

Sakon Kaidou  
Illustrator: Taiki

# Infinite End Program

13. Vorpal Rabbit, Vorpal Hare



# *Table of Contents*

*Prologue: Friends*

*Chapter One: The Third Job*

*Chapter Two: Clan*

*Chapter Three: The Fearsome Clan*

*Interlude: The Imperium's Preparations*

*Chapter Four: The Rabbit Skips Through the Darkness*

*Chapter Five: The Night Before the Peace Conference*

*Chapter Six: Peace Conference*

*Interlude: The Assault on Altea*

*Chapter Seven: Opened Hostilities*

*Chapter Eight: The Battle of the Masterless*

*Chapter Nine: Vorpal Rabbit, Vorpal Hare*

*Interlude: The Spectator*

*Afterword*

*Bonus Short Stories*

*About J-Novel Club*

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# Infinite Dendrogram

13. Vorpal Rabbit, Vorpal Hare

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The two faced each other like in a western. Then... both of them vanished.

"Yes, please do so. I will also PK you."

"I'll find and kill Tom after PK'ing you. You only added another step to the process."

Kashimiya

Chrono Crown

# Character

## Ray

Ray Starling / Reiji Mukudori

A young man who began playing Infinite Dendrogram. Though generally a calm person, he has a strong will and sense of what is right that allows him to keep struggling for as long as he needs to.



## Nemesis

Nemesis

A girl that manifested as Ray's Embryo. She has the ability to transform into a greatsword, a halberd, a shield, and a pinwheel. She's a bit of a glutton, too.



## Juliet

Juliet

Ranked #4 in Altar's duel rankings. Her main job is Fallen Knight, and she often acts edgy or mysterious for the sake of seeming cool. Likes to hang out with Chelsea, a girl who holds the 8th position in the duel rankings.



## Kashimiya

Kashimiya

A major duelist, and the strongest player killer in the Kingdom of Altar. After a long period of rising up and beating the odds, he's risen to the #2 spot in the duel rankings. He's a PK with a moral compass, and makes a point not to attack people indiscriminately.



## Azurite

Altimia Azurite Altar

First princess of the Kingdom of Altar, and holder of the Sacred Princess job. After she encountered Ray, she started to change her feelings towards masters like him.



# **Prologue: Friends**

*Sacred Princess, Altimia A. Altar*

I immediately realized that I was dreaming.

I'd had this dream many times before — a dream of the past. However, unlike the previous times I dreamed of this, I didn't relive the last time I saw my father.

Instead, I saw a scene that dated back a lot further than the day my father died. The dream was more of a vision from half a decade ago, when Altar and Dryfe were on such good terms that the very idea of a war between them seemed absurd.

It was a peaceful time, before the attack of The Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria, and even before the increase in the number of Masters.

Back then, I was a transfer student at a school in Dryfe. On that day, I was in the dorm's lounge, reading a book I'd checked out from the library.

I was the only one there, most likely because I was the first princess of a kingdom. I'd been here for almost a year now, so I was used to being avoided — not out of hate, but out of fear.

“Altimia, can I have a moment?”

Despite all that, there was still one person who would always talk to me.

“Claudiah. What is it?” Claudiah was her name, and she was one of my few friends here. You could definitely say that we were close.

...Though, it's not like I had many friends in Altar, either. There was only Liliana — the daughter of my father's friend — and Integra — the youngest of the Arch Sage's disciples.

"Would you like to come shopping with me this afternoon?" Claudiah asked. "We can get some tea at a café, too. They should start selling fall treats today."

"...You really like going out, don't you?" Claudiah was the daughter of the third prince of Dryfe and one of the candidates for the throne. She had also been in charge of helping me live in this foreign land. We were about the same age and had some things in common, so we got along rather well.

"What do you need to buy, if I may ask?" I wondered out loud.

"Clothes! Mostly for you!"

"Me?"

"You've gotten a little bigger in the chest, haven't you? By next season, all your clothes will be too tight for you."

"Well, I *am* in the middle of a growth spurt. I'm impressed you noticed."

"...Heheheh. Well, people really pay attention to things they desperately want, but can't easily get." Claudiah then indicated her own bust — it was on the smaller side, and it didn't look like it would be growing anytime soon... If ever.

Claudiah was staring at my chest with envy in her eyes, too. I got the impression she'd reach for it if I took too long to respond, so I rushed to give my answer.

"Very well... Let's go. I wanted to look around the bookstores, anyway."

"Splendid! Let's meet up outside the gate at one o'clock! I can't wait!"

I found the meeting time she specified a bit odd. My watch said that it was still ten in the morning. That meant that we wouldn't be meeting up until over three hours from now.

“Why the afternoon?” I asked. “I’m free. We could go right now. Do you have some prior commitment?”

“My brother asked me to help him in his workshop! Ugh... I know my stats are high, but he shouldn’t make a lady carry things around for him.”

“Oh, I see...” Like she’d just said, her stats *were* extremely high.

After all, her job was The Ram.

Claudiah had been born with incredible talent that had allowed her to claim the open Superior Job at the tender age of thirteen. That was one of the reasons why we got along so well. Though I used the Swordmaster job title as a cover, I was actually the Sacred Princess. We were both daughters of ruling families, and we both spent a great deal of time honing our martial skills, so it made sense that we would see eye to eye. We even sparred together at least once every few days.

“Could you not simply have someone else assist your brother?”

Claudiah was a lady — someone you could truly call a “princess.” I found it unfitting for such an individual to perform manual labor, and it seemed strange that her brother would ask something like that of her.

“Sadly, no,” Claudiah answered. “My brother is extremely anxious around strangers and cannot focus on his work if he’s with someone besides me or a member of our mother’s family... the Barbaros, I mean.”

“I see...” That seemed reasonable enough to me.

Claudiah had lost both of her parents, and it was rumored that they were assassinated by someone from the imperial family. While Claudiah had somehow gotten through everything while remaining innocent and cheerful, I could only guess that her elder brother, on

the other hand, refused to trust anyone but those he considered his own.

"Well, I don't mind waiting," I said. "You go help your brother."

"Thank you! I will not take long, so please be patient!" Claudiah rushed out of the lounge and through the hallway at supersonic speeds.

That was a level beyond the usual rule-breaking in the dorms, but her carelessness just made me chuckle. I resumed reading my book, killing time until she came back.

About two hours later, I closed my book.

There was less than an hour left until one o'clock, our proposed meeting time, but Claudiah hadn't returned.

A bit curious, I went to the workshop she'd mentioned earlier. Dryfe was a country of machines, so all places of education had facilities for machine-related crafting jobs.

And so, in a pleasant hallway outside the workshop, I found a familiar face — Claudiah herself.

"Oh. Claudiah — Hm...?" However, once I came close, I realized that it *wasn't* her.

This person had a very similar face, but the expression and the eyes were nothing alike.

Princess Claudiah was cheerful, energetic, and had the vigor of a true battle-focused Superior Job. This person, by contrast, was far too gloomy to even serve as her shadow.

The lovely face that so resembled Claudiah's was spoiled by the dark expression and the oil staining their hair and cheeks. They also weren't wearing a school uniform — instead, they were clad in a set of dirtied work clothes.

However, what made it plainly obvious that this couldn't possibly be Claudiah was the *gaze*. It was icy cold, as though this person had never once felt any warmth or passion.

Still, the face resembled Claudiah's so much that it must have been someone related to her.

"Are you... Claudiah's brother?" I asked.

"...Yes, Your Highness Altimia." Though his voice was lower, it was similar to Claudiah's in tone, just as you would expect from a sibling.

I could only assume that they were twins.

I also realized that he knew who I was. Perhaps Claudiah had told him about me?

"Claudiah... I mean, Her Highness is always a great help to me."

"...No need to act like that around me. She does what she does because she wants to. Also, you don't need to use 'Highness' for me, or her."

Though it seemed like he wasn't fully tuned into the conversation, I felt like his attitude had shifted slightly.

"Do you know where Claudiah is?" I asked. "I was looking for her. We agreed to meet up, and it's almost time."

"...I suppose she's taking a bath right now," he replied. "I had her help with my work, so she's probably as dirty as me... She can't go with you in such a state. I'd appreciate it if you wait for her a bit longer."

"Oh, so that's what's happening." Gloomy as he was, his words still held a hint of gentleness towards his sister, as well as some consideration for me — her friend. I also started to notice that his eyes held more warmth than I'd realized at first.

I quickly revised my impression of him. Maybe he wasn't such a cold person after all.

I looked down and saw a metal container clutched in his hands.

"A toolbox..."

"...Despite appearances, I *am* the King of Machines. I'm often entrusted with repairing all kinds of devices, like the machines here in this school or the Imperstand."

King of Machines was the Superior Job in the mechanic grouping. Dryfe Imperium was a country that boasted far more technicians than warriors. You couldn't say the same about Claudiah's job, The Ram, but there had to be a great many people here in Dryfe competing for the King of Machines title. If he was truly Claudiah's twin, he was far too young for such a job. The fact that he actually had it meant that he must be nothing short of a genius.

...Though, I did find it odd that a candidate for the throne was entrusted with something as mundane as repairs.

"I will be going, then," he said. "Please keep being a good friend to my sister."

"I will. Thank you."

And with that, we parted ways.

However, it was only after I'd returned my book to the library that I realized something important.

"Oh... I forgot to ask his name."

What was it, again? I didn't know at this point.

After several dozen more minutes, Claudiah finally appeared in the lounge.

"My apologies! I'm late!" she exclaimed.

“It’s okay. You had a hard time, didn’t you? It doesn’t bother me at all.”

“Ohh! You’re so nice! I love you!” Claudiah ran up to me and hugged my arm like a little girl. Her hair smelled faintly of the machine oil she’d failed to entirely wash off.

Oh, I could only imagine how hard she worked to get rid of this smell.

She soon realized that I’d noticed the smell and jumped back about twenty metels, like any normal battle-focused job would.

“I-I’m sorry! Ugh! Why did my brother have to make me help him *today*, of all days?! My usual deodorant did nothing! I can’t walk with you like this!”

“There’s no point in shopping separately. The smell doesn’t bother me, really, so you can come closer.”

“Altimia... Th-Thank you!”

And so, we stood side-by-side and went shopping just like we’d planned. Shoulder-to-shoulder, we talked about many things on the way.

One of the things we discussed was her brother.

“Oh? You met him?”

“Yes. And as rude as it may be, I forgot to ask for his name.”

“Well, he almost never introduces himself,” she said, before heaving a heavy sigh and shaking her head. “I’ll make introductions in his stead! His name is... Reinhard!”

The moment I heard that name, the dream ended.



Then, I awoke from my dream of the past and sat up. Wiping the sweat from my brow, I let out a sigh.

"To think I would dream of her *now*, of all times..." Once the dream was over, that was the only thing I said.

However, I knew full well why I saw that vision in particular.

It was no doubt the peace offer from the imperium.

Now, there was a small part of me that hoped the war would soon end and our relationship would go back to the way it was. That small part of me had dreamed of my time in Dryfe — the fun memories I made with my friend.

If all went well during the upcoming peace talks, the war would be over.

But if it didn't, the fighting would inevitably resume. It would be a war that would decide the fate of both the kingdom I led and the imperium that Claudiah's brother Reinhard ruled.

In silence, I pondered the situation. We were no doubt good friends.

However, the war with Dryfe had taken my father from me.

The gulf between not just the two of us, but our whole countries had grown too vast and too deep.

If there was no peace to be had, then we would have no choice but to fight.

She and I might be friends, but both of us had something more important to protect.

I was the Sacred Princess — the sword of the kingdom — while she was The Ram — the spear of the imperium. Just as I wanted to protect my sisters, she wanted to aid her brother. I was certain that we would be forced to fight each other to protect what we held dear.

It might even lead to one of us taking the other's life.

"But..."

No matter what happened next.

No matter what lay in store for us.

No matter what terrible fate might befall me.

“I... I want us to always be friends.” That was the conclusion I drew from my nostalgic dream, before I steeled my resolve once more.



### *The Imperator’s Office, Dryfe Imperium*

On the day that Gideon, the City of Duels, was shaken by the two Superiors — King of Berserk, Hannya and Over Gladiator, Figaro — Field Marshal Gifted Barbaros was having an audience with his imperator.

“And that concludes our report on the events in Quartierlatin.”

Barbaros had been summoned here for two reasons.

One of them was to deliver the final report about the Quartierlatin incident. His mission there was to investigate the ruins and prevent the kingdom from acquiring any powerful weapons there — and by his own estimation, he’d failed.

However, that wasn’t because the superweapon, Acra-Vasta, had been destroyed by the kingdom’s Masters and the Sacred Princess, Altimia A. Altar. The real problem was in the reports that followed the events, saying that the kingdom was only growing stronger thanks to the discovery of certain facilities in the ruins — a plant that produced not the uncontrollable Prism Soldiers, but Prism Steeds instead.

Thanks to events such as the clash with The Lynx, Tom Cat, and the large-scale battle against Acra-Vasta, Gifted had found the whole incident to be an extremely hectic experience. However, he saw the ultimate outcome as a failure on his part and didn’t even try to hide that assessment in his report.

"I see how it is, Uncle Gifted," a matter-of-fact, emotionless voice replied. "Also, there is no need to be so formal with me."

The person calling Gifted "Uncle" was none other than the current imperator of Dryfe — Reinhard.

"You claim that this is a failure on your part, but I do not see it that way. The primary objective was to destroy the superweapon. That was accomplished. Certainly the ideal outcome would have been for us to secure the weapon and destroy the production facilities on top of that, but the outcome we have is far better than one where the kingdom wields the weapon as their own."

Gifted took a moment to think about how to respond, but his train of thought was cut off by a different voice resounding in the room. "But Brother Dearest, this 'Acra-Vasta' was an *uncontrollable* superweapon, was it not? If Dryfe could not master it, the very notion that Altar could do so is absurd. They never could've wielded it in the first place." This new voice was much like Reinhard's; the differences were quite subtle.

"It's entirely possible to control supposedly 'uncontrollable' weapons with Embryos. We even know of one example, do we not?"

"Oh, The Weapon. I'd somehow forgotten how he ruined an entire underground city." With a voice that carried slightly more emotion than before, Reinhard was now talking to his sister, Claudioh.

Gifted said nothing. He merely listened, thinking back on the past and noting how the machine-like Reinhard always had a soft spot for his sister.

They were both his relatives. Gifted had been adopted by the Barbaros family, meaning that their mother was his elder step-sister, and his wife was their cousin. It was a complicated family tree, but this relationship was a major factor in his rise to the rank of imperial field marshal. He was their uncle, Claudioh's mentor, and the only

person in the military that the two of them could trust. No one else was worthy of it.

"By the way, Uncle Gifted... you met Altimia, did you not?" Reinhard asked. "How was she?"

For a moment, Gifted wondered why he would ask such a thing, but then recalled that the First Princess of Altar and Claudiah had been good friends in school.

"She seemed to be in good health, but..."

"But... what?"

"She was wearing a mask and calling herself 'Azurite.'"

"*Pfft!*" Claudiah covered her mouth and burst into laughter at the mental image. "A mask...! And 'Azurite'? That's just her middle name...! AHAHAHAHAHAH!" Claudiah was so amused by this that she actually fell to the floor clutching her sides, rumpling her fancy business clothing.

"I-I know she really loved books about aristocratic girls concealing their identity and bringing change to the world... but I didn't think she'd actually do it...! PFFT! AHAHAHAHAH! HOOH! HAAH!"

"...Claudiah," Reinhard spoke up, having had enough of the sight and the sound. "I have nothing against laughter, but snorting like that is unbecoming. Also, you are not much better than her in that regard, are you?"

"...Oh. Th-That is true." That was enough to calm Claudiah down.

"I wish to continue talking to Uncle Gifted. Could you please keep yourself under control?"

"Then I'll have to wage a mental mock battle against Altimia herself!" And with those words, Claudiah vanished from the room.

"Now... Let us change the subject, Uncle Gifted."

“...Very well.”

“I’ve heard enough about Quartierlatin; we should discuss the other issue at hand. I believe the information already reached you, but the kingdom now has a fifth Superior.”

Gifted said nothing. This very day, yet another battle between Superiors had occurred in the Altarian city of Gideon. The clash had been arranged by King of Light, F and the control AIs themselves. As unlikely as it seemed, it actually ended without a single casualty. The two Superiors had settled their differences and King of Berserk, Hannya had officially joined Altar.

Now, Dryfe and Altar had an even number of Superiors, and though the former still boasted a higher number of pre-Superiors and Masters in total, the shift in the balance was not to be underestimated.

*We already have to watch out for interference from Caldina,* Gifted thought. If the war resumed as things were now, Caldina would strike the moment both Altar and Dryfe were exhausted, subjugating both countries.

That was the worst outcome he could possibly imagine.

“Altar and Dryfe are now equally matched in military might,” said Reinhard. “And Caldina is biding its time like a watchful hawk. What do you think the best course of action would be?”

The field marshal faction’s original plan had been to demonstrate the imperium’s power to Caldina and quickly annex the kingdom using overwhelming force, but that was no longer an option. The plan was already in doubt once King of Destruction showed his power, but with King of Berserk thrown into the mix, the power gap had grown far too small.

*King of Beasts can keep King of Destruction occupied and ultimately defeat him. That would’ve given our other Superiors the*

*chance to quickly subjugate the kingdom, but that's impossible now that the numbers are even,* Gifted thought.

And thanks to the failure of the chancellor faction — namely, Franklin — it was now impossible to force the kingdom to surrender.

Both factions' ideal plans had been rendered entirely unachievable.

"All we can do now... is end the war," Gifted said. It was impossible to fight Caldina while also facing Altar, and with the kingdom's newfound power, outright war was a futile effort that was best abandoned.

"Exactly," Reinhard nodded in response. "And if we were to be honest with ourselves, we've already won in any case."

"...That is true." The imperium's primary motive for war was the famine caused by Dryfean land gradually becoming woefully unfit for agriculture, as well as Caldina and Altar ending their food exports to the country. However, that had all ended when the imperium occupied the old Lunnings Duchy in the previous war.

The area had a dark history, having been utterly decimated by the mighty and wicked Gloria, but it boasted extremely fertile soil. Dryfe had begun agriculture operations there shortly after the occupation, and some of the faster-growing crops from the territory were already flowing into the imperium, helping to alleviate the famine. The food from the former Lunnings Duchy was enough to prevent mass starvation, meaning that the imperium already lost their primary motivation for fighting.

"The problem is whether the kingdom would allow us to rest on this victory," said Reinhard. It was indeed questionable whether Altar would be open to peace after losing so much of its land and its people, including the king himself. If this was what it took to finally end the war, would they truly accept it?

"In all honesty, I am only half certain," the imperator continued. "I believe that she... the acting queen, I mean, would choose to stop, but I am not so sure about the nobles and commoners who suffered in the war, either directly or indirectly."

"But..."

"Oh? Am I wrong somehow, Uncle Gifted? Do you have anything to say?"

"No... I don't." Gifted refrained from telling Reinhard that he couldn't be so sure that the first princess would choose peace. After all — she had lost her father. She wasn't the only one who felt that way, either. Many citizens of Altar had lost loved ones to the war. Could those people truly just... stop? It was an extremely complicated problem that made any predictions difficult, but Reinhard didn't even seem to consider that. It was as though it had completely slipped his mind... or as if he found it not even worth thinking about in the first place.

"Also, even if we end the war, we still lack certain things," Reinhard added.

"What things would those be?" Gifted asked.

"What was necessary for the country was the old Lunnings Duchy. However, we still do not have what is necessary for the war, for us... and *for the world*."

Gifted fell silent and pondered.

He knew what Reinhard meant by "What is necessary for the war" — that was the kingdom's Superiors. Part of the reason he wanted to annex the kingdom was to acquire its Masters, because it was the only way Dryfe stood a chance against Caldina.

Gifted guessed that "What is necessary for us" likely referred to the first princess of Altar. He already knew that the imperator had strong

personal feelings for her, and it was clear that she was needed for the annexation of the kingdom to occur.

*But what does he mean by “What is necessary for the world?”* Gifted wondered. Not even Gifted could fathom what he meant by that, and he was a high ranking imperial official as well as the imperator’s uncle.

He couldn’t even begin to guess at what Reinhard was thinking.

The young imperator had always had a different viewpoint than most for as long as Gifted could remember; the only one who truly understood him was his twin sister, Claudiah.

“...What is it that’s necessary for the world?” Gifted asked. Reinhard fell silent for a moment to think, then opened his mouth. “It’s...” he began, only to fall silent before saying anything further. “I’m sorry, Uncle Gifted. It seems I have an unexpected guest. Could you please leave us?”

Without answering Gifted’s question, Reinhard suddenly dismissed him instead.

“What...?” Gifted activated the miniature marionettes he’d placed in the surrounding area, but he didn’t see anyone anywhere.

He also wondered what kind of guest would require Reinhard to make everyone else leave.

“I will handle the second matter by trying to make peace with the kingdom,” Reinhard added. “I will draft up our terms and discuss it with you and Mr. Vigoma... so please, leave us for now.”

“...As you will.” And so, Gifted did as he was told.

He considered leaving a marionette in the room in order to find out who his nephew would be talking to — and about what — but decided against it. He realized, based on Reinhard’s attitude alone,

that it would be someone Gifted would not be allowed to know about at any cost.

The imperator was the child of Gifted's step-sister and someone who had been family for nearly twenty years, so there were some things he could understand without Reinhard having to utter a single word.

And so, shortly after Gifted's leave, the space in the office warped... and a single person appeared.

*Imperator Machina, ■■■■■■■■■■■■■■*

As you may be aware, the imperium and the kingdom are now more or less even in their number of Superiors. However, if you consider each individual Superior and their potential for cooperation, then Altar might actually have the upper hand. I understand that I am in no position to say this, but Dryfe's Superiors have some glaring personality flaws.

One is too confident in his own status as a prodigy.

One has been rejecting any sort of companionship since the very beginning.

Murdoch is relatively decent, but he puts too much of his adventurous spirit into all of his actions.

Zeta? She is not a Dryfean Superior, per se. There are far worse snakes you could clutch to your bosom, but I believe she would be willing to complete a particular task I have in mind, at least. That would be satisfactory. I already took it into account.

Huh? Ohh, Franklin... *She* is a timid coward. In addition, she is a mental deviant who cannot put the brakes on her desires and convictions... particularly her drive to create and her desire never to lose.

That is why her plots always have far more layers than necessary. She could not stop herself, and she was afraid of coming into conflict

with someone and suffering defeat. It is a possibility she cannot tolerate. That's why she puts so much unnecessary effort into eliminating any obstacles in her path, and the longer things go badly for her, the less discerning she becomes about her methods.

That's why the one they call Ray Starling is her ultimate obstacle, the being she hates most in the world. His brother — King of Destruction, Shu Starling — is far more powerful than him, but that is irrelevant to her. She found Ray Starling's very existence unpleasant, and no matter how weak or strong he was, she simply could not tolerate him.

However, like I said before, she is also a timid coward, so she is afraid of their next encounter. She lacks the nerve to hurt him even indirectly.

That is why she will not touch him until she is prepared enough to be completely confident in her victory.

Though, if you asked her about it directly, she would dance around it in her usual jester-like manner.

How am I able to analyze everything in such detail, you ask? It's the same as working on machines. To me, seeing the movements of human hearts and minds is about the same as tinkering with circuits of machines from the pre-ancient civilization.

...I do feel uncomfortable saying that to an expert like yourself, though.

You look like you want to say something, and I know what it is.

You are wondering why, despite being so understanding, I do not seem to comprehend anything that relates to *her*. Well, there is no helping that. What I feel for her makes my circuits go into overdrive and creates a major glitch in the program inside me we call "personality." Indeed, this is a glitch in the brain... or perhaps my very soul.

And it is a glitch I myself have grown fond of.

Regarding anything about my love for her, the computational device we know as the brain stops outputting the correct values.

I myself know full well that letting her father die in the war was suboptimal. But despite that knowledge, I do not reject the result.

Indeed, I know perfectly well that I am not of sound mind. It is as if the calculating side of me and the side of me that is driven mad with love for her are attempting to control this machine we call the body in tandem.

I suppose that most onlookers would find me less agreeable than your garden-variety madman. However, I myself think that this state of affairs is tolerable. The fact that I have been driven mad by my love for her simply cannot be helped anymore.

Now, I have a question for you, as well.

What was the goal behind *this war you incited*?

...Heheh. No answer? I expected as much.

You have your reasons for what you do, after all. You came here to plant the seeds of a new war, in case I intended to stop it completely. Worry not. A war *will* happen, one way or another. It might not be against the kingdom, but that is of no consequence to you, is it?

What you need is merely the phenomenon of war itself. It does not matter who is involved.

Wars are major events to the Masters... and important matters to the observers.

They always act whenever there is a war. The Lynx's appearance 600 years ago is a perfect example. He wielded his Embryo's immense power to intervene in the battle between that era's strongest champions.

You wanted war because you wanted something like that to happen again, did you not? No need to be so surprised.

You and the president of Caldina are not the only ones who can see right through people.

Whatever the case, Dryfe will go to war again, so there is no need for you to worry. Feel free to scheme in other countries instead.

Oh, but one more thing. Claudiah has a warning for you.

"If you conspire to assassinate Altimia, I will hunt you to the ends of this world and slaughter you." There. That is that.

Yes. Make sure you do not forget it.

Goodbye, then. If fate so dictates, let us meet again.

Oh, I forgot to say one thing.

That appearance suits you well... Arch Sage.

*Re-Open Episode: "The Forms of The Self"*

# ***Chapter One: The Third Job***

*Prism Rider, Ray Starling*

Only about a week in *Dendro* time had passed since Hannya's outburst, but that was long enough for the situation here in Altar to change drastically.

The biggest reason for the sudden change was that Azurite had announced there would be peace talks between the kingdom and the imperium, scheduled to occur in about two weeks in *Dendro* time. Thankfully, that was a Saturday in real life, so I would have no trouble participating.

It would be held in a building built on the border between Altar and the old Lunnings Duchy, which was now effectively under Dryfe's control. In preparation for it, the kingdom was recruiting a lot of Masters to act as Azurite's retinue. This was necessary because there was a chance that the talks could go badly and lead to immediate war, as well as the possibility that all of this was just a trap *disguised* as peace talks. If either of those worst-case scenarios became reality, it would be the Masters' job to protect Azurite and the other diplomats.

Our party had received a personal request to join her retinue, and we'd already accepted it.

Of course, it would be best if none of that happened, but if it did, I'd really regret it if I wasn't there by Azurite's side. No one in our party had any objections to going, so we agreed.

There was one problem, though. If a fight broke out *during* the peace talks, I'd obviously be up against some of the best Masters in Dryfe... but I really wasn't strong enough to fight them. In fact, it was possible that I'd be the lowest level person there. I already had the lowest level in my party, after all. Marie was a Superior Job, B3 was a

veteran player, and even Rook was fast approaching level 400, while I was only level 150.

...I'd actually reached 150 that very morning, meaning that I'd maxed out Prism Rider — my second job — and it was time to choose my third.

"The Catalog gave me several options... but I just don't know what to pick," I muttered.

The Suitable Job Diagnostics Catalog that Shu gave me presented the best jobs for me based on my current build. The ones it recommended now were Knight, which would buff my base build; Priest, which would increase my healing ability; and Scout, which improved a few very useful utility skills.

"I can see why," Nemesis commented. "All of these jobs are so common that they don't feel right for you."

"Hey, I don't mind that they're common... It's just that I don't see that X factor in any of them." I half-heartedly nodded, still paralyzed by indecision. It didn't seem like any of them would change my set-up quite as much as Paladin or Prism Rider had. If possible, I wanted a job that would quickly breathe new life into my build.

I'd hoped to see the high-rank direct upgrade to Prism Rider listed, but I couldn't find it anywhere in the Catalog — meaning that either no one had taken it yet, or it was a lost job and its conditions were secret.

It seemed like I had no option but to pick one of the jobs presented to me, but...

"Why not just pick Knight?" asked B3. "If we ignore your Payback Beyond the Stars and Shining Despair skills, you're primarily a melee fighter. I don't think that will change anytime soon, so I think you'd benefit from the active skills Knight would give you."

"No no no," Marie objected. "Scout is the way to go here. Ray always charges head-first into trouble, so he'd get a lot of benefit from utility skills like Reveal and Killing Intent Perception."

"Ray's build is based around taking damage," said Rook. "I think Priest is the best choice here." Not even my party could help me decide. Each person present was in favor of a different job.

We were in a café, by the way. Nemesis and I were here first, but we'd been glaring at the Catalog for so long that before we knew it, we were joined by B3, Marie, and Rook.

I did have the option of picking all three jobs, but I could only max out one or two of them before I had to accompany Azurite to the peace talks. Taking that into consideration, the next low-rank jobs I took were actually extremely important, but that just made this choice all that more difficult.

As this discussion continued...

"Ohh? Well, now ain't this a shady group, inside and out. What's up, B3 and company?"

...I heard a familiar voice from outside the terrace.

The speaker was that muscle-bound, wolf-eared woman whom I'd seen several times now — the sub-leader of the K&R, the PK clan, and the Nobushi Princess, Rosa.

"...That's quite a greeting, Rosa," said B3, looking extremely displeased.

"Hahahah. Good to see you know what I'm talking about."

B3 didn't look shady on the outside, so she must've felt that Rosa was making a comment about her character. Well, her tone *did* seem pretty provocative.

"So? Why're you lookin' at a Catalog?" Rosa asked. "Messin' with ya build again? You're so indecisive. Just get a Superior Job already."

“...That’s easier said than done.”

B3 was searching for info on Full Armor Giant or Shield Giant Superior Jobs, but neither DIN nor The Lunar Society had anything to offer. Apparently, such jobs often had strange conditions — for instance, to get King of Destruction, Shu had to do a certain amount of damage to objects.

“Also, this isn’t about me. It’s about Ray.” B3 continued. “We’re discussing what job he should pick next.”

“Hm? Ohh, Unbreakable’s still level 150,” Rosa said. “You have Paladin and Prism Rider... so this’ll be your third one, huh?” For a moment, I wondered how she knew that, but then I remembered that I was actually still a Paladin back when I’d fought her, and she must’ve used Reveal to see that I was a Prism Rider currently.

“The Catalog’s tellin’ ya... Knight, Priest, and... what the hell? What a boring build.”

“No peeking — it’s bad manners,” said B3. “And if you think that’s boring, what would you say is an actually interesting build?”

“A good ol’ first-strike Nobushi build with a focus on spear skills and concealment.”

“...That’s just *your* build. I might as well just say, I like this END-based giant set-up,” B3 huffed.

“Ugh, you damn turtler. Try comin’ outta your shell once in a damn while!”

“Bitch, don’t act like ya didn’t use your ult to pump up your defense last time we fought!”

*B3, your Barbaroy mode is showing,* I thought.

“One’s all about offense, the other’s all about defense... but they have a lot in common. Like their boorish nature and preference for younger men, for example.”

“...Marie, please don’t throw fuel on the fire,” I said.

*Also... B3’s into younger men? Since when?*

“Well, let’s leave it at that, then,” said Rosa. “Any ‘best’ builds that don’t follow the Guardian-Jaguarman theory are more or less parallel to each other.”

“...That’s true.” The Guardian-Jaguarman theory, huh? I’d heard of that before.

“More importantly, why aren’t ya reccing him *that* job?” Rosa asked B3.

“That,’ as in...?”

“Death Soldier.”

“...Is your stupidity terminal?” For my part, I’d never heard of the job Rosa mentioned. B3 opened her mouth wide and made a face like she’d slipped back into Barbaroy mode, while Marie looked like she was trying to remember something.

I was curious, so I used the Catalog to search for the job, and found it almost instantly.

“It has low stat growth, only one skill, and to top it off... it requires you to die,” B3 explained.

*...Requires you to what?* I wondered.

“Despite being a low-rank job with a utility skill, it’s so unpopular that it might as well be a lost job.”

“But don’t you think it suits him perfectly?”

“The problem is he’d have to get into a situation where Death Soldier’s skill would actually be useful...”

“And he gets into those situations all the time, right? He just does some insane shit and basically goes ‘Chances of survival? Caution? What’re those? Can ya eat ’em?’”

“...I can’t deny *that*, but...” That actually seemed like a pretty insulting evaluation to me, But B3 actually glanced in my direction, as though thinking that Rosa might actually have a point.

“Umm, what kind of job is Death Soldier, anyway?” I asked.

“...Basically, it’s a job that only saw use centuries ago, and even then, only as a punishment for tians.”

“A punishment?”

“The unfortunate tians were made to take it before being forced to charge into enemy lines as suicide bombers.”

*Now that’s just terrifying*, I thought.

“According to the lore, it was most popular as a kind of capital punishment 600 years ago.”

“...How come was it used like that?”

“Because of Death Soldier’s only skill — Last Command. To summarize its effect, it lets you keep moving after you die.”

“...You mean, it turns you into an undead?”

“No. It just lets you move around after your HP drops to 0 for a time based on your level in the skill. Of course, you die once the effect ends, and even at level 5 — the Death Soldier’s max — you still get less than a minute.”

I said nothing in response. This skill literally cost the user their life.

“Since it lets you move even after your HP drops to 0, Last Command allowed the Death Soldiers sent out as shock troops to keep running even after they were killed by a rain of arrows. Though, apparently, you can only move parts of the body still connected to the brain — so the Death Soldiers who were blown up by their own bombs couldn’t do anything but wait for death to come for half a minute or so, after their body parts were scattered everywhere.”

*...That is downright horrifying,* I thought. Also, the fact that you could only move parts still connected to the brain made it seem more like a zombie thing than a higher tier undead.

“Because it has such a terrible history and reputation, not a single tian would willingly take this job. The same goes for our fellow Masters.”

“It does?”

“Nobody really *wants* the death penalty, and if they have to choose between a job with poor stat growth that lets them move around after death, and a proper job with good stat growth and normal skills that help them survive, they’ll obviously choose the latter. That makes Death Soldier extremely unpopular.”

“...Oh, I remember it now,” Marie finally spoke up. “Tenchi actually had some tians that took the job, but they’re all part of the Nanshumon clan... which is like the Shimazu clan from real life history. They’re all extremely reckless.”

...My college friend had also compared some Tenchi clan to the Shimazus, and now I couldn’t help but wonder if he meant their outlook rather than just the location of the territory.

“...All right, I think I get what Death Soldier is about,” I said.

“See what I meant?” asked Rosa. “Fits ya like a glove, doesn’t it? It’ll make that one technique of yours easier to use, too.”

“Technique...? Oh.” I thought for a moment and quickly figured out what she was talking about.

It was the Impact Counter I’d used on her. She’d actually been the one who named it. And yes, Death Soldier’s skill would certainly be useful for that. In fact, it might even make it more powerful.

I had to think on this a bit. I could definitely make good use of Death Soldier’s Last Command, and since it was a utility skill, I could use it

while maining other jobs. This would come at the cost of the stat growth and amount of skills provided by the other jobs... but it *would* bring me the major change that I wanted.

“...All right. I’ll level Death Soldier,” I declared, gathering my resolve.

“You should *really* reconsider,” B3 suggested anxiously.

I shook my head and said, “The peace talks are really close. If Dryfe is plotting something, I need to be as strong as I possibly can. However, I don’t have the time to raise my base abilities high enough to match experienced Masters. I’d rather bet on something that, if I use it well, might let me go toe-to-toe with those more powerful than me.”

B3 gave up and sighed before saying, “...It’s your build. The choice is yours to make.” Rook and Marie nodded in agreement.

“If that’s what you think is best, then I think it’s good too,” said Rook.

“Oh, by the way,” Marie said, remembering something. “Last Command’s skill level... as in, the time you get to move around once it’s active... is linked to job level, so you should focus on leveling Death Soldier immediately.”

...Well, it would be pretty bad if it improved based on the amount of uses. Tians couldn’t die over and over, after all.

“Though, don’t forget — despite everything, you’ve only actually died once so far,” she added. “The skill might turn out to be useless to you.”

“...How strange to hear that from the person responsible for that sole death,” said Nemesis with an exasperated look in her eyes.

“I would appreciate it if you stopped pointing that out,” Marie replied with a tense face.

Anyway, I’d chosen my third job. I was going to be a Death Soldier. The name was a stark contrast to the bright and positive names of my first two jobs.

"It suits your manner of dress perfectly," said Nemesis, who was harsh on my fashion sense, as always.

"By the way, those peace talks everybody's talkin' 'bout," Rosa spoke up again. "Are you all goin'?"

"Yes," B3 replied. "Your tone makes it sound like you're going, too. Are you?"

"Yeah. I'm a ranker, so I got a request to come."

Naturally, we wouldn't be the only Masters joining the retinue. Out of the ones I knew, Juliet, Chelsea, Riser, and Bishmal were also coming, and Azurite told me that she got Miss Eldritch and Tsukikage to join, as well. Apparently, she was already making her pay for her involvement in the Hannya incident.

Even Shu would be joining us. I found that odd at first, seeing as he'd been apprehensive about leaving Gideon recently, but I would certainly appreciate having him around.

Even with just these few, Altar's side was already very powerful — enough, according to B3, to surpass the kingdom's entire forces in the previous war.

However, there were some that couldn't make it. After his proposal, Figaro suffered an attack that left him hospitalized in real life, and Hannya seemingly hadn't logged in since the incident, presumably because she was staying by Figaro's side. Lei-Lei always had an erratic Dendro schedule, so she wouldn't make it to the peace talks, either.

As a result, only two of the five Superiors would be present.

"What about Kashimiya?" I asked.

"Darling has family business that day. Said he doesn't know if he'll be able to log in for it."

Kashimiya was among the strongest 1v1 fighters in the kingdom, right next to Figaro. Not having him around really hurt, but if it was real life business, then we had no choice but to accept it.

Tom had also said that he wouldn't be able to participate. Apparently, he was still rumored to be connected to the developers. Maybe his refusal had something to do with that?

"If Rosa is participating, it means that I'll be on the same side as her and the Superior Killer," said B3. "This kinda reminds me of what we did at the capital back in March."

Oh yeah — they were the ones behind the blockade at Altea. It was strange and almost moving to think that the same people who'd conspired against the kingdom would now be fighting for it.

"Speaking of which, I wonder where Eldridge and his GobStreet went," said Rosa.

"Ah, DIN has info on him," said Marie. "After the blockade, he traveled all over and fought Superiors like Master Jiangshi, Xunyu; The Earth, Fatoum; Great Admiral, Antimicrobic Soy Sauce; and The Saber, Saki Muryo-Taisu."

"I haven't heard of the last one before, but that's a... big name." *Muryo-Taisu* referred to "10 to the power of 68" — one hundred unvigintillion. It was a Buddhist concept of the immeasurable.

"I had that exact thought when I first heard it," said Marie. "Ignoring that last name, though, she said that 'Saki' is her first name in real life, too."

"You know her?"

"Yeah. From my time training over there. She's a Tenchi Superior, after all."

Tenchi, huh...? That place was on the other side of this world, so I rarely heard anything about it. It didn't seem like my Tenchi-dwelling friends from real life got involved in any major incidents, either.

...Though, I did recall Natsume looking like he wanted to say something. "Yinglong... Magical Apex, Human Bomb, and now Realm-Divider, huh?" said Rosa. "Why's Eldridge pickin' fights with beasts like that? Wasn't he the cautious type?"

"Mad Castle split up after the blockade incident, so I can only assume that Goblin Street had a bad time, as well," B3 answered. "They must've tried to make up for it, only to be defeated again and again... The fact that he fought a lot of bad matchups is proof of that."

"His presence opens up many tactical avenues, though," Marie added. "He's really strong against people he *is* compatible with."

Plus, even if he was defeated every time, he still managed to challenge all those Superiors. In addition to what I'd heard about his tactical skill, it became pretty obvious that Eldridge was a really fearsome Master.

"Well, enough about him," said Rosa. "What matters is that we'll be on the same side for our next job. We were really at each other's throats recently, but let's get along, shall we?"

"Yeah. Let's," I said, and we exchanged a handshake.

She was a decent person... for a PK junkie, anyway.



### *Death Soldier, Ray Starling*

I switched jobs to Death Soldier right after we left the café. It had no conditions and you could pick it at just about any crystal, so it was no trouble at all.

Now, we were leveling as a party some distance away from Gideon. The party consisted of me, Rook, Marie (who'd switched to

Journalist), B3 (who'd switched to Shield Giant), and finally two of Rook's monsters, Marilyn and Audrey. This was more or less what we always used when leveling.

"By the way — is it just me, or are Marilyn and Audrey bigger than they were when I first saw them?" I asked.

"Have they gained weight?" Nemesis echoed me. Marilyn roared and Audrey screeched as if arguing with her. They were both girls, I guess, so I could only assume that they didn't like the assumption that they'd gotten fatter.

"Well, both Marilyn and Audrey are higher level now. They might even change species at some point," Rook said.

