



After finishing the data separation of Nero and Blanck in Futzu Tower, Red and the others were preparing to return to Shepherd. As they finished up their preparations, Merveille called out to Yurlungur, who sat in the large hall known as 'Mirrirmina', which was located in the dimly lit central area of Futzu Tower.

"By the way... I'm concerned about Nushi."

"I see. You are welcome to ask any questions."

Yurlungur answered as detached as usual from the tall space where she was gracefully sitting. Merveille explained the discharge phenomenon that struck everyone on the way to Futzu Tower.

"Understood. That was because the entity you call Nushi has reached its active limits."

When Merveille heard those words, she frowned.

"Well, that's about what I expected..."

Red and Chocolat could not properly understand the significance, and looked at each other with puzzled faces. With that in mind, they went to Elh for confirmation.

"In other words, Nushi will die... Is that it?"

In response to her question, Yurlungur replied with an inflection-less voice.

"If we are to use that notion as an example, then it would be safe to say that,"

As she continued to speak, Red became belatedly panicked.

"No way, he's going to die? Why so soon!?"

"Nushi has been living for ages, right? I can't begin to imagine why he would die now..."

As Chocolat frowned and gently rubbed her head, Merveille spoke once again,

"Whether something is living, or whether it's just an object, a lifespan will always exist. It's unfortunate, but... In any case, how much longer is his lifespan?"

"I can't guarantee this, but in less than half a year, that entity will have completed its purpose."

Yurlungur announced the truth bluntly.

Due to her emotionless tone, everyone realized they had no choice but to accept the inevitability and became unable to utter a word.

It was then, that Yurlungur made a proposal no one had expected.

"Do you desire a new 'contract'?"

Elh, who responded sensitively to the word 'contract', asked for an explanation.

"What kind of contract do you mean?"

The others aside from Elh looked at Yurlungur. After a while, Yurlungur slowly opened her mouth.

"—Once, we formed a contract with your ancestors, the Wolf Tribe. In order for your race to hold a stable civilization, we provided various limited assistances."

So as to compare their known knowledge with history, Merveille went into explanation.

"History says that it was the Wolf Tribe who brought Robo technology to Shepherd. However, they should have disappeared afterwards... Is that related to the contract?"

Yurlungur gave a small nod.

"In exchange for technology and the future of their lineage, they were bound to a contract to erase all traces of themselves from the world."

They fell dead silent.

It was Elh who interrupted the silence.

"Where are they now?"

Yurlungur faintly shook her head.

"That is a confidential matter— Nevertheless, if you desire a new 'contract', you may request it."

They glanced at each other's faces, and before long, the destination of their eyes naturally gathered on Red. Merveille prompted Red by asking,

"So, what are you going to do?"

Taking the brunt of the question directed at him, Red became panicked.

"Huh, me? Why me?"

"I'm not saying you have to decide now. I just want to hear your opinion on what you would do."

Red crossed his arms as he thought about it.

"Hmm... In that case, I don't really think we need a contract."

Red looked at the faces of the people watching him, and they all nodded similarly.

"I agree. It wouldn't be good to get too involved here."

"Hm... It'll be a waste, but I guess it can't be helped."

Chocolat had a slightly dissatisfied look on her face, though she didn't seem to be too attached to the idea.

"To not make this contract means that we cannot come here anymore... Are you still okay with that?"

Merveille made sure to emphasize that.

"Yeah. I told that to Baion as well."

Merveille blinked and pressed her eyebrows together.

"...To Baion?"

"Yeah, when we fought in Tartarus I said that 'the ancient people obtaining such a useful, versatile power, meant that they stopped having to help each other'... The things here are too convenient for us."

Yurlungur suddenly looked up, complimenting him.

"Ah, I'm grateful for the situation with Nero and Blanck, but even so, maybe we're making a mistake in the way we're doing this?"

Merveille laughed.

"Well, I think so too... From the start, technology has been something not to be given, but created."

Merveille gracefully pushed the glasses being held up by her mouth with the tip of her finger, somehow giving off a sense of superiority.

