices in their hands.

"Heh-heh… Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Sorry, Hexagram, but it's time to wave the flag of rebellion! And how dare you claim to be on the side of justice when you completely disregard my goddess?! Ridiculous!!"

Seiran Kugasaki was kicking ass as always, his cape (complete with epaulets) fluttering in the air.

Of course, butting into a fight like this was unheard of. A third party would normally never be allowed to join a battle in progress like this… But there was a clear reason why Asamiya was able to throw her own command into the fray.

"…No way," Tsuzuki muttered, just realizing something as he looked down at his device. He was probably looking at the detailed explanation of the new rules I'd introduced for this fight. And his hunch was correct—what I called the "sped-up rules" had one more special clause, aside from the one I'd explained to him.

"A 'new challenger' rule…? Other teams may join this battle at any point as long as they announce themselves… And only the team that remains at the end will be the winner?!"

"Yeah, that's right. Those are the rules I proposed, and you said yes to them, right?"

"…! Minakami! What's going on here?!"

Tsuzuki turned around, his voice raised. He must've had a good picture in his mind about what just happened. Minakami had

carefully examined the rule in question and declared that there was no problem, after all.

"I thought not lying was your credo…! Or do you think it's okay to trick me now that you're not in the Hexagram anymore? If so, you've become the very 'evil' you hate so much!"

"…? What a strange thing to say, Koto."

Minakami sounded completely unabashed and completely composed. She quietly lifted her face and let her black hair flow down her back. The expression she hid wasn't despair at all—but a dazzling smile.

"I said it 'won't be a problem.' And that's not a lie, is it? I don't know about *you*, Koto, but for *me*—a student at the Eimei School—this isn't a problem at all!"

"Wha…?!"

After seemingly refuting everything she stood for, Minakami ripped the Hexagram's emblem off her chest, stuffed it into Tsuzuki's breast pocket, and strolled over to us with the full extent of her dignity intact. It was all bravado, though, and by the time she reached us, she was looking ready to burst into tears. Then, in a voice too quiet for anyone but me to hear, she said:

"…I'm counting on you, Shinohara."

"Sure, Minakami. Good work. I'll take care of the rest."

I gave her as gentle a pat as possible on the shoulder and stepped in front of her. It was now only Koto Tsuzuki and me.

A fearless smile slowly grew across my face.

"Hah! Now do you see? This battle isn't a one-on-one between you and me at all. It's a huge fight that anyone who's left in Dropout Tamers can join in. And once my familiar's Life Points run out, the rules are set up so it switches over to the next member, so I don't think I'm gonna run out of firepower anytime soon!"

"…But… Why even start a battle like this, then?"

"Oh, there's a good reason for that. You see, if we win here, we get Suzaku, right? That, and all the resources our opponents used in the fight. The more people involved, the greater the profits for my side. And in fact, I think just about everybody in this Game will wanna pitch in!"

"Ngh… Then I'll finish it before the crowds arrive!"

Tsuzuki raised his right hand into the air, as if trying to block my verbal barrage. He must have used some kind of buff, because the light around the Archangel shone even brighter as it pummeled Asamiya's familiar. It was driven to the brink of death in an instant, but despite an "Ooh, rough," from Asamiya, she didn't look too perturbed. After all…

"Heh-heh-heh… Looks like you're up to something interesting! And I heard *anyone* can participate, so there's no way that I, as the protagonist, can't show up! Having just brilliantly won against the final boss's lackey, it's now time for me to face off against the Archangel!!"

"Don't twist the facts, girl. I agreed to a draw because you wouldn't stop talking the whole damn fight."

Despite their squabbling, Yumeno and Fujishiro were joining our side. The latter gave me a quick glance, then stood next to Minami, his eyes sharpened upon Tsuzuki. It looked like Misaki Yumeno made the snap decision to join in, too—and this time, she was yapping at the Archangel, not me.

"…Shinohara, can you hear me?"

As if these newcomers weren't enough activity for me to deal with, Enomoto's voice came through my device.

