

Sakon Kaidou

Illustrator: Taiki

Infinite End Program

2. The Beasts of Undeath



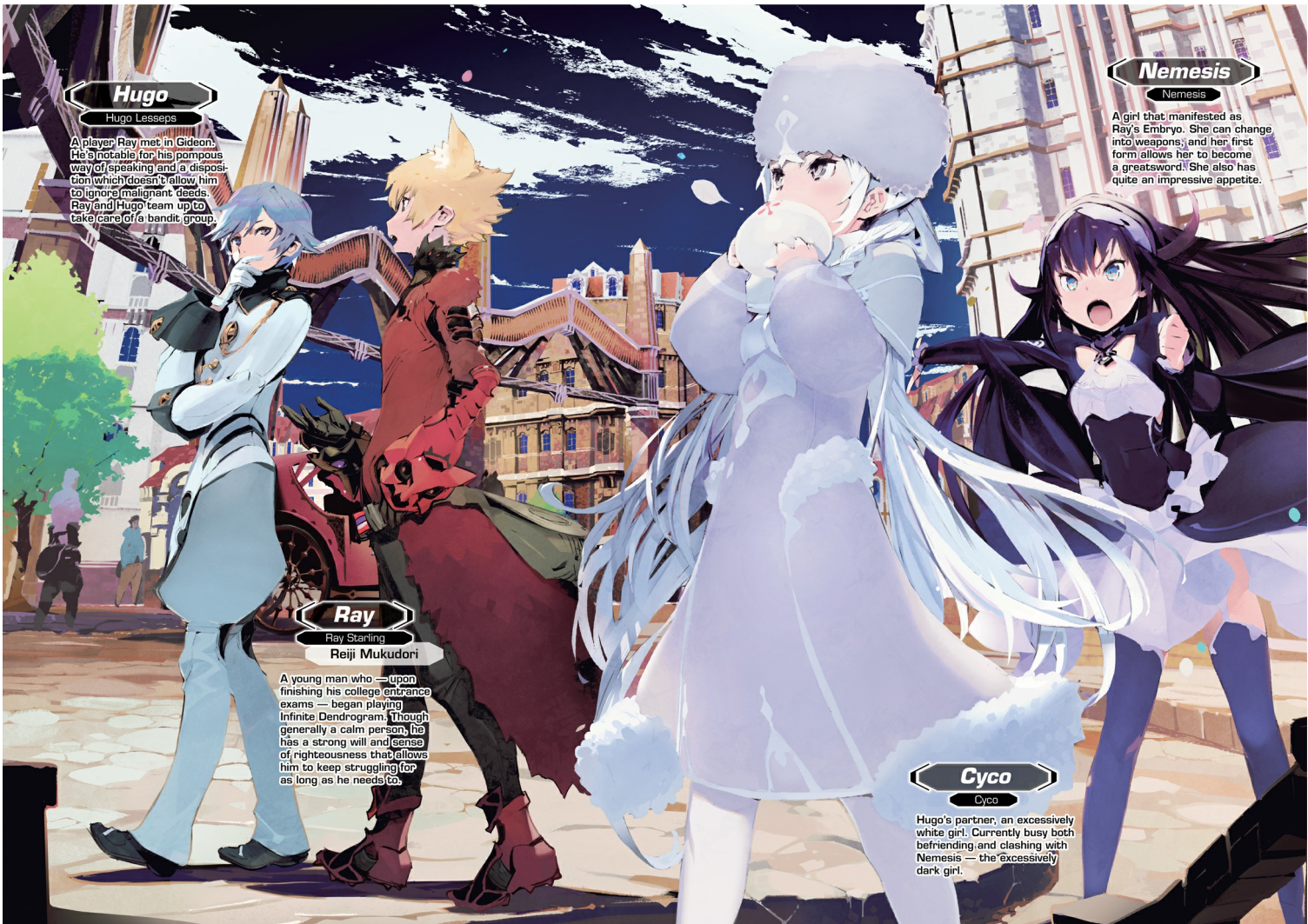


Infinite Endrogram

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Hugo

Hugo Lesseps

A player Ray met in Gideon. He's notable for his pompous way of speaking and a disposition which doesn't allow him to ignore malignant deeds. Ray and Hugo team up to take care of a bandit group.

Ray

Ray Starling

Reiji Mukudori

A young man who — upon finishing his college entrance exams — began playing Infinite Dendrogram. Though generally a calm person, he has a strong will and sense of righteousness that allows him to keep struggling for as long as he needs to.

Nemesis

Nemesis

A girl that manifested as Ray's Embryo. She can change into weapons, and her first form allows her to become a greatsword. She also has quite an impressive appetite.

Cyco

Cyco

Hugo's partner, an excessively white girl. Currently busy both befriending and clashing with Nemesis — the excessively dark girl.



“Ray!”

I called out to him,
but he didn't answer.

“Forgive me!”

I poured the content of the
Potion into my mouth and
pushed my lips against his.

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Prologue: The Emotions of the Dead

Kingdom of Altar, Cruella Mountain Belt

To the east of Gideon — the second largest city in the Kingdom of Altar — there was a mountainous area known as the Cruella Mountain Belt. It was the kingdom's border with Caldina — a country of expansive, desertlike wastelands.

For years, this border area had been a popular place for bandit gangs and their hideouts. Even if some group on a quest from the Adventurers' Guild eliminated one of them, they would soon be replaced by others.

There were two reasons for that.

The first was that the kingdom couldn't do any widescale and thorough bandit hunts due to the possibility of the neighboring country of Caldina seeing it as an act of war and thus provoking them.

The second was that the belt was on the primary trade route between Gideon, one of the kingdom's largest cities, and Caldina — a nation known for its mercantilism. A bandit couldn't ask for an area more plentiful with prey. Thus, the bandit problem in the belt was neverending.

However, it actually wasn't a bad thing for the Adventurers' Guild.

The new bandit gangs were always made up of people who went broke and got reduced to brigandry. Their jobs were low-rank and their levels weren't even maxed. Most active adventurers could eliminate them without much effort, and since it was a net positive for the adventurer economy, the guild wasn't averse to the idea of the problem's continued existence. The only real victims were the peddlers unfortunate enough to be marked by the brigands.

However, at one point, this bandit problem — already reeking of bloody money — took a turn for the worse.

One of the bandit gangs started kidnapping children from Gideon and the nearby villages.

They demanded ransom money for every child, and those with unpaid ransoms were simply never returned. Some relatives didn't get their children back even after paying, while others only received shredded pieces of their corpses. It all seemed like a sick joke.

Naturally, the parents of the children requested to have the Adventurers' Guild eliminate those bandits, and, of course, the guild accepted it.

The officials of the Adventurers' Guild believed that the kidnappers had someone particularly powerful among them. Thus, they gathered and dispatched a party made up of several excellent tian adventurers. It was a group that could even fell a Pure Dragon.

Everyone believed that — regardless of whether the kidnappers had capable people among them — the party would eliminate the bandit gang and bring back any children that were still alive. The party members themselves were certain of that, as well.

The party's leader — famous for his dashing looks — set out on the quest while waving goodbye to the people seeing him off. The intrepid smile on his face made everyone — the guild's officials, other adventurers, and, of course, the inhabitants of Gideon — all the more certain that they would return successful.

The following day, the leader's half-eaten face was placed outside the steps of the guild hall. It was accompanied by a paper saying "Seconds, please," along with a number of small fingers, one finger for every kidnapped child.

Though perplexed by this unexpected turn of events, the Adventurers' Guild quickly made their next move. Their plan was to gather several adventurer parties and annihilate the bandit gang through human-wave tactics. Among the adventurers — numbering nearly a hundred — there were even some Masters. The guild's Masters were absolutely certain that they would emerge victorious.

Three days later, a resurrected Master came back to report what happened. "They killed us all. It just can't be done," he said.

According to him, most of the enemies were absolute weaklings, but two of them were ridiculously strong.

One was a horse-man undead, while the other was a large, ox-headed man. Their power was far beyond that of normal tians, and it was fair to say that they were what had killed most of the adventurers.

With that report, the guild's master realized that this wasn't a job for adventurers. He contacted the knights responsible for the area around Gideon, but the army couldn't act due to the area being close to the border with Caldina.

Even Gideon's local champion — Super Gladiator Figaro — rejected the request, despite being able to take care of the matter all by himself.

The Adventurers' Guild had exhausted all their options, leaving them unable to do anything. Every now and then, some stronger sorts would accept the request and head out to eliminate the bandits, but they would always end up as corpses and were sent back to the guild along with fingers of the children.

This tragedy continued for a year, and the Adventurers' Guild eventually stopped making the request appear in their catalogs.

Thus, the bandits in question — the Gouz-Maise Gang — were still active in the Cruella Mountain Belt.



It was happening in the gloomy cellar of an abandoned fortress.

"Third this month. Payment received. No relevant materials. To be returned." The man mumbled something while looking at an old desk in a piercingly-cold room thick with suffocating moisture.

"Fourth this month. Payment not received. Relevant materials found. Turned to materials."

He looked through the documents, spoke those words, and wrote something down on the ledger in his hand. It was much like a ledger one would use in a business, and the one under his hand wasn't the only one on the table.

Gloomy as the idea might've been, it seemed as though he had only placed them there just for the sake of having them around, and the man wouldn't deny that idea.

“Fifth this month. Payment received. Relevant materials found. Head to be returned after turning to materials.” With those words, the man stood up and walked to a neighboring room.

The way he walked was curious. His upper half was that of a human, but the bottom half was that of a horse. The man was a humanoid creature known only as “horse-man.”

Just as there were human-horse mix *monsters* known as centaurs, so there were human-horse mix *humans* known as horse-men. An average monster would have its name pop up above its head, but that didn’t apply to the man.

Therefore, this horse-man was, in fact, humanoid...

...regardless of just how inhuman his appearance and mental workings were.

“This is the one,” he said.

The room had cages in it, and inside there were a number of small animals. They were the man’s commodities. The small animals were all asleep and thus completely oblivious to the man’s presence.

The horse-man removed the small animal from the fifth cage and placed it on the stony floor of his own room. On the floor, there was a magic circle the man had drawn. The man fixed the shackles, which were chained to the floor, on the small animal’s limbs. He took out a black crystal.

“ _____ ”

As he whispered something, the magic circle began to shine, and it released small amounts of purple lightning.

At the very same moment, the small animal woke up.

“GYAAAAHHHHH!”

The shriek that escaped its mouth was thick with anguish.

It tried to raise its body up, but the manacles binding it were not so accommodating. As the metal on its limbs tore through its skin, the small animal’s body spasmed and hit its back to the stony floor in a futile attempt to break out.

This continued for a long five minutes...

“Mo...mmy...”

...and at the end, the small animal — the miserable little human child — breathed its last.

“This is less than I expected,” the horse-man said, looking at the crystal in his hand.

Then he cut off the corpse’s head with a large blade he had prepared, stuffed it into a bag, and threw it into a basket that said “To be returned.” The rest of the body was carefully put into a container saying “Materials.”

Then — as if what had just happened was nothing special — the man returned to the table and continued filling in the ledger.

No one who knew the ledger’s contents would ever compare it to those used in business. At this point, it was nothing but a cursed book containing the fates of countless children.

“Sixth this month. Payment not received. No relevant materials. Dispose. Gouz!”

In response to the man’s call, something within the darkness began to move. “Ahh...”

The creature referred to as “Gouz” — a large man with an ox’s head and demonic fangs — reached into one of the cages and grabbed a little girl by her arm. She was sleeping and continued to do so even as he dragged her across the floor.

Many would say that she would’ve been better off if she continued sleeping. However, Gouz didn’t allow that. Gently — like a parent or a close friend — he tapped on her cheek.

The little girl stirred and woke up...

“They taste better when they’re scared, y’know,” he grinned.

...and her flesh was rendered from bone. Eaten alive.

By the time Gouz was done with his snack, the horse-man was done filling in

the ledger.

“Gouz, don’t make such a mess,” he said.

“Gahahah!” the ox-head laughed. “Maise, this place is basically painted with the brats’ blood and other fluids! I couldn’t make it worse if I wanted to!”

“I’m talking about your saliva. It reeks.”

“That so? Well, I’ll try to be careful, then.”

The horse-man — Maise — sighed at Gouz’s half-hearted and unreliable response and changed the subject.

“That’s today’s set done,” he said. “Gouz, after we go through tomorrow’s set, we’re leaving this place.”

“Huh? We are?” asked the ox-head.

“Yes,” answered the horse-man. “That event is starting in Gideon in just two days. Some of those who will gather for it might try to eliminate us. It would be far too troublesome.”

“Masters, huh?” sighed Gouz. “Why not just kick their non-serious asses?”

“Because we can’t,” curtly replied Maise. “We could handle those with high-rank jobs, but Superiors and their Superior jobs would be far too challenging. Also...”

He momentarily stopped talking, merely to emphasize the words that followed.

“...they stand where we are aiming for.”

Maise’s words — which had some sort of certainty to them — made Gouz laugh out loud. “Gehahahaha! You’re not wrong there.”

“Ah, it just hit me,” added the ox-head. “You said we’re leaving, but what about our underlings? There are, like, a hundred of ‘em, and they’re still working hard getting the brats and whatnot.”

Gouz’s question made Maise’s eyes — empty sockets where a wisp-like fire popped up and disappeared — light.

“We’re taking them with us, of course,” said the horse-man.

“Gahahah! Hope they all fit!”

Gouz was a man-eating ox-head demon with a high-rank job from the gladiator grouping: Strong Gladiator.

Maise: a grudge-wielding undead horse-man with a high-rank job from the necromancer grouping — Lich.

They were the Gouz-Maise Gang.

They were Gideon’s most feared band of kidnappers and murderers.

Chapter One: A Morning in Gideon

Paladin Ray Starling

Most large cities in the Kingdom of Altar — the royal capital included — were encircled by a large wall. Not only was it a necessary structure that protected against monsters and attacks from other countries, it also separated the worlds inside and out.

Duel City Gideon, where we had just arrived, was no different.

“Whoa...” I couldn’t help but voice my amazement. Beyond the walls — which were similar to the ones in the capital — waited a radically different scenery.

It made me remember how I’d felt when I had first entered Altea. The atmosphere of a hyper-realistic fantasy town was moving, to say the least, and Gideon was making me experience it all over again.

The air here was thick with people’s enthusiasm. I had a feeling that most of it came from the very middle of the metropolis — the Great Central Arena of the duel city, towering right before my eyes. Ancient Rome’s Colosseum was 200 meters in diameter and 50 meters in height, yet Gideon’s pride and joy seemed to be more than twice the size of that.

According to a sign hanging near the gates to Gideon, there were twelve smaller arenas evenly spaced out around the city, and every single one of them was active daily. The sign also said that the Great Central Arena was often used for various events.

With all the liveliness here in Gideon, I found it hard to believe that this city was part of a kingdom that had recently experienced a crippling blow in a war and was forced to the verge of defeat.

I looked around and saw a number of humanoid races I didn’t encounter much back in the capital. Some had beast-like ears, others had dragon-like horns... There were even some fairies, so petite they only went up to my knees. They seemed to be this world’s Demi-Humans — a staple for every fantasy

work.

As I watched them, I noticed that there were both tourists and those who actually lived and worked here. Figaro hadn't been lying when he'd said this place was lively.

"What an energetic city," said Rook.

"It's only natural, since this area isn't close to the kingdom's border with Dryfe, which is in the north," Marie said. She began explaining why. "The countries close to Gideon are Caldina and Legendaria. The latter signed a treaty of commerce with Altar, while the former is a full ally, so this city gets many tourists from both."

She showed us a map to illustrate what she'd explained. In the center of the map was Gideon; to the east, a mountain belt, followed by Caldina; and to the south, there was Legendaria. To the west, there was a small patch of land followed by the open sea, while to the north, there was the capital.

"Not only is Gideon positioned in a safe spot — you can also count all the gladiators fighting in the arenas as its soldiers," Marie continued. "It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that Gideon is the strongest city in the kingdom."

I see, I thought. That makes it the safest city in the Kingdom of Altar.

I could only assume that many people who'd escaped from the capital had chosen this as their destination. After all, in the catalog of the capital's guild, there had been many escort requests from people searching for a safe refuge.

However, there were still merchants like Alejandro, who would go out of their way to stock up in the capital. We and that merchant had gone our separate ways at the entrance to Gideon, but since he'd wished to thank us properly, he'd invited us to visit his shop whenever we had the time.

"Now, let's go to the Adventurers' Guild," said Marie. "We have to finish the quest and report that Gardranda was eliminated."

Rook and I were quick to agree, and we all made our way to Gideon's Adventurers' Guild.

The ceiling inside it was higher than it was in the capital's guild. The entrance

was larger, too. The designers were probably being considerate of the larger races inhabiting and visiting this city.

Anyway, we completed the delivery quest without any problems. The reward was 30,000 lir. We split it evenly and got 10,000 lir each. It was a nice amount, no doubt about it. However, we ran into some problems when claiming the reward we were supposed to get for taking care of Gardranda.

Proving that we'd done it wasn't difficult at all. We simply had to go to a special counter and show them the MVP special reward: The Miasmaflame Bracers, Gardranda.

Items of this type were always named after the defeated UBM, had qualities that fit the MVP, and couldn't be transferred in any way. Thus, the fact that I possessed the item with Gardranda's name on it could only mean that I had been the most valuable player in Great Miasmic Demon, Gardranda's elimination.

Of course, it was also possible to prove such things by going through a thorough inquiry. It was only natural, considering that not every bounty was a UBM.

And so, though we got the reward money without any trouble, we found the amount to be quite problematic.

It amounted to a total of 1,000,000 lir. That was the equivalent of 10,000,000 yen, which was quite a fortune. It got us to sit around a table in the guild and intensely argue about how we would split it.

"Oh, come on, now!" I raised my voice. "Let's just all take a third and be done with it!"

"No!" said Marie. "I already took the money for the potions I used, so there's no reason for me to have any more! I didn't participate in the battle at all! You two should just split it in half!"

"I didn't fight Gardranda, either!" cried Rook. "I could never accept the same amount as Ray! He should just take it all, honestly!"