I had actually heard that certain kinds of monsters could change species as they leveled up. This seemed like something straight out of Pokémon, allegedly, a good number of UBM's were actually normal monsters that had become uniquely strong among their kind. They were both Demi-Dragons right now, but apparently there was a chance that they'd actually go up a rank.

"I'd have new tactical options if that happens before the peace talks in two weeks, but I don't know if it will," said Rook. "But you're working so hard, so I'll do my best to become stronger, too."

"Thanks, Rook."

*Though, you know you're already over twice my level, right?* I added internally. *I'll have to work even harder...*

"By the way, Ray," Marie spoke to me from the dragon carriage. "You seem to be laser-focused on the peace talks right now, but you do know that it won't end there, right?"

"Yeah," I nodded. "If something happens during the talks, it's likely that we'd just end up with another war, right?"

“Exactly. Oh, and do you know about the special effects of war? I mean the War Boundary, of course.”

“I do. I looked it up after Franklin’s Game.”

It started when the leaders of the countries involved agreed to activate it. It was just called the “War Boundary,” and once active, it granted three special effects to the involved countries, as well as the rest of *Dendro*.

The first of these effects was a restriction on Masters logging into the countries who were at war.

The moment the war began, the War Boundary would be established in the parts of the countries that were designated as battlefields. Masters who were outside the country rankings would be unable to enter those zones, and the non-rankers who were inside the boundary when it became active would be forcefully logged out. The amount of people who would be allowed in would be really limited if it was just kill and duel rankings, but because it counted clan rankings as well, you could easily get in by just belonging to a ranking clan, even if you only joined it for the duration of the war.

There were two reasons for this.

First, it limited the damage done. If anyone could participate in the war, the amount of Masters on both sides would just keep growing, which would severely increase the damage suffered by both countries. This was a preventative measure against that.

The War Boundary also allowed rankers from countries that weren’t participating in the war, though. That was how Caldina was able to send rankers to Dryfe to interfere in the previous war.

The other reason was crime prevention — to keep Masters from taking advantage of the situation to perform illegal acts. Masters on all wanted lists — like the members of the infamous IF — didn’t belong to any country and weren’t part of any rankings, meaning

that they were always rejected by the War Boundary. Supposedly, this prevented wartime criminal activity all over the land.

It seemed like something that might be nice to have around all the time, but apparently there was a limit to how long War Boundary could last.

The second special effect was the increase of experienced time. Normally, for each real-world hour, you experienced three hours in *Dendro*; but during war, each hour in reality would become *thirty* in-game. This was applied to the entire world, so Masters from the other countries received an absurdly good time bonus.

However, one real life day translating into an in-game month was an incredibly significant change. If you got the death penalty during a war, the conflict would likely have ended by the time you were allowed to log in again, meaning that you'd be unable to do anything more for the war effort.

The third special effect was the victory conditions. Before the War Boundary was activated, both countries would present their win conditions and demands. The losing side would have no choice but to fulfill the demands registered by the winners at the outset. Wartime demands surpassed even the highest-level Contracts in gravity, and it was said that a country that refused to fulfill them would be met with something far worse than mere destruction.

Apparently, this helped ensure fairness. Because *Dendro* had clear Contracts and victory conditions like this, there was much less deception and far fewer people went back on their word than in real life, making conflicts far more straightforward.

Perhaps that was just how this whole thing had been designed.

During the last war, Dryfe's victory condition was the fall of the kingdom's capital, while Altar's was the destruction of the imperium's forces — but it actually ended without either side

achieving their goal. However, the Old Lunnings Duchy was on Dryfe's invasion path, and they now effectively had control of it.

Of course, it was possible to fight without activating the War Boundary, but that would only result in an all-consuming struggle, without a clear demarcation for when it should end. Anyone could see that would result in huge numbers of civilian casualties, just like it had during Franklin's Game and Logan's invasion of Quartierlatin. Because of this, the very game-y War Boundary, with its victory conditions and established demands, was the preferred way to wage war throughout *Dendro*'s history.

Therefore, if the coming peace talks went badly, the countries would decide on how and when they would deploy the War Boundary again.

"So, what do you think is our biggest problem if a war does break out?" Marie asked.

"...The fact that none of us are rankers." Because of that first special effect, which limited what Masters could log in to the warring countries, only rankers would be able to stay in Altar and Dryfe. No one in the current party was on any ranking table, so we'd all just be ejected from the War Boundary immediately.

However, entering the ranks at this point would be difficult. The kill rankings, which were based on total kill points, were dominated by wide-scale extermination builds and veteran Masters. You could become a duel ranker by fighting another ranker for their position, but you needed to be a distinguished duelist already to even challenge the lowest — 30th — in the rankings.

We obviously didn't have the time to try for the kill or duel rankings, so our only option was the clan rankings, which were based on the amount of quests completed by the clan's members, as well as the difficulty of those quests. Every quest gave points based on its

difficulty, and the higher that was, the more points you received. A difficulty level one quest gave you 2 points, level two was 4, level three was 8, and it doubled that way until level nine, which gave you 512 points. The points you got for difficulty level ten quests varied, but apparently, the minimum was 10240.

“...Hey, shouldn’t level ten quests be 1024 points?” asked Nemesis.  
“That was the pattern, right? Where did that extra decimal place come from?”

*I was wondering about that myself, but it seems that level ten quests just give you way more than the others,* I thought in response.

Also, the points were split evenly between all the people who participated in the quest. Some said that you could enter the clan rankings by just clearing a few difficulty level ten quests all by yourself, but almost no one was capable of that, obviously. Clans that made it to the rankings were almost always ones with tons of members who did a whole bunch of quests. There were also clans made up of a few elites who’d cleared a handful of difficulty eight or nine quests, but they were a minority.

I could see why Miss Eldritch’s Lunar Society was the kingdom’s number one ranking clan. It had a huge amount of members, and most of them were no-lifers who believed that *Dendro* was the true reality. It’d be weird if it *wasn’t* at the top. Lots of ranking clans would be getting temporary members who only wanted to be allowed inside the War Boundary. That made it extremely easy for the order of the rankings to change, but The Lunar Society would no doubt remain at the top.

Speaking of which, the clan rankings were updated every month in real time — which was three months in *Dendro* time — and the next update was coming up in a week. That was shortly before the peace talks that could very well lead to war, so you could see many clans looking for new members, even in the streets of Gideon.

Also, I'd heard that just before the previous war, Dryfean Masters who'd temporarily joined clans that ended up not making it to the rankings abandoned them in favor of those that did.

That was totally possible and expected. Ultimately, anyone could take part in the war as long as they managed to find a clan that was in the rankings.

"It'll be difficult to enter the kill or duel rankings in time, so if a war broke out, I think we'd have to temporarily join a clan," said B3.

"Well, we don't have a choice," Marie agreed. "Neither I nor B3 killed enough monsters or did enough dueling."

"...When it was still active, Mad Castle would've made it to the lower end of the clan rankings, but we're no longer on *any* rankings." Oh yeah. K&R was a top-ranking clan, so it made sense that B3's Mad Castle — a PK clan on a similar level — would've been there too, if it hadn't disbanded.

"Why not borrow the club prez's Lunar Society?" B3 asked. "I think she'd let us in."

"I'd... honestly want to avoid that." I felt like that'd make me indebted to her, and I was scared of what that could lead to.

"Besides that... I know that Kashimiya's K&R is in the rankings, but that's basically just a Kashimiya fan club, so getting in would be pretty difficult," B3 continued. That was a shame. Even though it was a PK clan, K&R seemed like a better option than Miss Eldritch's Lunar Society.

Fortunately, though, I already had a good clan in mind.

"I was actually considering snagging some spots in Chelsea's clan. I'll talk to her about it later," I said.

"Ohh, Golden Pirates," said B3. "I suppose there's nothing to worry about, then."

Golden Pirates was the clan belonging to the eighth-ranked duelist, Chelsea, the Wandering Golden Sea. It was a clan that had followed her here from Granvaloa, and it was still quite active. The members regularly did duels, quests, and dungeon raids, among other things, and it was always floating between the 10th and 20th places in the clan rankings — meaning that it would most likely stay on the ranking boards even after the next update.

“I was told that I could bring a party, too,” I said. “I think it’ll work out.”

“I see,” said B3. “Once we return to Gideon, you should go get confirmation, though, just in case.”

“Good idea.” We continued the hunt until the sun began to set, and by the time we returned to Gideon, it was already dark out.

At that point, we went straight to Chelsea to talk to her about letting us into the clan.

We found her at a diner she frequented, and for some reason, she was holding a mug in one hand and looking really peevish.

“Nnghh... Screw love... just screw it...” She was hanging her head and had a dense, dark feeling hanging around her — something I’d never expect from someone so hearty and cheerful.

“Chelsea... don’t look so sad,” said Juliet — a fellow duel ranker — as she gently rubbed Chelsea’s head.



“...Look at those mugs and plates piling up,” commented another girl duel ranker I’d seen before.

Also, they were all underage, so despite appearances, they were actually drinking juice.

“Juliet and... ‘Max,’ right?” I called out to them. “What happened to Chelsea?”

“Ah...! ’Tis a conflict borne of the throes of passion that burden all of mankind,” Juliet replied.

“Oh. It’s the guy with the freaky outfit and nickname,” added Max as she noticed me.

*Wait, “freaky nickname?” Does she mean “Light and Dark-Wielding Hero Clad in Violet and Crimson?” Doesn’t she know that only Juliet calls me that? I’m just “Unbreakable” to most people,* I thought before focusing on the conversation.

“Relationship trouble?” I asked.

“Indeed,” said Juliet. “Love struck down the horde of gold, and upon the twilight of this very day, it all became as dust.”

“...some relationship problems were tearing the clan apart, and it was disbanded this evening?” Juliet confirmed this with a nod, but that was really bad for us, actually. We came here for a reason, but it meant nothing if Golden Pirates were no more.

“Chelsea... how did it come to this?”

“...You’re really gonna ask that?” she looked up at me with steady eyes and a red face.

Honestly, I was intimidated.

“...Then again, we did talk about taking you on as a temporary member if a war broke out, so I guess it would be unfair if I didn’t explain it,” Chelsea said before taking a deep breath. “It all started

because there was a scumbag in the clan who was secretly dating twenty of the girls at once.”

“Twen...” Now *that* was a hell of an overreach. How was it even physically possible to cheat on such a scale?

“It seemed to be going well for him, but he was exposed at the Love-Duel Festival.” It was a couples event, so... did he schedule too many dates? Honestly, it was actually kind of impressive that it took the festival to finally rat him out.

“The girls he was two-timing followed some weird light that led them to him,” Max added. “He was on a date with another woman, so they questioned him, and then a fight broke out.”

The Love-Duel Festival and strange lights... that rung a bell. That King of Light guy caused more trouble than just Hannya’s outburst, huh?

“The cheater left our clan as if to run away, but the cracks he opened up began to widen... and today, our clan disbanded.”

“Now that’s just... damn...” The idea that such a hearty crew met such an end made me kind of sad. Well, they were all only human, so perhaps it was only natural for their relationships to fray like that.

“And... you know the thing that pisses me off the most about this?” Chelsea continued.

“No. Not a clue...” I shook my head.

Chelsea made an even more terrifying face and said, “That I had absolutely no part in any of this drama.” Her voice was full of both grief and rage.

I honestly didn’t know what to say. Juliet also seemed somewhat flustered, while Max was just freaked out.

“...A playboy who can date twenty women at once didn’t even *try* to get her, huh?” said Nemesis telepathically.

*Don't you dare say that out loud. She'd probably sink this whole place in Poseidon's liquid gold,* I thought in response. Chelsea's power might've been one of the reasons why the cheater didn't make a pass at her. He might've been too scared.

"Screw love..." Chelsea said as the dark aura gathered around her again.

"But Chelsea... y-you *are* cute," said Juliet.

"Oh man," sighed Max. "I'll treat you to some food, so just cheer up already... I hope my wallet's not too dry..."

I had no choice but to leave Chelsea to them. But... man, we had a problem of our own now. With Golden Pirates no longer an option, we had to find another clan, and...

"...Is it just me, or do you now have no choice but to join that woman's Lunar Society?"

...Ah. Damn it.

## ***Chapter Two: Clan***

### *Royal Capital, Altea, The King's Office*

That day, Altimia the First Princess of the Kingdom of Altar was hard at work as the acting queen. The peace offer from Dryfe came right on the heels of the Hannya incident, so she immediately returned to Altea to do everything necessary for the coming peace talks.

“The Second Model Prism Steed production is going well, and both the royal guards and Altea’s knights are already supplied with them. The other matter is still encountering difficulties, however. The next report is... Hm?”

After she’d finished reading the report from Countess Quartierlatin, Altimia reached for the next one, which made her tilt her head.

It read: “King of Blaze, Feuer Lazburn has disappeared.”

This next document was a report from an order she’d put out while she was still trying to avoid relying too much on Masters. At the time, she had instead depended exclusively on powerful tians.

The kingdom had several Superior Job-holding tians who claimed no allegiance to any of Altar’s organizations, and Altimia had sent out messengers to try and recruit them. However, since many of them were essentially hermits living far from normal society, the results weren’t exactly favorable. Some of them even turned out to have already died of natural causes and passed their Superior Jobs on to powerful Masters.

This report on King of Blaze, Feuer Lazburn, would actually be the last one she received.

He was powerful enough to rival even the Arch Sage, and it was rumored that he currently lived and trained deep in the mountains, but...

"He disappeared? And his retreat was burned to the ground...?" According to the report, the messenger had traveled to the hermitage on the mountain Feuer lived on. However, the entire place was completely destroyed, and most of the surrounding land and trees were still scorched. Since there was new grass growing out of the burnt surroundings, the report conjectured that a great deal of time had passed since the burning... over half a year at the very least, according to the presented estimate.

Suspicious of this unusual report, Altimia silently pondered.

It was possible that Feuer had burned the hermitage himself to go on a journey somewhere. He was fairly old, so it was also possible that he saw his death coming and had immolated himself along with the place where he lived.

However, Altimia had the sneaking suspicion that this was somehow part of a much larger plot.

This feeling came with a sense of danger, as if an unseen snake had coiled itself around her leg.

"...Though, I doubt that Dryfe is involved in this." Regardless, Altimia knew that this unusual incident was definitely something to keep in mind.

The princess continued her work, and after some time had passed, she had finally taken care of all the documents that required her eye or involvement. The last document was a report on her request for retinue at the peace talks.

"I put out a request for Masters to join me at the peace talks, and it looks like we'll have a great many participants..." A part of her was upset that they hadn't rallied like this for the previous war, but she concluded that was more of a reflection on Altar's leadership, not the Masters. There was just no denying that the low participation in the previous war was mostly the kingdom's own fault.

However, there was something that still didn't make sense to her.

"Why was Father so adamant about this...?" Eldor, the previous king, was firm in his conviction that Masters were very special beings and should never be employed as tools of war. Altimia had heard him say so herself, and she did understand that point of view to a degree.

However, she had no idea how he'd come to have such a deep conviction in the first place. She thought she may be able to figure it out if she followed in Eldor's footsteps as the acting queen, but she struggled to understand it even now. In fact, after her interactions with Ray and the others, she was even more certain that the cooperation of the Masters in a prospective war was absolutely necessary.

Altimia changed her mind after she came into contact with a particular person... namely, Ray himself.

"...Was Father the same way?" Perhaps Eldor had settled upon his ideas after meeting someone specific as well.

"Maybe I should look into that, too," Altimia said. "Oh dear. Look at the time." It was already dark out, and furthermore it was almost dinnertime.

Altimia had planned to have dinner with Elizabeth and Theresia today. Once the matter of Elizabeth's arranged marriage was settled, she and Altimia had made up; after Elizabeth returned to Altea, all three sisters ate dinner together far more often than they had previously.

Though, perhaps they were simply trying to create memories together before Elizabeth left for Huang He.

The plan was that she and Canglong the Third Prince of Huang He would leave together the day after the peace talks. That was the final deadline. Even if the talks went badly, Elizabeth would be gone before the War Boundary would activate.

Although, if Altimia was assassinated *during* the talks, Elizabeth would become the heir to the kingdom's throne. That would most definitely change the manner in which Altar and Huang He would be united.

Everything depended on how the peace talks actually went in two weeks' time. In the meantime, Altimia did whatever she could — even considering scenarios where she herself died.

"Your Highness, are you here?"

There was a sudden knock on the office's door. The person responsible for the knock was none other than Altimia's confidant — Marquis Findle.

"Yes," Altimia answered. "You may enter."

"Pardon the intrusion." Marquis Findle had a single letter in hand.

"What is that?"

"It is a letter for you. The sender is... Lady Integra."

The name shocked Altimia into slightly widening her eyes.

Integra.

Integra Sedna Clarice.

She was an apprentice of the Arch Sage who'd died in the previous war... The last of them all, in fact.

Though she was the youngest of the apprentices, the Arch Sage had recognized her talent, and she learned much from him. Her ability certainly surpassed that of his many other apprentices, and two years ago, as a last task from the Arch Sage, she'd left on a journey across the seven countries. Because of this, she hadn't been present at the battle against Gloria which killed all her fellow apprentices, nor did she participate in the war that killed the Arch Sage.

Unfortunately, Altimia didn't have any means to contact Integra as she traveled the world. In fact, she didn't even know if Integra was alive... but now, she'd received a letter from her.

After pondering for a moment, Altimia took the letter from Marquis Findle.

To Altimia, Integra was like Liliana — one of her few close friends. However, the kingdom's situation had changed drastically over the past two years, and her fellow apprentices as well as her mentor were now gone. That fact made Altimia a bit afraid of seeing the letter's contents.

Regardless, Altimia gathered her resolve and broke the seal to see what was written within.

“...Eh?”

What she read in that letter was something she could have never expected.

“I, Integra Sedna Clarice, have succeeded my mentor and become the Arch Sage. Upon returning to the kingdom, I wish to serve Her Highness Altimia Azurite Altar just as my mentor did.”

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### *Death Soldier, Ray Starling*

“Man, what now...?” After finding out that Golden Pirates had disbanded, I spent a lot of time pondering: would it be best to just join Miss Eldritch’s Lunar Society, or keep searching to find a better option?

“It would be great if you had some other clan you could get into... but that seems unlikely,” said Nemesis.

“Yeah... I don’t exactly have connections in a lot of ranking clans.”

There were some clans out there recruiting “mercenaries” — essentially, temporary members kept on-hand in case a war broke out. One of these was the AETL Union — the second in the rankings.

As high as it was, though, it didn’t have many stand-out members like The Lunar Society’s Miss Eldritch or K&R’s Kashimiya and Rosa. They just had so many members, second only to The Lunar Society.

The clan itself was... basically a fanclub. It was dedicated to the three princesses of the kingdom, as well as Liliana — who, as Shu once said, enjoyed great popularity even among tians.

The clan known as AETL Union was a combination of their fanclubs for all four of them — it even took its title from the first letter of the princesses’ and Liliana’s names. Since their goal was, above all, to protect their favorite girls, they actually allowed anyone to temporarily join them in case of war.

They were actually the largest Master faction that had participated in the last war, and some thought they were the major reason Altar avoided complete destruction. AETL Union had always declared that if war broke out again, they would return to the battlefield with the same vigor as last time.

Since my goal was basically the same, I’d actually gone to them before I considered the Golden Pirates, but...

“...AETL Union didn’t let me in, huh?”

“That was... well...”

The main reason for my rejection was that video of the incident in Gideon that Franklin had broadcast In it, I was shown fighting alongside Sir Lindos and... yes, Liliana.

After I defeated RSK, Liliana had even nursed me to health.

That seemed to have made them really upset.

I talked directly to the clan's sub-leader — the head of Liliana's fanclub — and he said, "You fought with Lady Liliana and even had her take care of you... You're just too close to her! And that intense expression on her face as she cared for you... GHAAAH! I'll never let you in! In fact, I'd rather spit in your face!"

"Fanclubs truly hate anyone who actually gets ahead, don't they..." Nemesis noted.

"It probably depends on the fanclub..." Still, AETL Union wasn't an option.

Well, the fact that they didn't assassinate me outright told me that they were still somewhat reasonable people, at least. Maybe they'd let me in if I asked again...?

"Wait, you're also close to Azurite," said Nemesis. "Joining AETL Union is simply impossible for you, don't you think?"

"...Oh yeah."

"...You even went to a mixed bath with her."

"...You better keep that a secret." If they found out about *that*, I'd definitely be as good as dead.

Yeah... as things were, I had to give up on AETL Union.

"...The Lunar Society *would* probably let me in, huh?" After all, their leader once had me kidnapped just so she could force me to join her clan. If I went to them and actually *asked* to get in, she wouldn't even think twice about it.

However, the problem was what came after. I'd only be joining The Lunar Society to participate in the war — as just a mercenary, basically. Alas, it seemed likely that they wouldn't just let me walk away afterwards. Miss Eldritch would make up all sorts of reasons why I couldn't be allowed to escape.

This was made even worse by the fact that we were acquainted in real life. It was just impossible for me to get away from her.

Still... Not participating in the war at all was completely out of the question. If the peace talks went awry, war was inevitable. Azurite, Liliana... the fates of many of my friends would hang in the balance, and not being there would leave a really bad taste in my mouth.

“...I really don’t have a choice, huh?” Well, we all had to make sacrifices every now and then.

Even if it was roughly equivalent to leaping into a lion’s den, I had to join The Lunar Society.

But how could I break this to my party...?

“Hm? Well, if it ain’t Ray? What are ya broodin’ over?”

As I gathered my resolve and stepped forward, I ran into a familiar person with a voice and height that really stood out from the crowd... Xunyu.



She was holding a cup of Shu's popcorn in her hand.

*...I'm impressed that she can eat popcorn with those claws, I thought.*

"Xunyu..."

"Seriously, what's wrOng? You look like yOu're about to get naked, tAke off your metal accessOries, chUg some vinEgar, cover yourself in sAlt, run through the doOr, and never come bAck."

...I was struggling to even picture that kind of scene.

Also, did I really look *that* bad?

"C'mon, tell mE what happened. I'll give yOu advice like thE good buddy I am."

"Xunyu..." She was so dependable... especially for a grade school kid.

"Well..." I told her what happened and that I was actually about to turn to The Lunar Society for help.

Upon hearing that, Xunyu tilted her head.

"Hey, why'rE ya goin' to The Lunar Society?" she asked.

"Because I don't have connections in any other ranked clans."

"That's nOt what I'm asking," she said before falling silent for a moment...

"Why nOt just make yoUr own clan?"

...And then saying something surprising.

"...Our own clan?" I felt like it was way too late for a new clan to make it into the rankings.

"A clan *you're* in woUld attract the bear likE honey, and the PKs in your pArty would follow yOu too, right? And if yoU and the beAr are bOth in, Figaro will fOllow, and then Hannya'll comE after her hubby. You cAn probably also grab sOme duel rankers who got nothin'

better to do. A lineup like that'd make it in the rankings, wouldn't it? Quality over quantity and all that."

I was speechless. That idea had never crossed my mind.

Though lacking in number, many of the people I knew were powerful, experienced, and well-established. Since clan ranking was depending on completed quests and their difficulty... it wasn't impossible that a team made up of them would make it in the rankings.

"Honestly, I think your brother's presence alone would get you on the board," Xunyu added. "He probably has enough quest points for that."

I was about to argue with her, but I remembered that Shu told me that he had cleared many high-difficulty quests — difficulty ten included. And on top of that, he did them either alone or in a small group.

In that case, Xunyu's estimate didn't actually seem unlikely.

"...Thanks, Xunyu," I said. "I'll talk to my group about it."

I can't have imagined what would've happened if Miss Eldritch turned out to be my only option, but I now saw a glimmer of hope. I had nothing but gratitude to Xunyu for showing it to me.

"You're treating that woman like the physical manifestation of despair. Even I feel a bit sorry for her, but I suppose your experience with her was just *that* rough..." Nemesis remarked. Abduction and confinement definitely qualified as "rough," yeah.

"Well, anyway, good luck with the peace talks or war or whatever stuff goes on here," Xunyu said.

"Speaking of which, what are you gonna do?" I asked.

"I ain't joinin' the retinue. I still gotta protect Cang, and hell, though I get participating in a war as a merc, it'll cause problems to have a

foreign Master among the bodyguards at a peace talk, won't it? It'll make it look like you want to fight, and the mood of the place would turn all sour."

"...Good point." Although I was looking for a clan to make sure I could participate in the war, there was no guarantee that it would actually happen. It was still possible that the peace talks would go off without a hitch. Xunyu was actually being very considerate in that regard.

"And then... it'll all depend on how the peace talks go," she continued. "If there's a war, I'll have to negotiate with the first princess again. If there's no war, I'll just go back to Huang He with Cang."

"I see," I said. "I'll be sad to see you go."

"Hey, you can always just come visit Huang He. Just so you know, it's a tourist paradise with lots to see."

"Huang He, huh...?" I couldn't really leave Altar for the time being, but maybe I could go visit some other countries once things calmed down here. Shu said that he'd traveled a lot, and I'd be lying if I said I didn't want to try that.

"...I'd love to visit Huang He, actually."

"I'll show you around when ya do."

"I'll be counting on you, then." And so, Xunyu and I parted ways. However, a short while later, a question popped into my mind.

If the kingdom hired Xunyu... who would act as Canglong's bodyguard on his way back home?



After parting ways with Xunyu, I went straight to where my party was waiting for me and reported that The Golden Pirates had disbanded.

I then told them I was thinking of getting into the rankings by making a new clan with us and Shu, among others.

B3 responded with, “I guess it’s possible that we’d make it in. Though I’d need to know how many points your brother has.”

You could always check your own points in the records window, and we could gauge our eligibility by comparing our combined points with what her clan had when it was still active. However, B3 also said that since a lot of clans were gathering mercenaries to get themselves onto the rankings, we would probably need more points than Mad Castle used to have.

I had to know if Shu was up for this, among other things, so I went ahead and contacted him. After checking my friend list to confirm that he was online, I used my Telepathy Cuffs to call him.

When I told him we were thinking of creating a clan, he immediately asked me where we were. I told him the name of the establishment, and it only took him about thirty minutes to arrive.

“Beary sorry for the wait.”

“Woow! Ray! It’s been so loong!”

...As it turns out, he was accompanied by a familiar face.

“Lei-Lei?!” Lei-Lei, the Prodigal of Feasts. She was the kingdom’s fourth Superior, and I hadn’t seen her since the welcome party on my first ever day in *Dendro*.

The fact that she’d spiked my drink still came back to me every now and then — mostly when I was drinking something.

Lei-Lei had a reputation for rarely coming online, and she didn’t seem to have a set pattern to her login times. Why was she here now...?

“Lei-Lei and I went on a quest together fur the first time in awhile,” said Shu.

"The past few times I could manage to come online recently, Shu was busy making popcorn, so this was our first co-op gig in a long time." Oh yeah — Shu had told me they'd been questing every now and then.

I never expected them to be doing that *today*, though...

My party was also very surprised to encounter a Superior who was such a rare sight.

"So... let's talk about that clan," said Shu.

"Ah... yeah," I said, after I'd recovered from the shock.

Shu, Lei-Lei, and I sat at the same table, and I explained our current situation.

"I see," said Shu. "Well, you beary much did the right thing by not letting yourself end up in debt to the fox." I nodded at him. I looked at B3, who pondered for a bit, but then nodded herself in agreement.

"Well, furst, let's start by addressing the points we'll need to get into the clan rankings. Here's how much I've got."

Shu opened his records window and showed us. He had several more digits than me, but I didn't know if it was enough to enter the rankings. I looked at B3, and noticed that her eyes were wide open.

"Umm, how does it look...?" I asked her.

"...He has... over twice what our *entire clan* had before disbanding," she answered. The rest of us were all lost for words.

B3's Mad Castle was a famous Altarian PK clan, and though they'd ultimately lost against the overwhelming force that was Figaro, they certainly weren't short on both quantity and quality of players. They must've completed a huge amount of quests and accumulated an enormous number of points, yet Shu here had over double that *just by himself*.

...I once again became aware of just how absurd Superiors were.

“...This is more than enough, even considering how many points other clans will be getting by taking on mercenaries,” B3 added.

“I see...” I said. It was now clear that we’d make it into the rankings with just Shu on our side.

“Yeah. My name’s enough to carry you into the rankings,” he said.

“But before that, I have a question for you.”

The air around him seemed to have changed suddenly, but I was the only one who seemed to notice. It must’ve been a pretty minor change that only I could pick up on.

“...What is it?” I asked.

“The day you first logged in, you said that you’d be gunning for a spot in the rankings.” ...Yeah, I could remember myself saying something like that, and even making a goal of it. However, on that very same day, I got the death penalty — and realized how powerless I was. Nemesis and I recovered from that defeat, and that moment served as our starting point before going on to be swept up in all kinds of events.

Still, that didn’t change the fact that my overall goal was getting into the rankings.

“If you make a clan now and I join it, you will *definitely* get in the rankings,” he continued. “Even if I didn’t join, you could probably manage just with all your friends. Honestly, even if that wasn’t enough either, you could barely easily gather mercs with just your name and some pocket money.”

I hadn’t realized it until now, but he was right — there was a solution available even if I didn’t get his help.

“But... will you be able to live with that?” he asked.

I pondered this.

"You think you can bear to become a ranker thanks to others instead of your own merits...? Won't that leave a bad taste in your mouth? More importantly, do you actually have the resolve to found a clan that has *me* as a member?" He was talking with the same jovial tone as usual, but I could tell that he was completely serious.

His question made me think about the fact that I was actually about to become a ranker.

I was pretty sure that clan rankings weren't what I'd had in mind back when I said that I wanted to do this. I thought I was going to increase my power and get into either the kill or duel rankings.

However, I had basically no chance of entering the rankings based on kill count, and I had neither the time nor the ability to become a proper duelist. The only way I'd ever become a ranker would be through clan rankings, and that was well within my reach. I could get there by either forming my own clan or joining Tsukuyo Fuso's.

Some would see this as relying too much on other people, and I could understand that point of view. The person I was back when I'd decided on this goal certainly wouldn't be satisfied with this state of affairs.

However...

Not saying a word, I looked at Nemesis. She also said nothing, telepathically or otherwise. She was just looking straight at me.

"...Yeah," I said. "I already have my answer."

I closed my eyes, let out a breath... and looked right into Shu's eyes, beneath the costume.

"...You're not wrong, Shu. Back when I set this goal, I probably didn't think that I'd become a ranker like this."

Like he said, changing my ultimate goal like this did leave a bad taste in my mouth. He knew me better than anyone, so definitely could say that about me.

“But as I am now... that would be a huge mistake.”

All of that wasn’t important to me anymore. My perspective then and my perspective now were just too different. Only about two months separated those two perspectives, but the weight of those two months was immense.

“By limiting myself to my old goals, I’d be unable to do anything for the kingdom... for Azurite,” I spoke the name of my friend. “That would leave an even *worse* taste in my mouth. I just can’t do that.”

As I was now, I could clearly see what I had to prioritize.

“I’ll seize this possibility with all my heart.” I was willing to do whatever it took to achieve the things I desired.

Also, I didn’t actually think doing this meant I relied too much on other people.

“Whether it’s you, my party, or my friends... I’ll make a clan with anyone who’s willing to join me and become a ranker through that.” Their power was their own, but the very fact that we were now united was the result of all the time we’d spent and the memories we made, as the person I’d been slowly transformed into the person I was now.

“I will proudly state that these bonds are *part* of my power, and I will wield them to fight alongside Azurite.” The person I was now had already decided to give everything he had to face the challenges ahead and seize hold of that possibility.

“That... is the choice I’ve made!”

We were going to make a clan and enter the rankings. This was the path I chose, and I would never regret it.

Silence filled the entire establishment.

Shu, Nemesis... no one said a single word as time slowly ticked onwards.

Amidst this stillness, Shu slowly opened his mouth.

“You pass,” he said, and I felt like he was smiling under his costume.  
“I’ll pledge my name and power to your clan, O fearless leader.”

“Thanks Sh—... Huh?” As I thanked him, I realized what he just said.

“Leader? ...Me?”

“Well, yeah. Fur sure. Your clan’ll get my name in the roster, but it’ll be *your* clan. That makes you the clan leader, right?”

...Right. I’d resolved to make a clan, but I hadn’t yet thought about who would lead it.

I looked at my party, and B3 slowly nodded.

“This party, King of Destruction, and anyone else you would invite — they’d all be joining because of *you*. It wouldn’t make sense for anyone else to be the leader.”

“Yes. Exactly,” Marie agreed.

“Well, it’d attract weirdos because birds of a feath—... Ahem... I mean, you’ll have really diverse members because of your popularity,” Rook said. So they wanted me to be the leader too, huh...?

“You’re the only one fit to lead this clan,” said B3.

“...All right,” I replied. I clearly had no choice, so I just gathered my resolve. If I shrunk back from this, I wouldn’t be able to keep going forward and seize that possibility I wanted. “I... I will become the clan leader.”

The moment I said that, Nemesis started clapping. She was soon joined by Shu, Rook, Marie, B3, Lei-Lei, and...

“...Hold on! Is *everyone* here clapping?!” I just realized that I’d made that whole speech while everyone in the place was staring at me.

...I was reminded of that moment at the fountain, back when I got the death penalty for the first time.

*...Man, is this embarrassing,* I thought.

“Heheheh,” Shu chuckled. “I only asked fur your motivations because I didn’t want to hand you my name fur free. But I’m satisfied. That declaration was beary fiery.”

*That was your whole reason for asking?!*

“Heheh,” Nemesis chuckled smugly. “Getting all fired up when it matters is one of his good points, Brother Bear.”

“I know.”

“Don’t just *say* something like that! You’re making this even more embarrassing!” My reaction made everyone around burst out laughing.

“Yep-yep! What a good conclusion!” said Lei-Lei, who was laughing particularly loudly. “Oh, and if you’re making a clan, I’m joining too!”

“HUH?” Those words made everyone — even Shu — doubt what we were hearing.

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### *Gideon the Duel City*

After that exchange, the group hurried to submit the clan formation registration. They had to hurry, because there was really no telling when Lei-Lei could make it online again.

The founding of country-affiliated clans and addition of new members could be handled in country-affiliated adventurer guilds, so that was where they were heading.

Ray's party chatted amongst themselves about the new clan, while Shu and Lei-Lei lagged behind, walking together some distance back from them.

"So, what was that all about, Shu?" Lei-Lei asked, making sure that only Shu heard. "If Ray's response hadn't been what you wanted, you wouldn't have actually joined his clan, would you?"

"...You can tell?"

"I've known you for a pretty long time, after all," she said with a smile.

"I see," Shu nodded in understanding.

Just as she assumed, Ray's response *did* influence Shu's decision.

There were several reasons for that, and aside from a confirmation of his brother's determination, the main one was that the name of the King of Destruction simply carried far too much weight.

"Clans with Superiors create many enemies," Shu said. Sol Crisis had once tried to gain fame by PKing Ray. This was the same thing, except the scale was orders of magnitude greater. That was just how valuable a Superior's name was.

Ray had already had some unfortunate ties to certain people in Dryfe and was targeted fairly often as a result. Shu was worried that his presence in Ray's new clan would only make things worse.

"That's also why I was shocked when you said that you were joining too," said Shu.

"Hey, might as well go all in," she replied. "Once you're on board, a second Superior won't change much, right?"

“...When he recovers, Figaro will likely join too... and then Hannya will follow him.”

“Wow. That makes four Superiors, then.”

“...That would make it the country-affiliated clan with the second-highest amount of Superiors, right under Sefirot. As the leader, Ray would attract even more attention than before.”

“It’d be a whole lot of trouble...”

And despite knowing all this, Shu had decided to join Ray’s clan.

“Still, I heard the resolve in his voice, so there’s nothing more to say. I’ll stand by him as both a clan member and a brother.”

Shu believed that if anyone could face the various troubles approaching them, it would be Ray.

Thus, a new clan was born. Led by the newbie known as Ray Starling, it had the highest number of Superiors among all clans in the three western countries.

## ***Chapter Three: The Fearsome Clan***

*Altea, The Royal Capital, The Royal Castle*

There was only one week left until the peace talks, and Altimia was hard at work in her office preparing for it. She had to make sure the country could survive any eventuality... including her own death.

She could envision three scenarios in which she might die.

One — the peace talks could turn out to be a trap.

Two — the peace talks could be genuine, but go very badly, and a battle would break out right then and there.

Three — a third party might target the talks and interfere.

In scenarios one and two, the war between Dryfe and Altar would resume.

However, it was difficult to predict what would happen in the third scenario. The optimal solution would have to be found by those left behind.

Elizabeth was too young to make such decisions, so Altimia decided to entrust this duty to her confidant, Marquis Findle, and her trusted friend, Liliana. She made sure to specify that she wanted them to act as Elizabeth and Theresia's guardians in the event of her untimely death.

“Integra didn’t make it in time...” Integra — Altimia’s close friend and the Arch Sage’s heir.

Her letter had said that she would be returning, but gave no timeframe. So far, there were no reports of her return to the capital, and the peace talks were just around the corner. By now, Altimia was working with the assumption that Integra would not make it and had prepared for the event without taking her presence into consideration.

As she continued her work, there was a knock on the door.

It turned out to be the royal guard tasked to keep watch outside of the gate. He reported that Ray Starling had arrived, and she told him to let Ray into the office.

Ray had shown up in the capital yesterday, and Altimia had asked him to visit her when he got the chance. As a college student, he returned to his other world — “logged out” — quite often, so she was surprised that he agreed to come the very next day.

“Welcome, Ray and Nemesis. It’s been quite a while,” she said, as they both entered.

“Yeah. It has been, hasn’t it?” Ray replied.

“Last we saw each other was during the Hannya incident,” added Nemesis.

“Indeed. I had lots to do in preparation for the peace talks, so I returned to the capital right away.”

“How’s that going, anyway?”

“Quite well. Everything is more or less settled. At any rate, there are two reasons why I called you here. The first is Silver.”

“Silver?” Ray tilted his head. He hadn’t expected to hear his Prism Steed’s name.

“Apparently, a copy of an original Prism Steed’s design is necessary for the repair operations in Quartierlatin. Second Model Prism Steeds are too simplified to be of use.”

“I see,” said Nemesis. “So some corners were cut, it would seem — that makes sense for mass-produced units.”

“Indeed,” Azurite nodded. “That is why the repair operations require structural data from an original Prism Steed. Mr. Blue Screen is at the

workshop here in the capital right now. Could you meet with him later?"

"Sure," said Ray. "So, what's the other thing you wanted to talk about?"

"...I have a personal question for you."

"You do?" Ray wondered what it could possibly be, but Azurite came right out and said it.

"You created a clan, didn't you?"

"Oh, that. You heard about it already?"

"Yes. It's quite the talk of the town..."

Altimia fell silent, and her cheeks flushed a bit.

The reason for that was the public statement Ray had supposedly made. Altimia hadn't heard it personally, but just *imagining* it was enough to make Altimia turn red.

"Azurite? What's wrong?" Ray asked.

"...Nothing," she replied. "More importantly, what members have you gathered?"

"There's me, Shu, the rest of my party, and Lei-Lei. We also invited some other Masters we know, and three of them agreed to join. That makes nine in total so far."

As far as clans went, it wasn't particularly large. However, two of the members were Superiors, and two more were famous player killers, so it was already an extremely noteworthy group.

The other three who'd joined were the three girls Ray's party occasionally quested with — Kasumi, Fujinon, and Io. Rook had invited Kasumi. Her response was, "Wow... A clan that has Rook, Ray, and even Teacher... That's incredible...!" and she instantly agreed.

The other two hadn't hesitated to join, either.

...Kasumi actually fainted when she met the other members, but that was a minor detail.

That was B3's fault. Unfortunately, she happened to be in Barbaroy mode when Kasumi showed up.

Ray also reached out to duel rankers he often sparred with, but so far, none of them had agreed to join. He'd avoided inviting Riser, though, since he'd been entrusted with the Babylonian Battlegroup — Bishmal, though, outright refused, saying, "I ain't in a clan, but I'm gonna stand by my buddy Riser!"

Juliet, Chelsea, and Max had all said they'd think about it.

Chelsea was still in a state of shock from her previous clan disbanding, so she couldn't decide whether or not to enter a new clan at this point; Juliet was so worried about her friend that she also decided not to join yet.

Max, on the other hand, was hesitant because Ray's clan members were a bit... much.

Chelsea and Juliet said they would give their answers once Chelsea had calmed down a bit, but they still hadn't decided whether they'd join Ray's clan or create a new one themselves.

"...Your brother makes perfect sense, but I did not expect to hear Lei-Lei's name there." Altimia said.

"I was surprised too," Ray replied. "Also, Shu said that Figaro and Hannya will probably join, but they're not in officially yet because they haven't returned."

That meant that Ray's clan would most likely have *four* Superiors. Altimia didn't know whether to be shocked or exasperated by that.

“Until recently, I could have never imagined that the kingdom’s Superiors would gather under a single flag like this... I suppose we have you to thank for all of this”

“You’re the real reason, actually. I decided to make a clan because of you.”