"I have some information. Right now, almost all the teams in the Game have stopped their own business and are watching your battle unfold. Three of them are already within Ward Zero, and at least four more are on their way. We'll probably see half the player base participating by the end."

"Great. Way to fan the flames, Enomoto."

"It wasn't me. Noa Akizuki deserves the credit this time. She harnessed everything she could to incite this—STOC, IslandTube, you name it. She's out of the Game, but you know she's a genius at getting people to act."

"…Ah yeah."

I chuckled. My mind already had a picture of the sorts of things she was no doubt doing.

So after a few turns of me fighting alongside Asamiya and

Yumeno, other teams began to join the fray against the Archangel, one after the other. Since they were "new challengers," they were free to fight against any opponent they wanted to here, but I guess nobody wanted to ignore the all-powerful Archangel right now, so most players had their devices aimed right at Koto Tsuzuki. There were seven teams and over thirty people on our side at this point—a gigantic melee.

But then…

"Useless… Useless, useless! If all you trash are siding with evil, I'll destroy every one of you right here!"

It seems this might be exactly the situation Tsuzuki had been hoping for. After buffing his Archangel up to berserker level, he selected a special group-attack command—Abyssal Pyre. A skill of the B-class Hellhound, it was a super-wide-range strike with 50 ATK behind it. If you didn't have a defensive command in place, you were guaranteed an instant death. However, another voice suddenly spoke up.

"Are you sure about that, Koto? I put that command in place for you, you realize."

"…?!"

The next instant, there was a deafening roar as an explosion rocked the Archangel. All the players, not realizing what had happened, stared wide-eyed at the sight—but Minakami, who was next to me again, gently placed her right hand on her chest.

"A group attack like Abyssal Pyre is perfect for this kind of situation, so I was sure you'd select it. But there's actually a pretty big risk with this command. If you miss even one strike at your opponents, your attack fails and is reflected back at your own familiar!"

"Wha…? Oh! Hiroto Shinohara's Fairy!"

"That's right. The Archangel has tons of Defense and Life Points, of course, so he can't beat her in a single blow. If he misses this chance, she'll just heal herself back up. But at least for now, Koto, you have no way to defend yourself!"

As she made this declaration, Minakami cut her right hand down through the air.

“”””*…Raaaaaaaaaaah!!*”””

All the players in the battle raised a mighty roar… And from there, it was over in the blink of an eye. The Archangel who once seemed invincible was showered with waves of attacks, and her LP was quickly whittled away. It was around this point that Hollow Creator also stopped working, so the divine figure reverted back into a black whirlpool that shriveled up and disappeared.

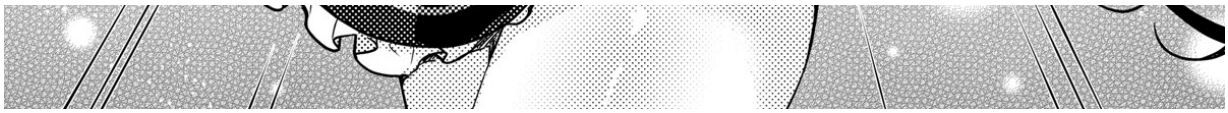
Seeing that this was the end for him, Koto Tsuzuki stood there in a daze.

“I lost… I lost? Me? Kaoru Saeki read this wrong…?”

His muttering was tinged with anguish, regret, and most of all astonishment. He probably didn’t expect to lose to me for a moment. He thought he was on the side of justice, that he’d naturally win, but then I—or, I suppose, the *legitimate* justice of Mari Minakami—had tripped him up.

“Well done, Master…but it’s not over yet.”





Huh? …Oh. Yeah, you're right, Himeji.

I relaxed a bit and nodded at Himeji's cool voice settled against my eardrum. Since we were still in free-for-all mode, the Archangel's death alone wouldn't end the battle. We now had nearly ten teams on hand, all watching intently for a chance to swoop in and take the victory.

But we came prepared for this.

Despite it all, I let out a small, self-assured smile and glanced down at my device. It showed the current status of my familiar, the C-class Fairy—but the numbers were a far cry from what I'd started with.

