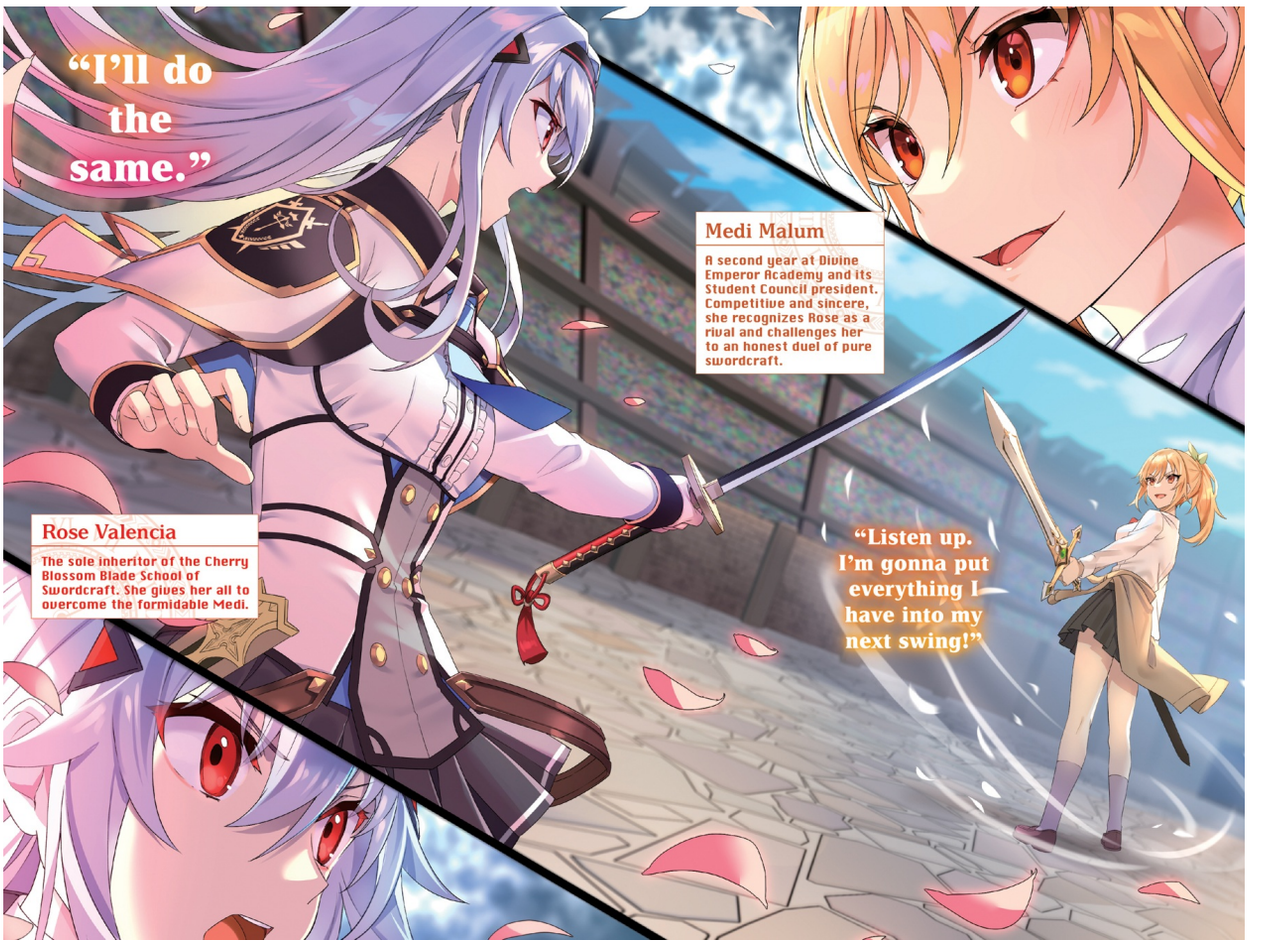

I KEPT PRESSING THE
100-MILLION-YEAR BUTTON
AND CAME OUT ON TOP
~THE UNBEATABLE REJECT SWORDSMAN~
10
SYUICHI TSUKISHIMA
Illustration by MOKYU