He said those words as if they were nothing, but they made Altimia’s heart beat faster.

“...You always manage to say something that surprises me.”

“Really?”

“Be careful, Azurite,” said Nemesis. “He might have a tendency to psych himself up and make impassioned speeches when the chips are down, but he can also drop some truly heart-stopping lines even in normal conversations.”

“Indeed he can.”

“...Is that what you guys really think of me?” The two looked away from him and fell silent, but that was an answer by itself.

Their attitude actually made Ray feel a little self-conscious, so he lowered the Storm Visage down over his face to disguise his expression. It was impossible to tell whether that was his way of saying that he would pick his words more carefully from now on, or a show of his embarrassment at realizing he put his foot in his mouth more often than he’d thought.

“At any rate, setting aside the matter of your mouth...” Azurite began, “we still need to talk about your clan. I want to know about more than just its roster.”

“And that would be?” Ray asked, his voice muffled.

“...Could you please remove that mask?”

“All right. So, what do you wanna know?”

Altimia presented Ray with a document. It was a copy of the current, post-update clan rankings.

“Your clan’s name, for one” she said. “The rankings have changed quite drastically, and I cannot tell which one is yours.”

“Oh yeah, the rankings are totally different from top to bottom now,” Ray said.

There were several reasons for this upheaval. First, the dissolution of clans like Golden Pirates and Mad Castle had left gaps in the rankings. Second, many clans had been actively recruiting new members and gathering mercenaries in case a war broke out, which had given them enough points to enter the rankings for the first time.

The third reason was the AETL Union’s recent split, and subsequent loss of members. The clan was a lot smaller now after Liliana’s fanclub had left — and the driving force behind that had largely been Ray’s attempt to join. Liliana was Elizabeth’s protector, and the fact that the clan’s sub-leader had refused Ray entry ended up making the second princess’ fanclub upset. “Ray Starling is connected to Liliana, which means we’d practically be one step away from Elizabeth herself! What the hell were you thinking, you dumbass?!” they’d cried.

“Shut up! You brainlets can’t possibly understand our feelings!” Liliana’s fanclub argued back.

Altimia’s fanclub had tried to calm the situation down, while Theresia’s fanclub was content to act like it was none of their business.

All this conflict ultimately led to Liliana’s fanclub leaving AETL Union and creating a new clan, called Liliana FC. The fact that this splinter clan made it in the rankings all by itself made it clear that AETL Union was a force to be reckoned with.

That also meant AETL Union was now actually just AET Union... even though the names of country-affiliated clans couldn't be changed, so it would officially remain "AETL Union."

That wasn't the only disaster they'd met with, though.

Through DIN, they'd also learned about Elizabeth's wedding and found out that she would be moving to Huang He, which had had an absolutely devastating impact on Elizabeth's fanclub. Some were so shocked that they barely managed to log on, some almost went crazy and got the death penalty from a mysterious sunglasses-wearing PK, and some said "Huang He, huh? That's a bit far, but..." and began preparing to leave Altar. All in all, it was not good.

They'd lost some members because of all this, and had dropped in the rankings.

The only silver lining for them was the fact that they weren't aware of Ray and Altimia's relationship. If Altimia hadn't worn a mask while they were operating together, the clan might've been completely torn apart.

As a result, AETL Union had dropped to 8th in the rankings, compared to Liliana FC at 27th — which was quite bad, considering their previous power.

Now, most would've expected the clan in the 3rd place — K&R — to take the Union's spot, but that wasn't what happened. That was all due to a new clan that hadn't been seen on the list before.

"A great many new clans have made it onto the rankings, but I am particularly concerned about the one in second place," said Altimia.

"Huh? Second?"

"I have never even heard of this clan before, yet it's right behind those Lunar Society people. They must be a very serious threat."

"Umm, Azurite..." Nemesis hesitantly spoke up. "That would be..."

"Their name is disturbingly sinister," Azurite continued. Not saying a word, Ray and Nemesis looked at the list on the table... then they both glanced away.

"Could they be one of those fearsome 'PK clans,' as you Masters call them..." Altimia asked, and neither of them knew how to answer.

"Uhh... well, in a way, it is, I guess?" said Ray.

"...'PK clan' is certainly apt. Obviously those other two fit the description, but I imagine that Brother Bear and the Chinese snake have killed many, as well."

"I see, Brother Bear and Chinese sn—... what did you just say?" Altimia couldn't help but ask.

After all, "Brother Bear" was how Nemesis referred to Shu, the King of Destruction.

That could only mean that...

"...Azurite," Ray looked into her eyes and finally spoke up. A cold sweat stood out on his face. "The clan in second place... is our clan."

"...Huh?" The answer almost made Altimia's heart stop.

She once again looked at the list, focusing on the second rank.

Listed there was indeed the clan that Ray had made in order to protect Altar and fight alongside Altimia. It was also an extremely powerful clan that currently had two Superiors, would soon have four, and perhaps might gather even more in the future. It was a very special clan, both for Altimia and the entire kingdom.

She hadn't even considered that this second-place clan might've been Ray's. After all, she didn't think that a clan with so few members could possibly make it that high, even if it had Superiors.

More importantly, she hadn't imagined that they would give it such a sinister name.

“...Why *that* name?”

“...Stuff happened.” Ray slowly opened his mouth and began telling the story.



*A Week Ago, Death Soldier, Ray Starling.*

It was the fateful day on which I finally founded a clan.

We were going through the clan creation process at the adventurer’s guild counter. We didn’t have to set a HQ or anything like that yet, so we had no trouble filling out the form... but then came the most troublesome part — actually naming it.

The clan name conveyed its reputation. That made it extremely important, and an important decision is always difficult.

The founding members were all extremely unique people, so there wasn’t a lot of overlap in the kind of names we liked.

Even if we could find a name all of us actually agreed on, the well-informed among us would find out that they were already being used by, for example, a ranking Granvaloan clan or a bandit gang that used to operate in Caldina or something like that.

We talked about it for more than an hour, right until the adventurer’s guild was about to close.

“I have an idea,” B3 said as she adjusted her glasses, the light glinting off them as she did so. “It’s the method I used to generate my clan name, and it’s a fairly popular one in general, too.”

She reached into her inventory, took out a piece of paper, and split it into twelve equal parts.

“The founding members of the clan — the six of us, in this case — each write down a word or phrase on two cards. One card is for the

first half of the name, while the other's for the second half. They're then put into two separate boxes. Do we have any handy...?"

"Should I make a couple of the paper boxes I use fur my popcorn?" asked Shu.

"Please do." Shu reached into his pocket-type inventory and took out some flat paper boxes, along with some tape. As he began folding them into actual boxes, B3 continued.

"The clan's leader will then pull a card from each box. Then, they'd combine the two cards they've drawn, a first half and a last half, and the result is the clan's name."

"That's simple, but I'm intrigued," said Rook. "I also think it works out well that the leader is the one pulling the cards."

The rest of the group nodded.

"Yes," said B3. "It's an easy, fun way to make a clan name. Lots of famous clans have used it, including my own Mad Castle and, to my knowledge, Goblin Street."

*...So you can make some pretty cool names you'd never have come up with otherwise like this, huh?* I thought.

Shu quickly finished making the boxes and everyone began secretly writing down their contributions. Personally... I decided to pick positive words. Thus, I put "Life" for my first half, and "Guard" for the second.

"Life Guard" sounded like the pretty mundane profession, but the chances of me pulling both of my own cards was low, and on their own, the words could potentially combine well with a lot of different things.

Eventually, we all finished writing and put the cards in the correct boxes. Nemesis then shook the box for the first half, while Babi did the same for the other one, mixing up the cards inside. Only

members could write the words, so we left the Embryos in charge of the shuffling.

Finally, the preparation was done.

“I’ll start.” Everyone focused on me as I pulled out a card from the box for the first half.

Tense, I looked at what was written on it.

“...Eh?” The word on it was... *Death* — the opposite of what I’d written on my first card.

The extremely ominous word made me fall completely silent. No one else said anything, either. They were all just staring at the second box.

Honestly, I felt like this was already a failure, but I pulled out the second card regardless.

On it, there was the word “Period.”

I put the words together, creating “Death Period.”

“What kinda combination is this?!” I exclaimed.

*Both words just mean some kind of ending! This clan ended before it even began! It’s way worse than any PK clan name!* I thought.

“...Amazing how you pulled something so... intense... on your first try,” said Nemesis.

“Hey, this is a bit...” This was supposed to be a clan that would protect the kingdom during the upcoming war. With a name like *that*, you’d think we were Altar’s worst nightmare. I wasn’t sure about all this...

“...I like it.”

...*B3?* I thought.

“This clan name is awesome! I mean, I’m the one who put ‘Death’ in there, but I never would’ve imagined we’d get a combo like *that!*”

*Hold on a second, Death Shadow, Marie Adler.*

“Ohh, now that just rocks! I love names like that!”

*Lei-Lei, why are you so excited?*

“As fur as I know, there’s no famous clan with that name.”

*Well, that’s important, but...*

“I’m the one who put in ‘Period,’” said Rook. “If you interpret it as ‘a full stop on unnecessary death,’ it really seems to suit your clan, don’t you think?”

He wore a smile that showed he honestly believed every word he was saying.

“Well, if you read it like that, then, I guess...”

“...From that point of view, your ‘Life’ suggestion would have been catastrophic,” said Nemesis. Life Period — a full stop on life,’ Now that was a PK clan name if I ever saw one.

“I guess this is a case of the negative of a negative being a positive,” I said.

“Ha ha ha! It suits this bunch beary well,” said Shu, and everyone nodded in agreement.

Anyway, all the members seemed to like the name.

...I still found it a bit unsettling, but I could deal with it if I looked at it the same way Rook did.

“All right,” I said. “The name of our clan will be... Death Period.”

And so, it was decided.

*...But it really does sound kinda sinister, huh?*

# ***Interlude: The Imperium's Preparations***

*A Certain Location in the Imperial Capital, Vandelheim*

Three days remained until the peace talks, and it wasn't just the kingdom of Altar that was busy with preparations for the momentous event.

By now it was well known in the imperium that the imperator's little sister, Claudioh, would be representing him; just like Altar, Dryfe was gathering Masters to act as her retinue — and one Master was more enthusiastic about this particular *quest* than the others.

That day, Zeta was at the castle — specifically, in the room she was borrowing for the time being. Safely inside this personal space of hers, she was practicing how to prepare proper coffee. Zeta knew that Sechs, the leader of Illegal Frontier, was a coffee aficionado, so she'd begun learning how to make it herself. She'd found out about his taste for it when he wrote her an email saying that he'd become so good at preparing coffee that even Gerbera had found it delicious. Reading that had actually made Zeta somewhat jealous of the girl.

However, since Zeta wasn't terribly good at picking up on nuances of taste, she couldn't quite tell whether her coffee was up to standard or not. She finally decided she could judge it by smell, at least, but when she brought her nose close to the cup...

“Zeta! I’m going to the peace talks! The Unbreakable is gonna be there too!”

...A red-haired, fine-looking man threw open the door without so much as a knock.

The momentum of the opening door shook the entire room. The black coffee that Zeta held in front of her face splashed out of the cup, right on the bandages on her face.

There were now dark polka dots on the previously immaculate white fabric.

“Ah...” The man who’d entered the room — Logan Goddhart — realized what he’d done, but instead of apologizing, he just froze in place.

“Hhaah...” Zeta sighed, putting away the coffee cup and removing her bandages as if it was nothing.

Brown skin, red eyes, a young and pretty appearance... her face was fully exposed now, but Zeta didn’t seem to mind. She merely took some spare bandages out of her inventory and began to replace the ones she’d removed.

This was the first time Logan had ever seen her face. It left him speechless, but not because he was enchanted by it or anything. He was just wondering why she would expose it so casually after hiding it all this time, and he felt as though he’d seen that face somewhere. The recollection was rather vague, though. He certainly hadn’t seen it in person before, but he was sure he’d caught a glimpse of it in some photo or video.

However, before Logan could remember anything more about it, Zeta finished replacing her bandages and called out to him.

“Suggestion,” she said. “Should be a must from now on. Also, you should watch your strength when opening doors”

“O-Okay. Sure,” Logan could do nothing but nod.

“Matter at hand. What business do you have? You mentioned the peace talks and The Unbreakable.”

“Y-Yeah! Zeta! I’m going to the peace talks! I’m gonna beat The Unbreakable and clear my name!”

“Refusal.” Zeta shot down his idea with a single word. She didn’t even bother with an explanation this time.

“Wh-Why?!” Logan asked. “That build you suggested to me is super powerful! There’s no way I can lose against that newbie! Hell, I could take on *all* of Altar’s Superiors now!”

“Discrepancy,” Zeta answered. “There is a discrepancy in your stated goal. It is *possible* that the peace talks will lead to battle — but officially, it is not part of the premise.”

“But it’s obviously gonna happen, right?”

“Unclear. That depends on how the talks proceed. Also... should you not focus on raising your level and gathering sacrifices? You are not even level 500 any longer.”

“Ghh...” Zeta was right — at the moment, Logan’s level was in the 300s.

Part of the reason for this was Zeta, but ultimately, Logan only had himself to blame.

Zeta had presented him with a build that took full advantage of his Superior Embryo, Rumpelstiltskin. It was the best build she could devise for him, and Logan fully agreed with her assessment.

In fact, he agreed with it *too much*.

In his haste to finish Zeta’s suggested build as quickly as possible, Logan had *reset all of his jobs* aside from his main, Hell General, and replaced them with the low-tier jobs necessary for the build. That greatly reduced his level, and spring break was over for him by that point, so he hadn’t had the time to regain his lost levels yet after going back to school.

“Word of warning,” said Zeta. “It is dangerous for you to go as you are. You still are not prepared to use this new strategy, and with your level, Altar’s High Prieste—”

“Don’t worry! Your build is a seriously real masterpiece! Level doesn’t even matter! Though, just in case, I’ll only go after raising my level to 500!”

“Insufficient. That will not be eno—”

“I have been reborn! Watch and witness the power of Hell General, Logan Goddhart! HAHAHAHAHAHAHAH!” Laughing uproariously, Logan left the room.

“Uninformed... He does not listen to other people and is slow to process information. Based on his statements, he probably does not even know that Ray Starling created a clan full of Superiors.”

Zeta wondered if it would be good to teach him about the importance of gathering information, but she felt that he might become *too* concerned with the information he had and act on his own more than he ought to. So for now, she decided against it.

She then closed the still-open door and folded her arms before starting to ponder.

“...Curious.” Her current thoughts were somewhere along the lines of, *Is that boy really that stupid?*

She’d known he was overconfident and particularly demented for someone his age — but after she’d started teaching him, he seemed to have become downright reckless. However, that could very well have been because his pride had been shattered by Ray Starling, Franklin, then Zeta herself, all in a short period of time.

Or perhaps the new build and strategy she’d provided had gone to his head? Even Zeta herself would have described it as “extremely effective while still only requiring the level of thought that Logan was capable of *before* his losing streak.”

For a Superior, Logan was really lacking in adaptability and player skill, and her build had accounted for that while making him as powerful as possible.

Fortunately, Logan himself seemed to really like it.

He liked it a bit *too* much, in fact — seeing how quickly he accepted Zeta's suggestion and how he'd rushed to make the switch.

Although warped and broken, Logan seemed to trust Zeta, at least. He might've come here to report his next endeavor to the person he could call a teacher.

He really ought to work on his listening skills, though, since he seemed determined to completely ignore her warning.

“...Unease.” That single word summed up her feelings about Logan’s attendance at the peace talks. If it was just a question of him losing another battle, it wouldn’t be that important — but it wasn’t out of the question that he’d launch a surprise attack on Altar’s forces, ruin the peace talks, get himself onto Dryfe’s wanted list, and end up in gaol.

That wasn’t the only thing she was uneasy about, though.

She was also worried about the fact that *she definitely wouldn’t be there herself* — meaning that she had no way to stop him. Though, depending on her actions, there may end up being no need to stop him in the first place.

“Time. I should go too,” she whispered as she gazed at the vista outside.

Her room was on the south side of the castle, so she had an excellent view in the direction of Altar. There, she saw the Border Mountain Belt, home of the skydragons. However, she seemed to be focused on something beyond it.



### *Vandelheim Outskirts, Triangle of Wisdom Headquarters*

As an R&D group, the Triangle of Wisdom operated several testing areas. They used them to evaluate new Magingear models and add-ons, and the areas would be active day and night, as there were members of the clan online more or less all the time.

In one of their particularly large outdoor testing areas, they were trying out something rarely seen here — a bunch of *tanks*.

As the creators of humanoid Magingears, the Triangle of Wisdom rarely used the “old-fashioned” sort of tank. A few members customized them as a curiosity, but that was about it.

However, at the moment there were several tanks of the same model, all erratically moving around the test area and occasionally firing their guns.

This unusual sight was being observed by ToW members, as well as two men who were standing together some distance away.

One was a spectacled man in a lab coat — someone who looked like a classic mad scientist. The other was dressed in a worn military uniform. He had an unshaven face and a cigarette in his mouth, which gave him the air of a stereotypical delinquent soldier.

“The peace talks are in three days, huh?” said the man in the lab coat.

“Did ya hear? Logan’s gonna join as a bodyguard,” the soldier said.

“Bodyguard, eh? That doesn’t suit His Excellency at all. I think he’ll abandon that job and attack Ray Starling.”

“...I can see that, yeah. Better hope the beastly lady can hold ‘im back.”

“The King of Beasts has some personal business of her own. I’m not sure if she’ll have time for His Excellency.”

The two men were Giga Professor, Mr. Franklin and King of Chariots, Murdoch Martinez — a peculiar Master who held the rank of captain in the imperium's army.

"Don't ya have some business with Ray Starling too?" Murdoch asked.

"I do... I really do," Franklin answered. His expression didn't change, but Murdoch could sense that the atmosphere around was different.

"Ya heard he made a clan?"

"Of course. Oh, how I laughed at all of that. The fact that *he* made a clan, its name, and even the ranking... I just completely lost it. I'd say I haven't laughed like that in a long time, but I'd be lying."

Shortly before Ray had made his clan, Franklin read some documents about an incident in Caldina — and the fact that, by some twist of fate, two people he knew very well were somehow together now had made him burst into laughter.

"You okay with stayin' behind when Ray Starling's gonna be there?"

"I am. The ace up my sleeve still needs some final adjustments. Also, I'm planning to break Ray Starling regardless of whether the outcome is war or unification," Franklin chuckled. "As I'm sure you're well aware, conflicts between Masters aren't a crime."

"I see. So ya basically handed this chance to Logan on a silver platter, huh?"

"I guess you could say that. Though, looking at the participants, I'm not sure how useful he'll be."

"Hm?"

"With His Excellency and the others, the retinue'll be impressive, but honestly, I feel like anyone besides King of Beasts is overkill... or more like, useless."

The two knew that Behemot, Logan, and many other Masters would go to the peace talks, while King of Thieves, Zeta would operate as part of some other plot.

Franklin and Murdoch would not be participating, however. They would stay behind to protect the imperium on the off chance that Caldina would use the peace talks as an opportunity to make their move against Dryfe.

Caldina, though, had its own share of problems. From what they knew, the country was in the midst of a chaotic situation surrounding UBM orbs that had leaked in from Huang He.

"Oh, right," said Franklin, remembering something. "Take this."

"Is this a... newspaper?"

"It's the latest info on Caldina I bought from DIN." The front page article was titled "WAR BETWEEN CALDINA AND GRANVALOA?!" and the photo attached showed a building engulfed in flames.

It read as follows: "Treasurebeast Orbs have been stolen from Huang He's treasury and taken to various areas in Caldina, where they caused all sorts of turmoil. They even recently led to direct armed conflict between Caldina and Granvaloa. The seafaring country has dispatched four Superiors to Caldina's territory: Miroslava Swampman, the 'Charm of Land and Sea'; the Edwards spouses, the 'Avowed'; and Antimicrobic Soy Sauce, the 'Human Bomb'; Their goal is believed to be the Treasurebeast Orb, which possesses the ability to transform water into dry land. Caldina responded to this invasion by mobilizing Sefirot to deal with the situation."

Reading all that made the cigarette drop from Murdoch's mouth.

"...Over *half* of The Great Seven Embryos of Granvaloa? Are they insane?" he asked.

"Not in the slightest," Franklin responded. "After all, that orb they mentioned is really bad news for Granvaloa."

"What...? Ohh, I get it," Murdoch said after a moment of thought.

"Caldina's got The Earth. Like Legendaria, Granvaloa has a geographical advantage. They keep the other countries in check by surroundin' them from the sea — so in their eyes, a thing that turns water into land? Caldina ain't allowed to have that."

With such an artifact, Granvaloa could have the territory that they so desired. However, the risks might outweigh the rewards. Caldina's Magical Apex might acquire the orb and invade by turning water into land, so Granvaloa had to secure the orb at all costs... or at least destroy it and make sure that a non-Caldinian Master defeated that UBM.

"They're basically doing the same thing we did in the ruins of Quartierlatin," said Franklin. "Granvaloa is a lot more serious, though."

Like the name suggested, The Great Seven Embryos of Granvaloa included seven Superiors. Only four of them had been dispatched on this mission, but it wasn't because they believed that four would be enough. It's just that these were the only four who could fully use their powers even on land. In other words, they'd actually sent all the Superiors they could muster.

"...With all that goin' on, Caldina's gotta focus on their own turf, huh?" said Murdoch.

"Well, Caldina can't just break the orb and have The Earth kill the UBM. The orbs are Huang He's national treasures, so they'd only be making a new enemy. Their relations with Huang He are already strained because of the orb that broke during the incident at Cortana, so if they break one on purpose, everything would fall apart."

Caldina might have had the option of breaking it before, but now that Granvaloa was invading, it was an extremely difficult choice to make.

Granvaloa, on the other hand, would much rather break the orb and make an enemy of Huang He than lose their greatest line of defense — the sea.

And if that wasn't enough to cause chaos in Caldina, there was more. Rumor had it that even Legendaria had infiltrated the country to secure new orbs. Caldina, at the moment, was a volatile powder keg that a single spark could set off.

"If Huang He and Caldina become enemies as well, the two of us might be relieved of our guard duty and sent off to attack Caldina." In other words, it was possible they weren't staying behind as a safeguard against an invasion *by* Caldina, but to keep them on standby for an invasion *of* Caldina. That was certainly well within the planning abilities of the current imperator.

In fact, their ruler was probably spinning a multitude of strategies in his head at this very moment.

"...By the way, prof — did ya get the list of demands for the peace talks?" Murdoch asked.

"Not yet," Franklin shook his head. "Though, I heard of a particular demand related to us."

"Eh? What's that?"

"One of the demands is..."

Franklin proceeded to tell Murdoch one of the demands that would be offered in the peace talks, and all the tanks in the test area suddenly stopped firing. Those words, meant only for Murdoch himself, made him break out in a cold sweat.

“...Man,” Murdoch mouthed in shock. “You think so too, huh, Captain? I know that His Majesty loves to strategize... but this, combined with the actions of you-know-who — it almost starts to look a little *too* ballsy. Prof, can ya hurry up with the tank mass production? I’ll increase your pay by twenty percent,” Murdoch added as he pointed at the tanks rolling to and fro.

“I can increase the production speed if I gather volunteer clan members, but... are you sure about this? It’s coming out of your pocket, not clan funds, right?”

“That’s fine. This is all just revving up for a good time, anyway. Also...” he said as he took a drag on his cigarette and grinned. “Fights and parties are both best when they’re flashy. Especially if you’re up against a goddamn land battleship.”

“Oh? You think so too, huh?”

“Fightin’ Caldina’s Rainbow might be fun too, though,” Murdoch said, his face showing an obvious joy that didn’t mesh with his rugged soldier appearance. “Though, I don’t really care if we’re throwin’ down with them or the kingdom. I’ll be satisfied as long as there’s war with a lotta smoke, big booms, and scrap.”

In Franklin’s mind, this man, who waited for war with excitement, was a true ludo. He was far less warped than Logan used to be, but anyone who actually *looked forward* to war had to be either a complete psychopath or someone who clearly saw *Dendro* as a game — an exciting experience that let you fight on the frontlines without the risk of death.

To him, this was a space in which he could sacrifice everything to satisfy his adventurous spirit.

However, that was... sane.

Compared to Franklin, who never hesitated to trample his enemies underfoot and spared no expense to reach his goals, Murdoch was

an extremely sane, healthy, and perhaps even *wholesome* kind of player.

“Let’s do our best in the war,” said Franklin. “Even though I have no idea who we’ll end up fighting.”

“Yeah,” nodded Murdoch. “Let’s do our best.”

Franklin wanted to settle the score with his nemesis.

Murdoch wanted a battlefield that would stir his heart.

These two Superiors, worder and ludo, waited for the moment when their wishes would be fulfilled.

“By the way, His Excellency isn’t the only unusual participant in the peace talks. There’s another one.”

“And who’s that?”

“*The strongest non-Superior in Dryfe.*”

“...Seriously?”

# ***Chapter Four: The Rabbit Skips Through the Darkness***

*Royal Capital Altea*

It was now two nights before the peace talks. The Masters who'd taken up the position of bodyguard were still free to do whatever they wanted.

Those involved could be generally categorized into two groups.

One group of Masters would join Altimia the following morning and act as her bodyguards on the road to the peace talks, which would be taking place at the Altar-Dryfe border. They were able to do this because they had a lot of free time in real life — maybe they'd been laid off, or something similar.

The other group consisted of the Masters who would go straight to the border. They would also be participating in the peace talks, but their real life schedule prohibited them from traveling there alongside Altimia for the entire way, so they would instead meet up with everyone else at a settlement near the border.

“All right, Riser — let’s check out one more place!”

“You’re drinking too much, Bishmal. We’ve got bodyguard duty tomorrow, remember?”

Masked Riser and Bishmal — the sixth and seventh on the kingdom’s duel rankings — had also answered the call, and they would be part of the first group. They had already left Gideon — their *Dendro* hometown — and arrived at the capital, where they (mostly Bishmal, actually) were sampling the local bars.

Bishmal clung to Riser’s shoulder as they walked through the lively downtown area.

"Hahahah! Hey, I'll just get a ride in your Hermod's sidecar again. You'll wake me up if something happens on the way, won't ya?"

"You're relying on me way too much," Riser sighed under his mask.

*What a pain*, he thought. However, he didn't argue against Bishmal's idea, which was probably a sign of the companionship they'd forged through their long-lasting dueling rivalry.

"By the way, did ya hear? Our boy Ray started a clan and got in the rankings."

"I heard about it a week ago, yes."

"His clan's in second! That's amazing!"

"It really is."

"...Oh. Sorry, Riser." The position of second place in the clan rankings held a special meaning to Riser. After all, he was the temporary sub-leader of a clan called Babylonian Battlegroup... which had once occupied that very position in the rankings.

The leader, Foltesla, had yet to return, and Shulka — the sub-leader who'd given the role over to Riser — was traveling the world. Riser had no idea where he was now.

After losing Claymill, their original hometown, to the Tri-Zenith Dragon, many of the clan's members had quit. There were so few left now that you could count them on two hands.

Accordingly, they'd dropped off the clan rankings a long time ago.

"It's fine," said Riser. "When our leader returns, the Babylonian Battlegroup will aim for the top once more. All I can do until then is keep the clan going, battle as a duelist, and protect the kingdom."

"Riser..." He'd lost so much to Gloria, but that was exactly why he was so determined to protect what little he had left. That was the primary reason he took up the bodyguard job for the peace talks.

“What about you?” Riser asked. “You didn’t join Ray’s clan?”

“Nope. I’m not the clan type,” Bishmal answered. *And if I did join a clan, I already know where I’d go,* he added, silently.

“But man, a newbie like Ray’s already in the rankings, huh?”

“It’s all because of his connections... and his personal strengths.”

“I guess. Ray’s not the only one who’s been on fire recently, though... look at Kashimiya, bro. That guy actually beat Tom.”

“...Yeah.” Tom Cat — the second in the duel rankings. To Bishmal and Riser, he was like an impassable barrier. Duels were generally one-on-one clashes of solo battle-focused fighters, and Tom Cat’s multiplication ability completely shattered that premise. He’d been a wall for Altar’s duelists since before *Infinite Dendrogram* was released.

When Figaro had defeated Tom and become the current champion, Bishmal and Riser had been both shocked and happy. After all, it was clear proof that Tom *wasn’t* unbeatable, which only hardened their resolve to challenge and defeat him.

However, even though Figaro had managed to scale that wall, it remained impassable for both of them.

After Foltesla had disappeared, but before Kashimiya and Rosa had come to Altar or Juliet and Chelsea had started climbing the ranks, Riser and Bishmal fought for third place while challenging Tom every chance they got.

No matter how many times they tried, though, they could never defeat him.

And while they failed time after time, the roster of top duelists began to change.

Kashimiya — a natural at the art of unsheathing, known as the fastest in the kingdom.

Juliet — a talented warrior who used every spatial dimension to its fullest.

Rosa — a master of the one-hit kill, her abilities honed in Tenchi, land of strife.

Time passed, and even more impassable walls appeared in front of Riser and Bishmal. Eventually, they dropped down to sixth and seventh in the rankings. There was even a chance that, given time, Chelsea and the rankers below her would surpass them too.

The two continued to walk without saying a word.

“We’ve been in *Dendro* for a pretty long time, huh?” said Bishmal, gazing up to the sky with his eyes full of nostalgia.

“Yeah. Switching between here and reality really messes with your sense of time,” Riser replied. “But you haven’t changed one bit since the day we met.”

“Hey, and you’re wearing the exact same thing you were back then. Your suit looked a lot more handmade, though.”

“That’s because it was. There weren’t many crafting-focused Masters around at the time, so I asked a tian craftsman to make it... they didn’t exactly know what a tokusatsu hero was around here back then, though, so it was difficult for me to explain what exactly I wanted in a way they could understand. I was just thankful they did as good a job as they did.”

Riser’s handcrafted tokusatsu hero suit had gone through many upgrades over his time in-game. His earlier ones did have, as Bishmal had put it, a kind of handmade, “amateur” quality to them.

It had become a lot easier to make such suits since then. Tians finally learned what he was talking about from Hero Club’s performances, and there had been an increase in craftsman Masters who knew exactly what Riser wanted.

The demand for suits like his remained low, though.

“By the way, I haven’t seen ya wear *that* recently,” said Bishmal. “I know that Hermod covers for it, but still.” Hermod was Riser’s Embryo. It had started out as a large motorcycle, but as it evolved, it had developed a hero suit as an additional form. “Did something happen to it?” Bishmal asked.

“I used it too much. Apparently, the next time it breaks it’ll be gone for good.”

“Ohh. Well, that’d be a waste. Keep it around as a souvenir, at least.”

“That’s the plan.” They had been walking while talking about the past, and before they knew it, the crowd around them had grown sparse.

“Oh boy, we wandered away from downtown. Better turn around,” said Bishmal.

“Shouldn’t we go back to the inn and sleep already?”

“No way! The night’s still young!” the hearty duelist cried. He and Riser turned around to head back the way they came, but then...

“Masked Riser and Bishmal — the duel rankers, I presume?”

...An unfamiliar voice called out to them.

“Hm...?” Riser didn’t care much for the fact that someone was addressing them so casually, but even more than that... he felt that something was very wrong.

They had *just* turned around to return downtown. However, the voice had come from *behind them* — from a place that was completely devoid of people only a moment ago.

The two turned back to see a boy, who seemed to be on the shorter side, with his hands completely hidden in his pockets. He was

dressed in light clothes with no armor, but his feet were covered by metallic boots.

His most notable feature, however, were the two bunny ears sticking out of his hat.

*Rabbit ears... I guess they're like Rosa's wolf ears?* Riser thought, remembering his fellow duel ranker. He'd concluded at a glance that this boy was an avatar built in the character creator.

In fact, there wasn't a doubt in his mind that this boy was no tian.

Riser couldn't say exactly how he knew this so strongly. If pressed for a reason, he might say it was because the boy seemed similar to a Master he knew well — a Master he and Bishmal had just been talking about.

“Oh! It really *is* you two!”

Upon seeing their faces, the boy smiled. Riser's instincts screamed in warning at the sight.

*I'll use Reveal... Hm?*

He *tried* to use Reveal on the boy — but the next moment, he'd vanished from sight.

Then, three things happened at the exact same time.

First, Bishmal shouted, “Riser!” and pushed his friend away.

Second, something hit Riser's mask and he heard a voice say, “Tch. What a tough mask. I couldn't cut through it.”

And third, *blood began spraying out of Bishmal's neck like a fountain.*

“Wh-What?!” Riser cried. Skilled as he was, even he couldn't process what had just happened.

It was plainly obvious they were being attacked, though, so he instantly summoned Hermod — his motorcycle-like Type Gear-Arms

Embryo. A moment later, he donned the hero suit that came along with it.

“Burstfla—” With the last of his breath, Bishmal tried to activate his ultimate skill that turned his body into flame...

“Ohh. Flame transformation is pretty annoying. Please don’t.”

...But then the boy landed directly on his head.

The mysterious boy’s metal boots had become lethal weapons — they now had guillotine-like blades jutting out of them like ice skates, but much sharper than any mere footwear.

The bladed boots split Bishmal’s head open before he could activate his skill. The resurrection period expired in the blink of an eye, and the duel ranker dissolved into motes of light

The boy landed on the pavement with a loud, metallic clang.



“Bishmal!” Riser called out.

“One down,” said the boy, as Riser’s brain finally caught up with the situation.

“Who are you...?!” he roared.

“I won’t waste my time answering your questions. I’m in a hurry.”

The boy showed no intention of even giving Riser his name, but he’d seen more than enough to know that he was an enemy..

*An attack...! This is the capital! You can’t fight here... Wait, no!*  
Thankfully, the alley was empty except for them. If they fought, nobody would be caught in the crossfire. Also, Riser couldn’t help but assume that someone who’d just attacked them out of the blue would go on to attack someone else.

Knowing that, he decided he had to defeat the boy here and now.

“Storming-Man, Gusting Bane Of All Evil — Hermod!” Riser activated his ultimate skill before leaping into the sky.

His Embryo followed him, and they became one.

Riser then accelerated using Hermod’s boosters, reaching the speed of sound — and then blowing past it.

As he gained speed, he traced an arc in the sky and began to spin before finally falling downwards like a meteor from the heavens.

“RISEERRRR... KIIIIIIIIIIICK!” This was the ace up Riser’s sleeve — a high-speed, high-powered kicking attack. A single hit from this could easily one-shot an upper-tier Pure-Dragon, or even a Superior Job. It was the kind of attack employed by the tokusatsu heroes whose ranks he’d always yearned to join — a true sure-kill technique.

It was also a skill unique to Hermod — the famed Riser Kick.

Riser opened with his strongest attack, fully intent on killing the mysterious boy...

“Ah...?!”

...Who was already above him.

“Jumping. Kicking. And *most* importantly, speed. Really, now. You can’t even hope to compare to me on any of these things, Masked Riser.”

Even though he went at several times the speed of sound, he heard the boy’s voice *right next to his ear*.

“And this is goodbye,” the boy said, slicing through the gaps in Riser’s suit behind both his knees — severing his legs.

With his joints destroyed, Riser could no longer control his kick.

“Ah...?!” Defenseless, he crashed into the pavement with the full force of the supersonic momentum from his ultimate skill behind him.

The impact cracked open a crater-like hole, and the pavement around it flew up into the air without even breaking apart, as though even stones couldn’t keep up with what was happening. The sound and resulting shockwave alerted everyone in the area that *something* big was going on. Lights began to turn on in the surrounding buildings; screams rang out as people caught a glimpse of the scene.

“Ngh...” At the bottom of the crater in the pavement lay the scattered remains of Hermod and Riser, who already looked like a corpse.

“Still alive...? You’re pretty tough,” the boy said. “I guess you’ve got some half-baked build that boosts both AGI and END? Well, whatever. This will finish you off.”

Peering down at Riser from the edge of the crater, he threw a dynamite-like cylinder bomb at him before turning and walking away.

The explosion that soon followed provoked even more screams, but the boy responsible for it was nowhere in sight.



### *Wez Sea Route*

The sun had already set. A vehicle sped along the path to the Altar-Dryfe border.

However, this was still Altar territory. Technology was sparse here, so this wasn't a machine, but a car-like Embryo.

"Thanks for driving me, Tomica."

"It's fine, big sis. I'm the one who should be apologizing for bringing you out here this late."

The fifth in the duel rankings, Rosa, had also accepted the bodyguard job, and since she couldn't log on to *Dendro* when it was morning in-game, she was traveling to the Altar-Dryfe border ahead of time.

She was going there using Oboroguruma — the Embryo of a fellow K&R member, Tomica.

Oboroguruma could seat several people and travel at hundreds of kilometels per hour for long periods of time. It was also a self-driving vehicle that automatically avoided obstacles, so it could maintain these great speeds despite being tethered to the ground.

"If my darling can come online before the peace talks, take him there too," said Rosa.

"I will! Though, he's faster than this car..."

"He's a sprinter, though. He can't maintain that speed for long, so you're still the best transport we've got."

"Eheheh. Thank you." As they talked, Rosa watched the landscape passing by outside the vehicle.

The nights in this land were dark, lit only by the stars, so most people wouldn't be able to see the scenery at all. However, as someone with a build specialized in ambushes regardless of the time of day, Rosa had the Night Vision skill, which let her see the surroundings as if it were noon.

"What a nice view," she said. "I should take darling on a date here."

"Umm... why not make it a picnic with the entire clan instead?"

"I'll do you one better: me, you, and darling. Just the three of us."

"Yes, please!"

"Ahahah! I'll suggest it to him sometime... Hm?"

Suddenly, Rosa's canine ears twitched. Despite what some people assumed, her base hearing ability was no different than a normal human's. However, as an ambusher, she'd acquired the Hearing Enhancement passive skill, and though her hearing still wasn't as strong as a wolf's, she was still quite a bit better at picking up sounds than an ordinary human.

"Sis?"

"...Sounds of battle? No, that ain't it." After noticing the noise, Rosa began to detect a certain pattern to them.

First, there would be the clatter of moving dragon carriages, footsteps, and the thunder of replica Prism Steeds or SMPS.

Then, there would be sounds of battle — or rather, the sound of a single attack.

And after that, silence. All the clamor of travel would vanish entirely.

Rosa knew this pattern well. She'd woven it herself many times over.

She was hearing ambushes.

Someone was launching surprise attacks on someone, then moving on to other targets. Just like Rosa and the others, the targets seemed to be en route to the Altar-Dryfe border. She guessed that they must also be rankers hired as bodyguards for the peace talks.

In that case, the attackers could only be...

“Hm...?!” At that moment, Rosa caught sight of something strange.

For a mere split second, a silhouette had appeared in the scenery reflected in Oboroguruma’s side mirror.

It was a rabbit-eared young man, only about as tall as Kashimiya.

However, the reflection didn’t last, and a moment later, something landed with a thud on the car’s roof.

“E-EHHHH?!” Tomica exclaimed in surprise.

“Tomica! Shake him off!” Rosa howled.

“EEEK!” Tomica quickly grabbed the handle and drove Oboroguruma into a spin.

The car managed to stay grounded despite the sudden movement, and whoever was on the roof... *remained there*.

Blades had sliced through the roof, acting as anchors that kept their assailant firmly affixed in place.

“Wh-What’s going on?!”

“Tomica... Sorry, but I’m gonna break this!”

“EEHH?!” Ignoring yet another shocked scream from Tomica, Rosa took out her Embryo. Gashadokuro...

“A Kill Supreme!”

...And engaged the Nobushi Princess’ ultimate job skill, which could only be used as the first attack.

Their assailant's legs were basically stuck to Oboroguruma's roof, so there was no possible way for them to dodge this deadly attack.

Despite that... Rosa missed.

Her target had vanished a moment before it landed, and her ultimate job skill only succeeded in blowing away the roof.

“EEEEEK!” While Tomica panicked, Rosa’s mind was silently racing.

She was really straightforward when it came to strategy and tactics — but when it came to pure fighting instincts, she had what some would call a “beastlike sense of smell.” She could tell by this enemy’s reek that he must be after her alone.

“...Tomica,” she said. “I’m gettin’ off.”

“E-EXCUSE ME?!”

“Use your ultimate skill to flee to the capital.”

“Eh?! Ah — I get it! But why can’t you stay with me...?”

“Because this guy would follow us back... to K&R’s headquarters.”

That was why Rosa would remain behind. She alone would face the enemy who was trying to kill her and let Tomica escape.

“I got no idea who he is or where he’s from, but... wait, no... this timing... Anyone who dies now won’t be able to come to the peace talks... So that’s your plan, huh?”

“Ah? Sis?”

“Go, Tomica! Go and warn the others about this! Especially my darling!” Rosa kicked open the door of the Oboroguruma and leaped out of the speeding vehicle.

“Remnants of Warrior Dreams — Gashadokuro!”