Chocolat spoke with a puzzled look on her face.

"Why are you laughing?"

"Fufu... It's like if a divorced husband was proven wrong, and the son grew into a person who appreciated their mother's feelings... That was an exaggerated analogy. Forget about it."

"Hmm~?"

Chocolat tilted her head, hopelessly lost.

"I don't really get it, but there's no need for a new contract like that. Sorry."

Red faced his hands toward Yurlungur.

"No, I predicted you would say something like that."

Was it just their imagination, or did she seem to faintly smile?

"It seems the former Wolf Tribe was correct in who they entrusted the future to. It's good that you came to this conclusion once more."

Feeling awkward, Red scratched his nose.

"In which case, in honor of the Wolf Tribe, I will make another proposal."

Yurlungur continued her speech while staring at Red.

"If Project CODA continues as it is, the layer of plasma clouds will disappear, and at any time, the land currently raised in the air will return to its original continents as planned. However—"

She slowly looked over everyone.

"As you have been deemed worthy to inherit this world, you must be involved with the project's progression, and carry out the decision of the final placement of this land."

Red frantically attempted to simplify Yurlungur's words through his head as he verified them.

"Umm... Basically, you want us to decide what to ultimately do with the land?"

Yurlungur explained it over again.

"Yes. To return the land its original continents, or to preserve it in its current state."

"Is it really okay for us to do whatever we want with the floating islands and keep them like this?"

When Red asked just to be sure, Yurlungur replied with a nod.

"Yes. So, is that what you desire?"

This time, they each had a face more complicated than with the previous proposal.

"What...do we do now?"

Elh examined Red's face.

"What we'll say... What would be a good decision?"

Sensing that their answer would not be immediate, Yurlungur spoke to compensate for that.

"Then, I will give you some time. No matter what you decide of the project's execution, it's a matter for the future. Please leave me a message if you come up with an answer."

"A message? If we can't come here anymore, how would we send a message?"

Yurlungur sweetly smiled as she answered Red's reasonable question.

"In the past, I received a rather positive message. How about that method?"

Saying that, Yurlungur gently cupped both of her hands together so as to hold them out. Both hands carried something similar to small constructs of paper.

"...Ah—! Are those the 'crane chains' we scattered back then!?"

Red loudly raised his voice in astonishment.

Merveille was also unable to hide her surprise any further.

"Are you saying they passed through the plasma sea of clouds and reached here? What a miraculous probability..."

While Yurlungur stared at the results of the miracle, she began to speak with more emotion than ever before.

"So it was you after all. Then, as before, I wish to entrust you with the future of the land. In the case that these 'crane chains' do not arrive here before the plasma sea of clouds disappear, I will assume you have abandoned the intention to alter the project, and I will carry it out as planned."

On the pale, inorganic skin of Yurlungur's face, she produced a faint, gentle smile, and continued speaking.

"Although it was not long ago when I said it would be a matter for the future, the arrival of that time, the true activation of CODA, may arrive earlier than we hypothesized."

Though Red took a sigh so as to try and gain an idea, his face was rather bright.

"Alright, I'll think about it."

He lightly raised his hands in a show of submission.

"Thank you. If there is ever a time in which you waver in your decision, your Robo... the Dahak you called it— I do not know if you will find basis for a decision in it, but there are some 'materials' installed in into it. Please 'listen' to it eventually."

"Materials?...Sure, all right."

He didn't properly understand, but for the time being, Red considered it might be good to look into it later.

"Well then, I have some homework to do, shall we get going?"

When Merveille spoke up, they each headed for the exit. Then—

"Ah..."

Elh seemed to remember something as she came to a halt and let her gaze swim free.

"What's the matter?"

Merveille asked, seemingly suspicious.

To reply, Elh fearfully opened her mouth.

"...By any chance, is it safe for us to go back?"

As she said that, Merveille suddenly realized it as well, and looked to Yurlungur. Yurlunger was bowing deeply.

"I pray for your safe return."

Everyone gulped.

Everyone, with the exception of Red.



Compared to the trip going there, the fierce electric storm they had anticipated on the way back was gentle.