The three of us were fiercely arguing in favor of reducing the amounts we would get.

First, Marie had been given approximately 100,000 lir of the reward to make up for the Elixir she'd thrown at me and other medicines she'd used on the people in the carriages. She'd been apprehensive about accepting it, saying that she'd chosen to use those items on her own volition, but I'd insisted, and she'd soon caved. With that settled, we'd had 900,000 lir left, and that was when things had gotten fiery.

I had argued that it had been the result of us acting as a party, and insisted that we all take a third each.

Marie had insisted that she didn't deserve or need more than what she'd gotten for the medicine.

Rook had stated that he didn't deserve any money because he hadn't participated in the battle against Gardranda.

I sincerely believed that they both were invaluable in the victory against the demon, so I really wanted them to take what was rightfully theirs.

"Honestly, I already got the MVP special reward, so maybe I shouldn't take any of it," I said.

"That would take you beyond simple selflessness and quickly make you look like an unreasonable lunatic," commented Nemesis.

I was being completely serious, yet Nemesis looked at me like I was an idiot. Rook and Marie, too, seemed thoroughly perplexed by my suggestion.

"Hey, these things are downright insane," I said. "I really can't let myself take much after getting something *this* good."

I raised my hands to show off the things on them. These two-tone colored bracers — one red, other dark purple — were inside my inventory after we had defeated Gardranda.

The description in the equipment window went like this:

Miasmaflame Bracers, Gardranda

Legendary item

A legendary item embodying the concepts surrounding the three-faced demon of flame and miasma.

In addition to being extremely tough, it increases the physical strength of the wearer.

This item cannot be transferred or traded.

No level limit.

It actually gave a 100% bonus to STR, and had more defense than all my other armor combined. Not only that, but it also allowed me to use the skills “Purgatorial Flames” and “Hellish Miasma,” which were probably much like the attacks used by the UBM itself. There was also a skill that I couldn’t read for some reason, one that simply said “???”.

They were insanely good, no doubt about it.

Not only did they seem to be worth more than 300,000 lir — they’d probably go for more than the whole reward for defeating Gardranda.

I mean, it’s a “legendary” item, I thought.

“I know I’m the MVP and all, but taking the reward after getting *these* would be far too much,” I said.

We would have lost the battle against Gardranda if Marie hadn’t provided support with her items. Rook, too, had done a great job holding back Audrey — who had originally been the demon’s mount.

We wouldn’t have achieved victory if it hadn’t been for them, so I thought I was fair in insisting that my contributions were worth only a third of the reward.

“...I understand,” said Marie. “But I think I have a better idea.” She lightly hit the table. “First of all, Ray, you’re getting 300,000, and that’s final. If *you* don’t accept that money, no one here has the right to have any of it. Now, Rook, I know you don’t want to take as much as Ray, so let’s cut it by half and give you at least 150,000. And before anyone tells me off for not taking anything, I’ll be satisfied with just 50,000, thank you very much.”

Rook and I weren’t against that split, so that was 500,000 lir taken care of. However, there was still 400,000 lir left.

“We shall use the rest as a party,” said Marie.

“By that, you mean...?” I raised an eyebrow.

“You could call it a little lesson for future reference,” she answered.

What is she talking about? I thought.

“For now, just leave it all to me,” she continued. “I would like you to gather here in the afternoon after three days game time. Is that okay with both of you?”

Three days game time was just one day in reality.

“No problems here,” said Rook.

“I don’t have any plans for tomorrow, either, but what are you planning?” I asked.

“Let’s have it be a little secret for the sake of surprise,” said Marie. “Oh, but if you don’t like this idea of mine, just say so. I’ll give your money back at once.”

“No, it’s fine by me,” I said. I had absolutely no intention of taking any more, so I just let Marie do her thing.

“Then with that, we’re done splitting the money,” she said. “Good job on finishing this quest, you two.”

“Yeah, thanks for the help,” I said.

“Thank you very much,” said Rook.

And so ended the first quest we had taken up as a party.

We had a small celebration, and by the end, I was so tired that I immediately logged out.



The next day, I logged in soon after waking up.

I’d slept long enough for a whole day to have passed in the game. *Infinite Dendrogram’s* tripled time feature was useful and all, but situations like these made it seem a bit confusing and even bothersome. The time here was six o’clock in the morning, and the sun was just beginning to rise.

As soon as I logged in, Nemesis jumped out of the crest on my left hand and

greeted me. "Good morning, Master. You sure are early today."

"...Funny, considering that I basically overslept in terms of real life time," I said.

"So what are you doing today?" asked Nemesis. "It's too early for shops to be open."

"Well, I was thinking of doing it after getting some new gear, but I guess I'll have to do the testing first," I answered.

"Testing? Of what?" she asked again.

I raised both my hands before her. "These." They were covered by two pieces of armor. My Miasmaflame Bracers.

Just like the royal capital, most of the kingdom's cities always had their gates open. There were many reasons for that, but one of them was the fact that there were many Masters who were active at night. It would be extremely inconvenient if they were only allowed to pass during the day, and there would be many people who would go out of their way to try to climb over the walls. Thus, the gates were open 24 hours a day. There were three guard shifts, and it reminded me of part-time jobs in convenience stores.

When I passed the northern gate and greeted the guards standing there, they greeted me back in a slightly sleepy manner.

Soon after leaving the city, I was standing in Nex Plains, the same place I had passed through yesterday.

I roamed about looking for a monster I could do the test on, and it didn't take long for me to find a lone Goblin Warrior. I was familiar with this monster, so I could defeat it even if the test failed. A good target, no matter how I looked at it.

"You said you were going to test the bracers, but is there anything specific you had in mind?" asked Nemesis in her sword form.

"Well, these Miasmaflame bracers have skills on them, right? I want to see if they're of any use," I said. "I don't like the idea of having to try them out on something stronger than myself."

I had gotten Vengeance is Mine during the fight with the Demi-Drag and Like a Flag Flying the Reversal while fighting Gardranda, but I couldn't continue to rely on skills I wasn't familiar with to always match my situation and lead me to victory. Testing was important.

Therefore, I decided to test the two skills on the item — Purgatorial Flames and Hellish Miasma. I couldn't use the skill named “???”, so that was on hold for now.

One was a flamethrowing skill, while the other was a release of poisonous gas. If I could master them, I would finally have attacks other than standard blows and Vengeance is Mine. Having to use Gems just to cast spells was quite a waste, after all.

“...Oh, it just hit me that I still have some of those Gems,” I muttered.

Suddenly, the Goblin noticed I was here and charged at me while swinging his weapon.

“All right, then... Purgatorial Flames.” I stretched my hand out to the Goblin and opened my palm flat facing towards it.

A moment later, a demon's mouth opened up on the back of my hand...

“Eh?”

...and it released a fierce stream of crimson fire, painting my vision red.

“AAAGHHHHH!”

Damn, that made my HP go down so fast! I thought. It's my own attack, so it's not affected by Paladin's Aegis and other defensive skills! Oh, crap! I even got the “Burns” debuff!

“You fool! Are you trying to kill yourself?! Oh! The Goblin is coming!” shouted Nemesis.

“OAAGHH!”

The damage I'd caused myself had turned this into an extremely dangerous battle. I desperately defended myself against the Goblin's attacks, used a number of skills and healing items, and barely emerged victorious.

Lesson learned. As important as testing was, one always had to consider safety.



“...All right, time to pull myself together and test the Hellish Miasma,” I said.

“Are you sure it will work right this time?” asked Nemesis.

“It will,” I answered. “...I think.”

After a short while of looking for a new prey, I had stumbled upon a bipedal, plant-like monster. The words above it said “Walking Grapevine,” and just as they implied, it was literally a walking vine with grapes hanging from it.

“Is that thing even breathing?” asked Nemesis. “Wouldn’t it be better to burn it?”

“I’m testing the Hellish Miasma right now. And yes, plants *do* breathe, so it should work,” I answered. “Hellish Miasma! Release!”

This time, I made sure to make the back of my hand face the enemy and thus prevent the smoke from hitting myself.

Just as I’d intended, the miasma surrounded the Walking Grapevine... and then a strong gust of wind made it go back to me.

“GYAAAAHHH!”

“I knew this would happen!” shouted Nemesis.

Trying to not breathe any of it in, I escaped the noxious cloud.

Man, that was close, I thought. I almost got destroyed by my own skill.

“Now, let’s see what the monster thinks of it,” I said. I looked as the wind made the miasma disperse to reveal the Walking Grapevine, clearly suffering due to the debuffs.

“It seems to be effective,” said Nemesis. “However, it’s hard to make it work on windy days, and trying to use it indoors isn’t even an option.”

“Yeah, I can’t deny that it’s a difficult skill to use,” I said.

As we were having that exchange, something flew right into my mouth.

“Hghuh?!” I accidentally bit and gulped it down. The aftertaste — both sweet and sour — was that of a grape.

A grape, of all things.

Yes, that Walking Grapevine was actually attacking me with its grapes.

“Whot kind ohf attahck ish that?!” I exclaimed in confusion.

“Master, don’t talk with your mouth full,” said Nemesis.

Seriously, though, what am I supposed to think about this attack? I thought. *The grapes are pretty good, and even if they hit me on the body, they only get me a bit dirty and don’t hurt at all—*

“Guh...” My face suddenly contorted.

“Master, what’s wrong?! Was that attack poisoned?!” asked Nemesis in perplexion.

Poison? I thought. *Yeah, it was poisoned.*

My stats clearly showed the debuffs that were affecting me. Their names were Poison, Intoxication, and Weakness.

“They’re the same debuffs I just gave it...!” I said. Apparently, its fruit had become poisoned by the miasma and I’d gotten its effects transferred to me by ingesting them. I’d had no idea that debuffs could travel like that.

“M-Master!” exclaimed Nemesis. “There’s a number of monsters coming this way!”

I looked around and saw some Goblins and beast-type monsters here and there. They were all here because of me — or, rather, the fruit juice on my body.

“I see, so that’s the aim of that attack...” I muttered.

And so, still under the effects of the debuffs, I was attacked by a group of monsters which numbered to more than ten.



“We ran into some unexpected trouble, but I think I know how these skills work now,” I said.

Despite the tremendous failure on its first use, I had soon found out that Purgatorial Flames was an exceptionally effective skill.

First of all, it was very powerful. It actually did more damage than my standard attacks. I could also continue to channel it as long as I had MP, not to mention that it could apply the Burns debuff or its upgrade — Charring. Just as the name said, it was a debuff that could reduce a burned Goblin's arm to charcoal.

Strong as it might be, however, Purgatorial Flames affected friend and foe alike.

Heck, it includes myself, as well, so I'll have to be really careful when using it, I thought.

Also, its power was lower than that of Gardranda's flames. If it had been the same, the first failure would've blown my head away. I could only assume that Purgatorial Flames was weaker than the original either because it had been reduced to equipment, or because I was simply a weaker creature. Due to the fact that there was a skill I'd yet to unlock, it was quite obvious that I wouldn't be able to master the Miasmaflame Bracers just yet.

And though it had gotten me into the unexpected predicament of getting surrounded by more than ten monsters, the Hellish Miasma test had been successful, as well.

Man, that was tough, I thought. If I hadn't activated the Reversal, I would be dead by now.

The only reason I'd survived was because I'd fought the monsters while powered up by the reversed debuffs.

By the time it was over, the Walking Grapevine had succumbed to the Poison and died. I was lucky to have found out that debuffing a monster and then getting those debuffs by ingesting its body parts was counted as a negative effect from the monster.

Though I have no idea if I'll ever find a use for it, I thought. I don't eat monsters while fighting, after all.

Whatever the case, I had to be extra careful when using Hellish Miasma.

Oh, I almost forgot to mention. Since the Walking Grapevine had died, the Reversal was no longer effective. Thus, I was currently being tortured by the debuffs.

“Uoghh...” I moaned. “First Heal.”

While lying on the ground due to Intoxication and Weakness, I used healing magic to restore my HP, which was being drained by Poison.

Since the Purgatorial Flames were weaker, I had hoped that would apply to Hellish Miasma, as well, but that clearly wasn’t the case. It was just about as bad as it had been when Gardranda’d given me these debuffs.

“Perhaps it becomes less effective on stronger creatures,” pondered Nemesis. “Your level is low, so it seems like its effect on you is still powerful.”

“Y-You might be right...” I muttered.

When examining the way the debuffs were applied and the relationship between Burns and Charring, I began to believe that some debuffs could change depending on how great the cause was. Say someone got attacked by something that applied debuffs, causing the attacked person’s debuff “level” to rise and make a debuff appear. Would it really be strange for a continued barrage of such attacks to stack the debuff level and make the illness more serious?

In other words, breathing the miasma for too long might cause some new debuffs to appear, I theorized. *...Not that I’m willing to try it.*

“But man, this is bad,” I said. “I might have to go back to the city by crawling on all fours.”

“That would be quite unsightly,” said Nemesis. “Oh...?”

As I looked to where Gideon was — still lying on the ground — a shadow came over me.

I realized that someone was standing behind me, so I slowly got up and looked at who it was. I wasn’t in a hurry because I was still under the effects of the debuffs and could simply feel that the presence wasn’t hostile, unlike the Goblins and such.

“...Eh?” I said, startled.

That assumption of mine had turned out to be both correct and wrong. The thing was definitely not a monster. However, it was clearly a creature one had to be cautious with.

“...”

It was a penguin. A large, bear-sized penguin suit was looking down at me.

“Huh?!” I hastily tried to back away, but the debuffs rendered me unable to move as I pleased. Even as I began to panic, the penguin did nothing but continue to watch me, completely immobile.

“...Did Brother Bear get himself a new suit?” asked Nemesis.

“No, it’s not my brother,” I answered.

However, it didn’t seem like a monster or a player killer, either.

It seemed like all it did was observe me.

“What the hell *are* you?” I asked.

“What am I, you ask? Heh heh heh heh... Oops!” In response to my question, the penguin completely destroyed his — the voice was male — silence and immobility and jumped upwards.

After making a number of mid-air spins, he landed and took a V-like pose.

“My name is Fla...MINGO! Call me Dr. Flamingo, if you will.”

...What a weirdo. I thought.

“Would you say that suits are a signal for oddballs?” asked Nemesis.

We only have two so far, I thought. *If we find a third suited weirdo, I’ll accept this theory of yours.*

Putting that aside, however...

“Flamingo?” I raised an eyebrow. “That’s a penguin suit, isn’t it?”

It reminded me of Adelie Penguins, common to many aquariums. Its primary colors were black and white, and no one with eyes could mistake it for the flashy, pink bird he’d named himself after.

“Who cares about the details?! What matters here is that you seem to be in a pickle! Do drink this!” The penguin reached for his pocket — which was in the suit’s stomach area — and took out a medicine bottle with liquid inside it.

“And this is?” I asked.

“A drug that removes debuffs!” he answered. “It instantly takes care of all disease-based status effects!”

I didn’t know how to respond. If he wasn’t lying, I would gladly chug it down, but I had basically no reason to believe such a blatantly suspicious penguin.

“Isn’t this a trap?” asked Nemesis.

I had gone through Lei-Lei’s lesson with the fake alcohol and knew the dangers of such offers, but if this penguin had had any intention to hurt me, he would’ve done it while I was writhing around due to the debuffs. He’d had no reason to prepare a trap for me.

“Thanks.” I took the drug from the penguin’s hand, activated Reversal just to be on the safe side, and slowly drank it down.

...Hey, this is pretty good, I thought. It had the taste of mixed fruit juice.

Soon after I drank it, the debuffs burdening my body quickly faded away...

“Drank it all, didn’t you?” spoke the penguin.

...and, at the same time, I was attacked by a sudden, powerful headache.

“Huh?! You little...!” I growled.

“So it *was* a trap!” exclaimed Nemesis.

The headache made me fall to my knees and grab hold of my head.

“I’ve been watching you and thinking...” said the penguin. “...‘What kind of drug would suit him best?’” The pain continued to get worse.

“It didn’t take long for me to come to a conclusion! It simply had to be *this* prototype!” he declared.

Soon enough, the headache became completely unbearable... and then it disappeared as if it had never been there.

“Huh?”

What was that all about? I thought. The headache had faded away and not caused anything to happen.

The penguin that drugged me seemed to be strangely satisfied. Not that I saw his face, but still.

“Hey, what the hell did you make me dri—?!”

“M-Master!” Nemesis cut me off. “Ears! Your ears!”

In response to her words, I reached for my ears, but didn’t find anything wrong with them.

“Not *those* ears! The ones above!” she exclaimed.

The ears above? I thought. *But I only have one set of ear—*

Suddenly, I felt something fluffy.

“Hm...?”

What was that strange sensation? I once again reached for the place I’d just touched — the area between the temporal region and calvaria. And again, I felt something fluffy. It was actually kinda pleasant to the touch. It reminded me of the ears of a Siberian husky I used to have...

“YES! I knew those ears would look great on you!” From seemingly nowhere, the penguin took out a full-length mirror. In it, I saw myself...

...with dog ears — as golden as my hair — sticking out of my head.

“...” ...*Wha—* “WHAT THE HELL IS THIS?!”





“I happen to be a humble Researcher, and I merely wanted to test my very own Animal Ear Drug,” the penguin explained. “When I went around to look for a convenient guinea pig, I stumbled upon you, just lying there on the ground. Not letting this divine opportunity go to waste, I mixed and blended a drug that removed your status effects with the drug I wished to test. My evaluation didn’t fail me! The Animal Ear Drug was a success, and the dog ears look absolutely perfect on you! ...I’m sorry, I am so sorry! I’ll genuflect and apologize, so could you please withdraw your sword? You’ll tear my suit! Please stop! It might reach my throat!”

I pushed Nemesis against the mad scientist penguin’s throat as I found out that I’d been used as his guinea pig.

Forgive me, Lei-Lei, I thought. I deserve this for failing to follow your advice. But man, isn’t this a bit too much?

“I’m not too big on fashion, but there are three things I’ve decided to never wear under any circumstances,” I spoke.

“A-And those are?” asked Nemesis.

“Glasses, girl’s clothing, and animal ear headbands.”