At the moment she jumped, Rosa used Pure-Dragon-tier bones to create an exoskeleton that greatly improved her stats.

“The Fail-Safe Drive — Oboroguruma!” Tomica also used her ultimate skill, making both her and the vehicle dissolve into a hazy mist.

The enemy tried to catch up to the car and jump on it again, but his body simply passed right through it.

Oboroguruma was now floating like a ghost, passing through objects as if they weren’t there. This was the effect of its ultimate skill.

The enemy was now completely unable to touch either of them, and had no choice but to let Tomica go.

“Stop starin’ at our girl’s ass!” Now fully armored in her exoskeleton, Rosa launched an abrupt attack at her assailant — only for him to vanish right before the hit landed and reappear a short distance away.

“She’s not even a duel ranker, so I thought she’d be a pretty ordinary high-rank, but it seems like she actually has a pretty interesting skill,” he commented.

This was the same boy who’d defeated both Riser and Bishmal at the capital. He’d since left the city to find and ambush Rosa and Tomica, *who were moving at hundreds of kilometels per hour*.

“You a Dryfean Master?” Rosa asked.

“Who knows? There’s no real reason to tell you, is there?”

“Nope... I’m gonna beat you up either way!” Rosa howled as she charged at the boy.

“Too slow,” the boy said. “You’re like a tortoise. Though, with a shell like yours, cutting your flesh is going to be difficult.”

He put his hand, hidden in his long sleeves, on his chin and pondered.

“I’ll do this, then.” After whispering this, he vanished again — *and placed bombs at every opening in Rosa’s exoskeleton.*

“Huh?!” A moment later, there was a chain of explosions. At point blank range, the bombs were able to easily blow away Gashadokuro’s exoskeleton and expose Rosa’s flesh.

“If a tortoise shell is in the way, you just crack it open.” The boy’s blade-boots then pierced into one of the holes left by the bomb, tearing out Rosa’s heart in one swift cut.

The wound was fatal, and her head drooped lifelessly.

“Oh, and I already know about that little trick.” Rosa had used the effect of her substitute-creating special reward to maneuver behind the boy, but he simply launched a roundhouse kick that sliced her head clean from her shoulders.

“Ah...!” Rosa’s face was frozen in a silent scream, full of chagrin; she received the death penalty immediately.

“I suppose that’s all the Masters who were on the way to the border...” And with that, the boy vanished, leaving the night road empty.



#### *Altar-Dryfe Border Surroundings, Vermina Village*

That night, at a village close to the Altar-Dryfe border, two girls were talking and gazing up at the stars together. The concept of air pollution didn’t exist in *Infinite Dendrogram*, so the sky was full of beautiful, twinkling lights.

“By the way, classes advanced in Japan, didn’t they? Did you make any friends?”

“...None in that realm are worthy of being sworn to the darkness as my companions.”

"That bad, huh?" One of the girls was dressed like a pirate and had a youthful face, while the other was clad in black, gothic-styled dress-armor. The former was Chelsea the Vagrant Golden Sea, while the latter was Juliet the Black Crow — respectively the eighth and fourth in the duel rankings.

This village was close to the location of the impending peace talks, so they'd arrived here in the afternoon and were now waiting for Altimia and the other Masters who would arrive tomorrow.

"You're a nice girl, though," said Chelsea. "You're just a bit hard to approach at first."

Juliet tended to speak in an overly complicated way even in real life. She knew it made her seem like a weirdo, but it wasn't something she did consciously. Anxiety over her odd way of speaking also made her tongue-tied whenever she made an effort to talk normally.

Because of all this, she had difficulty talking to people in real life.

In *Dendro*, however, you had either Masters who viewed her unusual speech habits as mere role-playing and tians who simply took for granted that Masters were odd people, so it was far easier for her to communicate and make friends here.

Chelsea was the closest friend she had, as well as her long-time dueling rival.

"It matters not," Juliet said. "Here in this otherland, there are many I count as sworn friends."

"Yeah, like me and Max," Chelsea agreed. "But you need to make *real* friends too... Though, I'm probably not one to talk... I still need to find a boyfriend... hah."

"Chelsea..."

In trying to cheer Juliet up, Chelsea had only succeeded in making herself feel worse. She'd never been all that concerned with getting

a boyfriend before, but after her clan had collapsed due to relationship drama *she wasn't even involved in*, she began to feel an odd sense of urgency.

"Umm... you're still in your twenties. You don't have to worry about that yet, do you?" said Juliet, breaking her usual speech pattern.

"Heheheh... Easy for you to say. You're still in your early teens," Chelsea replied, untouched by Juliet's attempts to console her.

"Umm... then how about we go to a... gokon?"

"Gokon'? Ohh, that mixer-type thing that was popular in Japan a few decades ago. It comes up in manga sometimes. I don't have a guy I could take to one, though."

"What about Riser or Bishmal?"

"...Then it would be just another one of our usual nights out. Also, I don't really see either of them that way."

"I see..."

"If I have to pick someone from our dinner parties, I'd probably go for Ray. He seems about my age, too."

"Eh...?" Upon hearing that, Juliet looked dumbfounded.

Chelsea noticed that and pinched the girl's cheek.

"Ow," Juliet squeaked.

"I'm just joking. Ray doesn't really seem to click with me, so he's probably not boyfriend material, either. But if you're gonna react like that, why don't *you* go for him?"

"It's not like that... We just hit it off... and I find him easy to talk to."

*...And you have basically the same fashion sense,* Chelsea added silently. She pictured the gothic armor-clad girl before her standing next to the young man who looked like a messenger from hell itself,

and all she could think was that, visually at least, they were a perfect match.

"His build is so great too," Juliet continued. "I like how it mixes holiness and death while letting both shine..."

"...I was really surprised to hear that he got Death Soldier, though. Speaking of which... It suits your tastes, but you know that the job's useless in duels, right? I mean, the duel ends when you run out of HP."

"I actually don't know how I never heard about that job before... I thought that 'The Death' was the only job with 'Death' in the title."

Apparently, she only cared about the name.

"If you get along with him so well, why didn't you join his clan? He invited you, didn't he?"

"Yeah... The clan's name was cool too."

Chelsea said nothing, but in her mind, the clan name was one of the most evil-sounding she'd ever heard. Even Max, who wasn't present here, was seriously creeped out by it.

"I'm fine this way for now. I'll think it over and give him an answer later," Juliet said.

"I see. Well, that's fine. Being conflicted about your feelings is just part of being young, I'm sure."

"Again... it's not like that...!" Juliet insisted with a pout. It made Chelsea smile and poke at her face.

And then, they heard sounds of clashing metal from outside the village.

"What...?"

"...Besides us, the only ones here already are Roadwell and Hineduck." The names Chelsea mentioned belonged to Masters

who'd also accepted the bodyguard job. Both were duelists floating between numbers 10 and 19 in the rankings, and though they were far below the top 3 and just a bit less impressive than those in the 4 to 9 range, they were still highly capable Masters. They'd been killing time until the peace talks by hunting the local monsters and the like.

"That's not a normal sound," said Chelsea. "There aren't any metal monsters in this area."

"So, they're fighting an *abnormal* monster...? Like a UBM?"

"...Or a PK." Roadwell had a defense-focused build and wore full metal armor. If someone attacked him, that would no doubt result in a metallic clang.

A moment after they thought that, the sound of a great many explosions reached their ears.

"...Chained explosions," said Chelsea. "This doesn't sound like a monster's breath attack or anything."

"Chelsea!"

"Yeah! Let's go, Julie!" The two then summoned their Embryos. Chelsea now held a golden axe, while Juliet grew jet-black wings that carried her towards the source of the ominous clamor.

Once they arrived at their destination, they found no sign of the duelists they knew so well. Instead, a mysterious boy stood with his back to them.

"I was about to go find you myself," he said, turning around. "You saved me some time by coming here."

The rabbit-eared boy put Chelsea on edge.

The signs of battle all around were proof that the boy had fought Roadwell and Hineduck and emerged victorious, and his words clearly indicated that Chelsea was next.

“...Where’s Juliet, by the way?” he then asked. “I thought she’d be with you.” The boy also somehow knew that Chelsea was with Juliet, but as he said — she was nowhere in sight.

Juliet was nowhere in his field of vision...

“Corpse-Eating Bird — Hræsvelgr!”

...But then that voice came ringing out from above.

A moment later, a black tornado came raging from the heavens. Its source was none other than Juliet, whose black dress-armor and wings allowed her to melt into the darkness of night.

Before arriving here, Juliet and Chelsea had agreed on their strategy. Assuming that the enemy — PK or otherwise — was strong enough to take on Roadwell and Hineduck, they had made the first move.

That’s why Juliet, who was hard to spot in the dark of night, hid in the sky above to attack with her ultimate skill the moment Chelsea had their opponent distracted.

“Golden Bull Tsunami — Poseidon!” Chelsea then used her own ult.

The blades of the double-edged axe in her hands vanished, and the space left behind began to leak liquid gold.

A black crow in the sky, and a golden sea on the ground. An umbral tornado that tore apart all life, and a surge of gold that pulverized all flesh and bone.

Together, they formed a combined attack of two area-of-effect ultimate skills. Whether above or below, no one could hope to evade their range.

Merely by failing to notice Juliet activating her ult, and letting that distract him enough to let Chelsea use hers, the boy had missed his chance to escape.

He fell silent. There was actually enough space between the golden sea and the vortex of feathers for a person to pass through, but it would be consumed in a fraction of a second.

Even those who moved at supersonic speeds couldn't evade this.

Indeed. No one could possibly have enough time to escape...

“■■■ ■■■■■ in the Right, ■■■■■■■■■■■ in the Left, Here I Hold  
■■■ ■■■■■■■ ■■ — ■■■nos, ■■■ros, Ai■■”

...Or so you'd think.

Between the raging noise of their combined ultimate skills, Chelsea could barely make out a quiet, yet notable sound.

She then felt something on her pirate hat, and when she just slightly tilted her head...

“...Eh?”

...She saw two Gems slide off the edge of her hat and fall right in front of her eyes.

A moment later, one of the Gems was activated.

They were Gems containing Crimson Sphere — Pyromancer's ultimate job skill.

These Gems dealt more damage than any other ones on the market, so a non-Superior Job like Chelsea had no hope of weathering the onslaught.

She only barely survived it thanks to the fire resistance she'd incorporated into her build — but a moment later, the other Gem activated too.

This one broke her Lifesaving Brooch. The item nullified the damage done, but after the roaring flames vanished, she found herself surrounded by countless bombs.

“Ah...” Right as she gasped, the bombs went off in a chain, quickly engulfing her in explosions that soon intermingled with sparks of light, vanishing into the sky.

“Chel...sea...!” Juliet, still in the air, had watched what happened to her friend the entire time, but she didn’t actually *see* it. To her, it was as if both the Gems on Chelsea’s hat and the bombs surrounding her simply appeared out of nowhere.

Juliet could move and perceive this world at supersonic speeds, but not even she saw what actually happened. Chelsea was just dead before she even realized what was going on.

Juliet clenched her teeth.

She processed the reality that the boy had evaded their ults and then killed Chelsea.

“This enemy... *which* is he?!” Experienced and talented as she was, Juliet instantly narrowed down the enemy’s method of attack to just two options.

The first was spatial control. The enemy might’ve evaded their ults by teleporting away, then using that same control over space to send bombs towards his opponent.

However, here in *Infinite Dendrogram*, spatial control was extremely costly. Even Xunyu’s Tenaga Ashinaga could only do it with an ultimate skill, and it still came with a cooldown. Chained teleports might have been possible with the perfect combination of Embryo type and resource distribution, but that would only account for the first evasion and the appearance of the Gems.

Juliet did not think it could possibly be teleportation. The bombs that followed were far too numerous for that.

The other option was comparably simple — pure speed.

The boy might be moving at speeds so great that not even Juliet could see him, letting him evade the ults and place the bombs. She'd already encountered a worthy opponent who could move that fast — The Unsheathe, Kashimiya.

If it really was down to pure speed, then this boy was just like Kashimiya, but...

*...no. There's a... big difference between him and Kashimiya. It's —* Juliet pondered the question, but her thought was cut short...

“Don’t assume you’re safe just because you’re up in the sky.”

...By a voice from behind her.

“Ah?!”

“You seem to be thinking about something, but there’s no point in that,” said the same boy who had just eliminated Chelsea. “My power... is inescapable.”

“Hgh...! Cursed Phalanx Disorder!” Juliet refused to listen to the boy’s bragging and didn’t hesitate to use her ultimate job skill against the person who’d hurt her friend.

“Hahahah. Too slow.”

But none of her weapons, which tracked their target through the power of curses, actually struck him.

“Uh...?!”

“You people really are slow. Like tortoises,” the boy said as he swung his boots at the top of Juliet’s spine.

A fountain of blood burst forth as the blade sliced cleanly through her neck.

The boy followed up this attack with a flurry of slashes, all targeting Juliet’s weak spots.

Her HP dropped until her Lifesaving Brooch activated, leaving her barely alive.

Even now, Cursed Phalanx Disorder was firing homing weapons at the boy, but he was evading them all with only minimal movement — and as he danced around them, they clashed together and shattered.

“It’s over,” he said, and then finished Juliet off by sinking his blade-boots into her throat.

That was when her HP finally reached 0.

“Gh...!” And in that very moment, an oppressive, overpowering aura emanated from her.

With his blade still buried in Juliet’s neck, the boy looked around.

*Feathers...? And fragments of the broken weapons?* he thought. The shattered weapons, mixed together with the black feathers, had surrounded the both of them.

The result was like a spherical cage.

“Did you seriously...?”

Juliet had *planned* for the cursed weapons to shatter.

She’d used Hræsvelgr’s wind to change the trajectory of her cursed weapons and keep the fragments of the shattered ones in orbit around the battlefield, making it impossible for the boy to escape no matter how fast he moved.

*Wait, how is she even still alive...?* he wondered, clueless about the recent change in Juliet’s build.

She’d switched one of her low-rank jobs to Death Soldier, giving her Last Command — the skill that allowed her to continue acting after death for a short amount of time.

“...a...” With her head nearly severed from her body, Juliet was unable to speak. The destruction of her spine had also made it impossible for her to move her body.

However, she didn’t need that to use her skills.

She just had to *think*. A single thought would activate the ace up her sleeve.

“...i...e...!” Thus, the skill was activated.

This was the final attack of the Fallen Knight — Dark Requiem.

It blew her body apart, and transformed all her flesh and blood into cursed projectiles.

“Ah...!” The bullets of blood and blades of bone would make short work of the young man. Even with a Brooch equipped, he couldn’t possibly survive this.

And the black feathers and fragments of cursed weapons surrounding him left no room to escape.



### *Control AI no. 1’s workspace*

This was a strange space.

The interior was shaped like a large cylinder — but it was so gigantic that each end stretched farther than the horizon.

The scale wasn’t the only thing unsettling about it. The entire surface area of the cylinder was covered in seemingly countless smaller cylinders. There was no space between them, and there must have been tens of thousands of them, if not much, much more.

Many of them were empty, but some were “occupied.”

The people — or their parts — inside them were many and varied. If you lined up the contents of each cylinder in a row, it would look as though the people inside them were being *built*, from head to toe.

Strangely enough, the complete humans had diverse sets of equipment on them... and all of them had crests on their left hands.

Indeed, these were all Masters — or more specifically, avatars.

This cylindrical area was the so-called “avatar space.”

It was managed by control AI no. 1, Alice, and it was where avatars were reconstructed and stored.

This was the place where Masters who received the death penalty would have their avatars rebuilt, as well as a storage site for the avatars of offline Masters.

In the deepest part of this space, there were several special cylinders. While the others were placed on the wall with no space between them, these were positioned in the middle.

There were fifteen of them. They were marked with numbers 0 to 13, but there were two 11s, separated by the Greek letters “α” and “Ω.”

Some of them looked like they had never been used, but some were occupied.

One of them — no. 12 — opened up, and the avatar inside stepped out.

It was the same rabbit-eared boy who'd just defeated so many Altarian rankers.

“Oh man, that was dangerous,” he said, removing his shredded hat and grinning wryly. “That could've destroyed my avatar. I really don't want Alice getting on my case about it.”

By “that,” he meant the final attack that Juliet took such pains to launch. It wasn’t something he could’ve evaded, but...

*Our avatars aren’t like theirs. We don’t have a standby period for storage. That’s why I could return here before my avatar was actually destroyed.*

To log out, Masters needed to go thirty seconds without touching anyone or passing through barriers or anything similar. This rule was meant to prevent players from fleeing encounters by logging out, but it didn’t apply to this boy.

After all... he wasn’t a player.

*My Brooch broke before I made it here, but that doesn’t matter. I took care of all the high-ranking Altarian Masters who accepted the bodyguard duty. The ones who were online, anyway. There’s also some who weren’t... as well as King of Destruction, High Priestess, and those around them... But they’re not my problem.*

“No. 12.” As the boy counted on his fingers, he heard a voice from somewhere.

The voice had a machine-like intonation, and it was impossible to tell its gender. Even so, the boy who was called “no. 12” knew exactly who it was.

“No. 0. I’ve said this many times before, but don’t call me that when I’m using my avatar. Right now, I’m The Rabbit, Chrono Crown. The infamous Dryfean PK.”

The boy — or, control AI no. 12, Rabbit — insisted that no. 0 stop calling him by that name.

Indeed, he was the avatar of a control AI.

Like the Altarian duelist Tom Cat, the twin CEOs of DIN, or Alison — an employee there... This was the form he took when he had to act as a human.

As part of *Infinite Dendrogram*'s management, he didn't have the same limitations on "logging out" or "storage" as a player would. If it weren't for that, Juliet's final attack would've surely destroyed him.

He couldn't have used this method of escape if there had been other witnesses, but Juliet was the only person present — and she was no longer conscious, due to her suicidal final ability.

"You also don't want to be called 'No. 0' when using that name, right?"

"Rabbit, Chrono Crown. About what happened—"

"Oh, you better not complain, No. 0. I just did *my* job," Chrono said, cutting No. 0's words short. "Besides managing time, I'm also meant to fight Embryos in their sixth forms. By fighting them, I'm promoting their evolution. This time, I just fought Altarian Masters who'd taken up the bodyguard job. That's it, right?"

Chrono spoke as if there were absolutely no problems with what he'd done at all. It was less of an explanation and more of a show of defiance.

"We're done talking, No. 0," he said. "I have bodyguard duty the day after — I mean tomorrow, now. I'm busy."

No. 0 said nothing in response. With the conversation over, Chrono left the avatar space.

He then headed towards the room with facilities that would transport him to Dryfe, but then he noticed something.

*...There's a debuff on my avatar.*

Chrono noticed a status effect on him... a curse called "Equipment Binding."

The Dark Requiem skill that Juliet had used at the very end of their battle was both an attack and an extremely potent curse. Juliet herself could specify the kind of curse, and she'd unleashed the skill

while focusing on a curse that made it impossible for the target to switch equipment.

*I guess she didn't pick anything deadlier because she thought I'd just resist it.* Lethal curses were powerful, but they could be nullified by Brooches just like Gloria's Fatal Field, and their effect could be further weakened with anti-curse accessories.

That was why Juliet had opted for a curse that was more of a bonus to her attack, not the other way around. Chrono understood her reasoning. Focused curses fueled by a Superior Job's death were extremely powerful, and since the effect was relatively minor compared to a fatal curse, it was more or less impossible to resist or undo.

The curse would stay with him until the next time his avatar was reconstructed.

The damage from the attack had destroyed his Brooch, and the curse had made it impossible for him to replace it. His clothing was covered in holes too, but each article had a skill that automatically repaired them, so at least that wasn't a problem.

*So I guess the only real issue is that I can't equip a Brooch now, he thought. Well, whatever. Unless they do something like Juliet did, no one can hurt me anyway. I'll get rid of the curse by asking Alice to reconstruct my avatar next time she's in a good mood.*

He concluded that the curse wasn't a problem and moved on to thinking about something else.

*My next job is at the peace talks. I'll target any high-rank Embryos there, he thought.*

His duty as Chrono Crown was to fight and defeat high-rank Embryos — specifically those in their sixth form.

Like he'd told No. 0, his actions hadn't deviated from his role, but there were some ulterior motives behind them.

*I don't know what Dryfe's planning to do at the peace talks, but it should go well if I remove some of Altar's fighting potential. No one was looking at him, but he still hid his mouth behind his sleeves.*

*Dryfe is still troubled by their dwindling Resources... both food and funds. That's why the best outcome for them is the least costly one. If possible, they'll avoid doing anything that'll be too expensive for them.*

His covered mouth warped into a grin.

*If all goes as Dryfe wants it to, there's no way we'll have war.*

He pictured how everything would go exactly as he wished.

*I won't have that huge workload dumped on me again. That level of processing is such a waste of my Resources... They can't make me do it that often.*

That was a thought he had not as Chrono Crown, but Rabbit — the control AI in charge of time. He absolutely despised the War Boundary. It demanded more of his processing power than anything else.

During war, time in *Infinite Dendrogram* was sped up ten times beyond the norm, and as a result he ended up focusing solely on time acceleration.

That made him unable to operate as an avatar, and lowered his active thinking ability to the bare minimum necessary.

He hated being like that, and that was the reason he went out to PK Altarian Masters as the peace talks drew closer.

*There's no need for war. We didn't even get any Superiors out of the last one. Giga Professor's Pandemonium evolved after the war, not during it. War does nothing but make life harder for me. It's best if it just doesn't happen.*

After arriving at the room which would take him to Dryfe, he whispered, "It's best if the countries just merge without any war."

He was then transported to Dryfe, vanishing from this space to go join the Dryfean retinue and take part in the peace talks.



???

“...”

“War is not necessary. Only triggers for evolution are.”

“Battles with unreasonable and unfair enemies may also function as such triggers.”

“Thus, there is no reason to stop No. 12’s actions.”

“The goal of the current phase is to gather one hundred Superior Embryos.”

“However, there is no single trigger that causes this evolution.”

“Everyday life, strife, love, hate, anger, grief, hunger, sloth, hope, despair... The triggers are multifarious.”

“Thus, it is best for the control AIs that had become Infinite to act on their own to experiment and discover the triggers.”

“The wait for the one hundred continues.”

# ***Chapter Five: The Night Before the Peace Conference***

*Paladin, Ray Starling*

It was now the day before the peace talks. The Masters who would act as bodyguards had gathered at the parade ground used by the knight office in Altea, where we would meet up with Azurite and the other officials participating in the coming talks.

However, about ten minutes before everyone was supposed to show up, I noticed something strange.

“...There should be more of us here.” There were 37 Masters gathered already. First, there were the members of Death Period. Five of us, to be exact—since Lei-Lei and Kasumi’s trio unfortunately couldn’t make it.

But as for the other 32 besides us, there was Miss Eldritch, Tsukikage, and a whole bunch of people with a crescent moon and closed eye symbol on their clothes... all members of The Lunar Society.

That’s right — there were only two clans.

“...I don’t see Rosa anywhere,” said B3.

“Hmm... I’m not seeing many of the famous rankers, either,” added Marie. “Based on my information, this is only about a third of the people who *should* be here.”

I’d heard that some duelists were coming myself, but none of them seemed to have shown up yet.

“Did something happen?” I wondered.

“Ray, should I speed off to DIN and investigate?” Marie asked.

As I considered whether or not she ought to do that, I saw some familiar faces among a group of knights and officials.

First was Azurite — the reason we were all here.

Next was... “Tomica,” if memory served. She was the K&R member around my age whom I’d run into back when Rosa ambushed us on the road to Torne.

And finally, there was a masked man, covered in Medical Bandages that enhanced the body’s self-healing abilities.

It was Riser the duel ranker.

“Riser?!” I called out.

“Ray... you guys are still fine... what a relief.” He had multiple injury-based debuffs. Even walking seemed to be difficult for him, since he was leaning against a knight’s shoulder.

“How did you get all those wounds...?” I asked.

“I’ll be the one to explain that,” Azurite interjected, before telling us what happened.

Shockingly, it seems that Masters — rankers included — had been ambushed en masse.

The one thing all the targets had in common was that they’d all accepted the bodyguard quest.

Riser had been one of them, and although he’d almost died to the bomb left behind by the assailant, his Lifesaving Brooch had activated and kept him alive, barely. He’d then used healing items to stave off death until the locals took him to a nearby state church.

Tomica had been ambushed along with Rosa, but she’d managed to escape back to the capital.

There were also reports that sounds of battle had been heard last night near the village next to the border, and the Masters who'd been waiting there had all vanished.

Riser and Tomica both vouched that their attacker was the same person — a boy with rabbit ears and metal boots.

Upon hearing those details, Shu spoke up. "...That's The Rabbit, Chrono Crown."

"You know him?" I asked.

"Yeah. I fought him back before I was a Superior. He's a PK who hunts pre-Superiors... or rather, Masters in their sixth forms. He's perfectly capable of assassinating dozens of Masters."

"...How did your fight with him go?"

"I don't even know. He did some serious damage to me, but stopped attacking after I caught him in a trap. I still don't know if that's because he actually got the death penalty or if he just ran away. Haven't met him since."

That was impressive, even if Shu wasn't a Superior back then. If The Rabbit had grown stronger since then, he must be even more fearsome now.

"Though, his tricks are more or less common knowledge by now," Shu added before explaining The Rabbit's abilities, strategies, and how to counter them... which wasn't something everyone could do, to put it mildly.

I thought about what he'd said and concluded that I was incompatible with Chrono's fighting style. Shu aside, B3 and Marie would be better opponents for him.

"That's it for his capabilities, but I've got another beary bad piece of info about him," Shu said.

"Oh yes," Marie nodded. "I was trying to find a good opportunity to explain that, too."

Whatever it was, they seemed to find it difficult to say.

"The Rabbit, Chrono Crown... is a Dryfean PK."

"...And he's coming to the peace talks as a bodyguard on their side."

So... that meant...

"You're saying the imperium ordered him to target Altar's bodyguards?" I asked.

"Maybe," said Shu. "But it could easily be something he decided to do himself. I mean, going around and hunting Masters in their sixth forms is just what he does normally. The bodyguard thing gathered a whole bunch of Altarian Masters in a few locations, so he might've seen it as a good chance to score some kills. Hunting Masters is his goal, not a means to some end, and he's never really done anything notable besides that. Really, the weirdest thing here is that he's actually joining their retinue. But if Dryfe did order him to do this..."

"...It means that they thought it was necessary to weaken *our* retinue," Altimia finished his sentence.

*...Suddenly, I'm not as optimistic that the talks will go well,* I thought.

"...This seems a little too bold for a Dryfean plot, though," Shu said. "Especially since the assassin is also a part of the official retinue."

"We shall use Truth Discernment and ask the imperium's delegation about it. Then we will know for certain whether they gave the order," said Azurite. "There is now a more pressing problem, however..."

"The gaps in our retinue, huh?" said Shu.

"Indeed. If this turns out to be a trap, our ability to respond to it has been greatly reduced."

If this whole thing was just a trap, then we would have to face the entirety of Dryfe's retinue of Masters — The Rabbit included.

"Would you be able to fight The Rabbit?" Rook asked, looking at Shu, who fell silent for a moment.

"...I obviously wouldn't be helpless. I'm almost certain I'd win, actually. The problem is that I'd be too busy to deal with him myself. If we end up fighting Dryfe, I'd have my hands full with the King of Beasts."

The Rabbit wouldn't be our only enemy there. Marie had told me they'd hired a whole bunch of Masters for their retinue, including King of Beasts — the so-called Physical Apex — and Hell General, who could bolster their numbers even further with his devils.

If Shu had to fight King of Beasts, then it would fall to us to face The Rabbit and Logan.

I silently considered my status as a combatant. My Grudge-Soaked Greaves were sufficiently charged, meaning that I could summon Gardranda, even though it was risky. Monochrome had also absorbed enough light for Shining Despair. I was completely stocked up on Counter Absorption uses, too.

I'd also maxed out my Death Soldier job and leveled Scout to get the Reveal utility skill before switching back to Paladin, which was the job that let me use all the skills I had unlocked.

And most notably of all... Nemesis had reached her fourth form and became a high-rank Embryo.

I was more prepared than I'd ever been, but I couldn't bring myself to say we'd get through a fight like that with no problem.

A sense of unease coiled around my heart like a vine, and even I couldn't say exactly what was causing it.

"It's still not certain there will be fighting... but the outlook is not favorable," said Azurite. The Rabbit killing so much of the retinue had stung her badly, and she was reluctant to continue under the current circumstances.

Suddenly, Miss Eldritch raised her hand.

Not in a manner that fit her gaudy Japanese-style apparel, but with the enthusiasm of a regular student who knew the answer in class.

"...What is it?" Azurite asked suspiciously.

"If we need more people, I can call a couple dozen more from my clan. You'd need to write off more of my debt beforehand, though."

After hearing that offer, Azurite spent a good amount of time thinking it through — then finally, with a bitter expression on her face, she said, "...Please do."

"Thank you for your business!"

*Azurite's really desperate, huh?* I thought.

Also, this just reinforced to me how powerful The Lunar Society really was. Being a cult centered around *Dendro*, it had so many no-lifers that Miss Eldritch could casually call up "dozens" of Masters worthy of joining Azurite's entourage.

I heard that it actually had the most high-rankers of any clan in any country, which made them actually pretty reliable in situations like this.

"Tsukuyo Fuso, I also have a request," said Riser as he bowed his head to her.

"Whaddya want, Ri?"

I certainly hadn't expected her to call him *that*.

"Please use your skills to heal me! I can't just sit by idly while something like this is happening..." he cried, a hint of grief creeping into his voice. Miss Eldritch fell silent.

Riser must've been so emotional because he wanted to avenge Bishmal and the other duel rankers who'd gotten the death penalty, on top of his desire to protect the kingdom.

"Okay. I'll heal you," said Miss Eldritch with a nod.

"I'll be in your de—"

"But you can't join the retinue." She agreed to heal him, but in the same breath she outright denied him the honor of becoming a bodyguard again.

"Why...?" he asked.

"You know that better than anyone, don'cha? Your Embryo is completely broken. My Mercy of the Holy can fully heal your body, but I can't do anything about your broken Embryo."

"But I can still fight just as I am...!"

"Do you really think a Master can do much without his Embryo? And your build is completely focused on yours, isn't it? You'd only get in the way."

Riser hung his head. He clearly had no counterargument.

...Her words seemed harsh — perhaps even cold — but even so, I could tell that she was being far more earnest than usual.

"...Very well," said Riser. "I won't come, but please heal me anyway."

"Can you give me a reason why?"

"Most of our powerful Masters are leaving for the peace talks. You're going to be summoning even more Lunar Society members who were supposed to stay here. There won't be enough people left to protect the capital in case anything happens." Miss Eldritch listened

to him silently. “If I can’t join the bodyguards, then I at least want to do what I can here in Altea. That’s all.”

“...Ugh, you Babylonian Battlegroup members are so stubborn,” she sighed before mouthing, “Mercy of the Holy.” With that, Riser was fully healed.

“Thank you... I’ll make it up to—”

“You don’t have to. I’m already indebted to you people. This is just me paying a fraction of that back.”

“...Thank you,” said Riser, bowing his head.

It felt as though Fuso was purposely looking away from him, which was something I’ve never seen her do before.

“Do you find it strange for Lady Tsukuyo to behave like this?”

“...Tsukikage.” Before I realized it, Tsukikage had snuck up on me and whispered right in my ear.

Fuso didn’t seem to notice, though. She was busy using a comms item to contact her headquarters.

“...I would say so, yeah,” I said. “She always seemed more, well... *ruthless* to me.”

“It’s because she feels indebted to the Babylonian Battlegroup specifically.”

“Indebted?”

“The Gloria incident.” From what I’d heard of the events surrounding the defeat of the Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria, The Lunar Society — which was first in the clan rankings even back then — hadn’t participated from the start because the negotiations with the kingdom were taking too long.

While that was happening, the second clan in the rankings — Babylonian Battlegroup, to which Riser belonged — had been the ones who stood up to protect the cities of Altar.

However, they were defeated. They lost their home base and ended up collapsing as a clan. Their members had close ties to tians, so their defeat was particularly painful.

Many people thought that things wouldn't have turned out so badly if The Lunar Society had participated from the very beginning — and though she didn't outwardly show it, it seems Fuso was actually bothered by how everything had turned out... which was the reason she treated Riser the way she did.

"Is this unexpected?" Tsukikage asked. It was more than unexpected — I never would have imagined this from her.

Then again... Fuso *had* been the one who'd treated my wounds back at Torne.

"Lady Tsukuyo is like the moon itself."

"Eh?"

"She is quite charming if you look at her the right way," Tsukikage, gazing at Fuso with a gentle smile.

Ten minutes later, an extra fifty Lunar Society Masters joined us at the parade ground. The speed at which they'd made it here really hammered home why they were the top clan.

"That makes up for most of the lost bodyguards," said Azurite.

"My people are strong. You can count on them... Though, I can't deny that they're a level below duel rankers."

This reminded me of the blockade incident shortly after I first arrived in this world. The Lunar Society had gone up against K&R, and Rosa was defeating Fuso's underlings one after another despite being under the effect of the Lunar Divider Field. That was clear proof that

you couldn't compare the power of a duel ranker with that of an ordinary Master.

"It'd be great if we had just one more ranker, at least," said Tsukuyo.  
"Ah, is Kashimiya online?"

Tomica shook her head and said, "Not yet... He said that he wasn't sure if he'd be able to come online today or tomorrow, so he probably doesn't even know that all this has happened..."

"That so? Could you get him to come with us if he does log on?"

"Yeah! I'm sure he'll want to avenge our sis...!" With Figaro being offline for the foreseeable future, Kashimiya was the most powerful duel ranker in the kingdom, but it didn't seem certain whether he'd be able to participate.

We really lacked fighting strength right now, but without Kashimiya, there were no duel rankers that—

"Did someone mention duel rankees?" Suddenly, I heard a very familiar voice — one belonging to someone who definitely didn't belong in this parade ground.

I turned and saw a young man with a giant cat seated on his head — a young man I knew very well.

"Tom...?"

"The Lynx, Tom Cat...?" Azurite and I spoke his name in unison.

He immediately drew everyone's attention as he approached Azurite.

"I haven't seen you since Quartierlatiin, Your Majesty," he said. "I understand this is rather last minute, but would I be allowed to joiin?"

"Certainly... but didn't you already refuse once...?"

“...The situation changed a bit, you seeee,” he said with a slightly dark expression.

I considered what he could be referring to, and instantly thought of last night’s ambushes.

“You mean... The Rabbit?” I asked, making him look at me with a shocked expression.

“...Yeah. He and I have a bit of a historyyy. I know that he assassinated Altarian Masters who took on the bodyguard dutyyy, and that he is part of Dryfe’s retinueee,” he said before clenching his fist as if gathering resolve. “So if we end up fighting Dryfe... let me fight Chrono.”

“Tom...” I had no idea what was there between him and The Rabbit. I had no idea why someone who was rumored to have ties to *Dendro*’s management would join the bodyguard squad of one kingdom’s ruler.

However, there was a light in Tom’s eyes, still shaded by his hair, that made me understand just how serious he was.

“...Then it is decided,” Azurite said. She then looked over the Masters gathered at the parade ground... and nodded.

“We’re heading to the peace talks.” Following that declaration, we all moved out.



#### *Dryfe Imperium-Occupied Territory, Old Lunnings Duchy*

To the people of the kingdom, the phrase “Old Lunnings Duchy” has held several different meanings over the past few years.

Once, it signified the greatest grain-producing region in Altar.

It grew far more crops than it consumed and made enormous profits by exporting the surplus to countries that struggled with food production, like Dryfe and Granvaloa.

However, its time as the world's breadbasket was tragically cut short just over a year ago.

The sudden attack by the strongest SUBM ever seen — Tri-Zenith Dragon, Gloria — had resulted in the deaths of just about every inhabitant of the duchy, including Duke Lunnings himself. Those who'd survived either abandoned the land completely or were consumed by despair, often to the point of taking their own lives.

Gloria's Fatal Field had also made every growing thing within it wither, devastating the fields and turning the land of bountiful harvests into a land of desolation.

After that, it became the Old Lunnings Duchy and began undergoing restoration as a territory directly under the control of the royal family.

However, half a year after the Gloria incident, the region became a battlefield once more.

The Dryfean army invaded through a pass near the Lightning Dragon Mountains, and they found the kingdom's forces waiting for them there.

Since it was no longer inhabited, the Old Lunnings Duchy was an optimal battlefield, but whether that actually benefited Altar was another matter.

Because there was no one living there, none of those present had to worry about collateral damage and could go all-out.

Countless elites. The Giga Professor and his many monsters. The Hell General and his devil army. And finally, King of Beasts, whose very steps cracked the earth and whose claws could shatter meteors.

All of them unleashed their full power, completely devastating the Altarian army.

After that, Old Lunnings Duchy became Dryfean territory. The imperium acted fast and relocated their farmers to the west side of the region — the side closest to Dryfe. They'd also hired Masters with abilities related to farming and construction, quickly preparing the western part of the region for agriculture and gradually transforming it back into the breadbasket it once was.

Because of all this, it was widely believed that one of Dryfe's demands during the coming peace talks would be for Altar to formally cede the Old Lunnings Duchy to them, shifting it from an occupied territory to a region that Dryfe officially owned.



Although Gloria had devastated the Old Lunnings Duchy, the destruction mostly took the form of pure biological death. Much of the construction had remained untouched.

There were a few remnants of villages destroyed in the war, but the town of Lunnings in the heart of the region still looked much as it had before Gloria's arrival.

The same couldn't be said for its atmosphere.

Lunnings had once been surrounded by verdant grasslands, and it had truly earned its title of "the town of meadows."

However, there was no longer a single patch of green anywhere in sight — the fields surrounding the town had become nothing more than withered wastelands. And on top of that, Gloria had brought about the deaths of every living creature there, leaving behind thousands of corpses.

Lunnings was no longer the town of meadows. It was a town of death.

Maybe people wouldn't say it in so many words, but that was the most apt description.

After the incident, the huge amount of corpses had been imbued with grudge, resulting in undead roaming the land; but before the war came, The Lunar Society's holy men had purified the area and cleaned up the bodies.

Even so, no one had wanted to move there. It had become a literal ghost town.

Now, however, the place housed quite a lot of people — the hundreds of Masters that Dryfe had hired for the coming peace talks  
“...Man, we’re spending the night in a place with a hell of a history,” one of them said. “This really is just like a classic RPG.”

“I can already imagine zombies or ghosts showing up and taking us out one by one.”

In a building that had once served as an auditorium, the Masters were exchanging their thoughts about the situation.

This would be where they would spend the night, but it hadn’t actually been their first choice. A lot of them had wanted to use the nearby inn, but the bedding — untouched for over a year — reeked of mold, and rumors started to spread about a tian corpse being found in one of the beds, which made everyone forget all about using the inn or any of the local homes, so they ultimately settled for the auditorium.

Although it had the space, it didn’t have any beds, so the Masters were now setting up their sleeping spots. A few hated the very idea of spending the night in a ghost town and had logged out to wait until it was time to leave.

Interestingly, one of those was Hell General, Logan Goddhart — and right before logging out, he’d said, “There’s no way I’m staying here!

I'm logging out back to my room!" ...which was exactly the kind of thing you'd hear from the first person to disappear in a horror film.

"...Wouldn't it be better to just camp outside?"

"You wouldn't be able to sleep with all the monsters around, dumbass. This is the most appropriate place here in this duchy. It's even been purified to protect against undead."

Villages and towns smaller than Lunnings remained untouched by The Lunar Society and still had undead wandering around as a result. The damage done by Gloria was far too great to easily undo.

"We could've just lodged somewhere on the western side of the border, then. It's already been developed by Dryfe."

"If we stayed there, we wouldn't make it for the peace talks tomorrow afternoon."

"...Altar's guys are probably spending the night in an actual village or something. I'm jealous," someone complained.

"If what I heard is true, then you should feel bad for them instead," the other whispered.

"What do you mean?"

"Apparently, like two thirds of their bodyguards were assassinated right before the talks."

"HUHH?!" another exclaimed.

"Shh...! And Chrono was the one who did it."

"...Seriously?" Chrono was an infamous figure in Dryfe. After all, a lot of the Masters in their sixth forms had fought him personally. It was also well known that many players had grouped up to face him... only for Chrono to fight them all off.

All of that wasn't immediately relevant, but there was another pre-Superior who was just as infamous in Dryfe — King of Light, F. In

order to avoid getting on the wanted list of his own country, Altar, he'd primarily targeted the imperium for his "reference gathering material."

Recently, though, he had become more active in the kingdom itself...

"But Chrono's also one of the bodyguards, right? Ah. Wait, so the thing that happened this afternoon was..."

"Yeah. That's what caused the fight."

There had been an incident in one of the groups heading towards the peace talks. One of the more notable Masters — the third in Dryfe's duel rankings, in fact — had angrily confronted Chrono about the things he'd done in Altar.