One reason was that they were mentally steeled (essentially prepared) for it. And the other reason, the biggest reason, was because of the effective electromagnetic shielding vaccine made in secret by Yurlungur that was given to Nushi for temporary support.

They hadn't thought she was the mischievous type, but that was a severe lack of information.

In any case, they all safely went through the sea of clouds and returned to Shepherd.

The Asmodeus withdrew from the body of Nushi, whereupon they soon identified the Golden Roar's figure nearby.

Opera had the sense (To be precise, it was on Gren's advice, however) to have the flagship, the Golden Roar, be on standby for Nushi's arrival in the airspace.

After Chocolat slid the vessel into the small ship dock at the Golden Roar's lower deck, Nushi grandly leapt its large frame into the sky, vigorously diving its body into the sea of clouds.

That movement may have been the final image of its farewell imprinted into their minds. From the bridge of the Asmodeus, Red and the others gazed over it, deeply moved.

"Ahh, welcome back

J"

As they descended to the Golden Roar's spacious surface deck, each feeling a little sentimental, a colorful— if rather carefree voice greeted them.

"Gah, Master, it's bad to have you come out like this—"

"It'll be fine, we have free time."

With a snap, a blood vessel seemed to rise on Merveille's forehead.

"Mr. Gren, it seems that your master has more time than she knows what to do with, so please put some of it to use on work."

"Gh—"

Gren, who was attempting to restrain Opera from behind, swiftly revealed himself.

"...As you command."

"Agh"

Opera quickly spread open her folding fan and concealed her lips with it as she retreated in a hurry.

"I completely forgot that I was ju~ust leaving to go do some work. Well, see you later~, meoui**√**"

'Aah, busy busy', Opera mumbled flauntingly in a loud voice as she left with great momentum.

Merveille and Gren both lightly sighed at the same time.

"Mr. Gren. Please look after her, as always."

"Sigh. Understood."

Gren chased after Opera with urgency.

"It's as noisy as ever here...haha"

"In the case of noisiness, I don't think you lose to them in that regard, Red."

Elh rolled her eyes at Red with an exasperated expression.

"So he's noisy too... Moreover, I wonder what I should do. Maybe just the usual homework..."

She set her hands behind her head while at a loss.

"You shouldn't need to think about it too hard."

Merveille replied to give them a farewell as Gren pursued Opera.

"Please give an honest answer when you feel ready. Well then, I'll be going back."

As Merveille said that, she returned to having the look of the Kurvaz technical advisor and left with a small run.

"Wow, she's pretty angry... I feel bad for Opera."

As Red saw them off, his whole body shuddered.

"...If that's what you think, then could you hide me for a bit? Tee-hee..."

Opera, who should have disappeared a while ago, unexpectedly revealed her face from inside the Asmodeus.

"Wha—!? When did—!?"

"I'll be looked down on if I get in trouble, dumpling. I'm still the the Kurvaz Guild Master...Tee-hee"

"Then, do your job as guild master seriously!"

Red pointed his finger with a snap.

"To think Red would be lecturing someone on work ethic..."

Elh shuddered as she quietly murmured.

"Oh, being feisty, are you? ... Can you still say something like that after seeing this?"

From behind Opera, was Chocolat, whose figure was displayed bound by rope.

"Hauu...Re~ed. Looks like I got caught."

However, there wasn't a hint of urgency on her face.

Red fell to his knees.

"Nom d'un chien! (Kh!) ...Coward!"

"Tee-hee-hee I If you know what this means, then let me escape with you guys!"

This was great.

"...Is that a Hunter request?"

Red displayed a mischievous grin.

This was going great.

"There's no choice... You'll have to do this. Tee-hee"

Her face completely reverted back to its malicious-look during her special ops days. Perhaps the aspects they saw of her during the times when she was unusually pleasant were because they were unexpectedly similar people.

"However, with Chocolat like that, the Asmodeus isn't going to be flying anywhere."

"Ah..."

With Elh attempting to end the charade by pointing that flaw out, Red became dumbfounded.

"I think I made a mistake..."