Naturally, this turn of events was quite upsetting.

“Master,” said Nemesis, “you are more averse to glasses than girl’s clothing?”

“Glasses are great,” said the penguin. “This pair, for example, gives you various skills and—”

“Shut up!” I cut his words short.

“Th-That sounded like you intend to kill him,” commented Nemesis.

“I’m shorryy!” cried the penguin.

No glasses, not ever, I thought.

“Well... what the hell do I do now?” I tried to hide the dog ears with some random headgear, but I couldn’t equip anything. They all got rejected like magnets of the same pole. I brought up my equipment window, and it said that

I already had “Dog Ears” equipped on my head. Apparently, as is normal in most such games, you could only wear a single piece of equipment in each slot.

By the way, these Dog Ears had no bonuses or skills on them. It was an item that only changed my appearance. However, just like a generic cursed object straight out of your average RPG, it couldn’t be removed through the equipment window.

There were also no relevant status effects to accompany that function, and Reversal couldn’t do anything about it, either.

“How do you fix this?” I asked.

“It’s growing out of your head, so you can’t just take it off,” said the penguin. “It’s like a sub-type of hair makeovers.”

Man, that’s annoying, I thought.

“Oh, but it should disappear after some time,” he continued. “If I had to guess, it will happen sometime in the evening.”

“By which time standard?” I asked.

“This world’s, of course.”

That was the equivalent of ten hours here or three hours in reality.

“Then I guess I’ll just log out until that time comes,” I said. I didn’t want anyone I knew to see me like this.

“Oh no, time when you’re logged out wouldn’t count,” the penguin said. “It would be boring if it did.”

...This mad penguin just said the word “boring,” didn’t he?

“Hhaah... All right,” I sighed, resigned. “Guess I’ll just continue like this, then...”

Having to go about with something like this on my head was somewhat embarrassing. *But when compared to having to wear glasses... hey, I guess this ain’t all that bad,* I thought.

“Just *what* did glasses ever do to you?” asked Nemesis.

Not gonna comment.

“By the way, Ray, my boy,” spoke the penguin again.

“What is it?” I asked.

“I have but one humble request.” The penguin looked at me with a serious face — not that I could see it, but it felt that way — and stated what he wanted of me. “I want to take a screenshot, so could you take off your clothes? Just the top would be fine.”

Without saying a word back, I slashed at him.

“Fwahahahah! Farewell!”

The penguin evaded my attack and quickly ran in the direction of the city.

Man, is he fast, I thought. A penguin has no business being this fleet of foot.

“What do we even make of oddballs like this...?” asked Nemesis.

“No idea. From the fact that he mentioned screenshots, it’s obvious that he’s a Master, but... Hm?” I stopped talking and realized something.

I realized that the penguin had called me by my name before he left. And I definitely hadn’t introduced myself to him...

After that penguin weirdo gave me the dog-ear drug, I made my way back to the city.

Since Gideon was a place where demi-humans weren’t uncommon, the guards didn’t make any comments about my new appearance.

I could hear one of them whisper, “Huh? Did that guy have those ears when he greeted us in the morning...? Guess I wasn’t fully awake,” but that was the extent of it.

“All right, what now?” I asked myself.

Prior to the testing, I’d had plans to go say hello to Alejandro, buy some new equipment, and perhaps even go hunting alongside Rook and Marie, provided they were online. As things were now, however, I didn’t want to encounter anyone I knew. Being seen with these dog ears on my head would be downright degrading.

“I don’t see why it bothers you that much,” said Nemesis.

It'd be weirder if it didn't bother me, I thought. Imagine a scenario where a good friend suddenly appears before you with a pair of dog ears coming out of his head.

I was fully confident that such a sight would be etched onto my brain forever.

I'm strongly averse to the idea of that happening, so I don't want to see anyone I know—

"Ah, Ray, Nemesis. Good morning," a feminine voice reached my ears before I could finish my thought.

I had no words for this situation.

Seriously?! You do this to me right when I was thinking that?! I thought.

"Well, if it isn't Marie," said Nemesis.

"Indeed it is," replied the Journalist.

"Now, Ray, why do you have such a unique look on your face..." Marie stopped talking and fixed her gaze on the things sprouting out of my head.

Crap, she's staring at them, I silently panicked. She's seriously eyeballing them.

I had to clear things up before she thought I was some weirdo who got his kicks from wearing dog ears.

"Marie, just so you know, this isn't my thing—"

"Don't say anything, Ray!" she cut me off.

"Excuse me?!" The vigor in her words made me stiffen up and rendered me unable to continue what I wanted to say. With her gaze still fixed on me, Marie reached into her wristband-shaped inventory and took something out. It was...

"A sketchbook and... a pen?" I looked at the items with questioning eyes.

Just like she had during the minion capacity explanation, Marie began drawing something at an incredible speed. I wasn't knowledgeable about the subject of drawing, but I couldn't help but question if it was really possible for such a coherent picture to have come from such fast movements. With nimble strokes, she drew the outline, the hair, the details on the face and — of course

— the dog ears.

“Phew,” she sighed. Two minutes later, Marie finally took the pen away from the paper and put up a satisfied expression. On the sketchbook in her hands, there was a ridiculously well-drawn picture of a blond youth with dog ears and no upper clothing.

...Huh? Is this me? But I still have my clothes on, I thought.

“Impressive,” said Nemesis.

“Well, yeah, it’s good, but... It’s good, but I, uh...” I stumbled.

It was definitely a high-quality drawing, but I had no idea how to react to a depiction of a shirtless me with dog ears. The art style was a perfect fit for those monthly magazines that were aimed at teenage boys, but which happened to have a lot of female readers, and that made it even harder for me to comment on it.

“Is there a Drawing skill or something?” I asked.

“It’s included among the sense skills, yes, but this is all me,” Marie answered.

Oh, so she’s good at drawing in real life, I thought.

“So, Ray, how did you end up with such a splendid pair of dog ears?” she asked.

“...A penguin drugged me.” I told her the details of my encounter with Mister Flamingo.

“I must say, that penguin has some great taste,” said Marie. “I’ll make sure to buy some of that Animal Ear Drug if it ever gets on the market.”

“Not that I’d stop you, but... are you serious?” I asked.

“Very,” she answered. “By the way, Ray. Dog ears look great on you, but I think that tiger or fox ears wou—”

“Whoa, now! Don’t think of using it on me!” I cut her off.

“...Tch.”

Did this shady Journalist just click her tongue?! I thought in disbelief.

“Anyway, you said that the effect wears off in the evening,” she said, changing the subject. “What do you plan to do until then?”

“I was thinking of paying a visit to Alejandro’s shop, but I can’t really do that with these things popping out of my head,” I answered. I didn’t want people to see them.

Although it may be a lost cause, considering they’ve already been seen by someone I know, I thought.

“Hmm, I really don’t think it’s such a big deal,” said Marie. “You shouldn’t be so self-conscious about them.”

“But—”

“You’d be hard-pressed to find a tian who’d be surprised by a Master who suddenly grew a pair of animal ears,” she cut me off and explained. “To most tians, we Masters are creatures that exist outside the boundaries of common sense.”

Is that how it is? I asked myself. Well, now that I think about it, the King of Destruction destroyed a whole forest in a single night, so it’s perfectly reasonable for tians to see us that way.

“Guess I’ll go to Alejandro’s place, then,” I sighed.

“I’m still busy with something, so I can’t join you,” said Marie.

“Busy?” I asked.

“Various preparations and all that,” she responded, but didn’t make anything clear. “Speaking of which, don’t forget to meet up with me tomorrow afternoon.”

“Yeah, I remember the plan,” I said. “What are you preparing, anyway?”

“It’s a secret,” she answered. “See you tomorrow!”

With those words as her last, Marie ran off towards an uncertain direction. I couldn’t help but wonder what kind of surprise she had in store for us.

After splitting up with Marie, Nemesis and I made our way to the shop address Alejandro had given us yesterday, which was located in Gideon’s fourth

district.

Gideon was a circular city split into twelve districts — making it seem much like a sliced cake — and the fourth was an area focused on trade. Making my way through the bazaars while trying not to get lost among all the people and other things, I somehow arrived at Alejandro's shop.

The large building had a sign that said "The Alejandro Company." I peeked inside and saw a variety of goods being sold. Obviously, there were weapons, armor, and healing items, but I also noticed works of art such as paintings and statues. There were fruit and other foods, as well, and they created quite a contrast with the rows of Jewels on display. The place was much like a department store.

"Good morning," I said as I came in. A moment later, a young girl — clearly an employee — ran up to me.

"Is Alejandro here right now?" I asked.

"Oh! You're the Master from the day before yesterday!" she exclaimed. "Thank you very much for what you did back then! I'll call the owner immediately!" The girl trotted off deeper into the shop.

From her words, it was pretty obvious that she had been one of the tians riding the carriages when Gardranda had attacked. I couldn't tell if I'd seen her back then, though. Things had been pretty hectic, after all.

"What a fidgety young girl," said Nemesis. "From the air about her, I assume that she has the makings of a 'klutz.'"

Not sure how I feel about summarizing people with a single word, I thought. What word would you summarize yourself with, Nemesis?

"Goddess," she answered with no hesitation.

Well, your name is that of a goddess, yeah, but I'd say you're better summed up as an "old loli ha-" I thought willfully.

"Hey! What were you about to think just now?!" Nemesis exclaimed.

"Ha ha ha, don't be so loud," I said. "You'll disturb the other customers."

"That laugh was so forced!" she shouted, seeing right through me.

As we were fooling around, Alejandro walked out from the shop's inner quarters.

"Well, if it isn't Mr. Ray," he said. "You are most welcome here."

"Hello," I greeted him. "Since you insisted that I pay a visit, I came to take a look at your wares."

"Oh, please do," he said. "Look at them for as long as you like. You get a discount on everything I have."

"Thank you," I said.

I had to get a lot of new gear appropriate to my current level, so a discount was very welcome.

Also, there was something I couldn't help but notice. The female employee and Alejandro weren't making any comments about my dog ears. Sure, the girl gave them a few involuntary glances, but she didn't say anything at all. Alejandro, on the other hand, acted as though the ears didn't even exist. A pro if I ever saw one.

Perhaps Marie was right about tians not being mindful of such things happening with Masters.

I was thankful for that. Having to explain the dog ears to every single person I encountered would've been really annoying.

Now, I can only hope they disappear before I meet Rook again, I thought.

"Oh, look, it's Ray and Nemesis," said someone in the shop. "Good morning. Nice to see that you're already logged in."

"Helloo," followed a feminine voice. "Oh? Why do you have those ears, Ray?"

I turned to see Rook and Babi, who had — apparently — been shopping here before we came in.

I had no words. *This is the second time today that my hope has died the very moment I created it,* I thought. *Are these dog ears cursed or something?*

"If you consider everything that's happened ever since you logged in this morning, the cursed item here might be the Miasmaflame Bracers, not the

ears,” said Nemesis.

...You have a point, I thought.

“Ray, how did you end up with that nice pair of ears?” asked Rook.

“It’s a result of this and that happening because of so on and so on,” I said.

“Surely you’re not expecting him to understand that,” commented Nemesis.

“I see,” said Rook. “You ended up like that because a shady person tricked you into drinking some drug, right?”

“He actually got it right?!” Nemesis and I couldn’t hide our surprise.

Are you an esper or something? I thought.

“No, this isn’t a superpower or anything like that,” he answered to my thought. “This level of ‘mind reading’ is easy once you get the hang of it.”

“How can you call it easy when you’re talking to my thoughts as naturally as Nemesis does?!” I asked, still perplexed.

“Ohh... what a heavy blow to my identity.” Shocked for some reason, Nemesis fell to her knees.

“That’s pretty amazing, Rook,” I said. “You’d be unbeatable when playing old maid.”

“Old maid, huh...” he said. “I don’t think this ability of mine would be this precise with anyone I don’t know, though. The most I can do with strangers is tell how they feel and notice if they have any ulterior motives.”

That’s still pretty amazing, I thought.

After Rook surprised us with his special ability, we began looking at the wares on sale here.

“Why are you here, anyway?” I asked him. “To say hi and buy some new gear, I assume?”

“Yes,” he answered. “Not just for me and Babi, either. I found out that I can get weapons for Marilyn and Audrey, as well. Also, we went hunting yesterday, so I have some drops to sell.”

So there's monster gear here, too, huh? I thought. This shop sure has a wide variety of items.

"Hunting, eh?" I said. "What level are you now?"

"48," he answered.

...H-He's about to reach the maximum level a low-rank job can get, I thought. It's almost two times greater than my level. How am I supposed to feel about this?

"Looks like someone got real busy during the day I was offline..." I muttered.

I could only assume that having Marilyn and Audrey had made his hunting that much more effective. Heck, Rook and Babi were absolute terrors in large-scale battles by themselves.

"I'm about to reach level 50, so I'll have to start working towards switching to a high-rank job soon," said Rook.

"Do you have anything in mind?" I asked.

"Yes, I did my research and found out that a Pimp's high-rank job is called the 'Lost Heart,'" he answered.

Lost Heart, eh? I thought. It was a reference to the Japanese word used to describe a person who'd lost all the eight virtues as they were presented in works such as *The Eight Dog Chronicles*. The term also referred to people who managed brothels. Quite the unique naming choice.

"Here are the requirements." Rook took out a Catalog and showed me the Lost Heart's page.

Requirement no. 1: Reach level 50 as Pimp.

Requirement no. 2: The sum total of all underling female monster and slave stats must be above a certain point.

Requirement no. 3: The total money gained by making the underling female monsters and slaves work must be above 1,000,000 lir.

“I see,” I said. Unlike Paladin, it didn’t have any requirements that involved human relations or some special victories. In fact, everything could be achieved by simply playing Pimp for a certain amount of time. These requirements could’ve been one of the reasons why it wasn’t classified as a battle-focused job.

Even though Rook makes it look far more formidable than most battle jobs, I thought.

“I’m about to reach level 50, and the second requirement is already fulfilled,” said Rook. “The third one is gonna take a while, though.”

“Yeah, that seems like a lot of work,” I agreed.

Is it even possible for a Pimp to make money by using creatures such as Marilyn and Audrey? I thought.

“I feel like they would be very efficient in construction sites,” said Rook.

I said, “I think that one of the retro games my brother owns had some tamed monster running around a construction site... Hm?”

I belatedly noticed that Rook was wearing a different outfit than he had yesterday. It was a coat that seemed to emit a strange, silver shine.

Well, this looks new, I thought.

“That’s an awesome-looking coat, Rook,” I said. The details on the décor were elaborate, and the metallic gleam was damn cool.

Its sleeves had different lengths, which made it seem very stylish, and Rook — handsome as he was — made it all come together in the best of ways. He hadn’t been wearing it yesterday, so I could only assume that he’d gotten it while I was offline.

“Oh, yes. I like Liz a lot,” he said.

Enough to give it a name? I raised an eyebrow.

Suddenly, the coat seemed to move in an unnatural manner. I had no idea why, but the movement seemed somehow happy.

While doing this and that, I finished choosing everything I needed. Since I was

going to wear the Miasmaflame Bracers no matter what, I didn't go for set armors like the Riot series items.

In my case, one of the most important pieces of equipment was the chest armor, and since Rook looked really cool in that coat of his, I went for a coat-type piece, as well. It had the name "Blaze Metal Scale Coat."

It was created by taking a coat made from the skins of red, wolf-type monsters and strengthening it with many metal scales. It had two skills on it — "Fire Affinity" and "Fire Resistance." The former increased the damage of my fire-based attacks by 10%, while the other reduced the damage I took from fire by the same amount, giving it good synergy with Purgatorial Flames. Sure, it was a luxury item that'd cost me a whole 80,000 lir, but I had no regrets about choosing it.

I got some other equipment to go with it and made my way to the counter to buy it all.

"Eh?" Right next to the counter, there was a device you'd often see in reality.

It was a rectangular case with many round capsules inside it and a lever on its side. By putting money inside it, you could pull on the lever and make one of the capsules pop out.

It was basically a gacha vending machine.



Gacha vending machines had existed since long before I was born.

I could remember when I used to go to the machines dedicated to my favorite anime or games, pop in 100 yen, pull the lever, and get a random toy related to those series. It was fun because you never knew what you were going to get, and because of that, those memories were dear to me.

However, *in-game* gacha machines were a completely different beast.

Some time ago, there used to be a game genre known as "social games." They could be played on mobile devices and PC browsers, and you could start them without paying any money whatsoever.

Social games were many and varied. Some were fantasy games with

equipment systems, while others revolved around monster growing, robot squad creation, or even idol producer work. The games were free, but if the players wished to get high-quality weapons, armor, monsters, robots, or idols, they had to pay additional money.

The most popular method of distributing such treasures was the real money gacha machine. For about 300 yen, the player could pull the virtual machine's lever and get a random item. The items had levels of rarity, and the rarest items of all had the lowest chances of popping out.

Rarity was often related to quality, too. To either win at the games, boast to others, or simply to enjoy their idols, the players would pull the lever. They would do it over and over until they got what they wanted.

However, it was all just data. The companies would never lose anything, no matter how many high-quality, high-rarity pulls the players got. Many players' desire to get the good stuff only increased with every bad thing they pulled, making them throw even more money at the game.

As a result, there had been many players who would spend 100,000 yen on the games every month. Some would even go above and beyond and break the 1,000,000 barrier.

It had been a very real, very dark time, indeed...



With that in mind, the gacha before me takes lir instead of real money, so it's not a big deal if I pull it once or twice, right? I thought.

"...I see that all those thoughts just now were nothing but a big excuse to do it," said Nemesis.

"Well, yeah, I *want* to pull it, after all," I said. I really enjoyed the excitement involved in pulling on gachas and buying random card packs.

All right, back to the thing before me... I thought and looked at the machine. Though its shape was familiar, there were several differences between it and the gachas I knew.

First of all, it was possible to choose the amount of money you wanted to put

in. There was a short line before it, and I noticed that some threw single 100 lir coins, while others went in with as much as 10,000 lir.

According to the explanation on the machine, the items that could pop out had rarities from S to F.

Rank C items were worth as much as the money put in.