Apparently, The Rabbit's response was somehow... off.

It had enraged the duelist, driving him to challenge Chrono... only for Chrono to give him the death penalty.

"...But that wasn't a big deal, right?"

"Yeah. I heard that Princess Claudiah said 'As long as they cause no trouble for tians, conflicts between Masters are not forbidden.' So yeah, no one's getting punished for that fight."

Legally speaking, that was indeed the case.

However, the fact that no one would get punished despite the current political situation sent a cold shiver down all of their spines.

"He assassinated the kingdom's bodyguards and took out one of our own... yet all of that is apparently a-ok. What the hell are we supposed to make of this?"

"No idea. Though, she probably thinks it's not much of a problem if we lose one or two bodyguards. I mean, we don't have much going for us besides our numbers. The only bodyguards who stand out are King of Beasts, Logan, and that problem child, Chrono. The duel

ranker Chrono beat wasn't even a Superior. Honestly, each one of those three are stronger than the rest of us combined."

"...Hey, why is that, anyway? We have a whole bunch of tougher guys, don't we?" In preparation for the war with Altar or Caldina (or both), Dryfe had gathered many Masters, and a few of them were indeed battle-focused Superior Jobs. Good examples were King of Magic Cannons, Heldine Rockzapper; King of Eaters, Cata Lugang Euanjelion; and Flow Princess, Juba. There were many other pre-Superiors, but not a single one of them were present here.

"Also, uhh... Her Highness is the only Dryfean tian here, isn't she?" That was indeed the case. Besides the Master bodyguards, the only Dryfean citizen present was Claudiah herself. There were no officials, no attendant maids... she would be the only tian in the peace talks.

Claudiah was currently staying in the late duke's residence in this very town, accompanied by no one but the King of Beasts.

"Assassinations and infighting are allowed... the only tian participant is Her Highness... isn't this kinda weird?"

"...The worst-case scenario I can think of is that these peace talks will just end up being a pretext to start a war."

"Huh?"

"Imagine if Princess Claudiah dies or gets hurt here. They go on to make it seem like the kingdom's doing and then kick-start the war with the Superiors that came here with her — King of Beasts and Logan. At the same time, the ones that stayed in Dryfe got ready to invade Quartierlatin to the east. We only have three of our powerhouses here because they're more than enough — and maybe the rest are tasked to be the invading force. Princess Claudiah is the only tian here because Dryfe lacks personnel and she's the only one they're willing to sacrifice... That seem plausible to you?"

"...What about the War Boundary?"

“It’s not like you can’t fight without it. You just don’t get a clear goal.”

“...And that’s why it’s the worst-case scenario, huh?”

“Yeah. These peace talks could bring about the worst kind of war — a messy one. Caldina would also be too busy with Granvaloa to interfere this time, so it’s a good time to start it.”

“This actually doesn’t sound unlikely...”

The Dryfean Masters had held such conversations amongst themselves several times by now. They were simply bodyguards and didn’t truly know what these peace talks would entail, so they could only speculate as they were.

It was probably safe to say, though, that all of their wild guesses did not reflect reality. The imperator’s plan for the peace talks was both far more peaceful... and far more crafty than they could ever imagine.



### *Old Duke Lunnings’ Residence*

The Old Duke Lunnings’ residence was a luxurious mansion once inhabited by the Duke and his family, but now it was as empty as the rest of the town. The duke had died when Gloria had descended upon the crop inspection he was attending, while his family was wiped out in a shelter beneath the mansion. No matter how safe their location seemed, nothing could stop the Fatal Field.

Now, a year after it was emptied, there were the sounds of human habitation once again ringing through its halls.

The source of these sounds was a facility at the far end of the first floor — the large bathroom.

Specifically, one might hear the sounds of flowing water.

"Truly, baths are wonderful no matter where you are in the world," Claudiah said in satisfaction as she stretched her legs out of the water.

She'd cleaned up the bath, fixed the magic item that supplied hot water, and drawn herself a warm bath; now, she was enjoying it to the fullest.

Claudiah then glanced at the entrance and called out.

"Would you two like to join me?"



“No.”

“I’ll refrain.” The ones who’d replied were King of Beasts, Behemot, and Leviathan. As befitting hired bodyguards, they were watching over Claudiah even as she was bathing.

“It is rather uncomfortable being the only naked one here,” she said.

“Why are you bathing in the first place?” Leviathan asked.

“Eh? Because we have the peace talks tomorrow. If I am to meet Altimia, I must clean myself, no?”

“...I’m not sure if *a bath with corpses* is fit for that purpose.”

Leviathan’s gaze traveled to one corner of the bath.

In that corner, a human-shaped stain was still visible — likely left behind by a person who’d died and decayed there long enough to leave a mark before becoming an undead and walking off.

It was a sign of death that couldn’t be easily washed away.

However, Claudiah didn’t seem to mind. She bathed happily, as if the stain didn’t bother her at all.

“What of it?” she asked. “*I’ve had corpses fall directly on me before.* This is nothing.”

She tilted her head and moved her fingers around.

Behemot and Leviathan both noticed that she was making the same kinds of motions that she did while wielding a spear.

“Even during last year’s civil war, I had blood and guts on me so many times that I lost count.” Claudiah played with her pinned-up hair as she sighed, thinking back on the past.

She was referring to the imperator accession civil war — an event that had happened because of two specific people.

The first instigator was the previous imperator, Xanafald Wolfgang Dryfe.

He was over eighty years old before the war started, but he had yet to cede his throne to his crown prince.

In fact, he hadn't even decided who the crown prince *was*.

At the time, there were two princes worthy of the throne — the first prince, born to a concubine, and the second prince, born to the imperator's legal wife

The imperator hadn't yet declared which prince would take the throne after him. In fact, he actively had them fight for it, implying that the one who survived would be named crown prince.

However, no matter how fiercely they feuded, neither of them killed the other. The first to perish ended up being the third prince and his wife, who weren't even involved in the conflict

Xanafald's life finally ended before he named a crown prince.

He had written down all of his thoughts in his will, but they seemed to be pure madness

"Fight over the right to the throne. The one who stands at the top will be the next imperator."

Through this will, his implication had become a statement.

Basically, he'd ordered his family to fight each other. It was unclear whether he was sane when he wrote those words, or if age had taken away his reason. Those who knew Xanafald before his health started to decline, though, would claim that he could have easily written those words while of sound mind

Every single person in the imperial family who had any claim to the throne gathered for a meeting at Dryfe Imperstand in the heart of Vandelheim, and there they were all presented with his will.

Many thought that this would be the beginning of the greatest civil war the country had ever known.

They were both completely right... and very, very wrong.

The two princes and all of their supporters *were killed mere moments after the will was read out.*

This deed was done by someone nobody had expected — a child of the late third prince of Dryfe, and perhaps the least likely candidate for taking the throne... Claudiah R. Dryfe.

The imperial succession civil war that followed was nothing but the unlikely new imperator's struggle to be recognized — to prove to the empire's powerful nobility that she fulfilled the previous imperator's will. The imperator had to wipe out any detractors, which were far more numerous than supporters.

The only people Claudiah and Reinhard had on their side were their direct relatives — the Barbaros family — along with an insignificant number of officials and soldiers, and their friend King of Beasts, Behemot.

They might be few in number... but in the end, they were more than enough.

"How nostalgic," said Claudiah.

"ggwp," said Behemot.

"It was obvious that we would survive, but it's a miracle that *all* of you did," said Leviathan.

"Truly. There were many times when I thought that Uncle Gifted's old friends, the SMTF, would kill me."

Before the number of Masters began to increase, the Special Mission Task Force was the imperium's strongest. They were against the current reign and had attempted to assassinate the new imperator on many occasions.

However, their attempts always ended in death at the hands of King of Beasts, Gifted Barbaros, and Claudiah herself.

“That eventually led to Reinhard bringing order to the country, but...” Because the opposition had been wiped out, the leadership of the country was quite monolithic.

The purges of opposing nobles had created a severe shortage of tians working for the government, but they filled the gaps by assigning capable commoners to act as civil servants and bolstering their military with Masters.

Some would say that they'd just drained the pus from a festering wound... but it was more akin to a lizard cutting off its limbs to become a snake, then ascending as a serpentine dragon. That was how drastically the imperator's leadership had changed the country's political climate.

The only thing left was to unify with the kingdom... which is what had led to the previous war.

“Dryfe and Altar's... I mean, Altimia's future and ours both depend on the peace talks tomorrow. You will have to be the best bodyguard you can be,” Claudiah said to her friend with a smile.

“ic,” Behemot nodded.

“...Speaking of which, I haven't had the chance to ask... What are the actual goals of these negotiations?”

“Umm... give me a second,” Claudiah said as she put her hand on her temple as if trying to recall something she'd forgotten. “We have three possible goals: the first is to completely cease hostilities between our countries while maintaining the current state of both. The second is to merge with Altar via their surrender. The third is to decide the win-lose conditions for the next war. These goals are ordered by priority, from highest to lowest. If nothing else, accomplish the third goal.”

She'd explained it in a tone that didn't seem like her own.

"...That's what Reinhard said, anyway."

"I see how it is," said Leviathan as she nodded.

"I will really be counting on you tomorrow," said Claudiah.

"kk," added Behemot.

"After Behemot, you're number one on my list of people to protect," said Leviathan. Time passed by and the night grew darker.



### *Paladin, Ray Starling*

By the time the sun was setting, we'd arrived at Vermina — the village closest to the Altar-Dryfe border.

Though many of the bodyguards had been assassinated last night, our trip from Altea went smoothly. We would spend the night here, then head to the hall prepared for the peace talks come morning.

After dinner, Azurite called us over. By "us," I meant the members of Death Period and Fuso. Tsukikage and the other Lunar Society members were tasked with keeping an eye on the village's surroundings.

Azurite was accompanied by the three tian officials she'd brought with her.

"Why'd you call us here, Azurite?" I asked. "Did something happen?"

"I gathered you together because I need Master opinions on tomorrow's peace talks."

"Our opinions?"

"Indeed. We decided on our terms before we left, but they were made with a tian bias. There might be some possible ideas and plans that we missed, but you Masters would come up with easily. I want

to make these final adjustments before we have to leave for the peace talks.”

“I see...” I did understand her point of view, but honestly, our “real” selves didn’t exactly have much experience with peace talks, either.

Also, cross-national negotiations here were quite different from the ones you saw in reality.

First, there was the military force... the *stats* you could bring. Then there was Truth Discernment — which could see through lies — among many other skills available to the participants.

And perhaps the biggest difference was the existence of Covenants.

Covenants were items in the same vein as Contracts, except they could only be signed by leaders of countries and their representatives, and going against them would cause terrible things to happen to the *entire* country — not just those who signed.

To break a Covenant was to doom the country. I’d even heard that one country that had broken a Covenant had its capital consumed by a giant vortex, leaving absolutely nothing behind. This meant that agreements between countries were far more binding than they were in reality.

That was why the coming peace talks would focus on thoroughly looking over each country’s conditions, finding a compromise, and signing a Covenant both sides could accept.

That was the goal, and there would be no going back after that.

“Let me start from the beginning,” said Azurite. “First, if both countries agree, we’ve planned to enter a treaty that would forbid ‘any and all warlike action between Altar and Dryfe for the next century.’”

A century. Time in *Dendro* passed three times faster than real time, but I felt like that would still be long enough to make sure there

would never be a war between Altar and Dryfe for as long as I was here.

“Define ‘warlike action,’” I said.

“Invasion by the military, unlawful occupation of land, and the activation of the War Boundary... Anything smaller than that could result in accidental breach of the Covenant, so there is only so much we can demand.”

“But that doesn’t prevent the kind of terrorism we saw in Gideon and Quartierlatin, does it?” Marie asked. “Neither incident involved the military and no land was occupied.”

“Indeed,” Azurite nodded. “We plan to deal with that in our terms for signing the treaty.”

“What do you mean?”

“The talks will involve negotiating the treaty conditions. Dryfe actually requested that we present them with our terms and what we are willing to compromise on.”

“That’s... pretty direct.”

*So Altar would be negotiating after laying all their cards on the table, huh?* I thought.

“It truly is. However, since both sides have Truth Discernment, it will be pointless to bluff or attempt to guess at any ulterior motives.”

That reminded me that one of the three officials accompanying Azurite had a build specialized in reading people. Skills like that weren’t limited to jobs, though. There could easily be Embryos out there that specialized in reading people’s motives, too.

“And? What are our conditions and the compromises we’d be willing to bear?” Shu asked.

"Our first compromise is obvious," Azurite said. "We will abandon the Old Lunnings Duchy."

That was the land that Dryfe had occupied in the last war.

"Are you okay with that?" I asked.

"...It would be worse to keep it, actually. In all honesty, that territory is pretty meaningless to the kingdom now."

According to Azurite, Gloria had devastated the region and killed most of its inhabitants. That had been followed by the destruction of the nearby town of Claymill and the immense losses during the war, so Altar no longer had enough people to repopulate the duchy.

The Lunnings family would have insisted that the kingdom reclaim and restore their territory, but they were all dead now. Control of the Duchy had officially passed to the royal family, who had little use for it.

It had once been the kingdom's biggest grain producer, but in its current decrepit state, it wasn't even worth touching. All of Altar was rich in arable land, so that one Duchy was far from necessary. The other regions nearby also produced far more crops than they consumed.

Besides, even if the kingdom took the land back from Dryfe, it didn't have enough people to dedicate to its development and restoration, so it would really be more trouble than it was worth.

"Dryfe, on the other hand, needs it more than anything else," Azurite continued. "Based on what we know, the imperium's soil is slowly turning fallow for unknown reasons. They're actually suffering famines right now, so they can't simply let go of the Old Lunnings Duchy. If we tried to take it, peace would be impossible. They'd be left with no other option but war."

"So we have one confirmed com-paw-romise, and we need to present conditions we want in exchange for it, huh?" Shu nodded in understanding.

"As I said, the biggest issue is terrorism committed by Dryfean Masters." Last month, Franklin was responsible for an incident in Gideon; this month, Hell General had caused some trouble in Quartierlatin. Although the worst-case scenarios had been averted, both places could have been completely wiped out.

"It already happened twice, so if we were to experience a third such event... perhaps if the King of Beasts attacks the capital or something similar... the situation would be especially bleak."

Shu showed a slight reaction at the mention of the Superior, but said nothing. Acts of terrorism were lethal preemptive strikes. And even if the culprit was put on the kingdom's wanted list, there was nothing stopping them from just coming back over and over again as long as the imperium didn't do the same.

After all, neither Franklin nor the Hell General had ended up in the gaol for their actions.

"That is why I intend to lead with that," said Azurite.

"You mean..."

"The first condition Altar will present will be... 'a shared wanted list.'"

"...I see." That would essentially create a rule that any Dryfean master who committed crimes in Altar and ended up on the kingdom's wanted list would also be added to Dryfe's list. That would certainly prevent the kind of terrorism that had been committed by Franklin and Hell General.

"This would necessitate the creation of additional conditions that prevent Dryfe from falsely accusing, say, Shu or Miss Fuso of some

crime in order to put them on the shared wanted list,” Rook noted. I was reminded of the fact that, while I was in Torne, Shu had been locked up as a suspect for a crime. Apparently, that was the fault of a Superior who wanted to frame Shu, but honestly, it wasn’t out of the question that countries could conspire to do something similar.

One of the officials wrote down Rook’s opinion.

“That is true,” said Azurite. “Anything else?”

“This condition would bind Altar as much as it binds Dryfe. Both countries would come out approximately equal in that deal.” said B3. “Although Dryfe already occupies it, you’re letting go of an entire region. Why not make a condition that’s more beneficial for us?”

She had a point. And honestly, I agreed that wouldn’t do enough to bind the imperium.

“Indeed,” Azurite nodded. “We have several conditions in mind, and I would like your opinion on all of them.”

The officials then handed us booklets printed using Secretary skills. They contained a list of conditions the kingdom might present to Dryfe.

“Hmm? I like the demand for reparations,” said Fuso after just a moment of looking at the list. “Why not go with that and present it as ‘compensation to the bereaved families of those who died in the war?’”

“What’s your reasoning on that?” Azurite asked.

“Dryfe became powerful by hiring Masters out of their own pockets, didn’t they? That’s why I think you should take a bite of their military funding. The more reparations they pay, the fewer Masters they can hire. It’s perfect for keeping them in check.”

She had a point. Before Franklin's Game, Hugo had told me that the war had been extremely costly for Dryfe. In that case, damaging their finances was a good way to limit their actions, but...

"But if the treaty is passed, warlike action will be forbidden," said B3. "On top of that, the first condition will make it impossible for their Masters to touch Altar, too."

I shared her opinion. What was the point of targeting military funds if we were about to enter a peace treaty?

"You're sooo innocent, B," said Fuso. "They could very well hire freelance Masters, you know? Money talks, and if it's loud enough, you can easily attract Superiors and pre-Superiors who are both skilled and willing to become terrorists. Hey, they could even get their own Masters to do it. They just have to not be afraid of going to gaol. In either case, Dryfe would need more money to hire Masters than they do now, but that's all the more reason to hit them in the wallet."

*Oh yeah, they really could do that...* I thought in surprise.

Azurite was even more shocked than I was. "That is just... so..." she muttered, clearly shaken. Tians seemed to consider the gaol a much worse fate than we ourselves did. Although there were exceptions like Hannya, whose crimes were minor, the vast majority of the outlaws sent there would never return, making it seem like a death sentence. I supposed that this was one of the differences in tian and Master opinions that Azurite had mentioned.

There were probably some optimizations to be made for the first condition.

"I wouldn't expect less from the un-bear-able, greedy, cunning she-fox," said Shu.

"Why, thank you. Maybe you could learn a thing or two, Mr. 'I'll sell popcorn to buy ammo.'"

What followed was an uncomfortable silence.

*...Was it really necessary to create such a hostile mood here?* I wondered.

We continued to discuss, but in the end we went for the condition first proposed, plus Fuso's idea.

"Though, we gotta bear in mind that they can also demand much more than just the Old Lunnings Duchy," said Shu.

"Indeed," Azurite nodded. "It's not out of the question that they would want me to marry the imperator so our respective countries could merge."

"...And take Altar as it is, huh?" I said.

"Apparently, the idea is not new."

"Huh?"

"Before the war, Altar and Dryfe were on good terms. I was a transfer student there, and Prince Hallon — the first prince's eldest son — was a transfer student in Altar."

"Oh yeah, you did say something like that. You even had a really good friend there, didn't you?"

"Yes... That same friend is also the person I will be negotiating with... Princess Claudiah."

"So..." Azurite was going to face an old friend and negotiate the fate of her country?

"It is possible that they selected Claudiah for the peace talks specifically *because* we were friends... Back to the matter at hand, though. Since Altar and Dryfe were on such good terms, there was talk of a possible alliance or even merger by marriage between the royal and imperial families."

I said nothing and waited for her to continue.

"Only my father knew about that idea, other than the Arch Sage — his advisor — and a few other high-ranking individuals. Even I only learned of it recently, from reading the records they left behind."

So it hadn't become common knowledge because it wasn't set in stone, huh?

"Countries that once got along sooo well are now at war," said Fuso.  
"What a twist of fate."

"...Truly."

"And what'll you do if they come bearing a marriage or merger demand?" Shu asked.

"I would never accept," Azurite instantly replied. "Our people wouldn't tolerate something like that. Also, though Dryfe's military power is growing, as a country it's weakening. Merging with them would only make things harder for the kingdom."

When it came to military power, Dryfe had many Masters, as well as five Superiors, one of which was the famed King of Beasts, the Physical Apex. However, their people were dying to famines, their wealth had been drained by war, and the civil war for the imperial throne had left them with a shortage of leaders.

With so many negatives, the kingdom had nothing to gain from merging with Dryfe.

"In the first place, we have no need for any Dryfean land, resources, or technology. Whether it's war or a merger, *Altar stands to gain nothing.*"

Altar wasn't expansionist — they were even fully willing to let go of the Old Lunnings Duchy.

While Dryfe lacked food production capacity, it was rich in minerals... but that meant little to a non-industrialized country such as Altar. The kingdom's technology, at least when it came to machines, wasn't

advancing much... and there was still more than enough R&D to be done in the recently-unearthed ruins in Quartierlatin.

There was really no point in pushing for open war or a merger with Dryfe. It was a net negative for Altar that the war had begun at all.

"Actually... we gained nothing, and lost much," Azurite said as she hung her head.

"Azurite..."

The war had taken so much from Azurite — her people, her teachers, and even her own father.

I couldn't even begin to gauge what kind of emotion went into those words.

Despite that, she raised her head and looked at us before saying, "That is why we must end this. These are the conditions and compromises we will present to them. In exchange for the Old Lunnings Duchy, we would demand that our countries share wanted lists and that they pay reparations. The bargain may be weighted in Dryfe's favor, but it will end the war."

She looked us all over before continuing.

"However... just like last night's ambushes, there could be some trouble at the peace talks... or it could all turn out to be a trap. If that happens..."

"You can count on us," I said. "If Dryfe bares its fangs, we will protect you... and Altar."

"Ray..."

"We Masters *can* help you and your kingdom, right?" I asked, recalling a question I'd asked her back in Quartierlatin.

In response, she said, "...Certainly!"

And so, it was decided. Come what may, we would give our all to seize the possibility Azurite desired.

Thus ended the last night before the peace talks.

When the sun rose, we would travel to an assembly where countless conflicting motives intertwined into a final apex.

Our goal was to get the peace treaty signed and end the meeting without any trouble.

Let the quest... begin.

# ***Chapter Six: Peace Conference***

*Paladin, Ray Starling*

“MUAHAHAHAHAHAHAH! I’ve been waiting for you, Unbreakable!” Upon our arrival to the location appointed for the peace talks, I was greeted by a familiar voice — though it was laughing in an unfamiliar manner.

It came from the imposing shape standing in the middle of the path leading to our gathering place — a handsome red-haired man known as Hell General, Logan Goddhart.

“Heheheh! From what I can tell, you’ve only gotten two new low-rank jobs since we last met! And you didn’t even upgrade your gear! I’m different, though! I have been reborn! I’m so powerful now, I’m practically a new man.” I said nothing and just let him ramble.

“...Hm? Ah, I see your Embryo’s clothes are different! Did you evolve it to high-rank?! Well, that alone won’t be enough to defeat me!”

That was unexpectedly direct of him.

Just like he said, Nemesis’ evolution to the fourth form had indeed slightly changed her clothing — she was dressed a bit more extravagantly than before. Her physical appearance didn’t change much overall, though, and she herself wasn’t too pleased about that.

“I’ve been waiting for the day I could wipe away the disgrace you and Franklin have burdened me with! It’s time for a rematch! I’ll beat you and prove my power to—”

“stfu”

“This isn’t the time, place, or situation for that.” Logan’s words were cut short by someone who came up from behind him and grabbed him by the neck.

“Ah...!” he gasped. The immense amount of pressure on his throat left him completely unable to say anything more.

The person grabbing him was a lady I’d seen way back when I first met up with Shu in Gideon. She was grasping Logan’s neck with her left hand while cradling a porcupine in her right arm.

Shu had already told me that these two were none other than King of Beasts, Behemot, and her Embryo, Leviathan.

“...Now that I see them, I can say this with absolute certainty,” said Nemesia as she looked at Leviathan. *“She and I are birds of a feather.”*

Just like Fuso’s Kaguya, Leviathan was a Maiden that had evolved into a Superior Embryo. She’d probably been wearing equipment to hide her true identity before, because the oppressive aura rolling off of her now was impossible to compare to what she’d been like before.

While Kaguya was best compared to the Moon dominating everything from the sky above, Leviathan was the incarnation of violence, bearing the potential to shatter entire planets.

But despite wielding such power, it seemed like she was behaving for now, and even holding back... if only barely.

I was so tense that I could feel sweat start to pool in my palms.

This was one of *Infinite Dendrogram*’s three apexes — the Physical Apex.

Barely able to make a sound, Hell General tapped on Leviathan’s hand. He was quickly turning bright purple from lack of air.

“Oh? Hit your limit already? You’re in worse shape than I thought,” said Leviathan as she let him go.

Logan fell to the ground and gasped raggedly for breath before glaring at her and the King of Beasts and grunting out, “You...!”

"You are here as a bodyguard," Leviathan continued. "Keep the personal rivalries somewhere far away from these peace talks."

"What?!" Logan raised his voice, nearly bursting a blood vessel in rage as he used Instant Equip to draw his sword.

"If you continue to misbehave like this, I can take your head off right now," Leviathan said, grabbing his head again at a speed that made me feel like I was watching stop-motion. It was easy to see that her slender fingers could pluck it off with as much effort as picking a flower. "Have I made myself clear?"

The Hell General had no choice but to nod, and once she let him go, he blurted out, "Shit!" and fled immediately.

To my knowledge, Logan was a Master who primarily fought using his summons and wasn't much of a threat from a close range. Still, he was a Superior, and Leviathan had just made him look like a weakling. Rather than meaning that Logan was insignificant, though, it really meant that the King of Beasts was *far too powerful*.

"Apologies for the unbecoming sight. Good day to you, Altarians. I have been entrusted by Her Highness Claudiah to welcome you. My name is Leviathan and this my Master, Behemot," she said before bowing her head. "The peace talks begin in two hours. We have a room prepared for you, so we request that you wait there. Allow me to show you the way."

"...Very well," said Azurite, who seemed rather tense — likely because she was facing Dryfe's most powerful assets. Had King of Beasts been chosen for this role just to put pressure on the kingdom? Or was there some other reason?

"By the way, where's Chronooo?" Tom asked.

"I do not know," Leviathan curtly responded.

[I think that King of Beasts is the one greeting us because they're beary cautious of The Rabbit,] Shu said to me through our Telepathy Cuffs.

[Huh?]

[Assassinations *before* the event are one thing, but if they attacked us here, it would be complete panda-monium. I'm beary sure that Dryfe wants this treaty to go well.]

That made sense. That must've also been the reason why they stopped Logan from causing trouble.

*I guess they don't actually want this whole thing to fall apart, then?* I wondered.

[...Or maybe they just want us to relax so we're caught off guard by the *real* trap,] Shu added. I could only hope that wasn't the case.

Last night, we'd agreed that Tsukikage, a few other Lunar Society members, and — by his own wish — Tom would scout the area around the building while the rest of us would accompany Azurite. We would act as bodyguards for her and the officials all throughout the meeting.

As I talked, King of Beasts and Leviathan led us through the assembly hall.

This place had been built right after Dryfe proposed the peace treaty to Altar, but unlike temporary buildings you'd see in real life, it actually looked really well-made.

According to Azurite, it looked exactly like the assembly hall she'd seen in Vandelheim.

Shu guessed that it had been made using a construction-focused Embryo that had copied either the existing building or its blueprints.

Well, there were people like Franklin, who could create monsters, so there was no reason there couldn't be a Master who created

buildings just as easily. Dryfe also had many more Masters than Altar, which made it even more likely that they could have someone with such an unusual skill set.

*We now have as many Superiors as they do, but if a war breaks out, Altar will still be at a disadvantage,* I thought.

“Please wait here until the appointed time,” said Leviathan, after she’d led us to a room that looked like the presidential suite straight out of an ad for a luxurious hotel. This had to be some sort of guest room for VIPs.

With her job done, Leviathan left the room. King of Beasts shot one last glare at Shu, but didn’t actually say anything.

“...Marie, are there any traps in here?” I asked.

“Hmm... No. Not a single one, and no listening device. I’m almost worried.” Marie was a Superior Job focused on hiding and finding hidden things, so I had absolutely no reason to doubt her on this.

“Even if there aren’t any traps inside, the right ultimate skill from the outside could easily kill us all,” said Fuso, and I glared at her. “Oh, don’t make that face. We have our devout patrolling the area.” Fuso then giggled mischievously. “Well, we’re outnumbered, so maybe they wouldn’t be enough. If numbers are their only advantage, though, then you don’t have to worry about a thing.”

“Hm...?” Was she saying that because her Lunar Divider Field was so potent in large-scale battles?

“So, Rook, did ya notice anything when you looked at their faces?” Shu asked.

“Hell General wanted to fight Ray, while King of Beasts wanted to fight you. That’s it, though. At the very least, I’m certain Hell General isn’t plotting anything.”

"Well, knowing the history between us, that's a beary reasonable reaction even if Dryfe doesn't have some plan in mind."

*That's true, I thought.*

"So, Ray," he then spoke to me. "Did ya use your Reveal?"

Normally, the stats of high-level people were hard to see. My Reveal was at level 5. That was the highest level I could get as a Scout, but it could still be easily resisted by people who were high enough level. Even the lowest level of Conceal could completely prevent me from seeing basically anything.

However, I'd been able to see their stats without any problem — meaning neither of them were trying to hide.

"Yeah... For some reason, Hell General was only about level 500."

"I guess he started respeccing after he lost to you. That's some bad timing. Fur real," Shu said before looking at Fuso for some reason.

"What about the King of Beasts? Unlike in Gideon, she didn't seem to be wearing any Conceal gear."

"Yeah, I saw her stats too, but..."

In a way, what I saw for King of Beasts was even stranger than what I saw for Logan.

Behemot.

Job: King of Beasts.

Level: 1156 (Total Level: 1656)

HP: 108060

MP: 3350

SP: 48980

STR: 10050

AGI: 15315

END: 9980

DEX: 1502

LUK: 125

Her level was extremely high. She was in the same tier as Shu — one of the highest level people I knew. I couldn't say the same about her stats, though. Most of her stats were higher than Shu's — who'd specced heavily into STR — but on average, her numbers were far lower.

My guess here was that these stats were largely unaffected by Embryo stat growth bonuses. They were, however, far from deserving of the title "Physical Apex." For a moment, I thought that she'd been showing me fake stats, just like Marie had done at first, but...

"The King of Beasts isn't scary because of her *own* level or stats, is she?" I asked.

"Yeah. King of Beasts is bad news because of Leviathan."

"...*Guardian-Jaguarman Theory*." That was the thing B3 had mentioned once and the thing I'd learned about before this event — the blueprint for what was considered to be the strongest of all builds in *Infinite Dendrogram*.

It had been perfected in King of Beasts, Behemot, and that was what gave her the title of "Physical Apex."

"We talked about this before, but... if a battle breaks out, I'll be the one fighting," said Shu. "...Right now, I'm the only one that can handle them. Though, if it was night, the she-fox could use the ace up her sleeve."

"Hm...?" Oh right... it had to be night for Kaguya to use her ultimate skill. Did that mean Fuso was actually able to stand up to the King of Beasts at the right time of day?

"I don't recall seeing the details of Prez's ultimate skill in The Lunar Society's database..." said B3.

"Ahahah! Oh, B. Of course it wouldn't be there. It's my top secret trump card that more or less guarantees my victory... The only one who's ever beaten me while I was using it is this bear here... You real-life hacker."

"I don't wanna hear that fur-om you." This reminded me that Fuso had once actually given *Figaro* the death penalty. Shu had gone on to fight and defeat her right after that.

"Well, the best thing we could've hoped for in our situation is Lei-Lei being with us," said Shu.

"...More like the worst thing," said Fuso with a grimace. "I can totally see myself getting caught up in whatever she does and dying anyway."

Although Lei-Lei was part of our clan, she wasn't with us here because of her business in real life. I also didn't know anything about her fighting style or build. All I knew was that she liked spiking drinks.

"Hey, Shu, is Lei-Lei really that amazing?" I asked.

"...She's so dangerous that you can ask any of us Big Three about the one person we don't wanna fight, and all of us will point to her. She's not 'amazing' or 'strong,' just beary, beary *dangerous*."

...Now *that* was a lot of emphasis.

"If you ask her about it yourself, or if you ever get a taste of what she does... you'll know what I mean," he added.

"...I prefer the former." I'd heard enough to know that I really didn't wanna fight her.

An hour had passed since we'd been led to the suite, and an hour more was left until the start of the talks. Azurite and the officials were busy with preparations and final checks. They'd also contacted

Altar and confirmed that there were no urgent matters that needed addressing.

At that moment, someone knocked on the door.

"It's... just one person," said Marie, just from one glance at the door. That meant it wasn't King of Beasts and Leviathan. Who could it be, then?

"May I come in?" the person outside asked. The voice was unfamiliar to me — but not to Azurite, apparently.

With slight surprise on her face, she replied, "Come in."

"Pardon the intrusion," said the person before opening the door, revealing a very... princess-like girl with curled blonde hair. She seemed to be about Azurite's age.

"Altimia! It has been so long!" she said.

"It really has been... Claudiah," Azurite replied, and it was our turn to be surprised.

Her Highness Claudiah herself. She was the person Azurite would be negotiating with in these peace talks.

It was shocking to me that someone that important would casually come to visit us in the waiting room.

Azurite, however, just stood up from her chair and greeted her with a handshake.

"It has been... far too long!" Her Highness Claudiah, embracing Azurite warmly.

"Ah...?!"



We were all unsure how to react to this.

“Ugh! It really has been far, far, *far* too long! After you returned to Altar, we could only talk by sending letters, but even that became impossible because of the war...”

“...Yet you still love to embrace your friends, I see,” commented Azurite. Like a child, Claudiah clung to Azurite with tears in her eyes while Azurite patted her on the back as though used to all of this.

They seemed to be off in a world of their own, separated from us Masters.

“...Ah! I-I am so sorry!” Her Highness Claudiah said as she suddenly backed away from Azurite. “I only came to greet you before the talks begin, but when I saw your face, I was just overwhelmed with emotion.” She looked bashful and her cheeks flushed a rosy red.

“No need to worry,” said Azurite. “I am also happy to see an old friend again.”

“Altimia... th-thank you,” Her Highness said with a blissful smile.

“That aside, is this not a bit careless of you? You are the representative to your country and the only member of the imperial family besides the imperator.”

“Oh, there’s no need to worry about that!” Her Highness said. “I mean, I am sure that both countries want the same thing. Neither side really wants to cause any trouble!”

She puffed her chest as she said that, and her words left us all unsure about how to react. The Rabbit and Logan had already made a bit of a mess, so hearing all of that made us all want to chuckle wryly.

“Hm...?” One of us did have a different reaction, though. Rook was staring at Her Highness with a bead of cold sweat running down his forehead.

“Anyway, I just came to greet you! We can chat about personal matters after the talks! See you soon!” And with those final words, Her Highness Claudiah ran off like a gust of wind. While everyone was busy staring at her back, unsure how to react, I walked up to Rook.

“Rook... Did you notice something strange?” I silently asked.

“...I’m not sure how to put it, actually.”

“Did she lie or anything?”

“No. She meant everything she said. Nobody’s Truth Discernment went off, so I’m sure I’m not mistaken there. But...” he wiped the sweat off his cheek before continuing. “At times, she didn’t seem *human* to me.”

“...What do you mean?”

“On the outside, she was exactly as she presented herself, but I couldn’t even see what was on the inside. I’ve never seen someone like that.”

I had no words. Rook was extremely good at reading others’ thoughts and figuring out exactly what kind of people they were. The fact that he would give such an evaluation, combined with the prospect of Azurite facing her in the peace talks, sent a cold chill down my spine.



The remaining hour before the talks was uneventful, and the peace talks began as planned.

Azurite and Her Highness Claudiah exchanged a formal greeting completely unlike the one they’d shared earlier, and the negotiation began.

...And right *after* they began, we realized that our chilling premonitions weren’t unwarranted.

"Let us begin these negotiations by presenting our goals. To find a compromise, each side must understand what the other wants," said Her Highness. They then exchanged the documents they'd prepared for this, allowing both sides to consider the other's demands and decide where they were willing to compromise.

Upon seeing Dryfe's document, I had to suppress a gasp of shock. I mean, who could blame me for my response, honestly?

Just as we'd discussed last night, Altar's first condition was a counter-terrorist measure — "a shared wanted list."

That condition had also been revised a bit to make sure that once the treaty was signed, false accusations and additions specifically targeting the other country would be strictly forbidden.

Well, one of Dryfe's demands was... "a unified wanted list for both Altar and Dryfe."

It was as though they already knew what the kingdom would demand. That wasn't the end of it, though.

The kingdom's second condition was "reparations to the bereaved families of those who'd died in battle as a result of the invasion."

Dryfe's second compromise was "the payment of condolence money to the Altarian families who lost family members to the war."

Altar's first compromise was "abandonment of the Old Lunnings Duchy."

Dryfe's first condition was "the acquisition of the Old Lunnings Duchy."

I was flabbergasted. The list was a perfect mirror. There was nothing to argue about — all of the conditions were in complete agreement.

Had Altar's conditions been leaked? That couldn't be the case. We'd done the final revisions just last night... And this bodyguard duty

involved signing confidentiality agreements using actual Contracts. This couldn't have leaked from us.

Did we have a spy, then? That couldn't be it, either. With Marie and Tsukikage keeping watch, sneaking in to steal the info would be nearly impossible.

That left only one possibility... that someone had actually predicted all our conditions and demands to the letter, and *this was the result of Dryfe's planning alone*.

"I'm so glad! I knew our countries wanted the same thing! There is nothing for us to even argue about!" said Her Highness with a smile, but we Altarians found it hard to share her sentiment.

The officials were also clearly shaken by this unexpected turn of events.

Azurite alone was an exception.

"Hey, Claudiah," she said.

"Yes? What is it?"

"Like you said, many of our desires are the same, but," she said as she pointed at the document. "*There is one point that is not.*"

She was pointing at the only stain on the otherwise perfect reflection — Dryfe's second condition.

It was "*removal of Masters from the wanted list.*"

More specifically, "all Masters that were added to the wanted list during the period prior to the signing of the peace treaty shall be immediately removed."

"Hm...?" I raised an eyebrow. That was something that we hadn't even considered last night. We were expecting something along the lines of a country merger or a marriage between Azurite and the imperator...

“...May I have your reasoning?” Azurite asked.

“It is simple,” said Her Highness. “If Altar and Dryfe’s wanted lists are to be unified, we would lose two Superiors. We have no intention of fighting Altar anymore, but we still have Caldina and other countries to worry about. Losing two Superiors in a situation like ours would greatly damage our defenses.”

That was actually understandable. Accepting this condition would make it so that both Dryfear Masters on Altar’s wanted list and Altarian Masters on Dryfe’s wanted list would be exonerated.

That would include both Franklin and Logan.

No one’s Truth Discernment went off and Rook wasn’t saying anything, meaning that Her Highness Claudiah truly and honestly wanted this done not to combat Altar, but in order to be prepared for potential aggression from other countries.

...Still, it was really infuriating that two people who’d got on the wanted list for acts of terror would now be totally innocent.

Azurite’s silence made it clear that she felt similarly.

Then again, this was a far more tolerable condition than forcing a merger or a marriage. After all, if this treaty fell apart, those two would still be free to do whatever they wanted. If it meant preventing any further acts of terror, it did seem wise to exonerate them now...

“...Hold it,” said Shu, breaking our trains of thought. He had spent most of his time here focusing on the King of Beasts right behind Her Highness. Why had he spoken up now?

“What is it? I would prefer if bodyguards stay silent during this,” Her Highness said, seemingly a bit troubled and sulky all of a sudden. It made her seem almost childish.

“Sorry, but I just can’t stay quiet on this,” Shu continued, not minding her. “Princess, in case you didn’t realize — you can’t, under any circumstances, undo the wanted list.”

“In case I did not realize... what?” Azurite asked.

“It says that you have to remove the Masters who got on the list prior to the signing of the peace treaty,” Shu said as he made a bitter face and pointed at the second condition. “You know Sechs, whom I sent to the gaol myself? Or Candy, who was beaten by the Superior Killer...? Well, if this passes, they’d all be able to use Altar’s save points again.”

“Ah...?!” He was completely right. Masters ended up in the gaol because being on wanted lists prevented them from using any existing save points, making the gaol their only option. But what would happen if all the criminals in the gaol were suddenly exonerated and, as a result, could use save points outside of it? Would they all be able to come here again? That had probably never happened before, but the possibility alone made this condition into a real landmine.

I looked over and noticed that Marie was also frowning bitterly. That told me all I needed to know about how bad the King of Plagues was. Shu was also so desperate it was actually kind of scary, which told me all I needed to know about the threat posed by the King of Crime.

We’d spotted the hidden danger of the second condition, and Her Highness reacted...

“That certainly *is* dangerous! Very well — I will change the condition right away!”

...By quickly retracting it.

“I will instead ask that you only remove the Dryfean Superiors,” she continued. “They may have caused trouble in the kingdom, certainly, but the imperium still needs them.”

She went on to revise the condition. Logan was standing behind them, and the words “the imperium still needs them” made him look really proud of himself.

“Can you really change the conditions that easily?” Azurite asked.

“I can,” Her Highness said as she puffed out her chest. “I have been given full discretionary powers. I can freely cover for any holes in our treaty!”

[It’s not impossible that they knew about this loophole from the start,] said Shu telepathically.

[I see...] I replied.