Opera slowly shifted her line of sight from Chocolat to another person. Red also slowly followed where her line of sight ended at.

"W-What?"

The pair's gazes stopped at Elh, who felt a premonition of something fierce and unpleasant rush by, causing the entirety of her fur to stand on end.



"Unbelievable."

On top of a bed in the living quarters of the cruising Asmodeus, which had departed from the Golden Roar in a hurry, Elh was laying down and grumbling, bound by rope.

Her face was stuck in a state of shock.

"Er~ sorry. I guess I thought this would enjoyable, or something—"

While he sat on a chair, Red was apologizing to Elh with his hands jointly together, facing towards her.

She didn't feel an ounce of sincerity.

"Unbelievable... Truly unbelievable."

"Now, now. Recently we've been borrowing the Kurvaz for one thing or another, so we had to return the favor sometime."

Opera was sitting across the table, opposite of Red, and piggybacked off of his remark.

"Oh, really? Isn't it mostly just you guys overusing our technical advisor conveniently?

"That's...also true."

Opera clapped her hand with her closed folding fan.

"I always say this, but it'd be better if you joined the Kurvaz sometime soon, don't you think...? Wouldn't it be nice to treat yourself with a salary?"

Though she was as talkative as ever, the color in her eyes held a trace of seriousness in them. For some reason, Opera placed a glance on Red.

"Well, I'll definitely admit the current Kurvaz are different from the old ones... Still, you're gonna have to give it up."

As a Hunter who made a living for himself, Red couldn't even begin to imagine becoming a member of an organization. Besides, he wasn't bound by anything. He acted only on his own intentions, and didn't want anything to get in the way of maintaining that independence.

It seemed as if on top of being pardoned by the current Kurvaz, Red would also be welcomed into their ranks. However, that's where he drew the line, Red thought.

"Maybe I'll find some other way to help you out after this and properly return the favor... Like right now, for example."

"...That's just like Québec. He's got a habit of being stubborn, and just aimlessly wandering about."

They both vaguely displayed a strained smile.

To interrupt the strange atmosphere, a muffled voice became audible from the bed.

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"Hey... You didn't forget about me, did you?"
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For some reason, the room's temperature felt several times colder, causing Red to shiver.

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"Ah...dang it."
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"So you forgot, after all?"

Opera hastily rose up and headed for the bridge.

"I wonder, has the heat gradually become cooler...?"

Red also attempted to follow Opera to the bridge, however the door slammed shut before his eyes. He tried to open it, but it seemed to be pinned shut from the other side.

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"Please... Just open!"
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From behind Red, who was rattling the door knob, hushed words filled with bloodlust became audible.

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"Oohn-Sala-Loosa..."
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"Marya-Sala-Loosa..."

Elh was standing behind Red.

A pattern was emerging on her forehead.

The rope had naturally been torn to bits and scattered around.

"Hey, that's what I heard at the Rite of Forfeit!"

Red's eyes roamed around, restlessly searching for some sort of escape.

"Mani-Shirahalita"

"Yaan-Loosa..."

Unquestionably clasped in Elh's hand was the Medallion, the center of which shined radiantly.

"Are you kiddin' me!?"

Afterward, the 'great and powerful' Elh's fury had somehow been suppressed, and the three people other Elh were collapsed on the floor.

It was right then, as if they had arranged it, that Calua came to the Asmodeus to pick up Opera.

"Why are you guys on the floor?"

"I don't know."

Elh's blunt declaration was cold.

Couldn't she just humor them?

"Must've been scary, dude."

Calua shook at Opera while avoiding Elh.

"I think it's time for us to go back, dude."

"Oh, I'm late, aren't I..."

Calua cut to the point as he watched Opera wobbly stand, on the verge of tears.

"Maybe it would've been better if you stayed at the Golden Roar, dude."

""

While seeing the two off, Red got up and called out to them.

"Hey, you guys... If the sea of clouds disappeared and all of Shepherd's floating islands were to float in a sea of water someday... What would you think?"

Opera replied while unsteadily exiting from the Asmodeus.