Rank F — the lowest rank — items were worth only 1% of the money put in.

Rank S — the highest rank — items were worth 100+ times more than the money put in.

The minimum amount of money you could put in was 100 lir, while the maximum was 100,000.

As was natural, low risk meant low reward and high risk meant high reward.

“But doesn’t that make it hard to keep track of the items inside and manage the quality of what pops out?” I asked an employee, and the answer I got was one I’d never have expected.

“It doesn’t work the way you think,” she said. “While it is true that we manage this magic item itself, we have nothing to do with the prizes inside or the money used on it.”

According to her, this gacha machine had originally been a rare item found in the Tomb Labyrinth.

It wasn’t a one-of-a-kind, either. There were records of other people getting these, and some had tried to take them apart and take the prizes by force. Apparently, the effort involved was insane, and yet those who succeeded had found out that the inside of the machine was completely empty.

Thus, everyone had begun to assume that the money offered to it made the machine magically summon an appropriate item. And since it was impossible to retrieve the money used, the gacha definitely wasn’t a part of any successful business model.

“However, the owner believes that it works to attract customers, so we keep it here for everyone’s convenience,” said the employee. “We also made it a rule that only paying customers can use it.”

A wise decision, indeed, for it created a decent flow of money from those who only came here for the machine. I now had no doubts that Alejandro was highly skilled as a manager.

“How did he come to have it, anyway?” I asked.

“When its previous owner ran out of money, he had to part with a lot of property,” she said. “This was among the items, and our owner bought it.”

“...And the reason for the previous owner going broke was...?”

“...Exactly what you imagine,” she said.

So he went broke because he pulled on this thing a bit too much, huh? I thought. That might’ve been another reason why Alejandro was using it for nothing more but attracting customers.

Anyway, I’d grown interested in the gacha machine, so I thanked the employee that told me about it and took my place at the end of the line.

“So, how much do you plan on spending?” asked Nemesis.

“100,000 li—GUH!”

The moment I answered, she hit me with a blow to my stomach. It came from a really good angle, so it actually made me bend forward.

“How can you let yourself use such a great amount of money right after hearing about someone who lost it all because of it?!” she exclaimed.

“I-I know that 100,000 lir is a lot, but I might pull something really good if I’m lucky...” I said.

“This reeks of a scenario where you get something worthless, if you ask me.”

Well, if something like that happens, we’ll have something to look back at and laugh about later down the line, I thought.

She sighed. “I hope you don’t regret this.”

“I’m sure I won’t,” I said.

Soon enough, it was my turn, so I put ten 10,000 lir coins into the gacha. Once done with that, I pulled the lever, making the machine release a single capsule. The thing had the letter C on it. According to the explanation, the thing inside

had the same value as the money I'd put in, so it wasn't a loss.

Excitedly, I opened the capsule and made the item inside it pop out.

Tomb Labyrinth Exploration Permit.

Seeing the familiar item made me drop to my knees.

"Ohh... nooooooooo..." I groaned. I could almost hear the thing greet me with a smug "Hey there! it's been a while!"

"Oh dear, a double," said Nemesis.

Well yeah, it's worth 100,000 lir, but... but I... I moaned silently.

"Rook... take it," I said, presenting the paper to him.

"Are you sure? Isn't this a decent pull?" he asked.

"It is, but I already have one, and you don't need more than one..."

Hell, being a Paladin, I don't need even one... I thought.

"Th-Thank you," Rook said gratefully. "Umm, shall we go explore it sometime?"

"That's a good idea..." I replied with little enthusiasm. It really *was* a good idea, though, since I hadn't gone beyond the first floor there.

All right, time to pull myself together, and...

"One more," I said.

"Haven't you learned your lesson?!" exclaimed Nemesis.

"Come on! There's no way I'll get another one of the Permits! I'm sure I'll pull something good this time!" I said.

"That's what every gambler thinks before losing it all!"

Despite Nemesis' disapproval, I stood in the line again and got ready for a second try.

Like last time, I went with 100,000 lir. Considering the total cost of the equipment I was buying, this was my last chance.

I pulled on the lever while praying to God, Buddha, or whatever was listening.

And the result was...

“...What?” I raised an eyebrow.

The capsule had popped out as normal, but the rarity displayed on it wasn't even in the range of S to F.

It simply said “X.”

Is this above S? Or is the X actually a cross that makes it as worse than F? I was thoroughly confused. There was a little warning on it, saying, “Open only in spacious areas.” I asked an employee about it, and she said that warning appeared on any capsules that contained something large, like a carriage. That meant that this capsule had something sizable inside it.

Also, the employee said that this was the first time she'd ever seen a capsule with X rarity on it.

I have no idea how to feel about that, I thought.

Whatever the case, since I could only open it in spacious areas, I chose not to open it inside the shop. I kept it in capsule form and placed it inside my inventory.

Okay, now that I've calmed down, there's something to consider, I thought.

One pull had cost me 100,000 lir.

My new equipment had a combined cost of 110,000 lir.

...That comparison made me aware of just how expensive the pulls were. In terms of rarity, I hadn't really experienced a loss, but I couldn't help but feel off.

“That's what you get for gambling away 200,000 lir,” said Nemesis.

I was in no position to say anything to that.

By the time I finished buying my equipment, Rook was trying his own luck on the gacha.

Apparently, seeing me try it got him interested, too.

“...You didn't really have to copy the amount of money I used, though,” I muttered. Hoping that his 100,000 wouldn't go to waste, I looked at what he got, and...

And, uh... Huh?

Silence overwhelmed the entire shop. The shock was shared by everyone inside, except Rook.

Nemesis, I, the employees, and the other customers were all at a loss for words.

The capsule in Rook's hand was rainbow-patterned.

It seemed to be made from a mineral so vivid that it looked like a rare item by itself.

Its surface had a large S on it.

Rook had actually pulled something great on his first try.

"Ah, Ray! I think I got something good!" he said.

"C-Congratulations!" My shock made me unintentionally raise my voice.

"Rook, let's hurry up and open it!" Babi cried.

"Y-Yes! Let's find out what you have received!" Nemesis agreed.

Since he'd used 100,000 lir, and the value of an S rarity prize was 100 times greater, the item inside should be worth 100,000,000 lir.

Naturally, something that amazing interested not only us, but the shop employees and other customers, as well.

Rook's capsule didn't have any warnings on it, so he opened it on the spot.

What came out was a pair of gloves, long enough to cover the elbows. Made from a blue, leather-like material, they were decorated by an intricate pattern of golden metal.

"Touch of the Silencer, Veltboule'?" Rook's mutter made me tilt my head.

That naming style was similar to the one on my special reward — "Miasmaflame Bracers, Gardranda." Such special rewards should be impossible to gain without defeating an UBM, and there was no way to transfer them to others, either.

"...Whoa," Rook said. He was looking at the details of the item — Touch of the

Silencer, Veltboule — and couldn't hide his amazement. His face was downright stiff, and it was probably the first time I'd seen him make such an expression.

"So, what kind of item is it, Rook?" I asked.

Looking around, I noticed that some customers — likely Masters and tians with a high Identification skill — seemed as dumbfounded as Rook was.

Okay, now I'm dying to know more about it, I thought.

"Basically, this is an MVP special reward for defeating a UBM," he said.

"Are you serious?" I asked in disbelief.

"Yes," he answered. "Let me tell you the details elsewhere."

After he said that, Rook and I left the shop. As I walked away, I glanced back inside and saw that the line for the gacha had gotten longer and that just about everyone was preparing 100,000 lir.

Apparently, finding out that you could pull UBM special rewards had gotten them all hyped up.

...I hope no one goes broke, I thought.



The place Rook took me to was the room he'd rented at the inn. Rook had clearly learned something that couldn't be heard by other people.

"Basically, this is a special reward that no longer has an owner," he said.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

He explained.

First of all, standard special rewards could only be used by the owner and couldn't be transferred to other people in any way.

However, there was one exception to this rule... and it happened when the owner was a tian who died.

In such cases, the special reward would be automatically retrieved from the body and become either an ultra rare drop in the deeper levels of created dungeons or — as it had been in this case — a high-risk gacha prize.

From that, I could easily understand why he'd gotten all secretive about it.

"You think there'd be more tian-killing if people found out about this, huh?" I asked.

"Yes," he answered.

I had no idea how many special reward-owning tians there were, but I couldn't be certain that there weren't any Masters who would kill them just to increase their chances of getting such items. At the very least, we sure as hell didn't want to be the root cause of such killings. That was the reason why Rook hadn't said that in public.

"Are you sure it didn't slip?" I asked. "What if someone with a high Identification skill saw that part of the description?"

"It wasn't in the item description, but in a personal message," he explained. "No one knows this, I'm sure."

"All's good, then," I said.

Though, now that I think about it, I doubt there would be many Masters willing to take the risk, I thought. Tian-killing could get you on the wanted lists, and there was no guarantee that items gotten this way would ever end up in your hands.

"Here are the details of the item." Rook showed me a window that described the Touch of the Silencer.

Touch of the Silencer, Veltboule

Ancient Legendary Item

A treasure embodying the concepts surrounding the sphinx famed for being a "mage killer."

In addition to increasing the wearer's magic and special powers, it provides them with a great resistance to mental status effects and attacks.

Just as the description said, the gloves greatly increased the wearer's resistance to mental debuffs and attacks while also giving a large bonus to MP and SP.

"So, what are the effects of the skills on it?" I asked.

"It's pretty interesting," said Rook. "There are two skills on it. I can't read one yet, but the one that I can use now is called 'Silence,' and it cancels any magic-based skills that are in their preparatory stages."

"Oh?" I asked.

Preparatory stages? What does that mean? I thought.

"Apparently, if an opponent is chanting or getting ready to invoke a magic spell, this skill will nullify it," he continued. "But it can't influence any insta-cast skills or magic that has already been cast."

So it's the bane of all casters, huh? Seems like it'll be useful in many scenarios, I thought.

After all, the skill would cancel any spell that hadn't been cast yet. Magic-based jobs would become powerless when going against him mano a mano.

"If it was originally owned by a tian, then... I see how it is," I nodded.

The source of this Touch of the Silencer — the UBM known as Veltboule — had clearly been a creature that specialized in killing casters. It had probably been defeated by a tian who had been strong without having to rely on magic. Later on, the tian had died somehow, and this special reward had ended up in Rook's hands.

"I must say, Rook," Nemesis spoke up, "You are quite a lucky sort."

I couldn't help but agree.

First Marilyn, then Audrey, now this great pull in the gacha... Rook was definitely a very lucky person.

I wonder if that has something to do with him being a good person, I thought.

"But you pulled something good, too, didn't you, Ray?" he said.

"Oh right, I got this thing."

Saying that, I took out the X capsule. I couldn't open it here due to the thing inside being a carriage or something, so I decided to do it after going through the northern gate again.

"I'm going to open it. Care to join me?" I asked Rook.

"I can't. I've been getting messages saying that I need to return to reality," he answered.

"Hm? 'Visitor,' I assume?" I asked.

"'Hunger' and 'Lack of Sleep,' actually," he said. "I've been online since yesterday, hunting monsters and leveling. The only food I've eaten was in-game, and I didn't get any sleep at all."

"Holy crap!" I exclaimed. "Get some food, take a bath, and go to sleep already!"

"Ahaha," he laughed awkwardly. "I'll do just that. I'll make sure to wake up in time for Marie's plan."

"Take care of yourself, man."

After I said that, Rook logged out, so I left his room.

I'd never expected Rook to be enough of a no-lifer to forget his own basic needs.

I guess he's just another student using his spring break for some unreasonable levels of gaming, I thought.

And so, I left the inn. The "spacious area" I was most familiar with was the Nex Plains north of Gideon, so I made my way to the city's northern gate.

"Master," Nemesis said, "shouldn't we have lunch now?"

"Oh yeah, I guess we should," I said. "I'll open the capsule after we do that, then."

I'd probably go hunting in the Nex Plains right after seeing what was inside, so having a meal before that was a good idea.

Since it was noon, most of the nearby restaurants were full, so I chose one that seemed somewhat empty by comparison.

“...Huh?” I said in surprise.

Inside the one I’d chosen, I saw that the shopkeeper was being questioned by a certain group. Wearing full plate mail armor and cloaks that had the Kingdom of Altar’s crests on them, they asked something of the shopkeeper while showing him a photo-like object.

Realizing that this was why the shop was so empty, I decided to observe them.

From his ragged voice, I could tell that the one asking questions was in a minor state of panic and that the subject matter was serious. However, looking stumped, the shopkeeper only shook his head in response, making it obvious that he couldn’t help them in any way.

After that, a woman from the group tried to calm down her panicked comrade. She was a familiar face.

“Liliana?” I asked.

“Oh? Well, if it isn’t Ray,” she replied.

It was the Kingdom of Altar’s Knights of the Royal Guard, Vice Commander, Paladin Liliana Grandria. I hadn’t seen her since I’d left the royal capital, and by some twist of fate, we had happened to meet again here in the city of duels.

As I was busy being surprised by the encounter, Nemesis telepathically told me something ominous.

“I feel some trouble brewing.”

Chapter Two: Back-Alley Cliché

Paladin Ray Starling

Liliana was the first tian I'd ever spoken to. Her responses had been so natural and she'd seemed so alive that I hadn't been able to see her as a tian — as nothing more but an NPC. That feeling was still alive, and even though I knew I was in a game, I couldn't see her as just a game character.

"It has been a while," she said. "I didn't expect to see you here in Gideon."

"Well, I've only been here for about two days," I said.

Probably due to her being my first personal — and physical — contact in this world, my manner of speaking automatically became somewhat courteous. She'd said that it'd been a while since we'd last met, but it had actually only been about eight days.

Now that I think about it, since I've started playing, only ten days have passed in this world and only three in reality, I thought. Man, this world's days sure are dense.

"I must ask — why the dog ears?" she asked, looking above my head.

"Please don't," I replied. "Way too much has happened. So, why are you here with such a group?"

Liliana seemed to be somewhat troubled, so I decided to ask her about what was going on. She was surrounded by knights wearing similar armor, flags and unit symbols. Liliana was a Paladin and the Vice Commander of the Knights of the Royal Guard. From that, I could assume that the people with her were part of the Royal Guard, too.

"Well, Ray, we—"

"Lady Grandria!" one of them cut her words short. "We cannot let any outsiders know of this!"

It was the same man who'd been questioning the shopkeeper. He was glaring

at me — or, rather, at the back of my left hand.

“But Sir Lindos, he is one of us — a Paladin,” said Liliana.

“He isn’t the same as us just because we share a profession,” retorted the man. “This is something we have to do without relying on Masters.”

It was clear by now that he was Liliana’s comrade — a Paladin from the Royal Guard. He also seemed to have a dislike for us players — the Masters.

“It’s only fair for him to hate your kind,” commented Nemesis.

Indeed. The Kingdom of Altar’s Knights of the Royal Guard had reasons to hate us Masters. Altar’s Masters were the ones who hadn’t helped much during the war, and the Imperium’s Masters were the ones who had done the most damage.

The king had even been killed by a Master, so it was only natural for him to hate us.

“But there are things that only they can know,” said Liliana. “We are not in a situation that allows us to choose who we get help from.”

“...That is reasonable,” he said, giving in. “In that case, please search the way you think is best. We will continue looking for her as we were. However, you should only request assistance from those you trust.”

“I understand,” she nodded. “Be careful in your search.”

“Certainly,” he said. “Come, men, we’re continuing this in the fourth district.”

The man Liliana had called Sir Lindos gave the other knights an order, and they all left the shop.

The only ones left inside were Nemesis, Liliana, me, and the shopkeeper, who seemed visibly relieved.

“I see,” said Nemesis. “From how he expressed his dislike for Masters, I thought he was an impulsive sort, but it seems that he’s malleable when he needs to be.”

Or maybe the situation is just grave enough for a Master-hating knight to accept a Master’s help, I thought.

"I am sorry, Ray. Sir Lindos isn't a bad person or anything, but..." said Liliana.

"No need for that," I said. "He seemed to be in a hurry."

"Yes, about that... there is something I'd like to ask you." With those words, Liliana took out a single photo.

It gave me a minor déjà vu, making me remember the first time I'd met her. However, the person on the photo was different this time.

"Have you seen this girl anywhere?" she asked.

The person on the photo was a young girl. She looked no older than nine. Her face was a strong contestant for the most good-looking one I'd seen so far here in *Infinite Dendrogram*. Of course, that was only among females. Rook was incontestably at the top if both genders were considered.

The girl in the photo had golden hair done into rolls and coils, and striking blue eyes that seemed to express a strength of heart. I also couldn't help but notice that her clothes were very well-made. I didn't know much about such apparel, but even I could tell that she wore a high-quality dress.

Her appearance, combined with the dignified way she was sitting in the chair, made the photo look like one of those formal marriage meeting photos.

She's a bit too young for that, though, I thought.

Anyway, there was no way I could've missed a person that stood out this much, so...

"I'm sorry, but I haven't seen her," I said. "So, who is she?"

From how the knights were panicking, I could only assume that she was the young lady of some important nobles.

"Eh?! Umm, uhh..." Liliana couldn't hide her surprise at my question and looked at me with a perplexed expression. It wasn't because she had trouble talking about the lady in the picture or anything. The bewilderment seemed too strong for that. She was acting as though I asked her something weird, like the answer to one plus one.

Once she realized that I really didn't know the girl, Liliana gave me the answer.

“This is the Kingdom of Altar’s second princess, Elizabeth S. Altar.”

“Ohhhhh.” It all made sense now.

“When someone asks you something that’s supposed to be common knowledge, it’s only natural to become perplexed,” commented Nemesis. “I’m not one to talk, though. Since we share most of our memories, I didn’t know the girl, either.”

How unbecoming of a Paladin, I thought of myself. I really should’ve investigated the ruling structure of the kingdom.

“So,” I said. “If you’re looking for her, then...”

“Her Highness went missing while we were visiting Gideon, and we of the Royal Guard are now searching for her,” she explained.

This seems like some serious trouble, I thought.

Since I didn’t know anything, Liliana gave me all the details about the disappearance of the princess.