They’d presented an outrageous demand at first, something our side would have to refuse, then scaled it down a little to make their real demand easier to swallow. That was negotiation 101 — a technique so basic that even novices knew about it. The exoneration of Franklin and Logan seemed like an easy compromise now, despite how many people on our side would have objected initially.

Now, it seemed that we might be able to try for another concession in exchange for accepting this demand, and once that was done, the peace treaty would be complete. In the end, Altar would only have to give up on the Old Lunnings Duchy — which we’d already planned on abandoning. Everything was going smoothly. War with Dryfe and the danger of terrorism from their Masters would finally be off the table completely.

...Though, I couldn’t shake the feeling that I was overlooking something.

It was decided that in exchange for letting Dryfe’s second condition pass, Altar would receive even more reparations and a transfer of resources. While Dryfe’s second condition had some trouble going through, all of Altar’s conditions were accepted easily.

Since they had so many demands and compromises in common, the talks lasted only about two hours, which was rather short for a treaty intended to completely eliminate the prospect of war.

Once everything was settled, the peace treaty looked like this:

### *Peace Treaty*

This document shall forbid any warlike action between The Kingdom of Altar and Dryfe Imperium.

“Warlike action” includes:

1. Post-treaty activation of the War Boundary targeted at the other country.
2. Post-treaty invasion by military forces.
3. Post-treaty unlawful occupation of the other country’s territory.
4. Post-treaty requests to Masters involving violence against or kidnapping of key individuals from the other country, or otherwise inciting your country’s Masters to commit such acts.

Conditions for Peace: With the signing of this treaty, the Kingdom of Altar and Dryfe Imperium shall do the following:

1. The Kingdom of Altar shall transfer ownership of the Old Lunnings Duchy over to Dryfe Imperium.
2. Post-treaty, both countries shall maintain a common wanted list.

(Those mentioned at point 4 shall be exempt from the common wanted list until they are removed from the standard one.)

3. Within a week, Dryfe Imperium shall transfer the listed amount in reparations and resources to the Kingdom of Altar.
4. Within a week post-treaty, the Kingdom of Altar shall have to remove the two individuals mentioned below from their wanted list.

Giga Professor, Mr. Franklin.

Hell General, Logan Goddhart.

This was the best we could do to prevent terrorism. All that was left was for the leaders or representatives of both countries to activate the Covenant by signing it.

The acting ruler and first princess of Altar, Azurite, and Her Highness Claudiah of Dryfe, who'd been given full authority here, were perfectly qualified to do this.

"It's done!" Her Highness said. She'd written down "Claudiah R. Dryfe" and handed the Covenant over to Azurite.

Azurite looked it over to see if there were any discrepancies between what was discussed and what was written on the official Covenant, but apparently she didn't see anything amiss.

"Ugh! There's no need for you to be so cautious. The Covenant has not been tampered with!" Claudiah said.

Azurite's Truth Discernment yet again remained silent, so she just sighed in relief and said, "It seems you are right."

She took the writing brush. Now, she would finally sign the document, making the peace treaty complete.

Still, I wasn't sure why, but... watching her prepare to sign sent a cold chill down my spine, as if she was doing something really dangerous. Why, though? Was I missing something...?

"Ray?" Shu asked, noticing my apprehension. As I stood there, still unable to pinpoint why all these alarm bells were going off inside my head, Azurite put the brush to the Covenant...

"...Ah."

...And that was when I noticed the Hell General at the edge of my vision.

The sight of him made me recall a particular conversation with Marie, in a flash of insight.

At that moment...

“...STOP!” I shouted out, as if in a fit.

Azurite halted right before she signed and looked at me in surprise.

Everyone was staring at me. Most were simply confused why I stopped Azurite...

...But Her Highness Claudiah was looking at me with eyes so cold they could have been mechanical.

“...I am uncertain how to feel about you raising your voice like that. This is a historic moment, signaling lasting peace between our countries. I did not expect someone to interrupt it like that. You are very like your brother, I see,” she said, looking at me as if she found this situation awkward.

“Ray...?” Azurite said as she shot me a worried glance.

Still... I’d noticed something that made me unable to stay silent.

Upon seeing Logan, I remembered the person who’d defeated him in a duel.

Marie had once described her like this:

*“Speaking of The Fatal Seal of the Four Seas, she escaped Granvaloa after stealing a national treasure. That got her on their wanted list, and she’s more infamous than famous now.”*

The person who’d defeated the Hell General and the current top of Dryfe’s duel rankings. The person who was on *every* wanted list... King of Thieves.

“Why...?”

“Hm?”

*“Why isn’t King of Thieves included in the second condition?”* Why wasn’t the King of Thieves among the Dryfean Superiors that Altar had to remove from their wanted list?

Her Highness Claudiah herself had said that they “would lose two Superiors.” She hadn’t even counted the King of Thieves, Zeta, who was also surely on Altar’s list, too. And yet, that hadn’t made anyone’s Truth Discernment go off.

My words had made Her Highness Claudiah’s eyes grow even colder, and Azurite looked at the Covenant again as though she realized what I meant.

“Oh,” said Her Highness. “It’s true that she is not listed, but she has not done anything within the kingdom, has she?”

“That’s not the point...” King of Thieves was not on the list not because they’d just forgotten to include her. “I should’ve realized what was going on when they completely predicted our conditions.” I had no idea why I hadn’t. Had I been overwhelmed by the shock? Or was that all part of the plan too? “I should’ve realized that they could take advantage of it.”

“Whatever do you mean?” Claudiah tilted her head, but I was half-certain that she was faking it.

She surely knew *exactly* what I meant.

“The Kingdom’s first condition covers requests made *after* the peace treaty is signed...” That was our blind spot — the trap that could easily be missed exactly because they’d predicted our demands so precisely. “...But the same doesn’t apply to requests made *before* the signing.” The treaty would forbid hostile requests after the treaty was signed, but there was absolutely nothing in there against requests made *before* the treaty existed, even if those requests were fulfilled *after*. “If you could figure out what we were thinking so easily, or if you were confident you could lead us into doing what you

wanted, you could easily have requested someone to commit an act of terror on your behalf before the peace conference even started.”

“But Ray,” objected Azurite. “That would still count as an attack by Dryfe. That would go against the treaty.”

“It wouldn’t,” I curtly replied. She was partially right — the peace treaty included a line that forbade inciting your country’s Masters to acts of violence or kidnapping against the other country. Even if the request was made before the treaty, this line would mean it was still in violation of it.

That was why...

“That’s why King of Thieves isn’t named.”

Claudiah was silent.

“After all... *King of Thieves is no longer affiliated with Dryfe — she’s a freelance Master.*”

That was why she hadn’t been counted by Claudioh or even alluded to in the writing. If King of Thieves had been mentioned as part of Dryfe’s defense force, that might’ve activated someone’s Truth Discernment.

“If a request is made before the treaty is signed and the Master in question is no longer part of Dryfe, it doesn’t actually violate the treaty. That’s why Dryfe would receive absolutely no punishment if King of Thieves does something in Altar after this is signed,” I said.

Of course, it was possible that they hadn’t fully predicted the kingdom’s intentions. It was possible that the treaty’s terms would end up being completely different, or just that the final document would end up not including this loophole. In that case, they would be able to just send out an order to stop the request. After all, while orders to attack were against the treaty, orders to *stop* attacks certainly weren’t.

I kept going. “And here is the greatest problem of all.”

Yeah... the fact that King of Thieves was free to act was just the beginning.

The greatest problem for the kingdom was right there on the treaty, written down in black and white.

“If King of Thieves did what Franklin tried and kidnapped someone to Dryfe... we’d be unable to get them back.” If they took someone, Altar would be unable to rescue them. This could perhaps lead to future negotiations where Altar was at a tremendous disadvantage.

“Once the treaty is signed, we wouldn’t have any way to retaliate against that at all.”

“Ah...!” Azurite gasped in realization.

Altar wouldn’t be able to restart the war.

Altar wouldn’t be able to dispatch Masters to retrieve the victim.

If the kingdom tried it, the treaty would punish us for attacking Dryfe.

The peace treaty would completely paralyze Altar.

In some senses, this would actually be worse than merely giving up or merging with them. Becoming a single country would at least leave room for rebellious factions within, but an opposing country bound by a Covenant would be completely powerless to reach them.

I now understood why Claudiah had come to say hello to Azurite today.

*“I am sure that both countries want the same thing. Neither side really wants to cause any trouble!”*

Truth Discernment confirmed that she was telling the truth there.

Of course she was. Both countries wanted to let the treaty pass without any problems. They wanted these peace talks to end without things escalating. There was no trap here.

After all, Dryfe's trap would only activate *after the signing*.

They seemed to desire peace, but there was a cunning strategy hidden just below the surface.

"...Do you have proof of that?" Claudiah asked.

"I don't," I admitted. This was just something I thought of based on what she'd said and the loophole I'd noticed in the Covenant.

It was possible, but I had no proof that they'd *actually* done something like that.

That was why...

"If my conjecture is wrong, just say it, loud and clear." If that was a lie, Truth Discernment wouldn't miss it. "If what you say is true, you can throw me in the gaol as a delusional madman who endangered this important event." If my worry was totally unfounded, I'd have no regrets even if it led to that.

In response...

*"You are completely right."*

...Claudiah confirmed everything.

"Claudiah, you...!" Azurite cried out.

"...Franklin told me that your brain really starts working when it matters, but I didn't expect you to notice something so minor. I am impressed that you could see through Reinhard's plan."

"...I don't think it's that impressive, actually." Usually, Shu or Rook would've been the one who noticed something like this. However, Shu was closely watching King of Beasts' every move, while Rook was laser-focused on Claudiah, whom he said he couldn't even read. They

couldn't spare the attention for noticing this loophole, and I just happened to stumble over it by chance.

Even now, Shu wasn't saying a word because of how focused he was.

After all, the peace talks were now officially canceled.

"Such a shame. The total casualties would have been far smaller if the treaty was passed without a hitch." Claudiah let out a deep breath. "Because of you, I will now have to pull the trigger and expedite the situation."

She took out a switch much like the one once used by Franklin...

"What a shame. I'd originally intended to signal that the peace treaty was signed, but, well... I suppose it's time for plan B."

...And pressed it as though declaring the beginning... or the end.

## *Interlude: The Assault on Altea*

???

An electronic sound rang out from a device in the corner of the room.

It was heard by a single woman — King of Thieves, Zeta.

She was doing little besides listening to it. The device had been given to her by the imperator, but despite that, it was profoundly simple. Paired with a couple of switches, its only function was to make one of two electronic noises, depending on which switch was pressed.

It was so specialized in range and counter-jamming that this was the only thing it could do — but knowing its purpose, that was more than enough.

The device was intended to inform Zeta in case the negotiations went awry or if the operation was canceled. The sound that had rung out a moment earlier indicated the former.

Their peaceful-yet-subtle plan A had been called off in favor of their more direct plan B.

“Shame,” Zeta said. “This means my desire wasn’t fulfilled.”

Dryfe’s second condition, in its original form, had been Zeta’s own request. Sechs Würfel — the leader of I.F. — was currently in the gaol, and she saw this condition as a way of getting him (and Gerbera) out of it.

However, she did say that she wouldn’t mind it much if Altar refused her demand, or if the entire negotiation process failed as it apparently had just now. If it *had* actually passed, Zeta would’ve helped Dryfe in their anti-Caldina efforts, but it was fine by her if it didn’t. In her mind, Sechs could get out of the gaol by himself anyway.

All that was left for her was to commence the anti-Altar operation Dryfe had already paid her for — her first and final job for the imperium.

“Very well. Commencing. I will do as requested,” she said, taking out a Jewel... and shattering it.

Motes of light rose up from the remains of the Jewel, then gathered together to form four humanoid figures.

“Demonstration. I will have you show me your power.” Zeta spoke to the people she’d smuggled into Altea. “Expectation. You were already given your instructions. I have high expectations. I’m certain La Crima did fine work with you all.”

Three of the four smiled in response. They were all eager for the chance to show off their power.

The last one, however, was merely staring at the giant castle outside the window with a somewhat distant look.

“...Is that where *he* is?” Empty as his eyes were... there was a strong will burning deep within them.

◇◇◇

### *Royal Capital, Altea, Rose Garden*

The castle at the heart of Altea had been built in the time of the founding king, the first Azurite. It was the work of his friend who held the title of Great Chief Carpenter, the Superior Job from the carpenter grouping, and it possessed numerous qualities that displayed that fact quite clearly. Some were security measures, but there were also features that merely served to improve the quality of life within the building’s walls.

The most noticeable of these was the rose garden blooming within the *indoor courtyard*.

The walls of the castle reflected sunlight, meaning that the enclosed garden was as brightly lit as anything outside. Ever since the days of the first Azurite, it was a royal family tradition to have tea parties here with their closest friends and family.

After the death of the previous king, Eldor Zeo Altar, only the gardener frequented this place; but now, by the desire of the royal family, a tea party was being held here once again.

The participants were quite unusual, however.

“Wow! Cang, I’ve never had anything like the tea you brought!”

“I imagine not. It’s Huang He tea. We still had some leaves left untouched, so I thought this tea party would be the perfect time to brew them.”

Sipping tea from a white porcelain cup was the organizer of this little party — Second Princess of Altar, Elizabeth. The smiling boy sitting at the table with her was the Third Prince of Huang He, Canglong.

The two were betrothed, and Elizabeth had invited him to this tea party as a guest of honor.

But they obviously weren’t the only participants.

“...Why’s therE popcorn at a teA party?” asked Master Jiangshi, Xunyu, as she gobbled up the popcorn in question. The Superior was here as Canglong’s bodyguard, and she had removed her Tenaga-Ashinaga. They just weren’t fitting for the occasion, after all.

“Umm! I bought it from a bear I met in town the day before yesterday!” said the guest who’d brought the popcorn, all smiles. She was Milianne — the little sister of the royal guard’s vice-commander, Liliana Grandria. She had a habit of sneaking into the castle. That was exactly what she’d been doing today, but Elizabeth had discovered her — and since they were friends, she was invited to

join. The popcorn was her way of thanking Elizabeth for the invitation.

“I had it in my inventory!” Milianne added. Liliana herself was also here to guard the tea party, and she was deeply surprised by the presence of her little sister. Part of her couldn’t help but worry that Milianne would cause some trouble.

She was also completely certain that the castle’s security was functioning properly, so Milianne’s presence here didn’t make any sense to her.

Anyhow, this children’s tea party had two more participants — though it was questionable whether one of them counted.

“...They’re delicious. I suppose Shu made these?”

“Dor...” The person commenting on the popcorn was Elizabeth’s little sister and the Third Princess of Altar, Theresia. Instead of a chair, she was sitting on a giant hamster she called “Dor,” and she was also here by Elizabeth’s invitation.

“Theresia! Drink the tea Cang brought!” Elizabeth insisted.

“Certainly. Thank you Elizabeth. I’ll try it right away.”

Like the good sisters they were, they were enjoying tea together. It almost seemed as though this whole tea party had been arranged just for the purpose of inviting Theresia.

*...Your Highness,* Liliana thought to herself, thinking back to the day before yesterday.

The day before Altimia left for the peace talks, Elizabeth had told her that she would marry Canglong. That was the conclusion she’d come upon after much thought both during and after the Love-Duel Festival.

*This will surely be her last tea party here,* Liliana thought. If today’s peace talks went well, Elizabeth would join Canglong on his

departure back to Huang He tomorrow. But even if peace was established, the world would still be in turmoil. Once Elizabeth was in Huang He, returning to the kingdom would be difficult.

That was exactly why she'd invited Theresia to this tea party.

She wanted to give her sickly little sister, who probably didn't have much time left in this world, just one last tea party with her.

She wanted to show Theresia her fiancé and let the little girl see them both having fun together, to assure her that they would be just fine.

Just thinking of all the emotion that Elizabeth had poured into this event made Liliana tear up.

"Dor, dor!" Dor suddenly made some noises that sounded... really fake. It actually seemed like someone who could speak just fine trying to mimic the sound they thought an animal might make.

"Dor...? Ohh, right," said Theresia.

"Theresia? What's wrong?" Elizabeth asked.

"...It's almost time to take my medicine, but it seems that I left it in my room. I'll go get it."

"Why not get a maid to do it?"

"The medicine is precious, so I keep it locked up. I'll be back in a moment."

Once Theresia said that, Dor stood up on all fours and walked out of the rose garden. Xunyu watched them until they were out of sight.

"...You know, I've been thinking... Why does a sickly princess have a rodent as a pet? It doesn't make sense."

To someone with a weak constitution, small rodents could be dangerous carriers of pathogens, and Dor wasn't even a "small" rodent.

"Who gave it to hEr, anyway?" Xunyu wondered. "There are mOre sensible pets to cHoose, aren't thEre? Your dragOn's a good example."

After Franklin's Game, Count Gideon had gifted Elizabeth a Pure-Dragon for her protection.

...Though, she'd used it to run away once, so now it was carried around by her bodyguards instead.

"I don't know where she got him, either," said Elizabeth. "He was there by Theresia's side before we even realized it."

"...WhAt?" Elizabeth's answer only confused Xunyu further.

"...Are you saying that a monster snuck into the castle and got close to her?" asked Canglong.

"Father said, 'Such things are to be expected with Theresia... It must have come to protect her,' and then declared him Theresia's pet."

Elizabeth's answer just made both Xunyu and Canglong think for a long time. Specifically, they were both trying to figure out what the previous king meant by 'Such things are to be expected with Theresia,' but neither of them could come up with an answer.

The weight of the mystery almost made the air between them feel heavier, but then...

"But Dor is really cute!"

...Milianne, clueless as she was, completely dispelled that atmosphere.

"Indeed," said Elizabeth.

"...Well, I cAn understand why childrEn would like it," Xunyu shrugged.

"Are you not a child yourself?" Canglong asked her.

The question was shelved, and the tea party continued.

A few minutes after Theresia left, someone spoke to Liliana. It was Sir Lindos, one of the royal guards who was also tasked to act as a bodyguard.

“Lady Grandria,” he addressed her.

“What is it?”

“There’s trouble at the main gate. Someone is trying to enter the castle without permission.”

“Huh? Why not merely confirm that they do not have permission and then ask them to leave?”

“The problem is this person’s identity, actually. The individual at the gate is...”

Upon hearing the name, Liliana widened her eyes.

“Huh?! Are you *certain* it’s him?! ”

“We need you to confirm. You are among those who were present at the battle a few years ago.”

Those words were enough for Liliana to understand that she was needed immediately at the gate.

“Your Highnesses, I must briefly pass my bodyguard duties to someone else,” Liliana told Elizabeth and Canglong.

“Very well!”

“Sir Lindos, keep the rose garden safe. You too, Miss Xunyu. We will be counting on you if something happens.”

“Understood,” Sir Lindos nodded.

“Well, I’m Cang’s bodyguard. I can protect Elizabeth and your little sister on the side.”

“...Thank you. Milianne, make sure you do not trouble them.”

“Okaay!” And so, Liliana headed out to the main gate, completely unaware of what awaited her there...



Liliana arrived at a hallway from which she could see the main gate. Looking down, she caught sight of the guards who had encountered trouble — and the three men who faced them.

They were all clad in caster-like robes, with hoods hiding their faces — the very definition of “shady-looking.”

However, the old man at the front stood out to her more than the others.

He was clad in a red robe and had a long, flowing beard — the very picture of a true master magician. His aura, as well, was completely unlike that of the other two...

“Is that... truly him?”

...And Liliana recognized his face.

It would have been embarrassing not to recognize such an illustrious individual. After all, this was the man who had rivaled the Arch Sage for the title of the greatest spellcaster in the kingdom a mere four years ago.

“Mr. Feuer... Lazburn.” King of Blaze, Feuer Lazburn. He was one of the tians Azurite had been looking for, and a true expert on fire magic.

However, he was supposed to be missing.

Liliana had already been informed of that fact, and it made his sudden appearance here in the capital — the castle itself, at that — even more of a mystery.

“Umm, Mr. Feuer Lazburn? What business do you have here?” one of the gate guards who recognized him asked.

However, Feuer wasn't even looking at him. His mouth twitched as he whispered, "...Where?"

"Eh?"

"*Where is... the Arch Sage?*" Neither the guards nor Liliana could understand what he was saying.

After all, the Arch Sage had died in the previous war. There wasn't a single Altarian in the world who didn't know that.

"Umm, the Arch Sage is—"

"He must be here... If he isn't... he will surely come soon... Does he need... a signal fire?"

The gate guard tried to explain, but before he could finish, Feuer just kept whispering as if he couldn't even hear him.

The guard looked at his partner, but he too seemed confused about what to do.

The only person who knew the best course of action for this situation... was Liliana, who was still watching the interaction from above.

"...GET AWAY!" she screamed.

However, before the guards could react to her words...

"A signal fire... can be arranged."

*...Two extra hands sprouted from Feuer's back.*

That was only the beginning of his transformation.

Something seemed to be rippling under his skin as his body gained more volume and his silhouette warped grotesquely. Soon, he'd grown an entire twisted extra pair of arms and stood so large that he no longer looked like an old man... or even human. His skin had also turned a blazing, unnatural red.

He then aimed his four arms at the guards and the gate behind them before speaking the words “Crimson Sphere.”

In an instant, four giant orbs of fire shot out from the hands of the creature that had once been Feuer. They easily incinerated the two guards and exploded against the gate.

These flaming orbs were far more powerful than standard Crimson Spheres, and even the magic-protected gate melted before them like butter.

The deafening roar of the fire and the rising black smoke signaled to the castle... and the entire city... that something major was happening.

“SHOW YOURSELF! ARCH SAGE!” This would certainly do for a signal fire. The thing that was once Lazburn had committed this brutal act to summon the person he was looking for.

However, he wasn’t the only one who had undergone a terrible transformation.

The appearance of the men who accompanied him had also changed drastically. One had become some sort of hybrid between man and spider, while the other now appeared to be part bat.

Needless to say, they had left humanity far, far behind.

“What... What are they?!” Liliana’s horrified shout surely echoed the feelings of anyone who had ever laid eyes on these creatures.

However, there was one key fact that she could not have known.

Even if she instinctively recognized these beings as abominations, she could never guess that they were the work of a single person... a single Superior Embryo.



???

There existed a Superior Embryo called “True Form Alteration, Idea.” It was a Type Legion composed of parasitic organisms that snuck into the bodies of animals and altered the abilities of their hosts. This Embryo could make them beautiful, healthy, or even grant them new capabilities.

It could give someone powers that no human had ever possessed — as well as make them human no longer.

Some of its hosts were like Lazburn, who might still qualify as humanoid, but no one would say he was actually *human*. Regardless of how they were classified, these kinds of mutated hosts shared very little with mankind.

Others simply had their bodies modified to give them abilities far beyond those of their original forms, while still others had their brains modified to hinder their will. Some of its hosts even ended up transformed in both body and mind.

They had all been modified by the Master of True Form Alteration, Idea... La Crima “The Source of Errors.”

They were the subjects of this Superior Embryo, as well as extensions of it. According to Platonism, they could be described as its “forms” or “ideas.”

In one corner of the noble district, a figure watched over these Ideas with emotionless eyes. This figure was none other than the woman who had shattered the Jewel and unleashed these beings upon the capital. Covered in bandages like she had just stepped out of a crypt, she was King of Thieves, Zeta.

“Excellent,” she said. “This is the first time we’ve deployed specimens that were originally Superior Jobs, and despite some minor mental disturbances, their physical state seems acceptable. They can also still tell friends and enemies apart. I will have to send this data to La Crima.”

Her tone was neutral, showing how unshaken she was by the tragedy she had unleashed upon the castle and its guards.

“Beginning. Ignis Idea, Aranea Idea, and Vespertilio Idea have infiltrated the castle.”

The creatures she had released served as assassins. Zeta tended to operate alone, so La Crima — a fellow I.F. member — had given these creatures to her, and she now employed them as combatants in her act of terrorism.

They were also intended to test how such creatures would perform in future I.F. operations, to gather data for La Crima — who was currently in Tenchi, a country full of quality specimens — and to complete the task given to her by the imperator of Dryfe.

“Favorable. Even tian Superior Jobs can be improved to a level above pre-Superior Masters.”

Perhaps the strongest among those she’d been given — “King of Blaze, Feuer Lazburn,” codename “Ignis Idea” — was beginning to push into the castle itself, blasting fire from all four of his hands. The spider-like Aranea Idea and bat-like Vespertilio Idea had also passed through the shattered gates and entered the castle grounds.

“Simultaneous. Regina Apis Idea and Apis Idea have also begun their attacks around the castle.”

Black smoke rose and screams echoed from the capital townscape behind Zeta.

To keep the Masters outside the castle in check, she had also created chaos in town by releasing one Idea with a Superior Job as a starting point, along with many of its underlings, all of which were based on high-rank jobs.

The Rabbit had killed many of the bodyguards who were supposed to guard the peace talks, so their ranks had been replenished with

Masters who would've originally stayed in the capital. Zeta believed that those who were left would find it difficult to handle what she had dispatched.

"Action. The order had already been given. The timing may have changed, but my job remains the same," said Zeta — the Superior to whom the imperator had given this final request. "Goal. Infiltrate the castle, steal what must be stolen, and erase what must be erased. That is all."

She leaped from roof to roof in the noble district before heading into the chaotic castle herself.

Set off by the peace talks, the imperium's fangs had finally begun to close on their throats.

They would take what was to be taken and kill what had to be killed.

# ***Chapter Seven: Opened Hostilities***

*Altar-Dryfe Border, Peace Conference Hall*

The moment Claudiah pressed the button, the situation changed drastically.

It was as though she had flipped a switch that turned the scene before her into chaos.

Leviathan was the first to act. She'd put down Behemot and jumped towards Altimia with a small blade in hand.

It wasn't a large weapon and didn't seem that threatening on its own, but its edge was covered in some sort of liquid.

She then threw the dripping blade towards Altimia.

"Gh!" However, Altimia noticed the poisoned dagger flying towards her and drew her sword — The Primeval Blade, Altar — deflecting it with ease.

But the moment she swung her sword, Leviathan was already right next to her. "You're mine!"

"Kodachi." Before Leviathan could even touch Altimia, Shu launched a high kick towards her. He was already clad in his Ursine Godcloth, Kim-un-Kamuy, and could use its first strike-limited optical camouflage and presence block effects. His unseen attack hit home, striking Leviathan in the back of the neck.

Shu hadn't been on-edge about the Dryfean Masters' movements for nothing. His attack went exactly as he'd planned, striking for maximum damage.

"Hh...!" The kick that had once instantly eliminated a Legendary monster was so strong that not even Leviathan could withstand it. It blew her away with the force of a cannonball, opening up a hole in the wall she crashed into.

However, her spine wasn't even strained, let alone broken, so she had no problem simply standing back up again. Marie followed up Shu's attack with piercing-homing bullets, but Leviathan turned them to dust with a mere swing of her arms.

Not even five seconds had passed since this battle had begun.

Many of the bodyguards present were clearly perplexed.

The Dryfean bodyguards actually seemed more shocked than the Altarian ones. The fact that Leviathan had just tried to assault the chief representative of the other country left them completely flabbergasted. Based on that, Shu assumed that only Behemot and Leviathan had been informed of this part of the plan.

Besides Claudiah — the representative — and King of Beasts — the imperator's ultimate confidant — no Dryfean present knew the full scope of the plot here.

"I knew this would not succeed," Claudiah said upon witnessing the failure of the assault she herself had ordered.

"It's only because my focus is split. I wouldn't have failed if I just had to kill *her*," said Leviathan.

"Everyone else can die, but Altimia must be captured *alive*. You must accomplish this at any cost."

"...I'm not suited for that kind of thing. Behemot should be the one to do this."

"kk" Despite the tense air, their talk was extremely relaxed, casually revealing that they were planning to kidnap Altimia — the acting ruler of Altar.

"Claudiah! What are you planning...?! What was that switch...?!"

"Basically, the peace talks are over," Claudiah said, as if this was nothing. "This young man here... 'Ray,' was it? He unraveled our

plan. After being so thoroughly exposed, these negotiations have fallen apart, and any hope of future peace has vanished.”

It was now obvious that no matter how favorable the peace treaty seemed at first glance, Dryfe would still hide traps within it. Now, Altar would be more wary at any future talks, making such traps impossible.

“However, it *is* true that Dryfe does not want war. We will only accept it as a last resort. Therefore, we will simply destroy Altar before that happens,” Claudiah said, without any enthusiasm.

“...How?” Ray asked.

“First, we will either capture or kill the second and third princesses, as well as secure Altimia herself.”

“Huh?!”

“The switch I had just activated should have signaled that person you mentioned — King of Thieves, Zeta — to assault Altea along with her own collaborators.” Her shocking words shook up almost everyone who heard her. The officials tried to contact the capital using comms magic, while Marie was poised to run outside.

Ray had also almost looked at the direction of Altea...

“Don’t move.”

...But Shu stopped him.

With those words, he was implying that here and now, they were dealing with something that was as important as whatever was happening at Altea... or was even more dangerous than that.

King of Beasts was here — a foe who could kill you the moment you so much as looked away.

King of Destruction was already prepared for battle, and his body was as tense as it could be.

“...Do you really believe the kingdom will fall if we disappear?” Altimia asked Claudiah. She was worried about the capital and her sisters, but as the one who carried the country on her shoulders, she stood firmly against the threat in front of her.

“Of course I do,” said Claudiah, pointing at Altimia. “After all, Altar is only Altar because it has you, the descendants of the founding king... the royal family. The country is only in one piece because it has you. If you believe I am wrong, then tell me... is there a single noble you’d trust to hold your country together?”

“Ah...!”

“The most influential of the nobility, the Lunnings family, was extinguished by Gloria. The previous war also took the lives of many illustrious citizens, did it not? The most prominent noble still alive is Marquis Findle, but he is more of a behind-the-scenes type, not suited to lead the country. Who else is there? Count Gideon? He’s far too young. With him in charge, there would only be more chaos. Without a proper leader, a country is unable to make Covenants, activate War Boundaries... it would be barred from things that can only be done by heads of state. It would be unable to even function as an independent nation.”

Claudiah took a breath before continuing.

“Even if someone tried to seize power to quell the chaos, someone else would rise to stop them. That much is obvious, given the existence of nobles like Marquis Borozel, who tried to gain authority even if it meant assassinating a princess. And I am aware of many of your elite who would swear allegiance to us the moment the royal family was gone. Even the lords who would not join us might just choose some other country to pledge themselves to instead. Marquis Nissa at Altar’s southwest is on good terms with Legendaria, for one, so he might desire to be annexed by them. On that topic, Count Keyora in the seaside region to the west has connections to

Granvaloa's trading fleet. Granvaloa wants more land of their own, so they would gladly take him... Well, the point is that without the *pillars*, such things would happen all over, and Altar would disintegrate into warring states once again."

Claudiah declared that the royal family was all that was keeping from Altar from crumbling into many smaller nations. That was how the country had been before the founding king united it, so it wasn't out of the question that it could one day return to that state.

However, it was obvious that Claudiah knew far too much about Altar's state of affairs. Some of what she'd said was unknown not only to Altimia, but even DIN.

Dryfe had been given all of this information by none other than King of Thieves, Zeta.

She was part of Illegal Frontier. The clan's leader, Sechs, knew far more about Altar than most could even imagine, and he had distributed this info to all of its members. Zeta had also gathered a great deal of information herself, and by now I.F.'s database had become extremely vast.

Besides the act of terror at the capital, Dryfe had also requested that Zeta sell them everything they knew about Altar's internal affairs.

The imperium wanted to eliminate the royal family in order to incapacitate the country and split it apart with the influence of other countries. This plan was based on the assumption that the nobles with ties to other countries would act exactly as Dryfe was expecting, but...

*...Well, actually, I guess that is a viable plan,* Shu thought. For all he knew, the nobles in question might've already talked things out with Granvaloa and Legendaria. The two countries wouldn't participate in the war between Altar and Dryfe, but they would come to take the kingdom's *territory* in the event that the government collapsed.

Legendaria and Granvaloa had nothing to lose from making such agreements.

Dryfe would benefit from this, as well.

If Altar collapsed, they would lose a potential force against the biggest threat, Caldina, but since a splintered kingdom would have very few factions willing or able to stand up to Dryfe, they could easily absorb what was left of the kingdom, along with the other nations opposed to Caldina.

That was their plan here.

*...The marriage-based alliance between Altar and Huang He would also fall apart if the second princess was gone. Even if Huang He wanted to retaliate against Dryfe for this, they still have Caldina between them, making invasion impossible. In fact, if that's how things went, Dryfe might even appreciate the damage that Huang He would do to Caldina.*

Crossing the Harshwinter Mountains to the north was another way to reach Dryfe, but Shu knew that that was a more dangerous path than Caldina's deserts — it was fair to call it impossible, actually. There had been a Superior who had tried that way, only to have the floating fortress he was so proud of shot down by the local ruler of the skies — Divine Comet Bird, Tunguska. Shu himself had been caught up in that incident.

Dryfe's plan seemed to account for all the tians involved, Altarian or otherwise.

"...Maybe that's how things would go with tians," Shu said as he looked at his little brother. "But what about us Masters? Even if Altar's gone, there'd be many who'd bare their fangs at Dryfe." Even if the country crumbled, there would surely be ex-Altarian Masters who would stand against the imperium. It would be especially hard to prevent VIP assassinations by the likes of Marie or Eishiro.

“Exactly,” said Tsukuyo. “Even with the threat of the wanted list, you’d still leave yourself open to a retaliatory strike or two.”

“Would you come to Dryfe if the reward was good enough?” Claudioh asked her.

“Don’t think that we would change sides that easily.”

“We would not mind making The Lunar Society into the state religion,” Claudioh said.

“...D-Don’t think that we would... Hold on, let me think a bit...” The fact that Dryfe would so easily do what the kingdom had so ardently refused to actually made Tsukuyo falter.

“...Don’t think that all of us can be bought as easily as Miss Eldritch here,” Ray snapped at Claudioh, his opinion of Tsukuyo dropping even lower than he thought possible.

“Oh, I’m certain of that. I know that there are many Masters like yourself. In fact, I am sure that almost all Masters who stayed in the kingdom after their loss in the recent war would be such individuals.”

Masters who only cared about themselves would have already switched to other countries, or they were like the people that Franklin had hired during Franklin’s Game. Many of those that were left were either close to Altarian tians or merely liked the kingdom and wanted to protect it.

“That is why,” Claudioh continued. “I hope you do not believe that we’re doing something so extreme without some kind of measure in place to deal with such Masters.”

“And that ‘measure’ is...?”

“I cannot say it. We are still only in the first stage, after all,” she said, before turning to face Altimia. “We will deal with the princesses at Altea and capture Altimia here. Our anti-Master measure comes after that.”

Those words didn't trigger anyone's Truth Discernment. That meant that they actually *had* thought of a way to deal with Altarian Masters who would attack Dryfe once the kingdom fell.

*The fact that they're not worried about assassinations makes it pretty clear that they've come up with something really extreme. That means that the most important thing here is...*

Their primary goal here had to be protecting the Altarian princesses from Dryfe's attack. If the kingdom ceased to exist, things would go exactly according to Dryfe's plan.

*Hell, we can't let them mess with Theresia... If worst comes to worst... It'll all be over.*

As one of the few who knew what *really* made Theresia special, Shu began to sweat — and not just because of the King of Beasts. He decided it would be best if they returned to protect Altea as soon as possible.

Between the Masters Chrono had killed and the ones on bodyguard duty here, the capital had been rendered more or less completely defenseless. If the attackers were powerful enough, it would all be over.

There was one major problem with this, however — their enemies here would not let them return to Altea so easily. While fighting King of Beasts the Physical Apex, a retreating battle was a foolish idea.

*They'll probably aim for AGI builds like Superior Killer and Tsukikage first. Even if he hid in the shadows, they'd just destroy the entire zone to get to him. And even if they somehow managed to escape, we would be too slow to retreat from the King of Beasts, who's almost certainly faster than either of them. There's no point in trying to run away when they can catch up so easily. It's better to stay and fight them here. With Claudiah around, they can't just destroy everything indiscriminately.*

And even if King of Beasts hadn't been here, there was no guarantee that anyone except those who could move at supersonic speeds would even make it to Altea in time.

*But staying here and fighting would still take up valuable time that could be used to hurry to Altea. Is it better for us to protect Altimia all costs or force our way out...?*

As Shu considered the situation...

"I will ask one thing, Cludiah."

...Altimia, who had been quiet for a while now, spoke up again.

"I will hear it."

"Are you able to stop the terrorism at the capital?"

"Yes. If I press the bottom button on the switch, it would immediately be c—"

As Cludiah revealed the means of stopping her act of terror, she raised up her right hand, still holding the switch — and a moment later, Altimia swung the sword Altar towards it, *cutting Cludiah's hand off at the wrist.*

Altimia then reached out with her free hand to try and catch the appendage, but even her massive blade had been barely long enough to strike home. She did not have the reach to seize it before Cludiah lashed out with her left hand, knocking her own severed hand away behind her.

The Dryfean Masters stationed behind backed away the hand as it fell, some of them letting out screams.

"...Ugh," Cludiah said with a pout, emphasizing just how upset she was. "You'd cut off my hand just to take the switch from me...? Is that your way of saying that we are no longer friends?!"

Her reaction to having her hand sliced off seemed rather... mild.

"No," said Altimia, denying that idea. "I still consider you my friend, even now. However, as their elder sister and the person Altar depends on most... I will raise my blade against you no matter my own feelings. I am fully prepared to have a dear friend like you despise me for the rest of your life."

She denied Claudiah's statement and presented her own will.

Claudiah's eyes as she looked at Altimia held no anger.

In fact... there was joy in them.

"Heheheh," she giggled. "So we are alike in that."

"...We are?"

"Yes. I also intend to capture you even if it means you hate me for the rest of your life," she said with a blissful smile on her face. "But I will not despise you just because you cut off my hand. Even if you'd cut off my head, I'm sure I'd feel the same. Not even the worst pain you could possibly inflict upon me could make me truly hate you."

Her eyes were shining with a profound affection... and some other emotion.

"Though, this barely even hurts," she added. Her whisper was followed by a sound of something metallic being crushed.

The source of the sound was Claudiah's detached right hand... *It had moved on its own to destroy the switch it was holding.*

There were sparks coming out of the severed end of its wrist, and a metal frame filled with electric wiring was visible, dripping with a red liquid.

"Claudiah... you..."

"I have been through many battles and lost parts of my original body. I am now what Masters would call a 'cyborg.'"

She said all of this as though it was nothing before removing her entire right forearm, only to casually take a new one out of her inventory and connect it to the port on her elbow.

This backup arm had no human-like skin on it at all, and the crude form made it seem like a true *tool of battle*.

“Anyway, the simplest way to stop the operation is gone,” she said. “However, Zeta *would* leave Altea if I contacted her using comms magic and ordered her to stop. Everything has been sealed using a Contract, so she would certainly obey me immediately,” Claudiah smiled as she presented another way to stop the terrorism.

“...Claudiah?” Altimia said, uncertain what to make of this.

Like before, Truth Discernment wasn’t triggered, meaning that she was telling the honest truth.

That was when they were finally joined by the Masters from outside the building, who’d likely been drawn here by the sound of the first clash with Leviathan. That meant that both sides now had more or less all of their bodyguards present — though Altar still lacked The Lynx, Tom Cat, while Dryfe lacked The Rabbit, Chrono Crown.

“...And the Masters have arrived. Excellent timing,” Claudiah said as she looked around, pointed at herself, then Altimia, with her mechanical arm. “We want to capture you. You want to capture *me* to stop my plot. We have already exchanged blows. Peace is no longer an option. What shall we do now, then?”

She then used Instant Wear to cover herself in armor.

No... not armor, but some kind of powered mechanical suit.

This blood-red suit had been constructed specifically for her using an MVP special reward material.

“Shall we do our best to capture one another, all while our bodyguards do their best to protect us?” Claudiah then drew a

mechanical drill lance — a weapon she'd acquired when she'd defeated an Ancient Legendary UBM.

She spun the giant lance as if it weighed nothing in her hand.

"This is not exactly what Reinhard planned, but I've made it quite a bit simpler."

*...So that's how it is, huh?* Shu thought as he clenched his teeth.

Claudiah had told them about the assault on Altea and the means to stop it specifically to give them more reasons to stay and fewer reasons to escape. This also made it impossible for the Altarians to just kill Claudiah, because they needed her alive to call off Zeta's act of terrorism. Even if they tried to do it themselves with Charm, the Contract would prove impossible to break if Claudiah died.

Even if they'd chosen to hurry to the capital despite all this, it would be difficult to actually protect it against the King of Beasts' speed.

Therefore, the quickest way to stop the assault on Altea was to capture Claudiah.

They were forced to play along with what she wanted, and they had to win in spite of that.

"Well then... Let us begin." Claudiah pointed her drill lance at Altimia and declared the start of the battle.

Despite that, most of the Masters didn't move.

Some just couldn't keep up with this turn of events... or this change of plans that seemed borderline insane. Others were just so focused on what they had to protect that they didn't move an inch.