I KEPT PRESSING THE
100-MILLION-YEAR BUTTON
AND CAME OUT ON TOP
~THE UNBEATABLE REJECT SWORDSMAN~
10


Allen Rodol
A boy who obtained supreme talent with the sword after pressing the 100-Million-Year Button. What awaits him as he starts his second year at Thousand Blade?
"I am not worthy of such praise... Your concern touches my heart...!"
Claude
The captain of the Vesteria Royal Guard. Her loyalty to Lia is unyielding.
"You really have it tough, Claude. Thanks for all your hard work."
Lia Vesteria
The princess of Vesteria Kingdom and Allen's roommate. She is thrilled to see Claude again at the start of the new school year.


“I’ll do the same.”
Medi Malum
A second year at Divine Emperor Academy and its Student Council president. Competitive and sincere, she recognizes Rose as a rival and challenges her to an honest duel of pure swordcraft.
Rose Valencia
The sole inheritor of the Cherry Blossom Blade School of Swordcraft. She gives her all to overcome the formidable Medi.
“Listen up. I’m gonna put everything I have into my next swing!”


“Allen Rodol’s heart... stops.”
Shin Rex
A second year at Divine Emperor Academy and a prodigy who became the youngest Holy Blade in history. He torments Allen with his innocent personality and logic-defying Soul Attire.

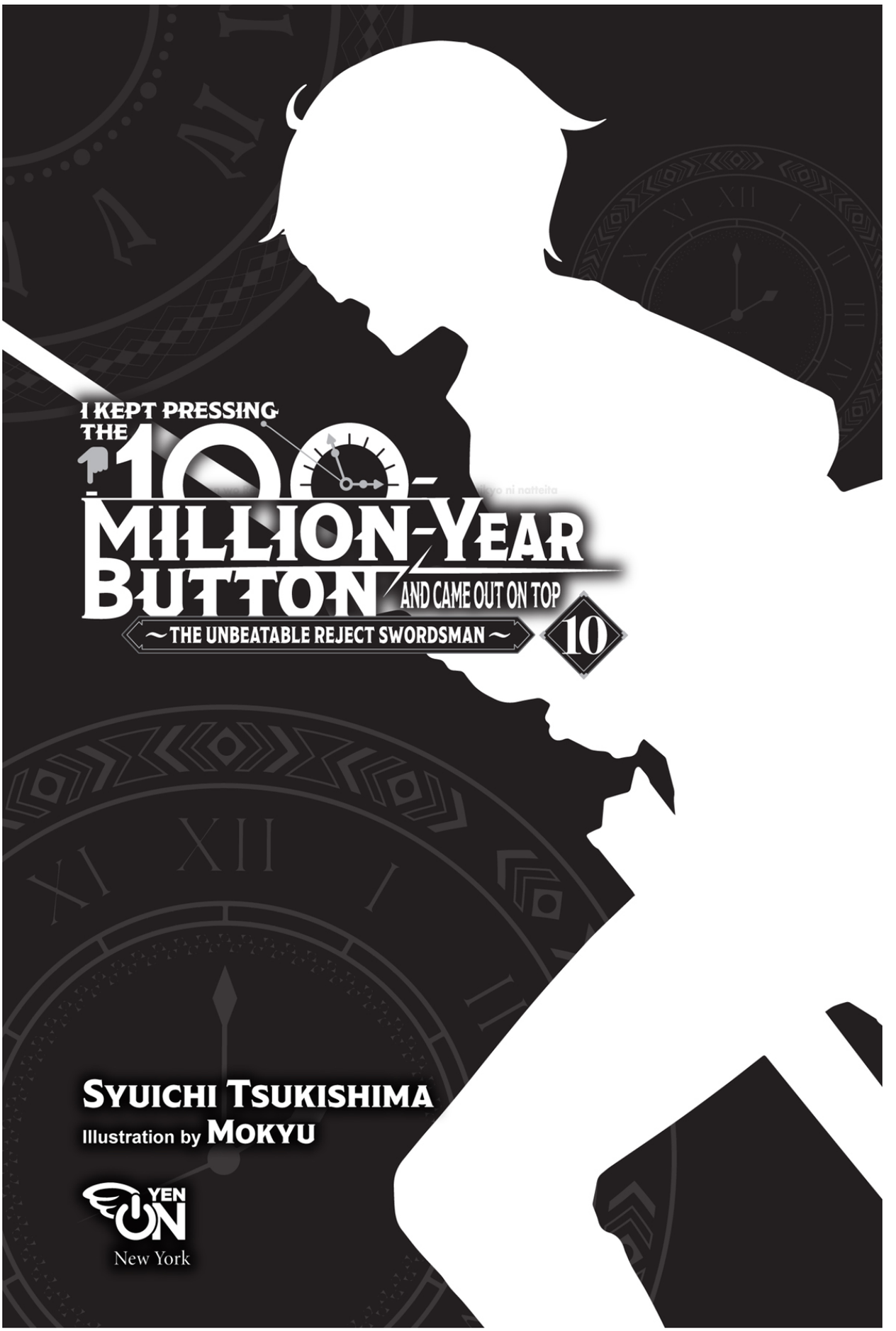
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SYUICHI TSUKISHIMA
Illustration by MOKYU
YEN ON
New York