First of all, she was the daughter of the king who had died in the war with Dryfe. The king had three daughters, but no sons. The missing girl’s elder sister — the first princess — was the acting ruler of the country.

The Kingdom of Altar had no rule that prevented females from inheriting the throne, but historically, the country had had more kings than queens.

Due to that, even though a whole six months had passed since the fall of the king, the accession had yet to happen, and Elizabeth was still just “the second princess.”

She had come here to Gideon to participate in some official event. She had arrived here and begun staying in Count Gideon’s mansion about two days ago.

Yesterday, she had still been there to talk with the count and participate in the preparations for tomorrow’s event. Today, she’d had plans to talk with some powerful people of this city. However, when one of Elizabeth’s maids had gone to her room this morning, she found no sign of the princess anywhere.

There had been only a piece of paper — marked with the royal seal — that said “I will be back by evening.” From the handwriting, it was clear that she

hadn't been kidnapped, but had slipped out on her own volition.

Also, it was well known that the princess had wished to look around Gideon, and had become quite upset when she'd found out that she wasn't allowed to.

Additional info: Liliana made sure to be as indirect as possible when saying this, but the princess was whimsical, excessively vigorous, terribly insolent, and so full of curiosity that it was troubling.

Basically, the princess had slipped out of her roles just so she could go sightseeing in Gideon.

Of course, the Royal Guard couldn't just let her walk around the city by herself, so, naturally, they'd begun searching for her.

If there was one thing I could say to this situation...

"Don't you think you should up your security?" I asked.

I mean, they let this little girl slip past them. That's clearly not right.

"You are completely right about that..." she said.

But it turned out they'd actually had a valid excuse.

During the time period in which the princess had made her escape, there'd been a certain bit of trouble.

It had happened in the process of passing the role of protecting the princess from the Third Order of Knights to the Knights of the Royal Guard. It didn't seem like that could ever be particularly troublesome, but there had been a reason for it being so.

The princess' visit to this city had been planned a long time ago. Back then, it had been decided that her protection — from the moment she left the capital until she finished her business in Gideon and was safely back home — would be in the hands of the Royal Guard.

However, the player killer incident had made them postpone the day they'd left the capital.

Once the killers had been taken care of, they had finally been able to leave, but there had been a whole new problem. It was the event that — as we'd

confirmed with our own eyes — had reduced Noz Forest to cinders.

Most assumed that the one responsible was King of Destruction the Unknown, but there was no proof of that.

However, it had to be known, so the role of meeting the King of Destruction and asking him about it had been given to the only one in the kingdom who knew him personally — Liliana. Apparently, everyone else who had been acquainted with him had died in the war.

Liliana was the Vice Commander of the Knights of the Royal Guard. However, since the Commander's seat was empty, she was basically the top of the order.

Since there were some problems with the prospect of the Royal Guard protecting the princess without Liliana's presence, the role had been hastily given to the Third Order of Knights. It had needed to be done because the princess' leave had already been belated due to the player killer incident, and they hadn't been able to afford any more delays. But that was the very cause of the trouble.

Little by little, the god of death... the Grim Reaper... the ultimate end... approached Gouz-Maise.

Overwhelmed by despair, it used its final card.

“D e E e A A — D e E a a D A a a — D d d D L Y y y M i X e E e e E E r r R R r R !?!?”

That was the third time it cast the ultimate spell.

It didn't care about what would happen because of that. Since the spell consumed great amounts of grudge — which was the core of Gouz-Maise's being — there was a chance that using it thrice in such a short period of time could made itself self-destruct. However, its fear of the man running up its arm was just too great for it to hold back.

The burst of destructive magic made the god of death and everything below the elbow completely vanish. Though Gouz-Maise's arm was thicker than a large tree, the spell disintegrated even its bones.

The pain signals were abnormally powerful, and due to the loss of its grudge, its Automatic Restoration didn't work at full capacity. The grudge flowing through its corpus was reduced to just that of the one who could cast Deadly Mixer and a few others. Despite that, however, the faces covering its body and the few remaining grudges all smiled in relief.

One leg, one arm, and approximately 80% of the grudge composing it.

The losses were great, but they had been enough to make their bane — the reaper himself — disappear. The battle was over. Now, it simply had to wait for the Automatic Restoration to complete, head to town to stock up on new grudge and...

“AaHhHh?” All of a sudden, a shadow came over it from above its head.

Gouz-Maise looked upwards.

Before the sunset, bathed in the light of the sinking sun, there was the source of the shadow.

The black silhouette held a black sword in the hand behind him. And, with great speed, he closed in towards Gouz-Maise's head.

“You beasts, wallowing in undeath...” a feminine voice began.

“...go to sleep... forever!” the Reaper finished.

The tip of the black greatsword pierced through Gouz-Maise’s forehead and touched its core.

“VENGEANCE IS MINE!”

Thus, a strike worth all the damage Gouz-Maise had ever given the man... no — a retributive attack avenging all the people that had suffered because of those composing the amalgam of death...

...completely destroyed its core and ended its very existence.

Epilogue: A Morning of Smiles

Undisclosed Location

["Maw of the Desert, Azmore" was defeated]

[Final level: 56]

[MVP: "The Earth" Fatoum, level 1,157 (total level: 1,657)]

[Embryo: "Overflowing Divine Vessel, The Grail"]

[MVP special reward: Legendary item, "Bag of the Desert, Azmore"]



["The Crimson Armor, Exademon" was defeated]

[Final level: 63]

[MVP: "King of Termination" Albert Schwartzkaiser, level 620 (total level: 1,120)]

[Embryo: "Seven Star Turnover, Septentrion"]

[MVP special reward: Ancient Legendary item, "Crimson Armor-Piercer, Exademon"]



["Four-Dimensional Kaiju, Todoghilas"]

[Final level: 51]

[MVP: "Commander-in-Chief" Gray α Centauri, level 490 (total level: 990)]

[Embryo: "Unidentified Flying Stronghold, Laputa"]

[MVP special reward: Ancient Legendary item, "Ultimate Suit Series, Todoghilas"]



[“Revenant Ox-Horse, Gouz-Maise”]

[Final level: 34]

[MVP: “Paladin” Ray Starling, level 35 (total level: 35)]

[Embryo: “Maiden of Vengeance, Nemesis”]

[MVP special reward: Epic item, “Grudge-soaked Greaves, Gouz-Maise”]

“...Hm?”

In a space enlightened by countless data windows, *it* sounded a voice of confusion.

At first glance, it appeared to be an adult male human, but upon further inspection, one would notice that the skin covering its body had patches of draconic scales and beastly leather, while its head was decorated by devilish horns. Overall, it certainly looked more like a “humanoid monster” than a person, but the glasses it sported successfully moved the impression it gave off into the “human” territory — if only barely.

It was doing one of the jobs it was assigned to — the checking of the data concerning the defeat of UBMs over a set period of time. In *Infinite Dendrogram*, its role was the acknowledgement of UBMs.

Though UBMs were abnormally powerful and had abilities just as strong, their primary unique feature was their transformation into special rewards upon defeat.

Many non-UBM boss monsters also had great strength and unique abilities. When defeated — either by people or other monsters — they dropped Treasure Coffers or items they possessed before death.

However, the special rewards left by UBMs were completely unlike any basic boss monster drops. They were the materializations of the image — the concepts — surrounding the abilities of the defeated UBM, adjusted to best suit the most valuable person in the battle.

Indeed, it wasn’t their strength or abilities. That very transformation was the prime feature of UBMs.

No standard monster possessed it. But if the control AI responsible for UBMs acknowledged a unit as a UBM, it would become exactly that — a monster with the function to transform into a special reward upon death.

The creature working in this space was Jabberwock — the very same control AI responsible for acknowledging, giving features to, and sometimes even designing UBMs.

“Ray Starling,” it murmured. “Going by Earth time, I saw this player name yesterday.”

It was the very same player that had, at an unreasonably low level, defeated the Great Miasmic Demon, Gardranda — a UBM of Jabberwock’s design. Naturally, Jabberwock was slightly surprised to see the same person become an MVP in a UBM fight two days in a row.

In this world, the UBMs Jabberwock had either designed or acknowledged were many. However, the same couldn’t be said for MVPs.

Many people couldn’t defeat them. Others couldn’t even encounter them. Others just plain couldn’t become MVPs.

Not to mention that the strongest of the strong — Superiors — were actively hunting UBMs. As a result, only the few lucky enough to encounter *and* successfully defeat them could become MVPs.

Thus, Jabberwock was quite intrigued by an entity that had faced UBMs two days in a row and — through hard struggles — emerged victorious both times.

“Fascinating,” it said. “If only most defeated UBMs like he did. I’m quite dissatisfied by how Superiors hunt them as if it’s a chore. Truly, treasure is best when earned through harsh struggles and intense drama. No good saga or epic is complete without those things, after all.” Jabberwock continuously nodded to his own words before beginning to ponder. “I believe I should make my designs even more tenacious.”

Saying that, he closed his eyes in thought...

“Let’s start by giving it atomic breath. Like Godzilla.”

The moment Jabberwock said something truly foreboding, something gave a

response. “No radioactive pollution, please!” Before he’d realized it, a cat-like mascot was sitting in the space behind him.

It was Cheshire — control AI no. 13. Shaking its head at just how troublesome its colleague was, it began commenting about what Jabberwock was trying to do.

“Leave the unreasonable amounts of power to SUBMs. They create enough calamities as it is. We don’t need anything that could cause irregular evolution. Do you have any idea how much trouble we had with the last two irregulars? Even Humpty’s favorite and Granvaloa’s Superiors could barely stop the Corpse Stronghold, while the Disaster Bioweapon is still space-sealed in Red King’s ‘gaol,’ you know? The ones who do all the work to take care of your UBM’s are the tians, us, and the players, you know?”

“I’m aware,” said Jabberwock. “Now, what is your business here, thirteen?”

“Oh yeah, I almost forgot,” said Cheshire. “The control AI responsible for monsters, Queen, has a message for you.”

“Which is...?”

““Explain your previous acknowledgement.””

“What am I supposed to make of that?” Jabberwock demanded.

“She gave me a letter, but — just as you’d expect from her — it was both overly emotional and too verbose, so I shortened it,” said Cheshire. “Also, it’s about Gouz-Maise — the last monster you acknowledged as a UBM.”

“I see.” That was enough for Jabberwock to understand Queen’s problem.

“If I had to add a bit more detail to that, it’d be, ‘It wasn’t born naturally, nor was it created or arranged by us. Why are you giving UBM status to an undead born from human sorcery?’”

“Gouz-Maise had interesting unique abilities,” said Jabberwock. “Its stats and the circumstances behind its birth were more than enough to give it Epic status. Also, by looking at the series of events that led to its creation, it’s safe to say that there will never be another Gouz-Maise.”

Thus, Jabberwock believed that acknowledging it as a UBM had made perfect

sense.

“That’s true,” said Cheshire. “Queen is probably just complaining because she’s upset that not many of the boss monsters she singled out and improved are being acknowledged as UBMs.”

“I’m just doing my job,” replied Jabberwock. “Also, does it actually matter to us whether I acknowledge something as a UBM or not?”

“...I think she’s just being peevish because she doesn’t feel appreciated,” said Cheshire. “But oh weell.”

While thinking about the relationship between this thickheaded fellow AI and the Queen, Cheshire heaved a sigh.

“Also, no. 3’s designs are unrefined at best, and overly predictable, at worst. Too lacking in both inventiveness and potential,” added Jabberwock. “When it comes to those points, this Gouz-Maise creature and some player designs make far better UBMs.”

“Queen is a simple and straightforward girl, after aall... Wait, what?” Cheshire realized that Jabberwock had just said something that simply couldn’t be ignored. “Player designs? What do you mean?”

“Exactly what I said,” said Jabberwock. “I’m talking about that Superior from Dryfe.”

“...Ohh.” The mention of that single person was more than enough for Cheshire. The Superior in question was more than capable of creating a monster that could catch Jabberwock’s eye.

“A part of me feels like Ray will get involved in that,” said Cheshire.

There was no basis for the cat’s assumption. One could write it off as standard intuition, but with the control AIs all having calculational capabilities that no human could match, it was difficult to call it “standard.”

Jabberwock wondered why Cheshire’s mutter had included the name of the player he’d been intrigued by just a moment ago, but chose not to react to it in any meaningful way.

The cat in question, on the other hand, became curious about something

relating to its own murmur and chose to ask about it. “Oh, yeah. Thinking of Ray made me remember. Hey, Jabberwock.”

“Yes?”

“Remember the ‘Great Miasmic Demon, Gardranda’ that he defeated recently?” said Cheshire. “What would’ve happened if it had reached completion? It died when it was only in its second form, so I’m kinda curious.”

I know it’s my own fault for telling Ray its weak point, but still, it thought.

In response...

“It would’ve been born.”

...Jabberwock said something far too concise.

“...Sorry, but I don’t get it,” said Cheshire.

So concise, in fact, that not even an AI with inhuman calculational capabilities could make sense of it.

“Its final form was the creature that was supposed to be born based on the demon’s accumulated fighting experience,” elaborated Jabberwock.

“A separate unit?” asked Cheshire.

“No.” The UBM control AI shook his head. “It’s better to look at it this way: the ‘mother’ was only a cover, and the child that was supposed to be born was the true Gardranda. Sadly, it didn’t get a chance to reveal itself.”

Power left unused — a life and mind that had failed to be birthed. That was exact same thing that the silhouette in Ray’s dream — the non-mother Gardranda — had told him.

So that’s why the demon’s weak point was the stomach, Cheshire thought and nodded to itself. “By the way, what kind of creature would it have been born as?”

“If I recall correctly, the mother fought and ate primarily humans,” said Jabberwock. “Thus, it’s fair to assume that it would’ve been humanoid.”

“It’s also fair to assume that it won’t get another chance at being born, right?” Cheshire asked.

“Yes, indeed.”

However, Jabberwock thought to himself, that might change depending on the final skill it received when it became an item.

There was a chance that the effect of the skill Ray had yet to unlock could give another chance to the creature that’d failed to be birthed. However, due to there not being any similar cases, Jabberwock concluded that it was highly unlikely.

“Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have work to return to,” he said.

“Sure, I have some tasks to do, tooo.”

Jabberwock ended the conversation and faced a window displaying a stream of information.

Cheshire left his colleague’s work area and went to do his own work.



Paladin Ray Starling

[UBM, “Revenant Ox-Horse, Gouz-Maise” was defeated]

[Selecting MVP]

[Ray Starling was selected as MVP]

[Ray Starling is presented with an MVP special reward — “Grudge-soaked Greaves, Gouz-Maise”]

“So that’s done, huh...?” I murmured.

With Gouz-Maise’s body disintegrating into particles of light and me receiving a message window similar to the one I’d gotten after defeating Gardranda, I could finally be relieved that I’d killed the abomination. However, my situation didn’t allow it. After all, since Gouz-Maise was about forty meters tall, defeating it from the head had left me to fall the entire way down.

Not to mention that I couldn’t move my body, either.

To win this fight, I’d used a downright insane method of activating Like a Flag

Flying the Reversal. Thanks to the debuffs I'd received getting turned into buffs, I had become more powerful than I was at my best, and had been able to emerge victorious against the abomination. However, just like it had been with Gardranda, the switching of weapons or the defeat of the enemy, Gouz-Maise, had caused the skill to get canceled. Thus, I was left burdened with a number of debuffs. My status window displayed Poison, Weakness, and Intoxication — the three effects of Hellish Miasma — along with Curse and Food Poisoning, which I'd most likely gotten for ingesting Gouz-Maise's flesh.

Well, I ate a part of a goddamn undead's body, so I can't really be surprised, I thought.

Moments after I canceled the Reversal by switching Nemesis to her sword form, I was able to move my body long enough to activate Vengeance is Mine, but the debuffs had gotten worse since then. I could no longer move so much as a muscle.

As things were, I was seconds away from crashing to the ground, and I would be able to do nothing to break my fall. With my current HP and the general state of my body, it was highly questionable if I could survive the hit.

"Better say my prayers, then..." I murmured.

A moment after I closed my eyes and braced myself for impact, I felt the touch of something unnaturally light.

The sensation repeated a couple of times. After the gentle swaying, I felt my body land on the ground.

I was thoroughly confused.

Fearfully, I opened my eyes and saw a shining artificial horse, Silver, standing at my side. Just like the first time I'd fallen off of him, he was looking down at me, seemingly worried.

It was apparent that Silver had gently caught me as I'd fallen and softly dropped me to the ground. I had no idea how he'd done it with his equestrian frame, but there was no other explanation.

"Ha ha," I laughed. "Thanks, Silver."

Not being an animal, he had no mouth and thus couldn't make any natural sounds, so he responded to my gratitude by simply rubbing the end of his "nose" on my cheek. That action made him seem much like a real horse.

With how he'd helped me chase down the Lich, it was safe to say that Silver had been an invaluable asset in this event. And if I hadn't had the Miasmaflame Bracers and hadn't seen that dream, there would have been a large chance of me losing this fight. However, there was someone who'd done more to help me than anyone else.

"Thanks, Nemesis," I said. "If you hadn't persisted like you did, it would've all been over for us."

If I hadn't had Nemesis and she hadn't bought the time I'd needed to regain my consciousness, I'd have been given the death penalty, and that pile of corpses would've been free to attack someone else. Nemesis was the sole reason why that hadn't happened, so I expressed my thanks.

However, all I got in response was peaceful, systematic breathing. Before I knew it, she'd disappeared from my weapon equipment slot, returned to her humanoid form, and had fallen fast asleep. It reminded me of a similar moment back in the dragon carriage after the battle with Gardranda.

The peace in her expression felt like the ultimate proof of the hard work she'd done today.

"Well done... Nemesis." I touched her with my left hand, causing her to instantly return to the crest.

Left alone and unable to move, I kept my HP up by casting healing magic on myself, and looked through my items to find a way how to neutralize the status effects. The misadventure from today's morning had made me learn my lesson, so I'd prepared for the three Hellish Miasma debuffs by buying the appropriate items when shopping.

After taking those, I lessened the effects of Food Poisoning by vomiting a few times, and made it go away completely by following that up with a swig of the right medicine.