Their hesitation didn't last, however, and the experienced Masters quickly leaped into action.

However, there were four Masters that did act immediately, while the others were still frozen.

Hell General, Logan Goddhart, quickly understood that he was now allowed to fight and *destroy* Ray Starling — so he immediately implemented his new strategy.

King of Beasts, Behemot had made Leviathan switch from her Maiden form to the Guardian form that would allow her to unleash all her stats.

High Priestess, Tsukuyo Fuso activated Lunar Divider Field: Faint Light, setting “Dryfean Masters” and “total level” as the targets.

King of Destruction, Shu Starling closed in on Leviathan while she was still transforming.

“FHAHAHAH! Let’s go! Call Devil—” Right before Logan summoned his devils, all the Dryfean bodyguards had their levels divided by six...

“Fatal Field.”

...And when Tsukuyo used another skill, all of them except for King of Beasts instantly died.

Many survived for a few heartbeats thanks to their Brooches, but the continuous field of instadeath quickly shattered the items and brought them to a silent end.

This was accomplished via the Superior MVP special reward — Gloria β’s item skill Fatal Field, which “Instantly killed all humanoid creatures under level 100 within a radius of 500 metels.”

Almost all Dryfean Masters present received the death penalty before they could even know what was going on, much like the Masters that had tried to face Gloria itself.

Tsukuyo had employed a combo of Faint Light set to divide the total level by six and Fatal Field, which instantly killed everyone under level 100. Although its effect was limited to humans, the result was even more fearsome than the Fatal Field of Gloria itself. It was one of

Tsukuyo Fuso's trump cards, and the only one who'd survived it was King of Beasts, whose level was above 600.

Despite being a Superior Job, even Hell General instantly perished simply because he was in the process of regaining his lost levels.

"...How pathetic," said Leviathan as she grew, shedding her human form. "So, what will you do now?" She looked down at Shu, who was clinging to her, as she posed this question.

Instead of answering, he merely looked back at his brother.

He was certain that what he was about to do was the optimal course of action and that it gave them the highest chances of winning against King of Beasts... but he still hesitated.

After all, this meant sending his brother and his friends to certain death.

The primary reason Claudiah had made this gamble in the first place — the thing that more or less assured her victory — was King of Beasts. Fighting her without Shu, the strongest among them, was essentially a death sentence.

However, Ray's eyes showed no fear whatsoever. His resolve had already drowned it all out. Thus, Shu gathered his own resolve and decided to leave the strongest enemy here.

There was only one thing left to say.

"I'm leaving this to you."

"You can count on me." Right after that, Shu put all his strength into his legs. His immense STR shattered the floor, and he and Leviathan — whom he was holding on to tightly — both felt the impact.

By sheer leg strength alone, he could move at extreme speeds. Leaping into the air with the force of a cannonball, Shu disappeared through the hole in the wall that had been left behind by Leviathan.

And the battle here was left to his little brother...



Most of the Dryfean bodyguards were dead.

Shu Starling and Leviathan had left.

The two princesses were left behind — one holding a sword, and the other brandishing a lance.

Besides them, there was Death Period and The Lunar Society... 86 Altarian Masters in total.

Dryfe, on the other hand, only had one Master left.

She was, however, the strongest Master in Dryfe as well as *Dendro's* Physical Apex... King of Beasts, Behemot.

She stared silently at the hole in the wall... seeing off the two who had vanished into the distance.

“...I don’t have anyone to fight now. No fair, Levia.” Behemot was shocked enough to stop speaking in internet slang and actually heave a sigh. Though she was surrounded by Altarian Masters, she seemed disappointed, as though she thought nobody but Shu could possibly pose a threat to her.

“Well, all right...” she said as she faced Altimia. “I’ll just quickly capture the princess... and then go to Sh—”

“No.” One Master cut her words short.

“It’s not my bro you’re gonna fight.”

“Hm?” The Master — Ray Starling...

“We are your enemies here... We will stop you, King of Beasts,” ...echoed his brother’s words, all while looking directly at the Physical Apex herself.

Behemot then looked around to see that his companions shared his resolve.

She blinked over and over as if seeing something really unusual.

“op...” The beastly jaw then warped into a smile. “But I like it.” A ferocious aura poured off of her as she prepared for battle.

Thus the curtain rose on Ray Starling’s first battle against an “Apex.”



# *Chapter Eight: The Battle of the Masterless*

*XXXX Years Ago*

A verdant and vast scenery stretched out as far as the eye could see. The wind-caressed leaves brushed against each other and water trickled through the streams as birds flitted to and fro, singing their songs. The trees were painted in all shades of green, their fallen leaves covering the ground in a blanket of fertile colors, and the sky above was as endless as it was blue.

It was a scene that seemed completely untouched by the hands of man.

Surrounded by all this nature, there stood a solitary young man — who could just as easily be described as a “boy.”

For reasons unknown, he was holding a pocket watch in each hand.

“Nothing in this scenery is real,” the youth suddenly said. Despite his young appearance, he seemed to have the aura of an aged and exhausted old man.

The years experienced by his mind far exceeded those of his body. He only appeared young because his flesh had been restored by a particular Infinite Embryo.

“The air and trees were replicated by Infinite Vicissitude. This sky is presented to me by Infinite Illusion. And even this body that senses it all is yet another creation of Infinite Birth.”

Like an old man whose grip on reason is finally slipping away, he continued his monologue — though it almost seemed as though his words were directed at the watches in his hands.

“But that doesn’t mean that nothing here is real. My flesh might be artificial, but my *life* is not... and so is the power that you wield.”

The aged youth spoke, still looking at the watches.

“Ignoring *that* one, this is the twelfth Infinite Embryo... Infinite Time. The flow of time exists for all things. That makes it impossible for it to be fake — which means that it’s ultimately as real as can be.”

He paused, exhaled... and put on a wry smile.

“And it... is what will finally snuff me out. Real as it is, my life seems to have a limit.”

“...”

“I will die and you will remain. That is what it means to become Infinite. It’s different for Embryos in their seventh forms or below. When their Masters experience their ultimate death, their Resources are crystallized and leave behind copious amounts of ‘nourishment’... form zero Embryos. Infinites, however, live up to their name and can remain active indefinitely as long as their cores aren’t shattered... Though, unlike when their Master is alive, reconstruction can become impossible for them.”

Another pensive pause.

“But even *your* infinity will end. The time will come when our project will be... complete.”

“...”

“...In these final moments, I will talk about myself.” He slumped himself down against a tree. Though he looked like a young man, he moved as if it was a difficult task.

“This is the only place I know. I was born here, I matured here with you... and I will die here.”

“...”

“I’m not displeased with that. We... are all like this. Seeking the end of the line, we walk an endless path as we develop Infinite Embryos.

That is our nature. In fact, as one who became Infinite, I'm among the lucky few. My life had meaning, and I was able to live my life to its utmost limit."

He sat and talked with his eyes fixed on his pocket watches, but then suddenly his arms became limp. It was as though he was losing his ability to support his own body.

"There is... one thing I regret, though." He looked up to the sky he'd called fake as his voice became a whisper.

"I wanted to try living in the real world someday. I wanted to see a different sky."

As if he had never been granted even that much, he looked at the blue sky above with somewhat sorrowful eyes.

A songbird flew by, and he watched it with envy.

"But you will remain active forever... You might have a chance to live in the real world."

"..."

"Heheh... I guess... even I became a bit sentimental in my final hours. I never talked to you even once until now..."

His Embryo was a non-living creature and had nothing that could be called "an ego." Thus, no matter how much he talked to it, it would never respond.

"If you are able... to live in the real world... once the project is over... tell me what... the world was like... See it... in my stead..."

"..."

"Heheheh... Well... It's not like I know... if there's... an afterli—" He stopped talking before he could finish, and his mouth never moved again.

“...m....a...” The pocket watches began to creak slightly as they tried to make some sort of sound.

However, its — *his* — Master didn’t hear him... or anything else, for that matter.

“...ma...s...ter...” The Embryo that wasn’t supposed to be able to speak called out to him, but received no response.

Soon after, the birds stopped singing and the color of the sky changed. The clear blue above vanished, leaving behind a ceiling of stark metal.

With the sole user gone, the false blue sky disappeared and once again showed its true appearance of a lifeless canopy.

His hands still gripped the pocket watches even as they grew colder.

“...”

“Confirmed the death of the twelfth’s Master, Mr. Chrono Crown. Relocating the remains to the appropriate location. Retrieving the twelfth and transitioning to autonomous operation training.”

Responding to the inorganic voice’s words, someone carefully picked up his remains.

As that happened, a third pocket watch fell out of the dead youth’s breast pocket.

Along with the two that were still clutched in his hands, there were now a total of three.

Each had a different Greek word carved on them. They were “Χρόνος,” “Καιρός,” and “Αιών” — Chronos, Kairos, and Aion.

All three of them made quiet sounds as time marched on... Every tick and tock feeling much like silent weeping.



*Present, Altar-Dryfe Border, Grove*

Claudiah had announced the start of a battle at the peace talks and Zeta had unleashed countless Ideas upon Altea, catapulting the forces of each country into a state of conflict.

And close to the location of the peace talks, there was yet another clash occurring.

“Oh boy, I really didn’t think you’d call me using secret comms.”

“...You don’t know why I called youuu?” Two men faced each other in a verdant forest some distance from the peace talks.

One was a young man with a plump cat seated on his head and long bangs covering his eyes.

The other was a boy with metal boots and rabbit ears.

The former was The Lynx, Tom Cat, while the latter was The Rabbit, Chrono Crown... and both of them were the avatars of control Als.

“No. Though, I gotta ask, Tom Cat... Why are you all the way out here instead of doing your odd-jobs or dueling? This is what people call ‘neglect of duty,’ isn’t it?”

Even this far away from civilization, there was no guarantee that they wouldn’t be observed, so Chrono opted to call Tom by his avatar’s name, and Tom did the same to him.

“...I’d say that you did something pretty arbitrary yourself, Chronooo.” Even as he spoke, he was simultaneously using his true form to gather information about the situation back in the kingdom.

Due to Chrono’s ambushes, Altar was at a clear disadvantage at both the capital and the peace talks.

“Arbitrary? Is that why you went out of your way to call me here?” Chrono asked.

"Yeah," Tom replied. "Though, I don't really get it. What you did ended up helping Dryfe, but there was no guarantee that would be the result. In fact, it was more likely that it would've just made the relationship between the countries even worse."

Tom's words made Chrono tilt his head in confusion.

Upon seeing that, The Lynx said, "I knew it... You and Bandersnatch don't understand human psychology at all."

That was the difference between them and a creature-type Embryo like Tom... or rather, Cheshire.

Non-creature-type control AIs naturally had difficulty with this. The two Tweedles were also non-creatures, but their immense processing power, the highest out of all control AIs, allowed them to overcome this limitation. The same couldn't be said of Chrono... also known as Rabbit, the control AI in charge of time. He was a non-creature-type, and most of his processing power was dedicated to keeping time in *Infinite Dendrogram* running at the base 3x speed. He didn't have much spare processing power he could use for humanlike thought, so his mentality was at about the same level as a normal human's.

Because of this, Chrono, being Rabbit's avatar, was somewhat simple and short-sighted. It was also the reason why his role was being a PK — it didn't require much forethought to be one.

The other control AIs actually would've preferred if Rabbit focused solely on time, but Rabbit himself had insisted on engaging in avatar activities.

"Human psychology... huh?" Chrono whispered as he looked up at the sky.

For a moment, his eyes had a hint of bitterness, but then he looked back at Tom... *and glared at him*.

“Of course I don’t understand it... THERE’S NO WAY I COULD!” He raised his voice as he blew up at Tom. “Unlike you, I didn’t have the *time* to learn to understand people as an avatar! I’m the one who’s always been doing nothing but make this world *faster* so you *all* could have time to prepare!” The smug boy who’d dominated Altar’s rankers was gone, leaving behind a mess of a child shouting out everything he’d been bottling up inside for so long. “Yeah, I know what you’ll say — the revised project needed more time and I was the only one who could get it! I’m the only one specialized in accelerating time!”

Tom said nothing and merely listened.

“But until we started accepting new Masters, THAT WAS ALL I COULD DO!” Chrono’s screaming now bordered on blood-curdling. “I was only able to even *move* with this body when they showed up and I could reduce the speed to just 3x! That was the first time I ever got to walk in this world! Do you understand how I felt?! OF COURSE YOU DON’T!” His voice was heavy with either rage or chagrin — it was hard to tell which. He was releasing his pent-up frustrations, but it seemed as though his feelings had completely taken control of him.

“Chrono...” Tom knew what was going on with him. Alice had said that there were two ways non-creature Embryos handled having their own avatars. They either ended up being cold and calculating regardless of how they presented themselves... or they proved unable to control the emotions surging through their new bodies.

Chrono was undoubtedly a prime example of the latter.

He’d only had an avatar for a few years — only a tiny fraction of the time the others had theirs.

This outburst was a manifestation of this problem.

“To live in the real world! That was my Master’s... *Chrono Crown*’s only desire in life! He wanted to escape this cage and live in the real world! But the destination was too far away and he didn’t have nearly enough time to reach it! THAT HAS TO BE WHY I WAS BORN ABLE TO CONTROL TIME!”

Tom still said nothing, but he could understand where Chrono was coming from. Tom himself was born the way he was because of his own Master’s wish — a desire for a friend.

“With his last breath, he asked me to share my memories of the real world with him once my end came! It took so long, but I can actually do that now! I now have his face and I carry these pocket watches! I can finally walk around this place freely... the real world... DO YOU KNOW HOW I FELT?! You were in charge of managing culture... CAN YOU EVEN UNDERSTAND ME AT ALL...?!” Chrono clenched his teeth painfully before continuing.

“And now, what, we’re gonna have a war? We’re gonna raise the War Boundary?! The last time it was used, everything went back to the way it used to be for me! Once it’s activated, I can’t do anything anymore! I stop being free! I’ll have fewer things to tell my Master *once my end comes!* Fewer memories to make in the real world! AND THAT’S MORE IMPORTANT TO ME!”

That was his reason for the focused PK spree. The war would rob him of his ability to do anything, and he hated the phenomenon more than anything else.

After all, it came at the cost of the time he could spend as himself — the time he could use to fulfill his Master’s wish.

Thus, he cried, “It’s a waste of time! *I’M IN A HURRY!*”

Tears began flowing from Chrono’s eyes — tears of crimson red blood. The Embryo that had once possessed no ego of its own was

now sobbing uncontrollably, barely able to contain the wellspring of emotion inside him.

“If that’s what it takes to prevent war... to prevent that meaningless *waste of time*... I will gladly destroy one side so thoroughly that they can’t even *think* of waging war! What’s so wrong about that...?  
WELL, GRIMALKIN?!”

“...Chronos Kairos Aion.” The two control AIs faced each other and called one another by their true names.

Chrono saw Tom as an obstacle and an object of envy who had everything that Chrono so desperately wanted.

Tom saw Chrono as a colleague who was about to stray from the path and a fellow Embryo who knew well the pain of losing his Synchronizer.

The two control AIs faced each other head-on.

“...The situation has changed,” Chrono suddenly said as he removed his hands from his pockets.

Each of them held a pocket watch. Of the three in total, these were the ones that weren’t his core.

“I’m going,” he said as he wiped the bloody tears with his sleeves and glared in the direction of the peace talks. “I’m also monitoring the situation there and in the capital. I know that Dryfe will win if the princesses are secured. I don’t have *time* to talk to you. I will go there and kidnap the princess myself. No one can keep up with me. I’ll then do the same at Altea. That will fulfill Dryfe’s goals... and prevent the war.”

“...I won’t let you,” said Tom. “This isn’t something that we control AIs should involve ourselves with. Masters are supposed to be free. We shouldn’t arbitrarily influence their actions and their results.”

“Then why are you in a place like this, huh?!”

"I wouldn't have come here... if I didn't have to stop you." Chrono's avatar was out of control. He had to be stopped.

Despite that, Tom didn't even think of getting Alice to do it, as she'd done with Tom himself back in Gideon.

Chrono's outburst had to be dealt with, but since it was an outburst on behalf of his late Master, Tom thought that it would be wrong to stop Chrono using such drastic measures.

Thus, he'd decided to confront him directly.

That was why he'd only asked Alice for one thing.

"Chrono," Tom said. "I talked to Alice and told her to deactivate your avatar if you touch an Altarian tian before defeating me."

"...What?"

"You know what that means." The cat on his head transformed into Tom and multiplied until there were eight of them. All eight then surrounded Chrono. "If you want to pass... you'll have to defeat me first... Think you can do that as The Rabbit, Chrono Crown?"

Emphasizing the form Chrono inhabited right now, the eight Toms prepared to fight him.

Chrono glared at them before chuckling. "Hah! Do you have even a single victory against me as The Lynx, Tom Cat?!"

A moment later, their battle began.

Thus began this conflict between two Control AIs — two Embryos who knew the pain of losing their Masters.





Type Infinite Legion. The Infinite Multiplication, Grimalkin.

He was one of the Embryos that had reached its eighth form and became Infinite. Even with his abilities constrained to the limits of the sixth form, he could simultaneously control eight Toms and easily replace them if they were killed.

The only way to defeat him was to either destroy all of them at once with an AoE attack or cut them all down so fast he couldn't multiply again. However, both of those things were difficult, as proven by the fact that only two of the many who had challenged him in Altar's rankings had actually defeated him.

Still, Chrono Crown was perfectly capable of destroying the Toms with sufficient speed.

"Gh...!" The moment Chrono vanished, each of the eight Toms suddenly found bombs floating next to their heads.

The Toms all quickly jumped away, but the bombs blew up only a moment after appearing. Even with their speed, only half of the Toms managed to get away before their skulls were blown to pieces.

The dead Toms then transformed into cats and vanished.

*That was dangerous!* Tom thought. All eight clones shared a single consciousness, and if the first one to notice the bombs had been just a moment slower, they all would've died.

*Yeah... this matchup isn't in my favor!* Embryos were all subject to the rules of compatibility, and Infinite Embryos were no exception. All other things being equal, who had the advantage or disadvantage in their conflict would be decided by the nature of their powers.

Tom knew full well that Chrono could kill him faster than he could multiply. They had trained against each other shortly after Grimalkin had become Infinite.

Tom quickly activated Octachrome Cat — Grimalkin to make up for the lost Toms, only to lose half of them again in the bombing that followed.

If his reaction was ever just a moment too slow, he would lose too many of his duplicates at once and be overwhelmed.

*...Bombs, huh? They suit his powers better than I thought.*

The bombs appeared next to Tom as though Chrono had placed them there after completely stopping time.

Obviously, this was possible due to the power of Chrono's Embryo.

The full name of his original form was "Infinite Time, Chronos Kairos Aion."

It was an Embryo that could control the *speed at which time passed for the target*.

The watches he held in his hands, Chronos and Kairos, were extensions of his being and a remnant of the time before he'd become the Type Infinite World Embryo he was now. Before that, he had been Type World-Rule-Calculator.

Chronos, held in his right hand, was two times faster than normal clocks, while Kairos, held in his left hand, was ten times as fast.

That knowledge alone was enough to guess at their abilities.

Chronos had a skill called "World Time Acceleration," which was an AoE AGI buff that accelerated the time passing for his nearby targets — such as his own bombs or the air touching around him — by two.

Kairos, by contrast, possessed a skill called "Subjective Time Acceleration," which was a single-target AoE AGI buff that multiplied his own speed by ten.

Together, the two skills multiplied Chrono's AGI by 20.

His avatar was specialized in AGI and had it at 13,000 — so once activated, the skills took it all the way up to 260,000.

Tom himself was AGI-focused and could move faster than the speed of sound, but he had trouble even *seeing* Chrono.

*And this is just his normal speed. He still hasn't used his ultimate skill to reach his maximum potential...*

As far as Tom knew, Chrono's ultimate skill doubled the effects of both pocket watches, bringing his total AGI well above 1,000,000.

*He does have weaknesses, though.*

Tom had known his fellow Infinite Embryo for thousands of years. Though Chrono had only recently begun fighting as an avatar, Tom already knew his flaws.

There was also the fact that Tom had operated as an avatar longer than any other control AI. He had a great deal of experience and knew his opponent's abilities well enough to predict such things.

*Among the smaller flaws, you have the fact that both his hands are occupied by the pocket watches. Chrono couldn't use his hands because he was holding these extensions of himself. That was why his main weapon was his metal blade-boots.*

However, since he could still use things like bombs and Gems by holding them between his fingers, this wasn't too much of a flaw.

But there was a bigger one Tom had spotted.

*...It also looks like his avatar form doesn't actually allow him to make full use of his speed. In terms of speed alone, Chrono surpassed Tom twenty times over. He could actually defeat all eight Toms at once, and there must be a reason why he wasn't doing that.*

*He's using nothing but bombs so far. I knew it... he has to slow down to use any direct attacks.*

That was the primary flaw behind Chrono's extreme speed. No matter how fast he was, it meant nothing if he couldn't actually attack with it.

After all...

*His avatar is hyperspecialized in AGI, so his END is really low. There's no way he himself would escape unscathed if he attacked someone at dozens of times the speed of sound. The faster you crashed into something, the stronger the impact. That was basic physics.*

A person's body could handle the impact of an attack using their own STR; even AGI-based attackers only needed about a tenth of their AGI's worth of END to withstand the recoil of their super-fast attacks.

Chrono, however, fought at speeds that were far too great for his body to handle. His avatar's AGI surpassed the insane level of 260,000, but his END only barely made it into the quadruple digits.

That was why he only dealt direct attacks with his blade-boots after first using his great speed to enter the enemy's blind spots, then *slowing down enough that he could talk to his opponent.*

Otherwise, his legs would be destroyed by his own kicks.

This also explained why Chrono was so focused on indirect attacks using bombs.

Kashimiya the Kingdom's Fastest also fought by boosting his AGI, but he used the Blade Speed-Through skill which removed as much of his opponent's END as he had AGI. This completely nullified any resistance that might hurt him as he sliced off an opponent's head as though it was nothing.

As a control AI avatar, Chrono had no job skills like that — in fact, there was no way he could even get them, making them impossible to incorporate into his strategy and leaving him with no offensive

options other than simply slowing down before attack and or approaching indirectly.

That was Infinite Time, Chronos Kairos Aion's greatest flaw.

*Though, that flaw only exists for him as he is right now. This weakness was only present because Chrono's power was currently limited to that of a sixth form Embryo.*

If Infinite Time was in his seventh or eighth forms, it would be as though that flaw had never even existed.

*At his current power level, he can't even use his main weapon... the blade "Time-Breaker." I thought I could overcome or stand my ground against him because his firepower was low, but...*

It seemed that Tom was wrong — Chrono was starting to overwhelm him, even now. He was forced to fight a defensive battle, evading the explosions and running while replacing any Toms he'd lost.

Tom had far more experience in avatar fights, but Chrono had developed an item-based strategy that worked really well for him.

That was why he used bombs and Gems, and why he'd made it so he could jump around in midair.

*...He's probably using an accessory with something like Air Skip. He might also have some equipment on him that reduces the impact from landing.*

It was worth noting that Chrono hadn't had a body at first; he'd only developed this power once he started traveling around *Infinite Dendrogram* just a few years ago.

*He might be better at fighting than I am, Tom thought. Well... then again, I'm basically just brute-forcing most of my battles with my multiplication powers. This reminds of something the King of Kings told me once. Rockfell said, "I see no end to you. You are inexhaustible, I assume? This is nothing to fear, though. In fact, it's quite boring. Tiresome. Show me something different."*

During The Era of the Peerless Three... when Tom was "The Lynx, Schrödinger Cat," he had the output of a Superior and could have a maximum of 800 copies of himself.

...Despite that, King of Kings had exterminated all of those Toms and had proceeded to scold him in those words that he still remembered to this day.

Though, as far as tians went, King of Kings was far outside the norm.

*...I guess it's also a matter of how our processing power is implemented.*

Tom was focusing on both battle analysis and recollections of the past, yet his movement in battle remained flawless. Because he was adept at parallel thinking, he could easily ponder such things while controlling eight bodies at once.

*I'm specialized in pure volume, so I can't improve my battle technique by that much.*

If each of the Toms were like some of the absurd battle experts he'd seen here in *Infinite Dendrogram*, he could easily dispatch Chrono despite his enormous advantage in speed.

But since that was impossible in this situation, he had to take a different approach.

"Tom Cat! Is this your idea of stopping me?! To go on the defensive and stall for time?!" Chrono said, slowing himself down.

"Who knooows? Maybe I'm actually just in the middle of setting up a trap for you..." one of the Toms replied, a moment before a Crimson Sphere Gem went off behind him and he was instantly incinerated.

This started a chain reaction, and a few more Toms were reduced to ash.

*...He has so many consumables. Did he go around buying up any that appeared on the market or does he have ties to people who*

*make them? Regardless, I'm impressed he built all this up in just a few years.*

This battle seemed to be a tug-of-war between Tom's multiplication speed and Chrono's item supply.

However, Tom didn't intend to be locked into a battle of attrition like that.

*But Chrono... You're using items made by tians living in the present.*

Tom was well aware that when it came to tools of war, the era that had turned the entire continent into a battleground — the era when Cheshire had operated as Schrödinger Cat — was far more terrifying than the current one.

However, all those things were of an age Chrono could never know. There were countless weapons he had no knowledge of, since he had been forced to focus solely on the world's time acceleration... countless *nightmares* that had faded into history.

“...It’s funny to think about,” Tom muttered with a wry grin. After all, he was the one who’d gone around destroying such tools to prevent them from breaking the balance when the time came.

*And now I’m about to use them... that’s pretty bold.* But he believed that there was no other way to stop Chrono’s rampage.

“It’s been a while since I’ve worn this.” Reaching into his own inventory one Tom took out a transparent cloak with the texture of silk and wrapped himself in it.

The next moment, that Tom *vanished* — *along with every trace of his presence.*

This was a magic cloak called “Nobody Whisper,” and though he had many such artifacts, *this* was the most important piece of equipment for his current strategy.

Back when he'd been operating as Schrödinger Cat during The Era of the Peerless Three, he needed something that would help him stand a chance against everyone else, so he'd brought the necessary materials to a particular Superior Job and had that person create this item for him.

It had incredibly high-level Presence Block and Optical Camouflage skills, letting it conceal the presence of those who wore it and hide them visually.

It only seemed good for hiding, but since Tom only needed one of himself to create more, it was an incredibly valuable item for him. This piece of gear had been Schrödinger Cat's close friend during The Era of the Peerless Three.

However, he didn't use this cloak very often these days.

It was too powerful to use in duels, and it was known that something like it had been used by the late Schrödinger Cat, so Tom Cat using the exact same item would raise uncomfortable questions. Also, he had avoided using it against Prism Soldiers because their senses weren't based on sight or even presence.

But there was no problem in using it against a colleague who knew his entire history.

*There's also this... I planned to keep it gathering dust in my inventory forever, but if this is what it takes to stop you, I have no choice.* All seven Toms who weren't in hiding reached into their inventories all at once.

All Toms shared inventory between them. Thus, it was impossible for them to remove something that another Tom had already taken out — like Nobody Whisper — but there were enough of *this* for all of them.

The seven Toms took out some... *collars*.

They all exuded a miasma, obviously marking them as deeply cursed items.

As three of the seven Toms died to Chronos' explosions, they equipped the collars on themselves.

A moment later, Chrono's bombs killed all the ones that were left...

[Murder-Suicide... activate]

...And the collars all produced a twisted, unsettling sound.



The center-west land which was now the kingdom had once been a land of conflict, where many small countries had vied for dominance. That chaos eventually spawned the King of Kings — that anomaly of a man who subjugated almost every country into one great nation.

That was the beginning of The Era of the Peerless Three — King of Kings, Draconic Emperor, and The Lynx.

The era ended with the sealing of the King of Kings, the death of the Draconic Emperor, and the disappearance of The Lynx. The vacuum they left behind only led to more wars. Until the Sacred King — the first Azurite — united the center-west to form the Kingdom of Altar, there was no peace in this land.

During these conflicts, many weapons were created and many grand strategies were woven. One of the latter was the suicide tactics of Death Soldiers. Slaves with Death Soldier jobs would be sent into enemy grounds to crack open their defenses with the force of their final exit from the world.

This strategy had a few flaws, though.

Though Last Command allowed the user to move even with 0 HP, they still needed limbs to move with. On the battlefield, it wasn't uncommon for people to receive wounds that rendered them completely immobile.

There were even some unusual cases when the bombs they were wearing detonated too early, blasting them into bits that had far worse problems than mere lack of mobility.

Even the country that used this tactic felt it was suboptimal. They had no moral objections to letting their slaves die, but they did see it as a waste of resources.

They believed that they had to make their Death Soldiers' deaths count and give them ways to kill their enemies more efficiently.

The people in charge were so focused on not letting their slaves' deaths go to waste that it would be darkly hilarious, if they weren't completely serious about it.

The one who finally provided them with a solution was a single High Alchemist — not even a Superior Job. He didn't have any transcendental skills, nor was he a genius like Grand Artificer Flagman of the pre-ancient civilization. The only thing unusual about him was that he had Lich as a sub-job.

However, because of this build... or perhaps because he was the kind of person who would choose such a build at all... he was adept at controlling grudge.

He was among the best minds of his time when it came to crafting grudge-based, or rather *cursed* items, but that certainly didn't mean that he was respected. Most of the things he'd made were useless in almost every situation, after all. A good example was CBR Armor, which granted Bleeding, Doom, and Weakness to all who wore it.

He was an artificer who specialized in devices that tortured their wearers. He'd made a living by primarily selling torture devices, but one day, he developed something that drastically changed the course of his life.

It was a collar-like item called "Stone Equals Gold."

It sounded like something an Alchemist would make, but also far from it at the same time. The name, however, was just something chosen by whoever made it — what mattered most was its function.

This collar only did one thing — upon the wearer's death, it passed on a curse to the closest living creature.

That didn't seem like much, but the curse — Murder-Suicide — was extremely potent. Even if the target was much stronger than the original wearer, it could kill or at least incapacitate them.

That made it possible to exchange the life of a slave — worth as much as a pebble — for the life of a hardened warrior that was worth their weight in gold. The Death Soldiers' lives would never be wasted again.

Some were worried that if the skill targeted the closest people, it could set off chain reactions that would obliterate the whole legion of Death Soldiers before they made it to the enemy lines, but the alchemist took care of that by developing an accessory that excluded people from being targeted by the Murder-Suicide curse. The leaders who used the suicide attacks endlessly praised the alchemist for his work and quickly decided to mass-produce the items for use in actual battle.

However, Stone Equals Gold never saw any official use. The very night it was decided they would be mass produced, the alchemist that developed it and the military officers that planned to use it *were all killed by a certain someone*.

On top of that, the completed prototypes and the research documents had completely vanished. With everyone who knew about it and the relevant documents having disappeared, this invention was forgotten by history.

And never was discovered who, exactly, had killed them all and took the prototypes...

Now, this was mostly irrelevant, but the alchemist in question... the *horse-man* alchemist had left behind research documents pertaining to the manipulation of grudge. These documents had been stored somewhere unrelated to research on the collars, and they were eventually found by one of his descendants.

The descendant in question used the documents to become a Necromancer and develop original necromantic magic of his own... but that was a different story.



Chrono's bombs killed off four Toms, and the collars they were wearing — Stone Equals Gold — all activated. The four curses released by their deaths all homed in on the closest target — Chrono.

"Ah...!" He gasped and threw a bomb at the roiling miasma of curse heading towards him, but it seemed to be unaffected.

He instantly realized that this was the kind of curse that would follow him forever, and that its presence wasn't affected by explosions or physical attacks.

Compared to Chrono, the floating curses were extremely slow, and he could easily put some distance between him and them.

*In that case...!* Chrono considered using someone else as a shield that would take the curse in his stead.

"Huh...?!"

But he quickly realized that wasn't an option as he recalled Tom's words came back to him.

*I talked to Alice and told her to deactivate your avatar if you touch an Altarian tian before defeating me.*

“That little...!” Chrono now understood that Tom had said that not just to force him to fight, but also make it impossible for him to escape this curse.

If he as much as tried making a tian take the curse for him, he would instantly be immobilized and the curse would kill him.

He then thought of using Masters, but the only ones remotely close by were bodyguards who, naturally, had tians they wanted to protect. Monsters might have been an option, but Chrono didn’t sense any of those in the area either.

*They ran away... wait, no!* This wasn’t an area where any powerful monsters lived, so he first assumed that they had been driven away by the sound of explosions, but then he quickly rejected that idea.

Almost masked by the scent of the surrounding flora, he could just barely detect another scent in the air. That was enough for Chrono to understand that Tom had spread some sort of concoction that repelled monsters.

Tom was the one who’d called him here originally, meaning that he’d planned all of this. He’d actually come here to prepare for his plan not after the Altarians had arrived here in the morning, but *last night* — when Ray’s group were talking to Altimia.

Since Tom could be in several places at once, it was child’s play for him to “leave” without anyone noticing. Plus, he could split up to do his preparations even faster.

He’d done all of this just to call Chrono here today and force him into this situation.

*This was all planned...?!* As if demonstrating his immense experience, Tom had led Chrono directly into a trap.

However, there was more to this trap than that.

As Chrono ran away, the surrounding surface and trees exploded and scattered debris into the air, forcing him to slow down and dodge.

“Gh...!” Small pebbles and pieces of wood. Normally, such things would be meaningless.

However, Chrono moved at 26 times the speed of sound, so they could easily pierce his body. Therefore, he had to either change his trajectory or slow down to the point that the impact wouldn’t hurt him.

However, the more he slowed down, the closer the curses came to him.

Eventually, the distance between them dwindled...

“Ah...!”

...Until it became non-existent.

The curses released a black light — the mark of their application. There were four flashes — one for each curse — and once they’d dispersed they left nothing behind... except Chrono, lying on the ground.

Upon seeing him, the last Tom — the one in hiding — approached him, still wearing the Nobody Whisper.

He was wearing the accessory that he had retrieved alongside Stone Equals Gold.

He hadn’t used any more Toms to make sure that the curses focused solely on Chrono, and it ended up working out for him.

*The curse definitely targeted Chrono,* he thought. Chrono’s corpse lying on the ground was all the proof he needed.

The four curses were fatal, too, as proven by the bits of light that soon began to rise from his body.

*This was a bit aggressive, but if it stopped Chrono's rampage, then... Hm?*

Tom had noticed something strange.

Though there *were* bits of light rising from Chrono, his remains didn't seem to be vanishing. He was a control AI avatar, of course, but his disappearance and Resource retrieval after death should have functioned exactly as it did with Masters.

"There you are, Tom Cat."

The next moment, Chrono's prone body vanished, and countless bombs and Gems appeared all around Tom.

"Kh?!" As Tom jumped back, he realized his failure.

He'd created a wall of pebbles and pieces of wood to keep Chrono from escaping.

They had fallen to the ground by now, and as Tom — still invisible — stepped on them, he'd unwittingly given away his position.

Though Chrono didn't know exactly where Tom was, he was able to seed the items all over his approximate location.

*But the curse hit him...! How is he okay...?! Tom thought in shock as he evaded the items and multiplied again.*

However, before he could find his answer, the bombs all went off at the same time, scattering all the Toms to the winds.

"Gh...!" Only a single Tom was left alive. However, he was far from unscathed. Though the explosions didn't take his life, he'd defended against them using all four of his limbs, and they had all been seriously wounded. It was difficult for him to even move anymore.

Chrono slowed down and stood before him.

"Just like you know me, I also know you," he said. "Your multiples are created based on the healthiest existing one... There's only one of

you now and all your limbs are hurt, so any clones you create will be the same as you are now.”

Tom could certainly create more of himself still, but since they would all have wounded limbs, it was nearly impossible for him to keep fighting.

It was difficult to even equip more Stone Equals Gold.

“...how did you dodge the curse?” Tom had been certain that the curse had landed. Besides specialized MVP special rewards, there was no gear that would allow anyone to survive Murder-Suicide, and even then, weathering a whole four of them would be next to impossible.

Also, due to the curse imposed by Juliet, Chrono was unable to switch gear.

Tom asked this question because he knew without a doubt that his attack was unavoidable, and instead of responding, Chrono merely glanced at the place he’d been lying on the ground.

However, that *was* the answer.

Following Chrono’s gaze, Tom saw a few things that were turning into bits of light as they vanished.

They were...

“The corpses... of birds?” Four songbird-like monsters were lying on the ground. Tom hadn’t seen them at first because they were under Chrono, and they were what made him falsely believe that Chrono’s avatar was disappearing.

Murder-Suicide was a skill that launched curses at the closest creature. It didn’t even have to be human — any creature could work as a shield against it. They just had to be closer to the originator of the curse than you.

However, Tom had preemptively driven away all wild monsters to prevent exactly this.

But then... where did these songbirds come from?

“My Master yearned for the real sky... He also loved the songs of birds.”

The one to answer Tom’s question was Chrono himself.

His voice was thick with nostalgia. He was remembering the death of his Master, looking up at the sky and listening to the songs of the birds in the natural scenery created by Infinite Illusion.

“Because of that, I *kept* a bunch of songbirds of my own in a Jewel.”

“Ah...!” Chrono *himself* had monsters, and right before the curse landed, he’d released them to take his place.

This was truly ironic. If Chrono had kept battle-focused monsters on him instead, Tom would’ve instantly noticed.

But because they were small and powerless songbirds, he was unable to realize that the curses had missed or that Chrono was faking his death.

“...I guess I should apologize, then?” Tom asked.

“It’s fine. I just kept them inside... Honestly, I was never able to understand what was so good or bad about their songs, anyway.”

Tom said nothing. Chrono’s voice had made it rather evident that he was most bothered by the fact that he had failed to understand something that his Master had loved.

However, he then composed himself and looked down at Tom with cold eyes.

“...It’s over, Tom Cat. You can try buying time by creating more powerless clones. I’ll just spread some consumables and burn them

all up again. I used a lot of them on you, but I still have enough for that."

He then took out his hands out of his pockets.

Between the fingers of the hands holding the watches, there were several Gems.

Tom still said nothing.

"Goodbye, The Lynx, Tom Cat," Chrono said, throwing the Gems over Tom.

# ***Chapter Nine: Vorpal Rabbit, Vorpal Hare***

*Royal Capital, Altea, Urban Area*

The capital of Altar was in a state of chaos.

It had been unexpectedly assaulted by a horde of bizarre creatures that attacked people indiscriminately.

The humanoid beings had bee-like features. They were Apis Ideas — the high-rank-based “Ideas” created by the Superior Embryo known as “True Form Alteration, Idea.” Their number in the city easily exceeded five hundred.

“BZZBZZBZZ...”

“KYAAHH...!” The Ideas, marked with black-and-yellow warning stripes were scattered around the city, attacking any tians they saw with their deadly spear-like stingers.

“Shit! I can’t let this go on!” The city guards pulled their swords and charged the Apis Ideas, but they could only barely scratch their tough exoskeletons.

The Apis Ideas easily dispatched such resistance and continued their slaughter.

Even though these Ideas were in some sense “mass produced,” their stats surpassed even Demi-Dragons, matching level 500 Masters with C rank stat growth bonuses — double that of tians. No capital guards could handle them, and even the Masters staying in the city were having a hard time.

However, there were some who seemed to be putting up a good fight.

“BZZBZZBZZ... BZZ?” Three Apis Ideas were wandering around in search of more prey when suddenly, a single whistling arrow landed between them with a sound like the cry of a bird.

“All together... Fire!” A moment later, the Apis Ideas were showered by a downpour of arrows raining from the sky.

This was the effect of Early Summer Arrow Rain, a skill of the Tenchi job Heavy Bow Samurai. It fired a hundred arrows with each use, and with 30 people firing, that number went all the way up to 3,000.

Pierced by a thousand times more spears than they had to defend themselves with, the three Apis Ideas quickly died.

And then, a moment later, they began expanding from inside before exploding violently.

“Yeah, they really do blow up when they die.”

“They look like old-school tokusatsu enemies. They even die the same way...” Two women were talking as they watched the Apis Ideas blow up.

They were part of the third-ranking clan in the kingdom and its greatest PK clan, K&R.

In particular, this was the clan’s ranged swarm tactics group. Many of its members were inexperienced Masters who were still in the middle of the leveling process, but the two directing them — the leader and her assistant — were veterans. They’d actually been with Rosa back in Tenchi before K&R was even a thing.

“The squad tactics group is having a hard time, too. Some were taken out by the explosions,” said the assistant.

“Then we’ll have to keep fighting them from a distance. We got anyone else who’s resisting?” asked the leader.

K&R’s headquarters were located in Altea, so once Zeta launched her act of terrorism on the capital, every member online instantly swung into action.

With most of K&R being battle-focused, they were one of the more powerful factions in the fight against the Apis Ideas.

“The gulf in power between these guys and tians is really bad. Also, there’s something going on in the castle, so most of the knights are busy with that.”