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I KEPT PRESSING THE 100-MILLION-YEAR BUTTON AND CAME OUT ON TOP: ~THE UNBEATABLE REJECT SWORDSMAN~
SYUICHI TSUKISHIMA

Translation by Luke Hutton
Cover art by Mokyu

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CHAPTER 1
The New Semester

It was the morning of March 31, and Lia, Rose, and I were traveling back from Ms. Paula's dorm. We headed straight home without making any detours, pushing through dense forests, crossing undeveloped mountains, and traveling over empty fields until the city of Aurest came into view.

"Sweet, we made it… Whoa, are you two okay?" I asked.

"*Haah, haah…* I'll never get used to that rough journey…," Lia said.

"Yeah, that's one heck of a workout…," Rose added.

They both wiped sweat off their foreheads as they caught their breath.

"Ah-ha-ha. It definitely takes getting used to," I conceded.

The more time you spent traveling through overgrown forest trails, winding mountain paths, uneven plains, and poorly maintained roads, the more helpful tricks you learned to make the journey less tiring.

We continued walking toward our dorms at Thousand Blade until Rose stopped at an intersection.

"I'm going this way," she said, pointing away from the academy.

"Why?" I asked.

"Is there something you need to do?" asked Lia.

Rose placed her left hand on the sword at her waist. "Tomorrow's the start of a new semester. I want a fresh start, so I'm gonna get my sword serviced at my favorite weapon shop."

"Oh, that's a good idea. I'll see you tomorrow, then," I said.

"Make sure to set your alarm tonight. You don't want to oversleep," Lia warned her.

We parted with Rose and walked toward Thousand Blade.

“Hey Allen, when do you think you’ll try going back to your village again?”

“Hmm. I haven’t really thought about it, but…maybe next summer break.”

We chatted all the way back to the dorm, but when we arrived, we encountered a small problem.

“…Hmm?” I said.

“…Huh?” Lia said.

There was an old woman I didn’t recognize standing at our door. She looked over eighty years old. Her long white hair, drooping nose, and deeply crooked back made her look like a witch out of a fairy tale.

“Do you know her, Lia?”

“No, I don’t.”

She either had business with one of us, or she had the wrong room. We wouldn’t find out which it was if we just stood around, though.

“Well, why don’t we try talking to her?” I said.

“Yeah,” Lia agreed.

We walked up to the old woman, and she turned toward us.

“Would you happen to be Mr. Allen Rodol?” she asked.

“Uh, yes,” I replied.

Apparently, she was here for me.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you. My name is Hiyobah. I am a humble maid of Lord Patriot Bolnard.”

“Umm… Nice to meet you. I’m Allen Rodol,” I said, freezing up for a moment after hearing that unfamiliar name.

Patriot Bolnard…? Who’s that?

“Criiigh?!”