The last status effect — Curse — went away by itself as I was busy taking care

of the others.

Since I hadn't gotten attacked at all while doing any of that, I assumed that Gouz-Maise's rampage had probably caused all the local monsters to scatter, letting me completely heal myself and remove the debuffs completely unbothered.

Even though my status screen now said that I was in perfect shape, I certainly didn't feel like it. The entire time interval from the moment I'd infiltrated the fortress until I'd ended the battle with Gouz-Maise had been a great drain on my mental and physical energy. My HP might've been at 100%, but I wasn't confident if I could wring up even 60% of my usual performance. Not to mention that Nemesis was in no state to fight, either.

Anyway, it was as good a time as any to check out the MVP special reward I'd gotten from Gouz-Maise.

As it said in the name, the "Grudge-soaked Greaves" were a pair of boots made of a malicious-looking purple metal and some leather — hopefully not human leather — and its description in the window went like so:

[Grudge-soaked Greaves, Gouz-Maise]

[Epic Item]

An epic item embodying the concepts surrounding the ox-headed horse-man clad in grudge.

In addition to converting surrounding negative emotions into pure power, it grants the wearer an understanding of the unity between man and horse.

[This item cannot be transferred or traded.]

"'Epic Item'?" Those were the first words that escaped my lips once I saw the status screen.

Given that the Miasmaflame Bracers, Gardrand was a "Legendary Item," I was now curious about what kind of difference those descriptions referred to.

I looked through the help window and found a section on "MVP special

reward ranks.” I couldn’t recall it being there the last time I checked over this general area of help sections, so I could only assume that it had appeared there only recently. If I had to guess, it had probably appeared there after I’d acquired the Miasmaflame Bracers.

As for the content of the help section, it said that UBM’s and the MVP special rewards received upon defeating them had several ranks. Those ranks were primarily decided based on the UBM’s strength and threat level, and from lowest to highest, they went like so: Epic, Legendary, Ancient Legendary, Mythical, and Superior.

Though I’d gotten stronger since my battle with the demon, I still felt that Gouz-Maise had been more challenging than Gardranda. However, the rank on the Miasmaflame Bracers was above that of the new special reward.

The stat bonuses reflected that, as well. While the Grudge-soaked Greaves increased my AGI by 30%, Miasmaflame Bracers increased my STR by 100%. Clearly, Gardranda had been above Gouz-Maise.

I felt that she herself might know something about this. After all, she’d called herself “a power left unused” and “the life and mind that the demon failed to birth.”

With that in mind, I tried talking to the Miasmaflame Bracers on my hands, but I didn’t get any sort of response.

That dream had been more than enough for me to confirm that her mind was still intact, but apparently, she had no means of talking to me in reality.

Suddenly, I was hit with the terrifying idea that Gouz-Maise, too, still had its mind. However, after a moment of consideration, I concluded that the greaves were completely devoid of any sort of consciousness. Though the assumption was based entirely on intuition alone, for one reason or another, I didn’t feel that it was the least bit wrong.

If I had to add reasoning to this, I’d simply say that the boots simply lacked the grudge that had permeated every inch of everything relating to the creature known as Gouz-Maise.

With that settled, I began examining the two skills on the Greaves of Grudge.

The first was Grudge Conversion, which was a downgraded version of the grudge power that had fueled Gouz-Maise. It absorbed the grudge from the surroundings, stored it, and turned it into either SP or MP. Though I assumed it had been part of the monster's functionality, the skill didn't come with the Automatic Restoration ability.

...Upon further thought, I realized that having my lost limbs regrow would be downright freaky, so I was kinda glad it wasn't there.

The second skill — Rider and Horse, As One — was clearly based on the fact that Gouz-Maise had been a horse-man. It increased the Horse Riding skill level by one.

Wait...

Increased the Horse Riding skill level by one.

"I can finally ride Silver!" Overcome with emotion, I shouted out my joy.

This is great, I thought.

It was exactly what I needed to no longer have to ride Silver like I was performing some circus act.

The skill also increased AGI while riding a horse by 10% for every Horse Riding skill level. That was pretty good, too... in fact, that was probably the primary effect of the skill. However, since I hadn't even been able to begin to ride, I appreciated the bonus effect far more.

With that, I got on Silver and began following the road which Hugo and Cyco had used to get to Gideon. I rode the mechanical horse as its hooves rhythmically hit the ground, and I couldn't help but be moved by the fact that I wasn't falling off.

Feeling exceedingly comfortable, I relaxed and head towards Gideon as I let Silver canter as he pleased.

I hope I can run into Hugo along the way, I thought.

More than an hour after equipping the Grudge-soaked Greaves, Silver and I were still on a mountain road.

“Are we there yet...?” I asked no one in particular.

During this time, my Horse Riding skill had already increased by one, and I’d gotten a message saying that the quest “Rescue Roddie Lancarse” was complete. It seemed safe to believe that Hugo had arrived at Gideon and handed the children over to the quest giver girl and the parents. I, too, wished I was in Gideon with them.

“I honestly think we should be close by now,” I said. The uncertainty in my tone was due to the fact that I wasn’t sure if the road I was following was the correct one.

When going from Gideon to the Gouz-Maise hideout, we had used a Magingear, and — to avoid getting spotted — traversed a path where we wouldn’t meet any people. Now, however, I was following a mountain road that was well-maintained enough to not have a single blade of grass growing out of it. When taking my and Silver’s comfort into consideration, this path was far better than the former, but it wasn’t without its problems, either.

The Cruella Mountain Belt was a net of many roads of various sizes. According to the area’s description in the help window, while some of them had been made on the kingdom’s or Gideon’s orders, many had been randomly created by the local gangs.

With all the magic in this fantasy world, road-related public works weren’t a hard task. There were even spells that allowed the caster to make vegetation simply move away, so it might’ve even been easier than using heavy machinery.

Due to that, there were countless roads, which made it difficult for me — a person with no knowledge of the lay of the land — to find my way back. Since I hadn’t gotten to the hideout by taking these mountain paths, my map didn’t display which one led to Gideon, and thus didn’t help with the pathfinding all that much.

However, since I knew the approximate location of the city, I could make good use of the map window’s cardinal directions. With that as my compass, I was able to make my way to where I thought Gideon was.

Considering our speed and the amount of time that had passed, the city should’ve — at very least — been in sight by now...

“Oh.” Just as I thought that, I noticed Gideon’s outline peeking through the spaces between the trees.

Since we were still on the mountain, I got to look down at it from a particularly high point. Though it was already turning dark, the city was emitting lots of light, making it obvious that its people were still full of energy.

“Hm?” I murmured.

A certain sound reached my ears. It was the sound of hooves hitting the ground beneath — something I’d grown familiar with throughout today. Except this time, there were many such sounds, and their sources all seemed to be in one group. Not only that — they seemed to be getting closer to me.

“What?”

As I imagined the unlikely and, frankly, silly scenario in which I was being chased by a group of horse-men Liches, the sound suddenly mixed with the sound of metal armor fittings scraping against each other. Soon enough, I saw a group of horses being ridden by people in full plate armor.

It was a highly familiar group — Liliana’s Knights of the Royal Guard.

“Hello, Liliana,” I said. “We sure see each other a lot to—”

“Ray!” she exclaimed before I could finish. “Are you all right?!”

“...day?” Okay now, why is she looking at me so intensely? I thought. And why are her knights turning all alert and battle-ready? Might I get an explanation?

“Where is the giant undead?!” she continued. “Were you able to escape it?! Or is it still nearby?!”

...Oh, okay, I get it now.

I first explained Liliana that there was no need to worry, and went on to have an exchange of information with her. She gave me a detailed explanation of what had happened on her end.

After we’d split up at the sweets café, Liliana had gone on to continue her search for the second princess, but come evening, she had received a grim piece of information. One of her people had told her that “The second princess seems to have been kidnapped by a suspicious individual.”

Liliana had been aware of the vile deeds committed by the Gouz-Maise Gang, and had concluded that it was entirely possible that the second princess had become another one of their victims.

However, Gouz-Maise Gang's hideout had been in the mountain belt that acted as the border between the kingdom and Caldina. Moving out with larger groups of soldiers could've been seen as an act of war.

That was why Liliana had formed a party comprised only of the best of the best of the Royal Guard, and planned a raid rescue mission to the Gouz-Maise Gang's hideout.

The moment they had prepared themselves and began heading out, two carriages had entered Gideon.

Due to it being late, the speed at which they'd entered had made them stand out. Once Liliana had asked them to state their identity and business, the coachman, a Master, had told them something that was nothing short of surprising.

He had said, "I am a Master who accepted the request of one of this city's citizens to rescue a kidnapped boy. We exterminated the gang and brought back all the children that were still alive. However, as we did that, some strange sorcery made the corpses of the gang merge into a giant undead UBM. We were able to escape using the carriages, but my fellow Master is still holding the beast off somewhere in the mountain belt."

The story had been so absurd that some knights simply hadn't believed it. However, a knight with the Truth Discernment skill had concluded that the Master wasn't lying. Not to mention that the requester — who'd been waiting for them by the gates — had confirmed that it was all true.

The shift from a kidnapping event to a UBM assault had made their situation turn quite chaotic. Also, Liliana had gone on to ask for the name of the Master holding back the UBM, causing her to find out that it was someone she was highly familiar with — me.

She had hastily departed the moment she'd found that out. The knights that had been supposed to join her in the rescue operation had gone after her. Some time after that, they'd run into me, still on edge and ready to face the

UBM.

"I see," I said. "So Hugo safely got the children to the city. What a relief."

I'd known it from the message I'd received, but now that I'd been told the circumstances surrounding it, I could be certain that there was no need for worry.

"What do you mean, 'What a relief?!'" Liliana exclaimed. "What happened to the UBM?!"

"I defeated it," I curtly answered.

"Oh, I see, so you... you defeated it?!"

"Here." I showed her my boots and opened their informational window.

"...Ray, if I am not mistaken, you became a Paladin about a week ago and were only level 0 before that, correct?" she asked.

"That seems about right," I said. Time went thrice as fast here, after all.

"Why are you able to defeat an UBM a mere week after starting?! Also, I just realized, but those bracers are...!"

"Oh. Yes. I got these the day before yesterday..." Saying that, I showed her the Miasmaflame Bracers, Gardranda.

Liliana froze solid.

"The scale of what they're talking about is just ludicrous," muttered one of the knights to the others. "The only person I know who can defeat a UBM by his lonesome is our late commander."

"You need to be kind of insane to even attempt it, honestly," said another.

"This is just off. Our vice commander is forced to act out the 'straight man' type of character," commented the third knight. "I mean, she's normally the 'natural airhead' type, isn't she?"

"Hhaahh..." sighed Liliana. "Truly, common sense does not apply to you Masters."

"Well, it's not like I won just because of my own abilities," I said. "I had my comrades, lady luck, this horse named Silver, and Nemesis with me."

“Speaking of Nemesis, where is she now?” Lilliana asked.

“She’s currently resting,” I said. “The things she had to do left her completely drained.”

I unequipped the Miasmaflame Bracers and gently rubbed the crest on my left hand, where Nemesis was sleeping.

“Ray... Nemesis...” Lilliana spoke again. “I cannot express how valuable your actions are. Because of you, the awful series of kidnappings in Gideon are over and the UBM disaster was prevented. I believe I speak for all the people of the city when I give you my gratitude. Thank you very much.”

“Well...” I had trouble reacting to that. “It just happened to turn out this way, for some reason.”

I had accepted a quest, gone to save a child, gotten mentally overwhelmed by the tragic sight in the dungeon, let my fury drive me into killing the Lich, and gone on to struggle against the Revenant Ox-Horse. Seriously, I was completely confused as to why things had turned out this way.

Thinking back on it, there had been events which got me all choked up. I’d felt both deathly dread and disgust. My heart had burned with a fire strong enough to sear my very being.

However, once I’d found out that the children had all returned to the city, safe and sound, the aftertaste of this whole event had become a bit better.

Once we were done with the information exchange, we grouped up and made our way back to Gideon.

Since there was no need to worry about any UBM attacks, Lilliana and her knights decided to accompany me. Apparently, she’d noticed how tired I was and had chosen to see to it that I returned to Gideon safely. I highly appreciated that.

“...Ah.”

Suddenly, a certain question went through my mind.

“By the way, what happened with the search for Her Highness the princess?” I asked. “I appreciate your company, but shouldn’t you be focusing on that,

instead...?”

My questions made Liliana’s expression turn stiff. At the same time, I felt a strong air of nervousness envelop the other knights.

D-Did I say something bad? I thought.

“Based on what you told me, Her Highness was kidnapped by the gang, right?” I continued. “I didn’t get a chance to take a look at the faces of the children in the carriages, so...”

“Her Highness wasn’t in the carriages.” Liliana’s voice as she said that seemed somewhat... flat.

“Does that mean that...?” I asked slowly.

Are there actually more gang members? Did they take her to some other area in the mountains...?

“The kidnapping itself was misinformation,” she said. “A short while ago, one of our people contacted me via communication magic and told me that she’d returned home, safe and sound.”

“That’s grea—”

“I was also told that she was carrying a store-bought mask, sweets, a goldfish, and a painting. She looked thoroughly satisfied.”

“I... uh...”

“The one thing she said to the people of the place she is staying at was, ‘It was most riveting!’”

I was dumbfounded.

...Your Highness, could you please read the mood? I thought. *These people spent the entire day searching for you.*

Though the way she’d explained the situation to me was highly smooth and matter-of-fact, I could see Lilliana’s forehead twitching in anger.

“Eheheheheheheheh...” she laughed ominously.

“A-Ahahahahahahah...” I reluctantly joined her.

“Eheheheheheheheh... Let us change the subject.”

“Good idea.”

Both the mood of the situation and my very instincts told me that delving into this was a bad idea.

We switched to doing some idle chatter and continued following the road towards Gideon.



When we finally reached the city, I couldn't help but notice that its atmosphere was exactly the same as it had been back when I'd entered it for the first time. One of Liliana's fellow knights used a communication magic skill to inform the guards about the defeat of the Epic-rank UBM — Revenant Ox-Horse, Gouz-Maise — causing them to no longer stand on alert.

Once we passed the gates, I looked around, but Hugo and Cyco were nowhere in sight.

“Liliana, there's something I'd like to ask you,” I spoke up. “Have you seen Hugo...? He's my comrade. The guy who brought the carriages with the children here.”

“Do forgive me,” she said. “I ran out the second he told me of the situation. Give me a moment to ask about him.”

After saying that, Liliana began speaking to the guards stationed around the gates.

A moment later, one of them took a step forward. “After explaining the situation and handing the children over to us, the person in question said, ‘I must return to the other side’ and vanished.”

Vanished? I asked myself. *What did he mean by “other side”? Dryfe? No...*

“So he logged out, huh?” I said. He'd probably done it to avoid getting questions he wasn't allowed to answer. The guy hadn't gotten cuffed or anything, so he would have been able to go offline with no problem.

I wonder if I'll meet him again tomorrow, I thought.

“Also, he gave me this,” said the guard and handed me a letter.

“Thank you.” I opened it and instantly realized that it was a message he’d left for me.

“Dear Ray Starling. I leave this message to you just in case you choose to stay in this world and either return here safe and sound or your death penalty expires.

First of all, I would like to thank you. Without you, I couldn’t have brought the children back to their parents or the lady we’d met in that alley.

You will likely be offered many rewards for acts such as defeating the Gouz-Maise Gang, and you can rest assured that it all belongs to you. I have no need for any of it. In fact, I’m incapable of taking any rewards from the kingdom’s public institutions.

It hasn’t been long since we’ve met, but I believe I have a good grasp of what kind of person you are. You will most likely hesitate to accept what you’re offered. However, with you having been the only one capable of doing it, you *must* be the one to take the rewards.

Also, you can rest easy knowing that I have already received my prize. My rewards were lady Rebecca’s smile and the tears of joy that she shed when I brought her little brother to her.

That was more than enough for me.

If you still feel apprehensive about it, you can pay me back by treating me to lunch the next time we meet.

Please excuse the fact that it’s in written form, but this is my goodbye to you.

Farewell. I hope we meet again. *Au revoir. À bientôt.*

The machine knight of ice and roses, Hugo Lesseps.”

I was speechless.

In case I choose to stay in this world, huh? I thought. *I...*

“Umm... Ray?” As I got lost in thought, Liliana looked at me with worry in her eyes.

“Are you sure you are feeling well?” she asked.

“Oh, sorry about that,” I said. “I’m quite fine, thank you.”

“Well, if you say so... Anyway, since you have defeated the Gouz-Maise Gang, please take some time within the next few days to report it to the Adventurers’ Guild and the knight offices. The Adventurers’ Guild is for the bounties, while the knights need to know about the elimination of a criminal organization.”

“I see. Thank you.”

“The day is getting late now, and I believe you are exhausted beyond belief, so please go have some well-deserved rest,” she said.

“I really should,” I agreed. “It’s been a really long day, after all. What will *you* do, Liliana?”

“I will go back to protecting Her Highness.”

“...Clearly, I’m not the only one here who deserves to be thanked for all their efforts.”

“Oh, there’s no need, eheheh...”

“All right, I will take my leave now,” I said.

“Feel free to,” she said. “Let us meet again.”

With that, Liliana and I parted ways.

Still logged in, I went on to take a nap in one of Gideon’s inns. Once I let myself fall on the bed, all the events of the day flashed through my mind. However, due to how exhausted I was, the sandman took me before I could think about any of it.

This time, I didn’t have any dreams.



The next morning, I woke up surprisingly early.

There was no sunlight flowing through the window and the sky outside only

looked mildly bright, so it was probably before dawn. I placed my hand on my head and instantly found that the dog ears that had tortured me throughout all of yesterday were gone. With me spending the night in-game, they'd likely gone away due to the time limit.

"Have you awoken, Ray?" a voice asked.

I looked to where I'd heard the voice — the side opposite to the window. There, I saw Nemesis, who was sitting in a chair and looking at me.

"Morning, Nemesis," I greeted her.

"Good morning, Ray," she responded.

After that, we both just wordlessly looked at one another.