ATK: 1 (+46) DEF: 1 (+32) SPD: 15 (+99) LP: 1 (+80) …Yes.

To be honest, I didn't suggest that rule set just to stall for time or add more strength to my side. With these rules, the battle would just keep on going no matter how many participants there were, so all the base command-driven stat buffs would keep whittling along as well. With the full extent of Fragile Covenant and the family of chain commands at your disposal, pretty soon you'd produce a demon with stats even the Archangel would drool over.

"…Hah!"

So I instructed Minami, Fujishiro, and Nitta to finally break our Fragile Covenant and lift our self-imposed ban on skill commands. Nitta no longer had any reason to mess with our team, and our stats were certainly buffed enough. All we had to do now was stomp our enemies down.

"Well… Shall we? It's time to kick off round two…even though the ending's already set in stone."

I grinned. And it didn't take all that much longer for the last team's familiar to fall.

Eimei Third-Year Players (4)

noa

I'm soooo tired!

Miya! Miya! Once this Game's over, let's go get some dessert!

nanase

You bet!

But wow, Noa-chi! Way to go out there!

How'd you manage to attract so many players?

noa

Hee-hee, it's a secret ♥

shinji

...You're better off not knowing some things, Nanase.

Regardless, I don't think Shinohara needs our support any longer.

noa

Nope!

By the way, Miya, you think you'll make it into one of the final slots?

nanase

Hmmm... I dunno, it could be close

It's just a hunch...but I think the Phoenix is the traitor on our team

Hopefully we can vote him off tonight, but if not, he could beat us tomorrow

shinji

...I see. So you're saying we still need to keep our guards up?

noa

Eh-heh-heh! I'll help out heeeeaps! ♥

Ha-ha, thanks, Noa-chi. Okay, let's give it our all!

Also, Mayu-yu, I dunno if you monitor this, but thanks! You were a huge help

mayu

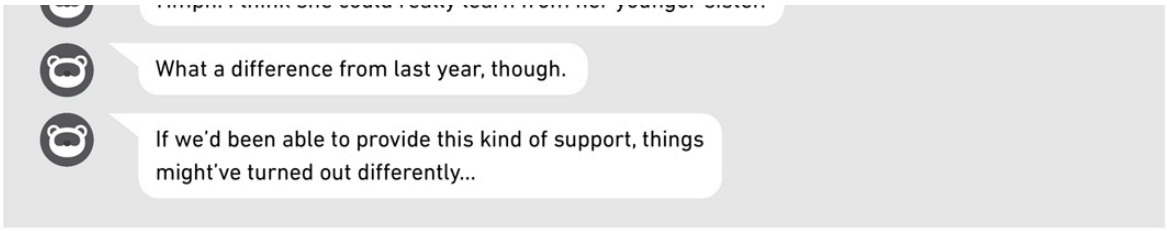


noa

Just a sticker...? I bet Mayu's already in bed

shinji

Hmph. I think she could really learn from her younger sister.


What a difference from last year, though.
If we'd been able to provide this kind of support, things might've turned out differently...

Epilogue

The End of One War and the Beginning of Another

##

Halfway through day three of Dropout Tamers, the wild battle that started with our quest to obtain the A-class familiar Suzaku ended in our victory… And as all the participants began to disperse, it was finally time to receive our rewards.

"…? Um, the winner was Shinohara from Team VI, was it not…?"

Delta, the quest guide, was a little confused about my request to give the Suzaku reward to Mari Minakami, but in the end, she nodded and said, "As you wish." After confirming it on her device, Minakami shook her long black hair and turned to face me.

"Thank you very much. It's on my device now, so I just need to use this familiar's intrinsic Ability on you, Shinohara? And defeat you in combat…"

"Yeah, pretty much. I'll summon a familiar for you to beat up, so have at it."

"O-okay. And that'll trigger Suzaku's Requisition, so I'll be able to steal the effect placed on you…the 'remove the Unique Star' effect."

Minakami glanced up, her face stern.