I heard what sounded like the death throes of a frog next to me. I turned toward the sound and saw Lia with an expression of pure shock on her face.

“Lia? What is—?” I started to ask, but I was interrupted when Lia regained her composure and politely spoke to Hiyobah.

“I’m sorry, but there is something I wish to discuss with Allen. Would you mind excusing us for a moment?”

“Not at all,” Hiyobah said, smiling kindly.

Lia tugged my sleeve and led me a short distance away.

“Lia, what’s going o—?”

“Allen, did you cause trouble again?!”

“No, I… I don’t think so.”

I hadn’t done anything to cause any problems… Not that I could remember, at least.

“House Bolnard is one of the two biggest royal families in Liengard, and Patriot is the head of the family,” Lia explained.

“Oh… I see… This sounds like an invitation to meet with the noble faction.”

Shii and the Empress had warned me multiple times that this would happen.

“What are you going to do?” Lia asked.

“Hmm… Well, I guess I’ll hear her out,” I said.

So far, I had only heard the imperial faction’s side of the conflict. I thought it would be a good idea to listen to both sides rather than just accept what they had told me as fact.

Besides, this is an invitation from one of the most powerful nobles in the country… I was a commoner, so refusing him would cause offense.

“Okay. Well…I doubt they can hurt you, but be careful, Allen,” Lia said.

“Thanks. I will.”

Lia and I returned to the old woman to resume our conversation.

“Sorry about that. So what business do you have with me today?” I asked.

“Lord Patriot sent me to convey that he wishes to speak with you, Mr. Allen,” Hiyobah said.

Just as I’d thought.

“I see. I would be honored.”

“Oh, how wonderful. Thank you very much. My master will be delighted,” Hiyobah said, rubbing her hands and bowing deeply.

“When would he like to speak with me?” I asked.

“Whenever you are able. Please let me know what a good date and time for you would be. I was ordered to arrange it at your convenience.”

“Really? I appreciate that.”

I considered my options. *I’ll be really busy starting tomorrow because of the new semester…* And more importantly, I didn’t want

the stress of this meeting hanging over me.

"Umm, this might be too much to ask, but…"

"Please, ask away," replied Hiyobah.

"…would today be possible?"

I couldn't think of many things I'd rather do less than meet with a noble, so I wanted to get it out of the way as soon as possible. *Still, is it unreasonable of me, asking to do it today?*

Unexpectedly, the old woman smiled. "Why, of course. If it suits you, I'll take you there right now."

"Huh? Are you sure?"

"Yes. My master wishes to pay you the utmost respect."

"Great. Then let's—"

"Wait," Lia interrupted as I was about to leave. "Don't you need to change first?"

"…Ah," I said, looking down. My Thousand Blade uniform was muddy and covered with leaves from traveling the rough roads back to Aurest.

I could change into a clean uniform, but that would feel lacking for meeting with an influential noble. There was a dress code people were supposed to abide by at times like this. *What should I wear to an audience with a noble…?* I didn't know much about etiquette, but I felt like a plain-colored suit would be acceptable.

Would the suit I wore for the New Year's Jubilee be okay? I wasn't sure. The dress code for a celebratory function like that was probably different from the one for visiting the mansion of a noble.

…Maybe it would be best to do this another day, after all.

But just when I was about to ask Hiyobah to postpone, she shook her head.

"Please, you needn't concern yourself with your attire. My master is not one to be offended by something so trivial."

"Is that really okay?" I asked Lia in a whisper.

"Normally, it wouldn't be…but if your host's housekeeper is telling you not to worry about it, then you should be fine."

"That makes sense. In that case, I'll leave now and come right back."

Now that the dress code issue had been resolved, there was nothing to prevent me from going today.

“Okay, Ms. Hiyobah,” I said, turning back to the elderly lady. “Could you please take me to speak with Patriot today?”

“Certainly. We will ride in a horse-drawn carriage to his estate, so let me know when you are ready to leave.”

“Got it. I’ll be quick.”

“Please, take your time.”

I entered my room and started tidying my appearance. *I don’t want to make them wait, so I’ll just give myself a quick once-over.* I wiped my body with a wet towel and changed my uniform—and with that, I was done.