Eventually, I broke the silence and invited Nemesis for a walk. I took her to the plains right beyond Gideon's northern gates. With it being my third time here, the area was already becoming familiar to me.

Nemesis and I were speeding through it while riding Silver. I held the reins and controlled the steed while Nemesis sat behind and held onto me by my waist.

"This is truly pleasant," said Nemesis.

"Sure is," I agreed.

As I had such meaningless exchanges with Nemesis, I continued making Silver gallop through the plains. After about thirty minutes had passed, I saw the sun begin to show itself from behind the eastern mountains.

"Will you leave this world?" That was when Nemesis asked me that question.

I said nothing. She was referring to what I had been considering back in the fortress' basement.

If I processed *Infinite Dendrogram* the same way I did reality, it was questionable whether staying in a world so filled with death would be a good thing for me. The sight of the corpses of children I didn't even know had been enough to make me feel as though my heart had been gouged out. If they were people I was familiar with, like Liliana or Milianne, it would probably hurt me as much as a loss of a friend in reality.

However...

“There’s more to this world than just loss,” I said.

If I hadn’t started Infinite Dendrogram, I would’ve never met the sisters, Rook, Marie, Hugo, Cyco and — of course — you, Nemesis. I simply couldn’t have come to know any of them if I’d only stayed there, and Nemesis wouldn’t even have been born.

“You *are* aware that you might go through something painful again, no?” she said.

Of course I am, I thought. You’re completely right about that. Events like what we went through yesterday are probably a daily occurrence here. But still...

“If something that would leave a bad taste in my mouth starts happening before me... I’ll just stop it,” I said.

This time, it had been all over by the time I’d gotten there. However, if I was ever in the right place at the right time, I would do everything I could to prevent such a tragedy. After all, the possibility leading to the desired future was there, as long as you didn’t give up.

“I would give my all to grab hold of the possibility,” I said.

“I see,” Nemesis spoke from behind me. “I feel like you are shouldering far more than you should, but I cannot say that this is unlike you. Yes — you should fight to protect. And while you do that...”

Still behind me, Nemesis gently patted me on the head.

The softness of the hand made me turn around.

“...I will be the one protecting *you*.”

Nemesis, covered in morning light, gave me the most gentle smile.

That expression made me face forward again and swing Silver’s reins to make him canter ahead. For some reason, I had become bashful enough that I was unable to look at her face again. Still, I felt that I had to say something back to her.

“Thanks... Nemesis...” That was all that came out.

As she held onto me, I felt as though she smiled once again.

After that, neither of us said anything more.

Still on Silver's back, we dashed through the fields as we let that gentle morning of smiles embrace us.



Conjunction Episode: The Night Before

The surroundings of the east gate of Gideon, the city of duels

Midnight.

The day when Ray had fought and prevailed against the Revenant Ox-Horse, Gouz-Maise had reached its end.

The surroundings of the east gate of Gideon — which were completely devoid of people with the exception of the few guards on their night shifts — were suddenly intruded by the appearance of a pair of people emitting a faint light.

One of them was a man clad in a military uniform reminiscent of a pilot suit — Hugo Lesseps, High Pilot of the Dryfe Imperium. Next to him was his Embryo, Cocytus.

After the last event, Hugo had logged out to avoid further questioning from the kingdom, and had now logged back in again after waiting for the right time.

After logging in, the two of them quickly walked away from the gate, entered a small alleyway, and began waiting for something. Less than a minute passed until someone came.

It wasn't a drunkard or some hoodlum.

Instead, it was a person wearing a penguin suit.

It was the very same penguin that had appeared before Ray last morning, pronounced himself "Dr. Flamingo," and gotten rid of Ray's debuffs while also giving him a pair of dog ears.

"Kept ya waiting," said the penguin.

"Not at all," replied Hugo. "I spent most of the waiting time offline."

"You were pretty busy today, weren't ya? Took care of the gang that was troubling this town, eh?"

"You're aware?" Hugo asked.

“Indeed I am,” said the penguin. “I was doing some wiretapping on Ray, you see.”

“Wiretapping Ray? How?”

“Not telling. I’ve been listening on him like I would a radio drama, and boy, was it a good one. He’s as much of a Maiden’s Master as you are, Hugh.” The penguin made his body sway and chuckled.

“Well, if you know what he was doing, there’s something I’d like you to tell me...” said Hugo.

“Yep, he won,” the penguin answered the question before it was even asked. “Victory is his. He actually solo’d a UBM.”

“I see. That’s good to know.” Hugo wasn’t lying when he said that. However, that sentiment was followed by thoughts that completely contradicted it.

If the UBM had given him the death penalty, we probably wouldn’t have to face each other today. After all, a person so straightforward in nature will surely try to stop the plan. Wait, in the first place, should I really be taking an active part in a plan that Ray would try to stop?

Little by little, hesitation began to envelop Hugo’s mind.

“So, Hugh, are you ready for tomorrow— no, today’s plan?” the penguin asked, as if it was fully aware of Hugo’s inner struggle.

Hugo quickly held back the hesitation, and reported something. “The Marshall II was destroyed.”

“I see,” said the penguin. “Here’s a Garage with a spare one, then. It’s Marshall II Revised — an improved version of the Marshall II you were using before. Its defense and AGI are 30% higher. The fine-tuning is done, too.”

The penguin reached into his inventory and took out a large, rolled up, metallic scroll much like the one Hugo had used in the afternoon.

“Thank you very much,” Hugo said gratefully. “Oh, I just remembered this.”

Hugo took out a bundle of papers from his inventory. It was the sorcery blueprint that he’d discovered in the hideout of the Gouz-Maise Gang.

“Oh yeah, the sorcery that created that UBM, eh?” said the penguin.

“Well, with the clan already having scrapped the grudge power plan, I think it’s probably useless to us,” Hugo commented.

“Well, you think right,” said the penguin. “After all, we got help from the King of Tartarus for that one, so the sorcery of a high-rank tian is just a bit...”

“Leader?”

The penguin was looking down at the blueprint and silently examining the text. “I see... So just because it’s grudge, it doesn’t have to... This needs to be verified, though...”

After making some conclusions, the penguin put the blueprint into his inventory.

“Back to the matter at hand,” he said. “With that Garage I gave you, you are prepared to be the heart of this plan. Other preparations are just about complete, as well.”

The penguin began counting down his fingers to confirm what was done or not. Since the suit didn’t have any fingers fit for counting, he obviously did it with the human fingers inside.

“The deployment of Castling and the gadgets is done. The arrangements to allow us to influence the device are done. The club, Veldorbell, has been taking root there for a few days now. And of course, my — the diamond’s — preparations are done... or so I’d like to say. But there’s something I still have to do. Well, it’s not like I won’t make it in time for the plan.”

Adding the names of playing card suits here and there, the penguin shared info with Hugo.

Though it seemed like some sort of coding, it was far simpler than that. When creating plans, the penguin simply had a habit of giving the codenames based on card suits to those who had important roles.

“The only real cause of worry here is whether the emperor’s joker is actually gonna do her job or not, but it all depends on luck,” said the penguin. “Still, she’ll probably act as long as our sources are correct and the first princess

actually comes.”

“Umm, what’s this plan’s spade?” Hugo realized that that suit hadn’t been mentioned, and decided to ask about it.

That was because, whenever using suits as codenames, the penguin always gave spade to either the trump card or the most destructive role in his plan.

The penguin’s answer was simple. “Ah, well... I don’t have one. No spade this time.”

It seemed as though he was hiding something, but Hugo didn’t bother to doubt him.

“But man, am I glad. The event is actually happening.” As if to change to subject, the penguin nodded and continued talking. “Seriously, I can’t be more glad. I have no clue what retard was responsible for it, but the blockade caused by the PK happening almost ruined the event and our plan with it.”

The PK happening. That was the event in which three player-killing clans and the Superior Killer had created a blockade in the four newbie hunting grounds around the capital. Though the kingdom’s four Superiors had taken care of the problem, it had already affected the kingdom’s overall power.

On the internet, it was rumored that it had been done by the imperium, which was on the verge of war with the kingdom. However, the penguin knew better than everyone that it wasn’t true.

“Who do you think was responsible for that?” asked Hugo.

“No clue,” curtly answered the penguin. “They went about it so well that they didn’t leave any proof behind. Though the PKs were rewarded with pretty nice sums of money. And besides our country, there weren’t many groups that relied on using coinage like that.”

“Caldina, then?” asked Hugo.

Caldina, the commercial city-state union.

It was a mercantile country that covered the entire desert in the center of the continent and claimed that the presence or lack of money was everything.

Its national characteristic was that people there could get special products

from all the other countries — albeit for large sums of money. Due to that, many high-end players had moved there, causing it to become the strongest country in terms of the amount of Masters.

“For what purpose did they do it?” asked Hugo.

“Well, I think there’s more to it than just sully the imperium’s reputation,” answered the penguin. “That place has both tians and Superiors that really know how to use their heads. They could have just used Sefirot — their pride and joy — yet instead they messed around with these indirect methods. What a pain.”

Sefirot was the name of the top clan in the commercial city-state union of Caldina. Though it was only a mere ten members strong, a whole nine of them were Superiors.

Among those nine were The Earth AKA the “Magically Strongest,” King of Termination AKA the “Seven Death Transformation,” God Hunter AKA the “Multifariously Invincible,” and Ace AKA the “Blue Sky Songstress,” all of whom were famous for their battle prowess.

Because of that, Sefirot was considered to be the strongest clan in all of *Infinite Dendrogram*.

“What is the likelihood of Sefirot showing up while the plan is commencing?” asked Hugo.

“I’m pretty sure they’re unaware of it,” said the penguin. “After all, if the plan is successful, it’s likely that the kingdom will give up before the war even happens. It’s like the imperium’s decisive blow. If they knew about it, they would’ve already done something.”

After saying that, the penguin began to consider.

“However, there’s a chance that one or few of them came to see the event... The Clash of Superiors. If that happens, I’ll just have to wreck their shit with the spade.”

The penguin’s words made Hugo begin to ponder.

Upon seeing that, the penguin talked to him with a gentle tone. “No need to

overthink it, Hugo. If this goes well, the war will end with only minimal casualties.”

“Minimal?” asked Hugo.

“Indeed. His Excellency the General(lol) wants an all-out war, but that would be a waste of all kinds of resources. Such things are best handled in ways that are both smart and exciting.” Saying that, the penguin removed his suit. At the same time, he reached into his inventory, took out a lab coat, and put it on.

The result was a lean, spectacled man clad in a lab coat. He extended his hands to the sides and made a sonorous declaration.

“Tomorrow, we — The Triangle of Wisdom — will put a decisive end to the war between the imperium and the kingdom.”

To be continued next episode...

Afterword



Bear: “Heyo! Time fur another afterword! (Been awhile since the last one.)”

Cat: “And so, volume 2 was able come out without any probleems.”

Bear: “This is all thanks to the readers who bought volume 1, the stores that sold it...”

Cat: “...the editors, and Taiki and all the wonderful illustrations he drew!”

Bear: “Now, you might be aware of this, but a lot has happened between the releases of volume 1 and volume 2.”

Cat: “First, there was the great *Dendro* festival on Twitterr!”

Bear: “It had all this unbearably good *Dendro* art drawn by a whole fifty illustrators!”

Cat: “You can go and check it out in the gallery of the official *Dendro* siite!”

Bear: “Also, it was announced that *Dendro* is getting a manga adaptation.”

Cat: “The one working on it is none other than Kami Imai of *Needless* faame.”

Cat: “Though that still wasn’t revealed at the time this afterword was written.”

Cat: “However, when volume 2 comes out, the first chapter should already be ouut.”

Bear: “It’s highly recommended that readers of these novels get their paws on that!”

Cat: “Search for it on Comic Firee!”

Bear: “Now, a word from our author.”

Hello, this is Sakon Kaidou.

First of all, I would like to thank you getting your hands on *Infinite Dendrogram* volume 2.

Because of everyone involved and the audience, volume 1 sold well and we were able to release volume 2 into the world without much trouble, and I couldn’t be more grateful for that.

Now, as you might be aware, the first volume had some typos and mistakes (in the Japanese release) which — unlike with webnovel uploads — couldn’t be fixed after they were done. That made me painfully aware of my own lack of experience.

Releasing books into the world and having an audience buy them involved a level of responsibility completely unlike that of a webnovel author. I will try to become familiar with it and continue publishing *Infinite Dendrogram* to the best of my ability.

With that settled, it’s planned that in the upcoming volumes 3 and 4, you’ll be presented with the climax of the first part of *Infinite Dendrogram*.

New characters, a great event in the city of duels, Superiors making their moves, and the first clash between Ray and a certain person who’s been involved with him since the very beginning.

I would be a very happy author if you, the readers of volume 2, became reasonably excited for what’s to come.

Thank you once again, and I hope this continues.

Sakon Kaidou

Cat: “...I suuure hope volume 2 doesn’t have any typos.”

Bear: “Well, according to head editor K, ‘typos happen.’”

Cat: “And with that, it’s time to end volume 2’s afterwoord.”

Bear: “It was brought to you by Brother Bear the bear...”

Cat: “...and Cheshire the caat!”

Bear: “Volume 3 is set to come out this year, so bear with us until then!”

Cat: “...It would be pretty surprising if it doesn’t come out in 2017, right?”

Bear: “I-I’m sure it’ll come out just fine.”

Bonus Short Stories

Marilyn

Paladin, Ray Starling

While on our way to Gideon, our group had set up camp for the night.

It was past dinnertime and we were all well fed. But while most of us were just relaxing around the campfire, Rook was taking care of Marilyn, who probably needed it, considering that she'd spent the whole day pulling the dragon carriage.

Mind you, I couldn't help but wonder how a person actually takes care of a triceratops-looking dragon, especially since Rook seemed to be cleaning her in a really skilled manner, giving the impression that he was actually accustomed to this activity.

"You seem pretty used to this," I said. "Do you have a pet reptile or something?" With him being a foreign player, I could easily picture him owning an iguana or the like.

"No, I merely happened to learn how to take care of animals," he answered my question.

...Did he go to a vet school or something? I thought.

"But your learning didn't actually cover dinosaurs, right?"

"Right," Rook nodded. "I had to go through a bit of trial and error, but I'm gradually getting a grasp of how Marilyn prefers to be touched."

After saying that, he used a particularly thick piece of cloth to wash the inner part of Marilyn's neck, making her "MHOO" in a gleeful manner. That action made the triceratops-looking dragon seem somewhat dog-like, reminding me of the dog I used to own.

"It hasn't even been five days since Grantzian gave her to me, but I feel that

Marilyn and I are getting along just fine,” said Rook.

“Speaking of which, I know you got her as a reward, but why did the artist have her in the first place?” I asked.

To my mind, artists were recluses who shut themselves in their studios and spent their days painting, sculpting or whatever, so I found it a bit strange that he’d had a Demi-Dragon like Marilyn *and* a dragon carriage to go with her.

“Grantzian is highly passionate when it comes to looking for inspiration for his works, so, a few times a year, he goes on a dragon carriage ride around the kingdom,” Rook answered.

That made sense. The guy’s model searching quest was difficulty level 6, which made it pretty obvious that his standards for inspiration were through the roof and thus couldn’t be contained in just a single area.

“Wait, then why was he okay with giving Marilyn away?” I asked. After all, he couldn’t go on his inspiration-searching without a dragon carriage and a Demi-Dragon to pull it.

“He has a few more land-dragons like her in his possession,” Rook said. “In fact, there’s even a Pure-Dragon, so losing Marilyn isn’t a problem for him.”

I hear that Pure-Dragons are a luxury enjoyed by only the wealthiest of merchants, so I can only assume that Grantzian is making some serious money with his art.

That thought seemed to appear on my face, and Rook didn’t hesitate to tell me a certain fact.

“The cheapest of Grantzian’s works go for 10,000,000 lir.”

That was far more than I could possibly imagine. Picturing a work that would go for that much was just otherworldly to me, which probably had to do with the fact that my siblings and I were all completely out of touch with the concept of art. My big sister’s artistic sense needed a sanity check, my big brother’s idea of art didn’t make any sense whatsoever, while I was just painfully average in that regard.

“Anyway, he uses them in his search for artistic inspiration, right?” I said.

“Well, with Marilyn — a Demi-Dragon — utterly destroying the monsters in this area, I imagine that Pure-Dragons allow him to go farther and... Oh, right.”

My words made me remember something.

“Didn’t a monster she killed today drop a box?” I asked.

Boss monsters such as the Demi-Dragon Worm I’d defeated dropped boxes that had several items in them. The bear-like boss monster that Marilyn had killed while we were traveling through the mountain hadn’t been an exception.

“Yes it did,” said Rook. “Shall I open it?”

“Yeah, I’m a bit curious about what it dropped.”

And so, he began opening the box.



The Honey Bear Claw that Rook received from the box became the cause of the terrible incident known as “Marie’s Midnight Snack Madness,” but that was a different story entirely...

Hugo and Piloting

Paladin, Ray Starling

Riding Hugo’s Magingear, we made our way towards the hideout of the Gouz-Maise Gang. It was located in the Cruella Mountain Belt — specifically, the second closest mountain from Gideon. Naturally, arriving there would take a while, so we used the travel time to discuss how our quest could go and how we’d handle it. While we were having such talks, however, a certain question came to mind.

“How are you controlling this thing, anyway?” I asked.

Though he was still in his Magingear, I could tell that my question somewhat perplexed him.

“I’m honestly not sure how to answer that,” he said. “There’s nothing more to it than the Piloting skill, really.”

“That’s exactly what I’m wondering about. Can you really control a robot just

by having the skill? Is it seriously that simple?”

A short while ago, I’d fallen off Silver because I hadn’t had the Horse Riding skill. That made sense — I’d merely lacked the grasp of the necessary technique for it. However, I didn’t really think I could do it just by learning Horse Riding. I’d never properly ridden a horse before, and a single skill just didn’t seem like enough to overcome that. Due to the very same reasons, it was hard for me to imagine that something as complex as a robot could be piloted just by meeting the skill requirement.

“I see,” he said. “I had the very same question when I began. As for the answer, well... having the skill *is* enough.”

“Seriously?”