The leader of the group glanced in the direction of the castle and saw black smoke rising from it.

It was definitely under attack.

“Part of the squad tactics group also went to the castle, but we lost contact with them after they said that they ran into some kind of flaming monster. Our member list says they’re offline, so they probably lost the fight. What do we do?”

“...We can’t use our tactics indoors, anyway. Let’s leave the castle to the other Masters.”

“It appears that most of the skilled fighters from The Lunar Society are acting as bodyguards in the peace talks. Those who are left can’t fight the bee-men by themselves.”

“So, the same Lunar Society that beat us up back then is helpless now, huh?”

“Their swarm tactics revolve around their priestess’ debuffs. I want to believe that we’d have been more evenly matched if it weren’t for that.”

“...And besides The Lunar Society, we have... Death Period, who are probably all on bodyguard duty. What about AETL Union and the like?”

“It doesn’t look like there are a lot of clans that have the numbers. AETL Union lost a bunch of members and they’re now scattered over other cities... Same for the Editing Division and Alliance.”

“Why now, of all times... Is there anybody else at all?” As she learned the state of the other major clans, the leader of the group scowled.

“Babylonian Battlegroup is doing something. That mask guy who’s sixth in the duel rankings was seen fighting the bee-men alongside his underling... the hippogryph rider.”

“There’s not many of them, but they fight as well as maxed-out Tenchi fighters. We can count on them.”

“...Oh, that does make them sound like they’re pretty strong.”

“Did you remember something?”

“...Yes. Tenchi’s battlefields were scary.”

“We’ve gotten a bit rusty since coming to Altar. War’s close, so let’s refresh our skills with these bee-men.”

“Yeah... I gotta say, though, the timing is awful.”

“You mean with our clan leader?”

“Yeah.” In response to her assistant’s words, the leader of the swarm tactics group shrugged and grinned wryly.

“You wanted to show off to him or something?”

“I mean, I did, but... it seems to me that the group’s morale is way higher when he and Big Sis are around.”

“Well, they were the ones leading us on all our hunts so far. We never had a swarm battle without both of them, but I guess bad timing can do that. This is the perfect opportunity to see how far we can go without them.”

She paused for a moment before continuing.

“Also... I’m sure he’s in the middle of a *real* deadly battle right now.”

She was looking far into the west... the Altar-Dryfe border.



*Altar-Dryfe Border, Grove*

The moment when Chrono released Gems on Tom and right before they burned his avatar to ash... *a single car* charged towards them.

“What?!” Chrono hadn’t even felt it approach.

The car made no sound at all. You couldn’t hear the branches crunching under the tires or even the sound of air rushing past it. It barreled towards them, passing through everything like a ghost.

Chrono had recognized this car.

*That’s the Embryo from the other night...* It was in fact the car-like Embryo that had escaped him when he assaulted K&R’s sub-leader, Rosa. Its Master was Tomica and its name was Oboroguruma.

Just like back then, it was in its ultimate form, and it was charging straight towards Tom, who was still lying close to Chrono.

Chrono quickly backed away, and as Oboroguruma passed by, the passenger seat opened up and someone pulled Tom inside.

A moment later, the Gems lit up behind it, covering Oboroguruma’s rear in Crimson Spheres.

“EEK?! It’s getting kinda hot! I really hope my Oboroguruma is fireproof!”

“Tomica, you should really get a better grasp of your own Embryo’s abilities.” While Tomica was teary-eyed and shrieking, the person sitting in the passenger seat was really composed.

Tom, who was pulled to the back seat, was really surprised to see who it was.

“You’re...”

“Mr. Tom... There are two things I want you to tell me, and please make it brief,” he said as he raised two fingers.

“I want to know your relationship with that boy, and if he is the one who assaulted all the other rankers. That is it.”

Tom thought for a moment before saying, “If I get the death penalty, he’ll go kidnap the princesses. That’s our relationship. And yes, he is the one who did it.”

“Thank you for the easy-to-understand explanation.” He nodded, even though the explanation was somewhat lacking, before putting his hand on the door.

“Tomica, please take Tom somewhere far away. I’m getting off here.”

“Eh? Ah. Umm...!”

“Tom... Will you pass on your opponent to me?”

“...Yeah. It’s not like I can do anything against him at this point.”

Despite doing all the preparations necessary to overcome his incompatibility with Chrono, Tom was defeated. He had no hope of winning now.

Thus, he now entrusted his hope to this person here.

Of course, he was somewhat averse to letting someone else handle his colleague’s rampage. Tom wanted to handle it himself.

However, he was also certain that if there was anyone in the kingdom who could beat Chrono — the master of acceleration and someone who lived in an entirely different world in terms of time — it could only be *him*.

“This is it for me. I’m handing it all off to you.”

“Thank you. I’m glad I came here prepared to duel. Tomica, thank you for taking me all the way here,” he said with a smile as he opened Oboroguruma’s door.

A moment later, as though someone had been waiting for the door to open, a bomb was flung into the car.

Obviously Chrono was the one who'd thrown it. He'd already caught up to the Oboroguruma and was running alongside it.

The car negated all attacks from outside, so Chrono had been waiting for the perfect opening to finally finish off Tom.

The bomb was similar to dynamite and had more power than most of his others. He'd thrown it into the car at supersonic speeds that nobody could follow, and a moment later, it... *didn't explode*.

The bomb merely landed inside Oboroguruma as if it was nothing more than an inert object.

"...What?" Still accelerating, Chrono opened his eyes wide.

He looked inside the car and saw *a cut wire* lying right next to the bomb.

That could only mean that someone had *cut it off* the moment before it exploded.

However, the biggest problem with that was that...

*I... didn't see it?*

...Despite being in a state of acceleration, Chrono hadn't witnessed the moment the wire was cut.

He wondered if that was even possible when...

"Ah...?!"

...At that very moment, Chrono's avatar warned him of an impending danger, like the feeling one gets when something stabs towards your closed eyes. It was a sense of danger that he felt on the back of his neck.

"...!" Chrono instantly activated his ultimate skill. By doubling the AGI buffs of both World Time Acceleration and Subjective Time Acceleration, he briefly broke 1,000,000 AGI.

Then, without even looking back, he ran ahead as fast as he could. A moment later, a slight pain pricked the skin at the back of his neck. “Ah...?!” He continued to run as he put the back of his left hand against his neck.

His neck was wet, and the fluid on the back of his hand was red. It took him a moment to understand that this was his own blood. Someone had actually cut him.

*Impossible...* Who could possibly attack Chrono from behind while he was accelerating? And more importantly, how? As far as he knew, even King of Beasts, Behemot couldn’t match Chrono’s AGI.

He racked his brain for anyone who could do this to him...

“Ah, right... There is one person.”

...And came up with a name and a face.

Chrono had info about him, as well. After all, he was originally one of the targets he planned to kill on that night.

However, he’d been offline, so they hadn’t encountered each other. He wasn’t among the bodyguards, so Chrono had completely forgotten about him.

“Gh...!” Chrono stopped and looked behind him.

He chose not to chase Oboroguruma or put more distance between himself and his opponent.

Oboroguruma’s Master was allied with his pursuer, after all. It was possible he’d ordered her to drive a route that would allow him to catch up on purpose. If Chrono focused too much on attacking Oboroguruma, he would certainly lose his head.

With that decision made, he decided to face the one chasing him.

He didn't say a word. Maintaining his base acceleration, he prepared to use his ultimate skill at any moment. Chrono already knew that, although his base acceleration speed was lower than his opponent's, he could become faster than him by using his ultimate skill. That was why he stood in place and waited for his pursuer, ready to make his move.

However, his opponent approached him far slower than Chrono was expecting.

His feet made gentle sounds on the dirt floor of the forest as he walked closer, step by casual step.

"I'm sorry I made you wait." He stepped out from between the trees, revealing a boy even younger than Chrono. He was short even given his age and wore a woolly coat. At his sides hung were two sheathed odachis, both bitten into by chains that were decorated with rabbit skulls and shark heads.

His appearance was difficult to forget, and his name was...

"I knew it... Kashimiya."

The young boy's name was indeed The Unsheathe, Kashimiya.

He was the duel ranker who'd risen to second place after defeating Tom, as well as the owner of K&R.

He also bore titles like "The Kingdom's Fastest" and "The Guillotine."

"Yes. And you are... Chrono Crown, yes?"

"...Yeah." Chrono wasn't that surprised that he called him by name.

The ambushes that night weren't easily linked to him, but Kashimiya actually knew his name because K&R's Tomica was there when Shu Starling said that the culprit was Chrono, and she passed it on to him.

*...It looks like I'm his mark here, Chrono thought.*

He now understood that he was Kashimiya's target, and he already knew his motivation.

"I see. Fifth in the duel rankings... Rosa was a member of your clan, wasn't she? I guess you came here to avenge her."

"Huh?"

"...What do you mean, huh?" Chrono had absolute confidence in his assumption, but then Kashimiya tilted his head quizzically in response, leaving him thoroughly confused.

"Oh no — this isn't revenge for Rosa. I didn't hunt down Tsukuyo Fuso for that, either." Kashimiya rejected Chrono's assumption while bringing up the name of the leader of The Lunar Society, which had annihilated K&R three months ago during the blockade incident.

"Rosa is a PK, so if someone PKs her, then fair's fair. Same goes for me, of course, and I always tell my clan that there's no need for vengeance PK."

"...Then, are you here as an Altarian Master joining the princess' retinue?"

"That... isn't exactly it either."

"Then why *are* you here?!" Chrono couldn't help but raise his voice at this person who'd interfered with him finishing off Tom.

Kashimiya made a somewhat perplexed expression before speaking up, his tone clear as crystal.

"I'm here to cut you."

"...Huh?" Kashimiya said that he wasn't here for vengeance, or to protect anything... he just wanted to cut Chrono.

"What... do you mean?"

"Umm... you are the one who attacked the rankers, and you are *the fastest PK in Dryfe*, right?"

“What of it...?”

“I almost never get to cut someone who’s faster than me. I thought this would be the perfect chance. Just a few moments ago, you moved faster than I could cut off your head.”

Kashimiya plainly and honestly stated that he was only here because he wanted to cut someone who was faster than him.

That answer made Chrono so angry that a vein popped out on his forehead as he shouted at Kashimiya, “Are you screwing with me?! Do you have any idea the emotion I’ve been putting into this?! How desperately I tried to beat Tom?! How hard I’m trying to prevent the war?! DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA?!”

“No. I have no idea. I don’t really care about that...” Kashimiya said as if it was nothing.

“You little...!”

“Also, didn’t I just say it?” Faced with Chrono’s rage, Kashimiya kept a composed face and explained his logic.

“Both you and I are PKs who kill other players for the sake of our goals. That’s exactly why we don’t have to consider our opponent’s feelings or the weight of their reasons, right?”

“What...?”

“I mean, we PKs often kill other people for our own convenience, right? It’s weird to expect consideration for your feelings when you’re about to be killed.”

Kashimiya wasn’t here to avenge Rosa — she was, after all, a fellow PK. PKs killed others for their own gain, so it was only natural to be PK’d themselves in turn.

That was why Kashimiya intended to fight Chrono here.

In a situation like this, there was no reason for him to consider Chrono's situation or emotions whatsoever. Not even Chrono's talk of stopping the war meant anything to him.

Kashimiya wouldn't change his outlook even if Chrono had told him everything — control AI secrets included.

He only cared about two things — to cut someone faster than himself and enjoy a fight to the death with a fellow PK.

Chrono had no choice but to acknowledge one thing about the boy.

*Isn't he a child in his own reality...? Ohh, but, then again... he thought as he was hit with a sudden realization. No ordinary child would be the leader of a country's largest PK clan.*

Kashimiya hadn't gotten where he was by mere chance — *his position was fully deserved.*

"...I heard that K&R has a rule about getting the target's consent before PK'ing them," said Chrono. That was Kashimiya's own rule — they only PK'd after giving a warning and obtaining consent to fight.

Kashimiya nodded before raising one finger. "Yes, but there is one exception," he said.

"Exception?"

"There's no need for that when the target is also a PK.' I've believed this since before I founded the clan."

Just as he'd already said, when he faced a PK, he would do so without considering their circumstances or emotions.

*That was why he was said to be Altar's strongest PK. Eldridge, Barbaroy Bad Burn... he was strongest among them because he'd systematically fought and defeated them all.*

"I see. I get it. I understand... That's enough."

Chrono let out a deep breath before glaring at Kashimiya.

“I’ll find and kill Tom once I’ve PK’d you. You only added an extra step to the process.”

“Yes, please do so. I’ll PK you too.”

Chrono grasped his two pocket watches and let his bloodlust overtake him.

Kashimiya also moved the chain holding his odachis. These were his Embryo, “Unsheath at Will, Inaba.” Doing this helped put him into a stance from which he could unsheathe both his odachis — a stance that was unique to him.

The two faced each other like gunslingers in a classic western. Then... both of them vanished.

This was the start of their battle to the death.

One was the avatar of a control AI and the fastest person in Dryfe — The Rabbit, Chrono Crown.

The other was the second in Altar’s duel rankings as well as their own fastest Master — The Unsheathe, Kashimiya.

Thus began the deadly struggle between the vorpal rabbit and the vorpal hare.

It was safe to say that it would be settled *in one single instant.*



The kingdom’s duel rankers and PKs well knew that you could only see Kashimiya’s slashes after he had already performed them.

Your head would fall off, and *only then* you would know that you had been cut.

Everyone Kashimiya defeated had experienced this.

This was the result of his pure speed and nothing else. Thanks to The Unsheathe’s skill, Godlike Unsheathing, Kashimiya’s AGI while he drew

his sword was multiplied by a hundred. That gave him over 500,000 AGI. His slashes made the speed of sound seem slow, and no one could see them coming.

And thanks to Inaba's skill, Hareshark Nullstep, Kashimiya could instantly cover the distance between him and his targets. He and his blade moved at fifty times the speed of sound, and you needed abilities like Tom's to have any hope of countering it.

However, right here, there was an exception.

The Rabbit, Chrono Crown.

In his accelerated state, he had 260,000 AGI — about half of Kashimiya's — and that was enough for him to see the start of the unsheathing, which others couldn't even notice.

"The World in the Right, Perception in the Left, Here I Hold the Eternal Law — Chronos, Kairos, Aion." Before Kashimiya could close the distance, Chrono used his ultimate skill.

Chronos in his right hand and Kairos in his left hand had their speeds doubled, making Chrono's AGI four times greater than it was previously.

That reversed their relative speed — Chrono now moved twice as fast as Kashimiya and used that speed to jump backwards.

The impact of the landing was harsh even with his accessory that reduced the damage, but that was a small price to pay to prevent the deadly blade from reaching him.

He'd evaded the blade that went at fifty times the speed of sound by a distance of about two hand spans.

At the same time, Chrono scattered Gems all around Kashimiya.

Kashimiya could only move extremely fast while in the act of unsheathing. Thus, if he was attacked the moment his sword was fully drawn, it would be impossible for him to dodge.

At this rate, Kashimiya would be destroyed while his right hand was still fully extended from his impossibly fast draw.

But contrary to Chrono's expectations, Kashimiya then began unsheathing with his left hand.

There was no time at all between the switch. As though he'd expected for his first attack to miss, he instantly grabbed the hilt of the other odachi with his left hand.

And so, without Godlike Unsheathing ever stopping even for a moment, he continued to draw his second blade. He also used the Hareshark Nullstep to zigzag through the Gems and approach Chrono in order to launch the blade at his neck.

*You little...!*

The lack of time between the switch to the second unsheathing threatened Chrono like few things could.

Kashimiya was performing a ludicrous feat that could only be called "continuous unsheathing," connecting everything he did into one single action.

The blade that moved with the Godlike Unsheathing buff was all you needed to know that there was no opening between the two unsheathing actions.

Inaba was an Embryo specialized in supporting just the act of unsheathing. This was possible due to both the existence of the chains supporting the blades and Kashimiya's own supreme skill.

It took a true talent to get a Superior Job from the "The One" grouping at his age, and this continuous unsheathing was all you needed to see to know that his rank was well-deserved.

*Still... I'm faster than him!* Chrono thought. No matter how skilled or speedy Kashimiya was, Chrono knew he could surpass him. To

Chrono, Kashimiya's unsheathing was only about half as fast as him, so he could see and evade the strike just fine regardless of its speed.

Once again, he evaded the blade by a distance of two hand spans.

Kashimiya had used both his odachis, and Crown was about to toss out his Gems again, but...

...What?

...He noticed that Kashimiya's right hand was reaching for *another sheathed odachi*.

And no, it wasn't his first odachi returned to its sheath.

It was actually *a third odachi*.

*Instant Wield...!* Chrono remembered the existence of the skill that allowed to instantly switch weapons, and it made him gasp.

Kashimiya's current posture was quite unusual.

It was as though he was preparing to slash down from the shoulder — an attack that should have been impossible off a draw.

However, no matter the angle, Inaba's chains supported Kashimiya's unsheathing. And the fact that his speed remained at its peak was proof enough that his draw was still, as the skill's name suggested, godlike.

The third blade went for Chrono's neck diagonally.

The surprise factor let Kashimiya close some of the distance between them, but Chrono was still able to evade the slash.

He'd unsheathed once with each of his hands, then did it a third time thanks to Instant Wield. Thinking that he had evaded all the continuous unsheathing Kashimiya was capable of, Chrono once again threw out his items... *but then The Guillotine's left hand began unsheathing his fourth blade*.

*Impossible...!* He'd already used his Instant Wield. The skill had a cooldown, so he shouldn't have been able to use it again this quickly.

However, there was one method of making this possible...

*...Does he actually have a skill that lowers the cooldown on Instant Equip?!*

Embryos evolved according to their Masters. Kashimiya's Inaba was specialized solely in supporting Kashimiya's unsheathing.

Thus, if Kashimiya found it necessary to always have sheathed odachis at the ready, it was entirely possible that his Embryo could evolve to overcome the flaws of Instant Wield.

Chrono's guess was on the right track, but it also somewhat underestimated the full picture.

Kashimiya was using a skill called "Willblade — Inaba." This was Inaba's ultimate skill, and it was actually an always-active skill that *completely nullified* the cooldown of Kashimiya's active skills.

This allowed Kashimiya to swing his blades however he wished, without any time in between.

That was the true power of Kashimiya's Unsheathe at Will, Inaba.

It let him to use skills continuously without any delay, like the white hare hopping across the sharks between the waves.

*...That Embryo is giving its all to support Kashimiya's unsheathing,* Chrono thought. After just barely evading the completely unexpected fourth, he saw Kashimiya still chasing after him as he prepared to draw a fifth odachi.

Inaba was indeed doing all it could to support its Master's combat abilities.

However, that was the extent of it — support.

The Embryo had no effect on Kashimiya's combat technique.

*The Embryo isn't increasing the power of his unsheathing or making it automatic or anything like that... It's only helping him do it continuously. The technique is Kashimiya's alone.*

The lack of Instant Wield's cooldown did not automatically make him a powerful combatant. Replacing the blades meant nothing if his draw technique was inadequate. In that case, he'd still lose the acceleration from his Godlike Unsheathing.

The fact that he was maintaining his speed instead meant that his technique was nothing short of perfect.

Kashimiya was the one controlling the chains holding the sheaths, using Instant Wield at the precise time to maintain his continuous unsheathing, and positioning himself using Hareshark Nullstep.

*With support from his Embryo, even a young child has reached this level... There was no opening even between the fourth and fifth slashes.*

Flawless, flowing, and continuous unsheathing.

This unique attack was woven from the triple threads of Kashimiya's job, his Embryo, and his own supreme skill.

It was the godspeed eight-chain slash attack... the "Personalized Mystic Slash — Octachrome Lightning." It had instantly killed all eight Toms when Kashimiya had faced him... and it was something that he alone could do.

*...The world is so vast... Master.*

Though his whole body trembled at the approaching blade, Chrono was also thoroughly astonished.

This feeling was greater than even his rage at those trying to get in his way. Still, it wasn't enough to take away his will to fight, and he had no intention of stopping now.

Evading Kashimiya's blades, Chrono searched for a way to win.

*That's the fifth... I guess the colors of the sheaths are different to make sure he doesn't take out the wrong blade?*

Thanks to the sheath coloring, he could differentiate between odachis he already used and ones he hadn't yet brought to bear, making it easy to predict which odachi he might use Instant Wield on next.

To a normal onlooker, this would seem like eight slashes all done within the blink of an eye. Just as he had during his battle with Tom Cat, Kashimiya could instantly kill eight people, or slash a single person eight times, killing them even if they were equipped with a Brooch.

It was a *continuous sure-kill slash*. That seemed like a contradiction, but that just made it more deserving of the prefix "Mystical."

However, this blade had yet to reach Chrono's neck.

*That's... the sixth!* No matter how fast his draw was, it didn't change the fact that Chrono was faster.

Though the distance between them was becoming smaller and smaller, the Octachrome Lightning had yet to reach him.

*...His unsheathing technique is peerless... but he shouldn't be able to continue this forever. There has to be an opening somewhere.*

Chrono's guess was correct. Just as it said in the name, "Octachrome Lightning" could only strike eight times. Kashimiya had yet to find a way to take his technique any farther than that.

Thus, Chrono prepared to go on the offensive once the slashes stopped.

*...Though, I'm running out of bombs and Gems.* He'd used too many of them during his ranker hunting and the battle against Tom, and his consumable supply was nearly exhausted.

Though, then again...

“...I can’t win against him with items, anyway.” Chrono felt that ordinary bombs and equipment wouldn’t be enough to finish this Master off. This one long moment was enough for him to see that Kashimiya was no doubt the most fearsome human being that he’d ever faced as an avatar.

Thus, he’d resolved to give his opponent all the recognition he deserved.

*...I can catch up to them even with just one leg left. I’ll finish off Tom and then go on to kidnap the princess.*

The reasoning behind this thought was simple: Chrono had finally decided to take Kashimiya seriously and defeat him properly.

This opponent was worth sacrificing a leg.

Chrono was about to use the greatest ace up his avatar’s sleeve.

In essence it was a blade-kick launched while in a state of maximum acceleration using his ultimate skill. The force of the impact would always shatter the leg that delivered the kick, but with the force of over 1,000,000 AGI behind it, it could even pulverize Mythical metal.

It was the only sure-kill ability that Chrono had given a name — “Dead in Zero.”

Using it, his opponent would die before they could even perceive that any time had passed.

*Of course, it’s likely that he’s wearing a Brooch... but that won’t be a problem.* If the critical injury was nullified by the Brooch, the damage to his leg from the impact would also be nullified. He would then just have to launch another attack, which would most certainly kill Kashimiya.

Chrono moved over two times faster than his opponent, so he had the *time* for that.

There was also the fact that a single hit would be enough to break Kashimiya's unsheathing and briefly return his speeds to mundane levels.

*I just need to... find the right moment!* Chrono evaded Kashimiya's seventh slash as he waited for the perfect chance to use Dead in Zero.

And so it came... Before unsheathing the eighth, Kashimiya slowed down just a fraction. Perhaps he was thrown off by facing someone who was faster than him for the first time, or by the fact that none of his previous seven strikes had even scratched his enemy.

Brief as the mistake was, Chrono didn't let it slide.

He jumped next to Kashimiya and kick-slashed towards his neck. The next moment, *Chrono's right leg was cut off from behind the knee.*

Shock overcame him as he realized something.

Kashimiya hadn't slowed down by accident. It was no mistake at all — he had deliberately changed the speed of his continuous unsheathing.

Right before pulling the next blade out, he slightly lowered his speed as he activated a particular skill.

The skill's name was "Iai strike," and it doubled the user's AGI when the opponent entered his range.

Meant for launching a counter strike, it was one of the basic skills in the art of unsheathing.

However, combined with Godlike Unsheathing, it let Kashimiya move at a speed that matched even Chrono's.

Kashimiya had expected Chrono to do exactly as he did — to anticipate that he would eventually stop and try to attack him during that gap between attacks. And as a fellow fighter who moved at

divine speeds, he knew that Chrono would try to attack directly instead of using his items that had failed again and again.

Thus, he'd lured him to his side and launched a counterattack.

It was a bit of a gamble, but it had allowed Kashimiya to take Chrono's right leg.

"Not yet...!" Despite the loss, The Rabbit hadn't given up. Right before he hit the ground, he thrust out his pocket watches as though attempting a handstand, and then pushed away to launch himself again.

His ultimate speed was still active. He would use his remaining left leg to take Kashimiya's head with Dead in Zero.

The Unsheathe also had his new odachi ready and began to draw it with his right hand.

He swung the final blade into the trajectory of Chrono's approach.

However, the stroke was completed before Chrono even entered Kashimiya's range.

Shocking as it was, this wasn't a measurement error on Kashimiya's part. He actually *had* swung the blade at the right time to meet Chrono's attack, despite his immense speed.

Chrono had just *made him miss*.

One of Chronos Kairos Aion's skills was World Time Acceleration, which doubled the speed for the selected nearby targets.

However, there was no limit to what or who could be picked — *even his enemy was an option*.

By accelerating Kashimiya right when he began the unsheathing, he forced him to swing his blade at the wrong time, so he cut through nothing but air.

*I have you now!* Right after the blade passed him by, Chrono used the opening before Kashimiya swung the sword in his left hand to launch his blade-boots towards the boy's head.

However... *his left leg was then shattered.*

This was done using the sheath of the odachi Kashimiya had used for his last draw. Since it was supported by chains, he'd swung it at Chrono's left leg before the acceleration from his unsheathing ended.

Of course, the sheath wasn't a *blade*, so Blade Speed-Through didn't apply to it. As a result, it shattered on impact.

The damage didn't end there. The shock shattered the chains holding it, and since he was connected to them, even Kashimiya was hurt.

However, the damage it dealt was extreme. This speed-based attack was much like Chrono's Dead in Zero, and it literally shattered his leg.

*Did he predict my actions again...? No! He actually sensed that his speed was different the moment he began unsheathing... and instantly switched tactics!* Kashimiya had realized that his slash would miss, so he quickly swapped to using his sheath instead. This split-second decision had successfully removed both of The Rabbit's legs.

*What an incredible person... To think the world has... such people in it...?*

As Chrono fell, Kashimiya prepared to unsheathe using his left hand and finish him off.

However, instead of feeling the frustration he'd felt at the beginning of this fight, Chrono was simply shocked... and astonished.

*Things beyond imagination... Things I can't hope to match... They exist not just in nature, but among people, too. This has to be the world that my Master wanted to see... Ohh...*

As he fell, Chrono's eyes were turned towards the blue sky above. He pondered its beauty and the supreme technique he had just experienced.

*I'm sure that both of these things... will be memories worthy of telling to Master... Hahah... Seriously...*

"The world is... so vast..." Kashimiya's final slash cut Chrono's head clean from his shoulders like a guillotine.

With that, The Rabbit, Chrono Crown dissolved into bits of light.

Even though he couldn't fulfill his goal and was indeed defeated right in the middle of pursuing it, he seemed unexpectedly satisfied.

Embracing the memory of that one moment when reality surpassed his imagination... he vanished into the air.

# *Interlude: The Spectator*

## *A Certain Place at the Altar-Dryfe Border*

There were currently three battles happening at the Altar-Dryfe border. Though the battle between Chrono and Tom — and then Kashimiya — had ended, the battles sparked at the peace talks had only just begun.

The combatants on those other battlefields probably weren't even aware of the deadly fight that had just taken place.

However, there was one who watched over each of these raging conflicts.

*Kashimiya and Chrono's fight is over. Switching view.*

Hiding in the shadow of some trees, a man scribbled something on his notepad with his eyes closed.

He was the thirtieth in Altar's kill rankings — King of Light, F.

The man who'd fought Ray on the Love-Duel Festival was yet again looking down upon everything.

*As expected, The Unbreakable's fight was one to behold, but there are many others worth seeing, too.*

The sights observed by his Embryo, Zodiac, were projected directly into his eyes. His left was focused on a single battle — the one involving Ray's group — while his right swapped between several of them.

The first was the now-finished duel to the death between Kashimiya and Chrono; the second was the martial dance between the two princesses; and the third was the clash between the machine god and a giant kaiju.

F could see so many rare occurrences merely by *being* in this place, at this time. In fact, there was so *much* to see that it was actually beginning to make him anxious.

On top of that, there was one thing that he was completely missing out on.

Due to a connection of his, he knew about the assault on Altea that was happening right now. However, the capital was far from the Altar-Dryfe border. That put it well beyond the range of his Zodiac's remote control, so he could only observe one of the two battlegrounds.

F had prioritized Ray — the one who'd beaten him and left an impression he himself had yet to fully make sense of — and followed him here to the border, but he definitely found it unfortunate that he couldn't see Altea too.

*The capital has more people, though. I can only hope that I can catch a glimpse of what's happening there through someone's recording.*

He considered Zodiac's observation to be the best and most optimal way of gathering material, but if something was too far away, then he had to resort to inferior methods.

"Hm...?" Suddenly, something strange appeared before his right eye, which was currently fixed on the clash between Shu and Behemot.

It was a monster that looked like an eyeball that had somehow sprouted wings.

F already knew about a creature much like this. If that was the same kind of monster, then it was probably doing the same thing as F right now.

*...Mr. Franklin.*

“The Weakest, The Worst” — Dryfe’s infamous mad scientist. One of his creatures was watching over the Altar-Dryfe Border just as F was.

Was he doing it from a distance, though? Or was he actually...?

He silently pondered it for a moment. F had noticed Franklin, but had Franklin noticed F?

He didn’t think that it mattered much, in the end.

He was merely a spectator who wouldn’t be caught up in any of these battles.

F simply shrugged and went back to his observations... And that’s precisely when it happened. An event that could only be described as earth-shattering...

*To be continued*

# Afterword

**Cat:** "It's time for the afterwoord! I'm Cheshire, the 'Cat' who lost two volumes in a rooow!"



**Bear:** "I'm Shu, the 'Bear' who spent the past two volumes duking it out with the unbearable muscle-headed she-kaiju."



**Xun:** "I'm 'Xun,' shOrt for 'Xunyu.' And beAr, it looks to me likE you're gonna do the same fOr a third volume."



**Cat:** "It's been a while since we had an arc that spans several voluuumes."



**Bear:** "Yeah. The last one was Quartierlatin."

**Cat:** "Please enjoy the stormy peace talks arc."

**Xun:** "AnywAy, let's move on tO the state of things. The animE's over."

**Cat:** "Yes. The final episode has aired. A big you 'thank you' to those who watched it."

**Bear:** "It's been something, but I'm beary glad it went by without a hitch."

**Xun:** "Let's alsO thank the stAff and the cast for thEir work."

**???:** "Yeah, but that's not all! Volume 1 of the Blu-ray is out in Japan and it comes with a 500+ page novel with starring the bear! Volume 2 is also out and it comes with the stellar OST! Volume 3 is coming soon and it'll have a production material collection! And all of them come with special episodes of 'The Whys and Whats of Dendrogram,' written by the author himself!"

**Cat:** "...Listen to that sudden onslaught of marketing."

**Bear:** "She-fox..."

**Fox:** “Yeah! That’s me! The ‘Fox,’ Tsukuyo Fuso! THE ONE WHO WON’T GET A VOICE IF THE ANIME DOESN’T GET A SECOND SEASON!”

**Xun:** “You mentionEd that in the last afterwOrd... You’re still hUng up on that?”

**Fox:** “The anime is available on most streaming sites! Those views seem to be important these days, so please check it out!”

**Cat:** “She’s way more serious about this than we are...”

**Bear:** “Let’s put aside the overbearing she-fox and make room for the author and his serious comments.”

Dearest readers,

Thank you for your purchase. I am the author, Sakon Kaidou.

The coronavirus is having quite an effect on the world, but novels can be enjoyed indoors; as someone who writes them, I see this as all the more reason to work hard, so I can hopefully alleviate your boredom. Please stay safe.

Now, as you probably know, featured on the cover of this volume are Juliet and Kashimiya.

The former is actually the protagonist of the spin-off manga, *Crow Record*. I wrote the plot myself, but I do not get a chance to write afterwards for it, so now that Juliet’s on the cover, I figured I would talk about it here instead.

*Crow Record* is a Monthly Comic Alive manga with a story focused on a group of particularly feminine characters: Juliet, Chelsea, and Max.

However, those close to me often tell me that my female characters have the hearts to rival the manliest of warriors or that I do not feel or understand what they call “moe.”

I also often hear that Nemesis does not seem like a heroine. Please be assured that she is.

Occasionally, I felt like my writing on Crow Record might also drift in that direction. I even had to stop myself from adding a few too many battles between unnamed male characters.

Still, I took the criticism to heart and actively tried to keep feminine cuteness and appealing presentation in mind while writing it, and I believe I properly conveyed the charm of the female-centric cast.

Though, a lot of that is thanks to La-na's splendid work with the characters' gestures and expressions. Personally, I am a big fan of Shion's face during the comedy scenes.

If this talk of Crow Record piqued your interest, please do go and give it a try.

Since we are on the topic of manga, I also suggest taking a look at Kami Imai's masterful manga adaptation of Infinite Dendrogram's original story. Volume 7 came out just recently, and just like the ones before, it is full of intense action.

Lobohta, who appears in the short stories that come with manga volume 2 and beyond, also has a couple cameos in Crow Record, so make sure to check it out if you like Pomeranians.

In other news, like Cheshire and the others have mentioned, the anime adaptation of Infinite Dendrogram has finished airing.

This was the first time my work was adapted into an anime, and it left me with both fond memories from the time working on it and regrets regarding the way I handled some things.

However, both the negatives and the positives are meaningful to the product as a whole.

This is not limited to anime — you could also say the same about the novel I write.

Regardless, I have something I can create, and I will hopefully entertain and move you to the best of my ability.

Please look forward to more Infinite Dendrogram.

Sakon Kaidou

**Cat:** “Anyway, time to wrap up volume 13! The next one will be really inteeense! VOLUME 14 IS COMING OUT AROUND OCTOBER! ...Huh?”

**Xun:** “No one gOt in the way this timE. Kitty actuallY got to do the announcemEnt for once.”

**Bear:** “Well, he’s control AI No. 13. If he couldn’t do it fur this volume, it wouldn’t happen ever.”

**Xun:** (...We’re treating this like a birthdAy?)

**Fox:** “13 volumes... We sure came far, didn’t we?”

**Cat:** “...I DID IIIIT! I GOT TO ANNOUNCE THE NEXT VOLUUUUUUUUUME!”

**Xun:** “Look at thAt outburst of emotiOn...”

**Bear:** “Anyway, we’ll be waiting fur you all!”

## **Bonus Short Stories**

\* May contain spoilers. Please read these after finishing the volume.

### *The Land of Strife*

*Reiji Mukudori*

“What kind of country is Tenchi, anyway?”

On a day much like any other, I posed that question to my Tenchi-dwelling friends from college.

“Oh dear. Why would you ask that?”

“I just felt like learning more about the place.”

Marie had gotten me curious when she’d said that Tenchi’s Nanshumon clan actually used the Death Soldier job, which I’d picked as my third. All I really knew about the country so far was that the median level of tians there was exceptionally high.

“You’re all from there, right? Can you tell me more about the country’s culture? The general vibe?”

“Hmm... the vibe, huh? I’d say that it’s...” Akiyama stopped mid-sentence, only for the other three to finish it for him in unison. “*The land of strife.*”

I’d heard the exact same description many times now, both in and out of Dendro.

“Not a month passes there without civil conflict,” Fuyuki — who was affiliated with the Hokugen’in Daimyo clan — said, reminiscing about something. “We had one just recently, in fact. Civilian casualties are rare, if that’s what you’re worried about, but the tians who take to the battlefield have a strong ‘BRING IT ON’ attitude. They’re all really tough, too.”

“It’s basically the Sengoku Era with leveling thrown in,” Kasugai added as he nodded. “The tians there are also skilled at martial arts, so they’re often way stronger than mid-tier Masters.”

“It’s pretty advanced, though. There’s a bath in every home, and most of them even have flush toilets,” Natsume said.

“Well, Altar’s a traditional fantasy land, but it’s no different in that regard,” I said as I remembered all the facilities the kingdom had.

The people of Dendro enjoyed many of the modern comforts we had here on Earth. Most of them had been introduced by people who had “Cat” as their last name — probably members of the dev team, specifically Tom.

“What about you, Akiyama? Got anything to say about Tenchi?”

“Well... I don’t live on Tenchi’s main island, but I can say that the cuisine has a Japanese vibe too. Though, due to the different flavors, they often use unconventional kinds of meat or western veggies, so even though the food is Japanese at its core, it often seems somewhat... thrown together.”

“Ah. I get what you mean! It’s a bit fancy and colorful!” Natsume voiced her agreement.

I knew what they meant. Dendro had ingredients we didn’t have on Earth, like monster meat or Remberries.

“Oh, and though Tenchi is constantly at war with itself, they do have someone at the top.”

“The ‘Conquest General,’ right?” I asked. “From what I can tell, that’s Dendro’s ‘Commander-in-Chief of the Expeditionary Force Against the Barbarians’ AKA ‘Shogun.’ What’s he like?”

“Hmm... compared to actual historical people... he’s not Ieyasu, at least.”

“Not Yoshiaki Ashikaga either, that’s for sure.”

“I guess he’s closest to Yoshiteru Ashikaga.”

“That’s the one they call ‘Swordmaster Shogun’...” I said in mild amazement.

I *did* expect the head of a country in Dendro to be strong, though — just like Azurite in our own Altar.

“But apparently, he’s weaker than his predecessors from ancient times. Our Daimyo said that the Conquest General’s powers change depending on how much land he owns, and he doesn’t have all that much of it right now.”

“I mean, Tenchi’s an island country, so there’s a limit to that anyway, right?”

*It might not have always been an island country, though, huh?* I wondered.

Time passed by as we talked, and when it was almost time for the next lecture, we split up and focused on our studies.

I learned quite a few things about Tenchi. The question now was... would I ever get a chance to go there?

The End

## *A Popcorn Deficiency*

*Death Soldier, Ray Starling*

Recently, Shu had begun going on regular hunting trips.

The quest he'd done with Lei-Lei hadn't been his only recent endeavor. He'd also been seen riding Baldr to distant lands many a time. He'd said that he was out making money so he could buy as much Baldr ammo as he could, and though that was fine and all, there was one little problem.

We were having dinner together one day when I handed him a letter. "Here. It's for you," I said.

"Fur me? What is this, fanmail?"

"...Well, knowing you in real life, I can understand why you'd assume that, but no."

Our letterbox used to be filled with letters addressed to him, and I vaguely recalled many envelopes being strangely heavy. That was in reality, though. This ursine goof right here in Dendro would never get any fanmail... except maybe from little kids.

"That's a petition I was asked to pass over to you."

"A petition...? Ohh..."

Shu opened the envelope, read the letter, and nodded in understanding.

"This person wants me to start selling popcorn again."

Someone was petitioning Shu to resume running his "KoD's Popcorn" stall.

Apparently, he'd only started selling popcorn to make some money while King of Beasts was in Gideon. He couldn't leave the city while she was here, but he still wanted to make a profit he could turn into ammo, however little it may be.

Demonstrating his immense skill as a cook, his popcorn turned out to be so good that he gained a devoted following of regulars and, well, business was booming. But with KoB having left Gideon, Shu was now able to resume hunting and make money far more efficiently, so he'd simply ended his venture into the popcorn industry.

The supply was gone, just like that, but the demand from the fans was still there, and one of them had gone on to write this petition.

By the way, this person was none other than my friend and duel ranker, Chelsea. She'd become a fan of Shu's popcorn too, and after her clan fell apart, she'd wanted to turn to it as comfort food, only to have no luck finding him or his business.

I'd found her in an awful state. Her eyes were lifeless, and if Dendro had a stat for sanity, hers would've been at rock bottom.

Once Chelsea had noticed me, she cornered me against the wall and slammed her hand into it so hard it shattered — her Poseidon gave a huge bonus to STR growth — before giving me this written petition to deliver to Shu.

Though “asking” might’ve not been the right word, since I felt like she would’ve done something really drastic if I’d refused. Her clan disbanding, her complete lack of involvement in the saucy love drama, and her popcorn deficiency must’ve put her in a really bad spot...

*Is the popcorn thing really as bad as the other two, though?* I wondered.

“...Shu, you didn’t put anything weird in your popcorn, did you? Why is it so addictive?”

“How beary rude! I told you I only used clean and proper ingredients, all bought on the market!”

“So you’re skilled enough to get absurd results even with ordinary ingredients, huh? Oh, and though that’s the only actual petition I got for you, people ask me if you’re gonna sell popcorn again all the time. Max did just recently, and Nemesis is asleep right now, but she often says that she misses it.”

“It got more fans than I imagined, huh?”

KoD’s Popcorn went on to make a return when Shu started making lots of it and storing it in inventories to sell on consignment.

Getting to eat the popcorn she loved so much did end up making Chelsea feel a little bit better.

The End



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Infinite Dendrogram: Volume 13

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