"Ahh... If that's the case, it would be very interesting."

"Yeah... You're right."

Opera, helpless and completely exhausted, departed from the Asmodeus in her Robo, the 'Tiamat'.

"Was that helpful, Red?"

Chocolat asked, sitting down.

"Yeah~"

Red crossed his arms as he thought about it.

"I'm kinda worn-out... I'm gonna head off to bed."



"Well, it's not like I'm in a hurry..."

He laid down flat on the bed and closed his eyes.

"It not gonna happen anytime soon, after all..."

As he reflected on the situation, he was replied to with a remark.

"Is that good enough?"

Within his cloudy consciousness, that voice was the only thing that reverberated. Before he knew it, he seemed to be within his own dream.

He knew, because that voice was one that he should not have been able to currently hear.

"Baion...? I guess I was conflicted enough for you to show up in my dream. About what I promised (the order)."

Even though he knew this was a dream, Red smiled bitterly.

"Though true that you were declared a failure..."

There were no echoes of anger or contempt felt in the meaning of those words.

"You will certainly follow through on what you have your heart set on... Nobody will condemn you."

"I...wonder what I want to do..."

"Hah, the order is all around, and shortly before you... Is it not?"

Abruptly, his head and eyes awakened.

It seemed some time had passed as he slept, as it was dark outside.

"That's right, Yurlungur mentioned something about leaving materials in the Dahak..."

He stirred out of bed, and headed for the Dahak's hanger. With the sound of a metal door being slammed shut, Elh woke up.

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"...Red...?"
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Sitting in the cockpit of the Dahak, Red looked troubled.

"What should I do about these materials?"

Red thought back on Yurlungur's words.

"Definitely, she said something like, 'listen'... Come on Dahak, let me listen to those materials... Just kidding."

He jokingly began talking to the Dahak.

whoosh...

Suddenly, sound began to play from the speaker used for communications.

"W-What?"

"...I hope that someday, someone will hear this..."

"It's hard to hear, but... it's a person's voice."

"We humans...have made a terrible mistake..."

"Already, those days...we cannot regain those peaceful days... It is regrettable..."

"Did they say...humans? No way, this is—!"

The audio continued.

"Soon, we will disappear... For the future of this star, there are no other paths than for us to disappear... We were involved in a science that should have illuminated the future of humanity... Please allow us to make this judgement..."

Red was speechless so as to hear each and every word that was vented out.

The voice wrung out every word with bottled up regret, sorrow, and despair. Therefore, it was sharply carved into Red's heart.

"If...if this voice reaches someone in the future, please I ask of you..."

"This star...the fate of Earth... It's entrusted to you."

The audio ceased there.

"This star...the fate of Earth... It's entrusted to you..."

tap

There was a sound near the hanger. A figure emerged from its direction.

It was Elh.

"Red...that audio just now... It can't be..."

"It seems like the last words of ancient humanity... I think it's just before the 'Reset'."

A bright determination burned in Red's eyes.

"Elh..."

"Huh?"

"Let's make them. The cranes."



Red was at the deck of the Asmodeus, gazing at the islands floating in the sky. Looking again at the islands, they seemed to look somewhat frail, yet he firmly felt they had the strength to support themselves.

"It's beautiful... Yes."

Elh was behind Red, watching the islands similarly to him.

"I also love this world... However, perhaps I couldn't have felt like this back when I was part of a clan of contractors, as I was too concerned about my mission of protecting the world."

"I see..."

Red turned his head to look at Elh. Her smiling face was proud, yet gentle.

"Red, have you decided on an answer yet?"

"Ah, well... Hehe."

Red looked at the cranes in her hands. It was only a bundle of what Red and the others had folded.

"Is this really all we need?"

"For what we made, these are good enough for now... Besides, even if they aren't received immediately, they'll arrive there someday. But even if they never arrive... Even if the islands return to the ground, it won't be a problem."

He smiled powerfully.

"As far as we're concerned, for the sake of these floating islands and everyone in the future, the world then will be theirs."

Chocolat's voice echoed sharply from the bridge.