“Piloting, Horse Riding, and Riding are not just requirements and mount-strengthening skills — they’re also sense skills that tell you how you should control your mounts.”

Sense skills... Like the ones that allow you to draw well and cook good food, huh? I thought.

“Basically,” he added, “if I think that ‘I want to raise the Marshall II’s right arm,’ I get a mental image of what I should do with the controls to accomplish that.”

“So you instantly understand the controls based on what you wish to do at that particular moment?” I asked.

“That’s about right,” said Hugo. “However, it’s not always ‘instant.’ It takes more time for the mental image to form if the pilot’s skill level is low. That delay is almost gone by the time they reach skill level 5, which is the maximum for Pilot — the low-rank job in this grouping.”

I see. I thought. I guess the same applies to when they try to do any complex movements. They think it, get the mental image, and follow it by properly handling the levers and gauges and the like.

“If we use the skill to actually and thoroughly learn the controls, we can pilot these robots without having to use the mental images as a crutch,” he added. “Becoming like one of those ace pilots from mecha anime isn’t a pipe dream.

Then again, it could always go in the opposite direction.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“The mental images only help you to do ‘the movements you want to make.’ If the movements you think of are sloppy, the skill won’t help, no matter how high its level is.”

“Oh, I see,” I said. If the action the pilot wanted to take didn’t fit the situation, actually going through with it would be a mistake.

“What about you, Hugo?” I asked. “Are you fine in that regard?”

“...Heh,” he grinned.

Okay, what am I supposed to make from that implicative, pompous smile?

“When he started piloting, Hugo broke a Magingear by making it move in a weird way,” said Cyco.

“Don’t mind that. I’ve gotten a lot better since then,” interjected Hugo. “I’m far past the point of failing a landing and dislocating the robot’s hip joint.”

Not saying a word in response, I pictured that scenario with the Magingear we were riding, and the result was pretty surreal.

“Again, I assure you that there’s no problem with my piloting now. I’m valuable on the battlefield — you can count on that.”

“All right,” I said. “I’ll be relying on you, then.”

With my question answered, we continued making our way towards the hideout.

Due to possible spoilers, it’s recommended you only read this after finishing Volume 2!

Hugo and...

A certain day of a certain month, Mechanic, Hugo Lesseps

After reaching maximum level on Pilot, I chose Mechanic as my second job. It was the optimal choice not only because it increased the amount of things I could do in the clan, but also because it helped me fulfill the “Have a certain amount of machine-related skills” condition for the high-rank job I was aiming for — High Pilot.

I spent my days raising my job and skill levels by completing the mechanic’s guild quests that got to me through my clan. At the rate I was going, I would reach max level in just two weeks or so. On a seemingly-standard day when I was doing regular Mechanic work, the clan’s headquarters suddenly got noisy. The place was always full of hustle and bustle, but I could easily tell that whatever caused the noise was completely outside the norm.

“Did something happen?” I asked a fellow clan member.

“The experimental machine from the fourth laboratory behind this wall here seems to have gone on a rampage,” he said. “They’re trying to get it under control now.”

I quickly recalled that the fourth laboratory was testing grudge-driven engines. A machine powered by such a thing had gone on a rampage?

“We might be in danger...” I said.

Afer all, unlike standard Magingears, they don’t need the pilot’s MP and can stay active just by absorbing the surrounding grudge. We can only stop it by destroying it, but—

Suddenly, before I could even finish my thought, a Magingear broke through the wall to the facility I was in.

It looked much like a Marshall II, but the details were different. The biggest one was the fact that, instead of a cockpit, it had a glass case-like object with a dark purple light flickering inside it. There was little doubt that it was the rampaging experimental machine.

“UUUUAAAAAAAAHHHH!” it roared in an unworldly manner.

After haphazardly destroying anything within its reach, it fixed its sights on the living. Masters or tians working within the clan — they were all the same to it.

“Oh no! I have to get the Garage, and...!”

I tried to take out the Marshall II that the clan leader had given me, but I was far too slow. Before I could even spread the sheet, let alone begin to fight against it, it got close to the nearby tians. Right when I thought that they would surely die...

“Deadly Explosion.”

The grudge flickering within the machine gathered into one point and created a small explosion. The scattering of the grudge — the power and the will forcing it to act — made the experimental machine drop the ground and cease all movement. It was now more like a corpse than anything else. The grudge-driven machine that had been about to hurt people had suddenly lost all the malice driving it to do that.

“Th-Thank you, Mr. Benetnasch!” Zerbahl exclaimed. He was one of our clan members.

“I should’ve been there to observe the experiment. My apologies,” a man I didn’t recognize answered.

He was a man with a predominantly purple girl at his side. Though I couldn’t recognize him by appearance, I was familiar with the name “Benetnasch.” He was the King of Tartarus — a Superior who didn’t belong to any of the seven countries and a collaborator in this experiment, responsible for gathering the required grudge, among other tasks. It was clear that he was the one who’d stopped the rampaging robot.

Despite that, however, he apologized for this event as if everything bad that ever happened around him was entirely his fault.

After he left, as part of my Mechanic work, I helped with the dismantling of the experimental machine. In the end, I didn’t get to talk to the King of Tartarus directly.

However, though I didn’t know when or where, I had a hunch that he — a fellow Master with a Maiden-Type Embryo — and I would meet again one day, in some form.

Carriage

Paladin, Ray Starling

Our group was making our way towards Gideon.

“Riding this thing really strengthens my awareness of the fact that I’m in a fantasy world,” I said as I looked at the scenery outside the carriage’s window. Our means of transport on this journey was Rook’s very own dragon carriage, drawn by Marilyn... a Trihorn Demi-Dragon.

A dragon carriage was like your usual carriage, except larger and sturdier, which gave a unique sort of “power” to the overall impression it gave off. Also, with Marilyn having the appearance of a triceratops, this vehicle had a particularly strong “fantasy” vibe to it. I was told that dragon carriages such as this were quite popular among merchants. That wasn’t just because dragons had tougher legs than equestrian monsters and could thus pull more weight, but also because they were simply stronger.

Marilyn had killed that bear-like boss monster that had gotten in our way in just one hit, clearly showing that — as was standard in fantasy — *Infinite Dendrogram*’s dragons were creatures of great strength. They were far more reliable than the average hired guard. Even I would have tons of trouble beating Marilyn without Nemesis’s skills. After all, being a Demi-Dragon, she was on the same tier as the Demi-Dragon Worm I had struggled against right after entering this world.

Due to that strength, most standard merchant carriages were pulled by either battle-ready Demi-Dragons or smaller, dinosaur-like monsters, while the traders with the fattest purses would get themselves a Pure-Dragon. Pure-Dragons were quite a rarity on the markets, and even the Masters that had them were almost always true veterans.

“With a beauteous mountain scenery such as this, snacks become simply superb.”

The sudden voice made me shift my gaze from the view outside to the inside of the carriage. I saw Nemesis, looking through the window at the opposite side as she ate the ice cream we’d bought back at the capital. The ice cream looked

completely new — not showing any signs of melting. The reason for that, too, was this dragon carriage. It had once been owned by an artist known as Grantzian. Thus, for comfort's sake, it had come equipped with a time-stopped inventory.

Marie had said that their inventories were another reason why dragon carriages were so widely used. They allowed a carriage to belie its apparent capacity and carry as many goods as a freight train. Also, if you were willing to part with a nice sum of money, you could have them equipped with time-stopped inventories that allowed the transportation of food without the risk of it rotting. This was the reason why the capital's restaurants had fresh seafood on the menus despite the city being landlocked, and the reason why these carriages were such a popular means of transporting goods.

Trains, on the other hand, were highly unreliable due to monsters often destroying the tracks, and from what I'd been told, such technology had yet to go beyond the experimental trams in the imperium's capital.

Man, the environment sure has a strong effect on the development of transportation, I thought while being told about those circumstances.

"You should also get your own means of transportation," said Nemesis. "After all, you're a Paladin — a holy *knight*."

You have a point. A knight without a horse to ride seems pretty off. Is it necessary for a knight's mount to be a horse, though? To be honest, I'm more used to motorbikes.

"Then why not get a horse that *feels* like a motorbike?" asked Nemesis.

"Yeah. Nice joke," I said in response.

I know this is a fantasy world and all, but such horses just don't exist, I thought.



It took a mere three days for me to be proven wrong.

The Prism Steed

Ten Months Ago, The Tomb Labyrinth

It was said that the world of *Infinite Dendrogram* had once been home to a civilization with technology far more advanced than it was now. The relics of that civilization seemed to be the result of merging magic and machinery into one. Such relics could be found by either excavating the dungeons known as “Ruins,” which were found all over the world, or as random drops from created dungeons like the Tomb Labyrinth.

“A horse?” said a man who’d just received one such relic by exploring a created dungeon.

It was a robotic horse. Covered in black, shining armor reminiscent of obsidian and equipped with eight legs like Sleipnir of Norse myth, it bore the name “Obsidian Earth-Edge.”

It was one of the five original Prism Steeds that had been created by Flagman, an artisan from the pre-ancient civilization. Being both a powerful, special piece of equipment and a work of art worth many a million, it was a treasure coveted by countless people. Anyone to receive it would surely be gleeful...

“It’s not like I can use it, though.”

...yet the man was painfully lukewarm about it.

“...!”

Unsatisfied with its new owner’s reaction, Obsidian Earth-Edge kicked the ground as if to show off.

It seemed to be saying, “Try riding me and then decide,” so the man did exactly that. He didn’t have the Horse Riding skill, so he only got on Obsidian Earth-Edge after equipping an item that gave it to him: the Amulet of the Equestrian Tribe.

The jet-black, robotic steed instantly began galloping. Its eight metallic legs thundered on the ground, echoing far and wide. The power of its kicks and the speed it reached were simply incomparable to that of any equestrian monster the man had ever ridden. As if that weren’t enough, Obsidian Earth-Edge neighed and used its ability to display its true power.

It was a skill that allowed it to control the earth. In but a moment, countless stone pillars popped out of the ground below. The metallic steed then began jumping on their sides, from one to the other, making it feel as though it was running on air, following a path that hadn't been there before. With that, Obsidian Earth-Edge finished demonstrating its powers, and the technological prowess of the olden civilization, to its new master.

After that was done, the metallic steed neighed as if to say "How do you like me now?"

"You're a pretty great horse," the new owner said in response, fully recognizing the power of Obsidian Earth-Edge. "Still, I won't be using you," he added, fully rejecting the Prism Steed as viable equipment.

"?!"

Obsidian Earth-Edge looked wholly confused and wanted to know the reason for the man's decision.

"After all, I'm faster on foot," said the man, Over Gladiator Figaro, casually.

Figaro was the owner a vanguard-type Superior Job and a Superior Embryo, so his battle speed could easily break the sound barrier. No matter how advanced Obsidian Earth-Edge was, it couldn't go that fast, disqualifying it from being used by its new owner. While looking as though it wanted to say "How does that make any sense?" the Prism Steed was put into Figaro's inventory.



Though Obsidian Earth-Edge didn't meet the ludicrous requirements to be used by Figaro on a daily basis, there were some duels that could only be done on mounts, so the Over Gladiator participated in those by using the Prism Steed.

The metallic relic was glad that it didn't end up being completely useless.

License

Paladin, Ray Starling

"This wind feels great," said Nemesis.

“Seriously,” I agreed.

It was early in the morning. Nemesis and I were in the Nex Plains, riding Silver and testing him.

“On the road to Gideon, we rode Marilyn’s dragon carriage, and it surprises me just how different rideable objects can be,” she commented.

“Oh, yeah. You haven’t ridden many things yet, huh?”

“Indeed,” she nodded. “The dragon carriage, Silver, and the Magingear are the only things that come to mind. And I was in my weapon form while riding that last one.”

Infinite Dendrogram had many rideable things. In the Kingdom of Altar, the most popular type was equestrian monsters. There were also lots of inorganic ones, such as Dryfe’s “Magingear” machines and Granvaloa’s ships. For all I knew, Huang He, being a fantasy country based on ancient China, might have flying clouds. You could probably roleplay some *Journey to the West* or pretend you were searching for the Dragonballs.

“Still, I feel that this one is unlike any of them,” I said.

Nemesis said nothing.

Silver, the mount I was riding, was a fully metallic robot horse. Riding it didn’t actually remind me of any horse I’d ridden in the past. If anything, Silver felt more like a horse-shaped motorbike.

“Now that I think about it, it’s been a while since I’ve ridden a motorbike,” I added.

I’d gotten my license in my first year of high school, but I hadn’t ridden one since I’d started focusing on my exams in the middle of my second year. This was largely because I didn’t have my own motorbike — I’d only used the one that my big sister left at the house. These days, I did my real-life shopping and the like by using public transport or my bicycle.

Since I had the license, it might be a good idea to get my own motorbike. Or perhaps, with me being a college student now, it was time for me to get a car driver’s license. However, that would mean having to go to a driving school,

which would likely lessen my *Dendro* time.

College was also starting in two weeks, which would surely affect my schedule in that regard. Unlike my brother, I didn't have all the income and time in the world.

"Learning to ride a vehicle on the other side seems like a time-consuming activity," commented Nemesis.

"Well, I certainly can't deny that," I said.

Having to get the required skills in Dendro can be pretty draining, too, though, as you're aware, I thought.

"By the way, 'motorbike license,' was it?" said Nemesis. "You say that you have one, but what about Brother Bear?"

"Yeah, my brother has a cruiser motorbike, and also a driver's license with a large car to go with it," I answered.

"I see."

"Oh, he also has licenses for boats and wheeled construction vehicles."

"...Hm?"

"There's also the helicopter license, and... oh yeah, he can also fly light aircraft. Like Cessnas."

He got the license for that in Hawaii, I remembered.

"Does Brother Bear have some unique occupation?" asked Nemesis.

"Nope, he's unemployed."

He hadn't had anything better to do during his school years and afterwards, during his NEET life after he'd graduated from college (which still continued to this day), so he went around taking any licenses he could get his hands on. Due to that, he often walked around with a notebook full of *only* licenses.

"My brother's a... very skilled individual," I concluded.

"I hope we get a chance to be on a ship he pilots someday," said Nemesis.

I said nothing.

My brother's ship license only existed in reality. However, he rode a tank here in *Dendro*, so it wouldn't be too surprising if he had a boat, as well.

"I'll call and ask him about that," I said.

With that thought on my mind, I continued riding Silver.

Lei-Lei and Fishing

A certain day of a certain month, in the West Sea

To the west of the Kingdom of Altar, there was an area of ocean known simply as the "West Sea." Surrounded by a scenery with no land in sight, a single boat was floating in the middle of it. Those familiar with real-life fishing boats would instantly recognize it as one and likely make a comment about it being quite sizeable.

"The seaaa iiis broooooaad aaand biiiig..."

A strange song was coming from the boat, sung by a needlessly moving, beautiful voice. The singer herself was as strange as her lyrics. Despite having the physical appearance of a Scandinavian beauty, she was wearing a Chinese qipao. The fact that she was on a boat and looked like that while holding a fishing rod made her into quite the bundle of mysteries.

She was Lei-Lei the "Prodigal of Feasts." Among the four Superiors of the kingdom, she was infamous for being even more unpredictable than King of Destruction the "Unknown." Such a person was now merely fishing in the West Sea.

"Oh! We've got a live one!" she said, upon feeling something pull on the fishing line. She began winding the reel on the rod. Upon further examination, one would notice that the rod was metallic, while the line was much like a wire.

"It feels like we *grabbed hold* of something big!" she cried. The rod bent to its absolute limit and the boat began to tilt, clearly showing that whatever was on the other side of the line was considerably heavy.

Any bystanders would think that the rod would break or the ship would flip, but that had little chance of happening. The Mythical metal that the rod had

been made out of allowed it to continue doing its job even as it bent the way it did.

“Heeere, fishy fishy!” she called after a few minutes of struggling, sounding completely overjoyed. At the same time, the shape of something gigantic appeared on the water’s surface. It was a sea-dragon reminiscent of a plesiosaurus — clearly a Pure-Dragon, too.

“Ha HA! How I could bear two whole hours without this sweet sunlight is just beyond me!” And holding on to its neck, there was a guy in a bear suit — Shu Starling. There was a metal wire wrapped around his waist, and it didn’t even need to be said that it was connected to Lei-Lei’s fishing rod.

“Good job on getting this big boy!” she said.

“The boat won’t bear the weight, you know?” he said. “Save the praises for later! Hurry up and catch this thing before it flips!”

Shu held on to the flailing sea-dragon, urging Lei-Lei to stop holding her thumb up and get to business.

“Sure, sure!” Lei-Lei replied as she took out some drugs and threw them into the water.

They were the kind that gave the Charm status effect. Normally, such drugs would have little effect on a Pure-Dragon. However, with Lei-Lei’s Superior Embryo’s skill — the negation of status effect resistances — the mighty and proud sea-dragon got Charmed as if it were no big deal. Then Lei-Lei changed her job to Tamer and tamed it just as easily.

“And that’s the quest done!” she exclaimed.

“Good work,” said Shu.

The two were on a quest to capture a sea-dragon type Pure-Dragon. Though Lei-Lei was a player that couldn’t log in all that often, she and Shu would sometimes go on difficult quests together. The fact that he was almost always online helped a lot with those arrangements.

In this quest, Shu’d had the role of being the hook and catching the sea-dragon, while Lei-Lei had had to pull them both up and tame the thing. Clearly,

Shu had been the one with the harder role, but no one involved had any problems with that. The only problem was with the suit.

“Shu, you reek of the sea,” said Lei-Lei. “Your pelt is all stiff, too.”

“I could breathe just fine with the Underwater Breathing accessory, but the seawater sure wasn’t good for my fur,” said Shu in response.

He had dived into the sea while wearing a bear suit, so that result was to be expected. In fact, normally, that action would be suicide. Many might’ve suggested that he should’ve taken off the suit before diving, but that was a thought that neither of them had considered.

After reflecting upon this incident, Shu spent two weeks at sea, hunting for a UBM to get a special reward suit for underwater activities, but that was a story for another time.



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Infinite Dendrogram: Volume 2

by Sakon Kaidou

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