"I understand the general flow of it, but…what if I turn traitor? Wouldn't you lose your Unique Star, then? I mean, I wouldn't do that… But can you really trust me after all the horrible things I said about you?"

She wasn't beating around the bush, but there was a hint of anxiety in her voice. I suppose it's only natural. She did join our side and fight against the Hexagram, but before then, she was in total

opposition to me. As serious-minded as she was, I guess it's not surprising that she'd think I was less than welcoming of her.

And it wasn't because of that, but my answer was obvious:

"…Of course I can."

There was no hint of concern on my face.

"Anyone who saw how you tricked Tsuzuki earlier would know that you're incapable of lying. You're a strong girl, but you're not really a schemer like that. And besides…"

"Yes?"

"I told you, you're already part of our Eimei gang. And I'm not about to start doubting my friends."

"…You're not…?" Minakami said, fighting back tears.

Then she unsteadily approached me, all but collapsing as she buried her head against my chest.

?! Wha—wha…? Huh?!

My mind went blank at her sudden action, but I couldn't let any agitation show. I forced myself to speak up as her carefully groomed hair tickled my arms and cheek.

"Hey, um… What are you doing?"

"Ha-ha… I'm sorry, Shinohara. I let go of my tension a little, and it kind of drained me… Um, can I stay like this for a little bit…?"

Minakami clung tightly to my arms as she naturally looked up into my eyes. With all her nervousness and anxiety mostly gone, the stern tone of her facial expression had faded a bit. There was even a slightly immature, pleading note to it, just like you'd expect from a young underclassman, and—well, what I'm trying to say is that she was incredibly cute.

"…Just this once, all right?"

Himeji's voice in my right ear sounded pretty pouty as well, although there was a hefty dose of kindness to it. I guess I was safe, after all.

In the battle that immediately ensued, Minakami won as planned, invoking Suzaku's special Ability Requisition. But we were still in the middle of DOT's third day, and since we couldn't get Nitta out of the Game until the night phase, we had to part ways for the time being.

"Hey, Minami, you're the traitor, aren't you?"

I broached the subject a few hours later at the same outdoor café as yesterday.

The rest of Team VI was there, too. Fujishiro was looking as fierce as ever, and Minami appeared to be her usual sleepy self, but I think Nitta's complexion had improved a lot since yesterday. I couldn't call it "healthy" yet, but at least she wasn't constantly hanging her head anymore.

Anyway, my sudden accusation made Minami run a hand through her blue hair.

"…? No way… I'm a good girl… I'd never, like…betray someone."

"I don't care if you're good or bad, but it's pretty damn obvious you're the traitor. You're carrying Mind Reader, which gave you insight into chain commands and their effects, Transform, which let you turn that Leviathan into a Hellhound, and Variable Control and Recycle, which you used against Saionji. That's four Abilities, and only traitors are allowed to install four in this Game."

"…Mmm. You got me there…"

Minami was feigning all that frustration. Her voice was as calm as ever… And really, maybe she never intended to hide this fact from the start. She must've known from day one what Nitta's deal was, so if Minami could get one more person to side with her, that'd ensure Nitta would never be voted off. It was pretty gutsy, really. As long as she wasn't in danger of getting booted, she didn't really care if people knew.

But that wasn't important any longer. What mattered now was:

"So, Minami, I want to ask you something. Did you need to obtain Suzaku to win Dropout Tamers?"

"…? Why are you asking that…?"

"Because it's important. Did you—or not?"

"…No, but…"

She was pretending not to understand where I was going with this, but she was pretty emphatic in her denial. Hearing that, I breathed a sigh of relief.

"Okay. Because Minakami—that's my Eimei classmate we fought earlier—I'm planning on having her release Suzaku later on. If we

unlock Saeki's cloud storage in its current state, Minakami's Suzaku will automatically get added to it, completing all the B rank and higher familiars, right? Then all the Hexagram members who weren't called for the Rapture yesterday would clear Stage Four all at once. So we can't let Suzaku go in there."