“This looks okay, right?” I said, looking in the mirror over the sink.

“Are you ready, Allen?” Lia asked, poking her head into the room.

“Yeah, I think this is good enough.”

“I’ll give you one last check.” She put her right hand on her chin and looked me over from head to toe. “Hmm… Ah, you have some loose hair. Your collar is wrinkled, too. Also…” Lia fixed my hair and collar and tightened the tie around my neck. “Perfect.”

“Thank you.”

“Hmm-hmm, you’re welcome.”

Now that I was ready, I left our room and rejoined Hiyobah, who was waiting outside.

“Sorry for the wait,” I said.

“Don’t worry, dear. You were back in a flash,” Hiyobah said with a teasing smile. She pulled a curved short sword that looked like a *wakizashi* out of her robe. “Please step back, Mr. Allen. I am going to produce the carriage.”

“Huh? ‘Produce’ it…?”

“Yes, like so.”

Hiyobah tossed her short sword into the air and quietly put her hands together in front of her.

“Intone Merrily—Fairy Tale.”

As soon as she spoke, the short sword spinning in the air transformed into a small pumpkin carriage.

“Oh, you’re a Soul Attire Wielder?” I said. “Being able to turn a sword into a carriage sure is a strange ability.”

“Ho-ho, it is little more than child’s play,” Hiyobah said modestly with a kind smile.

That really is one of the stranger Soul Attire abilities I've seen. She had produced not just a carriage, but also a horse to pull it. If I had to guess, she'd probably reproduced the very concept of a "horse-drawn carriage." *Considering the name "Fairy Tale," maybe her Soul Attire can summon things from children's stories.* I didn't know the limits of her ability, but it seemed very versatile.

"Please, Mr. Allen. Take a seat," Hiyobah said.

"Thank you," I replied before climbing into the pumpkin carriage.

Wow... It's bigger on the inside. The carriage was much more spacious than it appeared from the outside, giving me plenty of room to stretch my legs. It was very comfortable.

"I'll see you later, Lia," I said, looking at her through the window of the carriage.

"Yeah. Be careful," she responded.

"Up we go," Hiyobah said, clambering into the coachman's seat. "Are you ready to set off, Mr. Allen?"

"Yes, thank you."

"Very good."

She lightly cracked a leather whip, and the carriage began to move slowly forward. And with that, I was on my way to the mansion of Patriot Bolnard, one of the most powerful nobles in the country.

■

I lost track of time as I sat there in the back of the swaying pumpkin carriage.

Fwah... Whoops, almost nodded off.

The steady clatter of the wheels, the *clip-clop* of the horse's hooves, and the slight vibration from my seat all lulled me into a drowsy state.

"Mmm. Ngh...!"

I spent the rest of the trip fighting off the urge to fall asleep, stretching occasionally to keep myself awake. Eventually, the carriage slowed, and it came to a full stop. We must have reached our destination.

The carriage door creaked open, and Hiyobah peeked inside.

“Mr. Allen, we have arrived at Lord Patriot’s mansion. Please watch your step.”

“Thank you.”

I stepped out of the vehicle to find an absurdly large mansion.

Wow… I’ve seen a lot of amazing mansions lately, but this is something else.

Patriot’s estate was an incredibly unique building with the most character of any place I’d ever seen. It consisted of three distinct parts: the left side, built with large logs; the middle part, made of concrete; and the right side, ornately constructed with bricks.

But that wasn’t all—the mansion was surrounded by a vibrant, flower-filled garden; large, majestic statues; a giant fountain decorated with distinct carvings; and more, all of which clearly conveyed the wealth of its owner. It was just as impressive as Rize’s stunning mansion in Drestia.

“Right this way, sir,” Hiyobah said.

Following her gaze, I saw a dignified set of double doors guarded by private soldiers on either side. The men bowed as soon as they saw me.

““Welcome, Mr. Allen Rodol!””

Without waiting for a response, they fluidly placed their hands on the heavy doors and pushed them open.