"We'll be near Futzu Tower any time now~♪"

Red and Elh exchanged glances.

They nodded to each other, then with all his strength, Red tossed the bundle of cranes toward the sea of clouds.

"Go! We'll be connected all the way, I believe in the people of the future!"

(Just as those people believed in us, and hoped to entrust us with the fate of this star,)

(We— What we can do—)

(Is keep doing whatever we need to.)

Red and Elh continued to watch until the cranes vanished into the sea of clouds.



A few hours ago—

Within the cramped cabin of a certain small airship, its crew who were jam-packed into it were clamorously raising their voices.

For some reason, it was filled with Felineko children.

Among them, a sole Caninu young man, who was holding what roughly looked like sky pirate's clothing, dropped his shoulders, dejected.

"Hey... Isn't it pointless for me to be in this outfit?"

The young man's excessively timid tone of voice showed that it was the final confirmation that his wish would not be granted.

"Wasn't you who said it'd be cool to enter a foreign country and raise an uproar?"

The voice of the lively and confident girl appeared to unabashedly enjoy the current circumstances.

"No, I said *not* to raise an uproar..."

"Isn't that the same thing? Anyway, end of discussion. □"

Just by imagining what would begin to occur after this due to the girl not verifying the mistake she pointed out, the young man hung his head.

Another girl spoke as she gently put her hand on the young man's shoulders. Though it was quiet, she had a distinct voice that could strongly express her will.

"...Your grandfather will certainly be there, waiting for you to come help him."

"Yeah... You're right, Stare."

The young man's expression quickly changed serious.

"I have to help Grandpa."

That moment, a nearby barrel abruptly broke open, thereupon something rushed out, and jumped up on a shelf. Something that, though small, roughly had the shape of a person. It broke into its signature pose and made a loud declaration.

"If that's the case, I shall aid my superior!"

"P-Panta... Since when have you been there?"

The young man was taken aback.

"Whenever the Black Cats Gang shows suspicious movement, I'm always there without exception!"

"I-I see..."

Not wanting to have to look after the small figure, the young man hung his head once again— Panta continued to talk.

"Aside from that, where are we?"

"That's—"

As the young man opened his mouth, the high-pitched voice of a childish and energetic girl echoed from above the cabin.

"Hey, hey, it looks like we'll be in Shepherd soon—! It's been a while— Hehehe♪"

"All right... I'll go over there now, Flare."

For the sake of the owner of the childish voice, Flare, the quiet girl, Stare, left the cabin to head towards the deck.

Panta looked puzzled as he began to ask the young man a question.

"Why Shepherd?"

The young man responded seriously, completely differing from his timid voice earlier.

"Red... I need his help."

With a smack, the lively girl who had been arguing with young man hit him on the shoulder.

"Owowow... What are you doing, Alicia?"

"Come on, make up your mind. It's not big enough a deal that you'll need that guy's help, is it Waffle?"

Staring at the sky pirate outfit he held in his hand, the young man, Waffle, gave in and began taking off his police uniform.

"I-Idiot! Don't just all of a sudden start changing clothes in front of a lady! It's no wonder I always say you have no delicacy!"

Hurling a slap to his back, the lively girl, Alicia, left the room with blushing cheeks.

"Ugh..."

Though Waffle had breathed out many sighs that day, he had already thought about the difficulties that might be waiting ahead, and so he reassured himself as he put on the sleeve of the pirate costume.

"Red, I hope to see you soon."



"Well, we did what we could... Didn't we?"

On the deck of the Asmodeus, Red spoke to Elh irresponsible-seeming.

The minute the Asmodeus returned to Shepherd, Red hit a mental wall.

"Yes, I knew you had no plan."

Elh was no longer agitated.

"...The world isn't going to let you go."

"The world; me?"

"Yes, so you had better prepare."

Red grinned back to Elh, who seemed to laugh mean-spiritedly.

"Is that what we're gonna do, then?"

Elh snorted, and answered with a hmph.

"I've already chosen to prepare."

From the other side of the Asmodeus, an airship drew near.

The vast world of floating islands certainly seemed unwilling to let them go.