"…So what? The only A-class familiars we need on our team are Genbu and Byakko. As long as we can duplicate the key with your Inferior Copy skill, it doesn't matter if we have Suzaku or not."

"Yeah, true." I sighed. "But there's a little problem with that."

To put it simply, it was a lack of capacity. An item duplicated with Inferior Copy can only be used a limited number of times, the exact number depending on the object being copied. Unfortunately, copying a key created by a Unique Star was a lot more taxing than I'd anticipated. It's definitely not the same as creating bunches of base commands at once.

"That's why I wanted to talk to you, Minami. Could you maybe use Recycle and Variable Control to restore as many uses of Inferior Copy as you can for me? Not for free, of course—once it's fully restored, I could duplicate the key for you, too. As long as you meet your victory conditions, I don't think this 'Rapture' cares if you're a traitor or not."

"…Not a bad offer. Hee-hee! So the poor delinquent will have to work to death for his own ticket…?"

"Huh? Shut up. I don't need you feelin' all sorry for me."

Fujishiro, after snapping back at Minami, opened his device and showed it to us. On the main screen, with all the familiars lined up… was a key.

"…Huh? Wait, where did you get that?"

"I stole it from Tsuzuki. You know, right after that free-for-all ended and he was on his knees and whining. I thought something like that might happen once you laid out your strategy this morning, so I installed this Ability called Magician's Bluff and waited for a chance to swipe his resources."

"Wow… That's total delinquent behavior. Now you're robbing people on the street…?"

"…Shut up, pipsqueak."

Fujishiro attempted to brush Minami away as she gave him a listless round of applause… So *that's* why he was so eagerly playing along with this. Calm, bold, and shrewd, too. Once the final battle rolls around, he and Minami are gonna be pretty tough opponents to face.

"Um…Shinohara?"

As I thought about this, absentmindedly scratching my cheek, I heard someone behind me. Mari Minakami was there, so I had her join us to discuss a few things.

Before much longer, the clock struck five o'clock, marking the start of DOT's night phase. Me, Fujishiro, Minami, and Nitta put our devices on the table; they were all on the elimination vote screen. Nitta's vote was for me, and everyone else's was for Nitta.

"Mm…"

This was all prearranged, but Nitta's expression was very calm. As it should be. For her, elimination meant being freed from her role as an indentured servant, and if she could do that without hurting anyone, there was no better ending for her.

"…Thanks, everyone," she said, smiling and looking ready to cry once her device confirmed the news.

On the next day—day four of Dropout Tamers, after the results of this vote took effect—things got pretty busy right from the start. With Sana Nitta's elimination, the Along for the Ride Ability Saeki made her install was activated, triggering the effect of making my Unique Star disappear. However, this Ability was stolen by Suzaku's Requisition and used to directly target the key of Minakami, Suzaku's owner. Applying Along for the Ride to the key associated with the locked-down Limited Sharing eliminated the prison effect for good, and the box became just regular cloud storage again. After that, to prevent any more Hexagram members from winning, Minakami released Suzaku back into the quests instead of putting it in the storage.

This caused several players to achieve their victory conditions all at once—those with a key to the Limited Share who didn't need

Suzaku to win. The conditions were the exact same as the previous Rapture, but the faces were completely different. To be exact, Minami, Fujishiro, and I were now heralded on Libra's official channel as the latest victors.

"…Whoa, huh?"

But as I watched the coverage from the Eimei's student council office, I raised my eyebrows a bit. Something was weird here. Asamiya's team needed to acquire Suzaku to win, so even with the key, they shouldn't have won at the same time we did. Also, by this point, Mari Minakami should have fulfilled all the needed conditions… but there was no report about her name.

What's going on?

I glanced at Himeji, but just then, my device rang. Seeing the name on the screen, I immediately answered it.

"…Hello? Minakami?"

"Oh, hi, it's me, Shinohara. Sorry to call you so early."

"That's fine, but…what's up? Why haven't you won yet?"

"Well, that's what I wanted to talk to you about…"

She paused for a moment, sounding hesitant…or maybe excited?

"I got rid of my key to the Limited Sharing… It's my way of atoning, you could say. I couldn't forgive myself for letting you all go to such lengths for me, only to use the Hexagram's power to win out. So…that's what I'm doing!"

"No, um… But there're other Hexagram members running around still. If they grab Suzaku, it'll all be over, won't it?"

"Actually, no. There was a usage limit on the Limited Sharing, and I guess if you executed a 'special clear'—the so-called Rapture—two times, it's set to self-destruct. Kaoru already did it once, so once you and the other two won, it was gone, you see? So from now on, everybody's equal in this Game again."

"…Oh. Really? Well, that puts you at a big disadvantage, doesn't it? Your team's in shambles."

"Well, it's kind of worse than that, frankly. During yesterday's elimination vote, I guess two of my teammates tried to hack into my device so they could vote Koto out. But my Iron Justice Ability was active, so the fraud was found immediately and they both got

banned from the Game… So now there's just the two of us. And since I know I'm a normal member, it also confirms that Koto's the traitor."

"Oooh…"

"But you know, I can challenge teams to battle even if I'm just by myself!"

Minakami sounded a lot like she was trying to cheer herself up. But if she saw this as a fresh start, then I guess it wasn't all bad. Her team was beyond repair, yeah, but if the Limited Sharing was gone, all the familiars—A-and S-class included—were freed from the Hexagram's hands. Now anyone had a chance of nabbing one of the four remaining open slots for the final stage.

"So…wait just a little longer, okay, Shinohara?"

She sounded more refreshed than before, though. Free of burden.

"I threw away the key, but that doesn't mean I gave up. I'll beat this Game on my own, so I can become a true companion to you all…following my own sense of justice."

"You will…? You know you don't have to do this, though. Why can't you just lean on people a little more?"

"I get told that a lot. But…don't worry. I'll lean on you a whole lot once I'm finished with this. There are many people I want to get back at in the final stage. I wanna give them a good talking-to, you know?"

She was joking with me, but Minakami did seem pretty enthusiastic for the final. That reassured me…but then I gave her a bold smirk.

"Sure thing, Minakami. Lemme see you up here. Because you're not the only student at Eimei pissed off about this. We all wanna pay those hypocritical bastards back a thousand times. So how 'bout we show them what justice *really* is?"

♭ ♭

…A *thud* echoed across the room.

“I never thought you’d lose, Koto…”

It was followed by a soft voice, not at all like the previous dull sound. Swinging his fist that he had just buried into the nearest wall, Kaoru Saeki turned toward the girl standing beside him wearing his usual kind smile.

“Miyabi, do you think my strategy was wrong in some way?”

“…Of course not. How could you ever make a mistake, Kaoru?”

The girl sounded absolutely certain about it as she shook her head.

“It wasn’t your fault that we lost. It was Koto’s. He’s not really a Suisei student, nor a Six Star… He’s a fake. He shouldn’t even be serving you, Kaoru. We don’t need him.”

“But he’s an excellent fighter.”

“Whether he’s somewhat competent or not, what’s it matter if he can’t help us reach our goals? If Koto lost to Hiroto Shinohara, that just shows he’s hit his ceiling. It has no effect on our path to glory—or should I say yours, Kaoru?”

“…Ah. I see. Well, good, then.”

Miyabi Akutsu smiled again, never hesitating, as Saeki looked at his device. On it was a list of people who had made it past the semifinal stage.

“Hmm… Pretty scattered results, though. It’s rare for the finals to not be dominated by a single school, isn’t it?”

“Not just rare; we’ve never seen this in history. Shinra’s got the most people in the final, and even that’s just three students.”

“Shinra High School… That’s where Toya Kirigaya goes, right? He’s been eerily quiet up to now, but I suppose he’ll be making waves soon.”

“I don’t care. Besides, if there’s no one dominant school, that means we still retain our advantage… Right, Kaoru? Though, it’s not like the numbers matter at all anyway…”

Miyabi looked over the list of finalists. Not everything had gone according to plan, exactly, but for her, having Kaoru Saeki was enough. The opposite was probably true for him, too. The Hexagram was made for him, after all.

“Ah, but I can’t wait for the final battle,” she said with a cruel

smile.

SFIA Round 4—"Dropout Tamers" Winners

#1: Toya Kirigaya (third-year, Shinra High School, Seventh Ward)—Six Star

#2: Miyabi Akutsu (third-year, Suisei School, Second Ward)—Six Star (Hexagram)

#2: Sarasa Saionji (second-year, Ohga School, Third Ward)—Six Star

#2: Mitsuru Fuwa (second-year, Shinra High School, Seventh Ward)—Four Star

#2: Senri Kururugi (third-year, Tsuyuri Girls' Institute, Sixteenth Ward)—Five Star

#6: Kaoru Saeki (third-year, Suisei School, Second Ward)—Six Star (Hexagram)

#6: Soma Yanagi (second-year, Otowa School, Eighth Ward)—Four Star (Hexagram)

#6: Ako Ishizaki (third-year, Ohmi School, Tenth Ward)—Five Star (Hexagram)

#6: Kanade Yuikawa (third-year, Ibara School, Fifteenth Ward)—Five Star (Hexagram)

#10: Keiya Fujishiro (second-year, Ohga School, Third Ward)—Six Star

#10: Hiroto Shinohara (second-year, Eimei School, Fourth Ward)—Seven Star

#10: Shizuku Minami (second-year, St. Rosalia Girls' Institute, Fourteenth Ward)—Five Star

#13: Misaki Yumeno (first-year, Amanezaka School, Seventeenth Ward)—Four Star

#14: Sumire Fuwa (second-year, Shinra High School, Seventh Ward)—Four Star

#15: Seiran Kugasaki (third-year, Otowa School, Eighth Ward)—Five Star

#16: Mari Minakami (first-year, Eimei School, Fourth Ward)—Three Star

AFTERWORD

Hello, good afternoon, or good evening. This is Haruki Kuou.

Thank you very much for picking up *Liar, Liar 6: The Lying Transfer Student Is Accused by Defenders of Justice*!

So how did you like it…? Volume 5 went pretty heavy on the rom-com stuff (at least by my standards), but this time I put the focus on the Games from the very beginning, since it's a big summer event and everything. The defenders of justice are closing in on Shinohara, the fake Seven Star! The lies and betrayals come flying thick and fast—you can't let your guard down for a second! …And so on. I put a lot of passion into this one, for sure, so I really hope you enjoyed it.

I have a pretty long afterword to write this time (two whole pages), so I wasn't sure what to write about…but it turns out that, combined with *Cross Connect* (my previous series), this is the tenth book I've published. What's more, next month will be the third anniversary of my debut…! Time really does fly by scarily fast, doesn't it? If you've followed my work from my previous series, hopefully you've been seeing me grow and mature as a writer—that's what I've been trying to do anyway. Meanwhile, those of you starting with this series can marvel at how much of a seasoned veteran writer I am. (Talking myself up a bit, I know.)

Now for some thank-yous.

As always, konomi has lit up my story with only the best

illustrations. The designs for the new characters are just incredible. I tend to like girls who default to a totally blank look on their faces, so I can't get enough of the cover and artwork for this volume… The art in the manga adaptation is also, like, really great, too (my vocabulary's failing me).

I also want to thank my editor and everyone else at MF Bunko J editorial for their help with this volume. I'm sure I'll be needing just as much assistance for the next volume, too, so I'm relying on your help then as well.

Finally, the greatest thanks of all must go to all the people who read this book.

I'm gonna work as hard as I can on the next volume, too, so keep an eye out for it!

Haruki Kuou


Liar, Liar ⑦
COMING SOON!
The final stage is set, filled with only the strongest players… and Hiroto stands among them, burning with rage!



Thank you for buying this ebook, published by Yen On.

To get news about the latest manga, graphic novels, and light novels from Yen Press, along with special offers and exclusive content, sign up for the Yen Press newsletter.

Sign Up

Or visit us at www.yenpress.com/booklink