“““Welcome to Lord Patriot’s estate, Mr. Allen,””” said a group of maids lined up in the entrance hall, bowing with perfect coordination.

“Th-thanks…” I was so overwhelmed by the unusual sight, I bowed multiple times in response.

“Please follow me up this staircase, Mr. Allen,” Hiyobah said. “The master is waiting in the Phoenix Room on the top floor.”

I followed her up a spiral staircase to the second floor, then down a straight hallway followed by a downward slope that took us underground. Patriot’s mansion was like a labyrinth.

“I apologize for leading you through such a dizzying route,” Hiyobah said.

“Don’t worry about it. You have to prioritize security,” I said.

Powerful members of society intentionally gave their homes confusing layouts to make them difficult for invaders to navigate. That was something I had learned from the various mansions and castles I’d recently visited.

Hiyobah led me through the mansion in all directions until we finally reached the Phoenix Room on the top floor.

"Okay, *Mr. Allen*. This is where I leave you," Hiyobah said, bowing deeply.

"Thank you very much for guiding me here," I replied.

I turned toward the doors before me. *Patriot Bolnard is in that room…* I let out a shallow breath to calm myself. *Okay, let's do this.*

I knocked three times, and a kind voice called out, "Come in."

I opened the door to find a room furnished with unimaginable luxury. A crimson carpet decorated generously with gold covered the floor, and a magnificent chandelier hung from the ceiling. There were imposing statues, pots carved with unique patterns, and famous landscape paintings. The room had no sense of style or cohesion; it was simply jammed with as many valuable things as possible.

At the far end of the room, standing before a large window that offered a full view of Aurest, was a man whose fancy clothes clearly announced him as a noble. A pair of men, presumably butlers, stood on either side of him.

"Ah, Allen Rodol. It is a pleasure to meet you," the man said. He smiled softly and walked toward me. "I'm Patriot Bolnard, but please, just call me Patriot."

Patriot Bolnard was 175 centimeters tall and of medium build, with long, milky-white hair curled into ringlets on either side of his face. I guessed his age to be around fifty. His most defining features were his drooping eyes and magnificent white beard, and he wore an eye-catching dark red noble's outfit with gold embroidery.

"It's nice to meet you," I said.

We shared a friendly handshake. Then Patriot continued.

"Thank you for agreeing to come all the way here when it is I who should have gone to you."

"No, I should be thanking you for hosting me on such short notice."

"Think nothing of it. I am the one who imposed on you first… Anyway, what are we standing around for? Please, have a seat."

"Thank you."

I followed Patriot's gaze to a sofa for guests, where I sat down. *Wow, this is crazy comfortable. What's it made out of?* The sofa was so fluffy that it was hard to imagine it was made of any worldly material, yet it was also firm enough to offer proper support. Considering its elite comfort and stability, it had to be one of the most expensive sofas money could buy.

"There we go," Patriot said as he sat down across from me on the other side of a table. Once he was comfortable, he addressed the butlers behind him. "Could we get some drinks?"

"Of course, my lord."

One of the butlers bowed elegantly and placed a menu on the table.

"Choose whatever you'd like, Allen," Patriot offered.

"Thank you," I said, reading the menu.

Tea Fastflash Oltagreim
Luminosity (Produced in Inzas, F.D.P.)
Alfredopatie Dinbrangold
Lacott Dolmonyu
Doltearno Possobita (Bolnard Special)

…What language is this? The words on the menu sounded like evil curses. They were probably the names of drinks, but I wasn't nearly sophisticated enough to know what they were.

"Umm… Could I just have some water?" I asked.

"Very good. Lord Patriot?"

"I'll have the usual."

"Yes, my lord."

The butler bowed and gracefully left the room.

"I didn't expect you to order water, Allen… Are you watching your calories?" Patriot asked.

"Uh, something like that," I responded evasively. Telling him I hadn't been able to read the menu wasn't an option.

"You meticulously manage everything you put in your body… Incredible! I suppose such attention to detail is what it takes to become an elite swordsman!"

"I'm hardly an elite swordsm—"

"Ha-ha-ha, no need to be humble. If we can't call *you* elite with the sword, then who can we? Don't you agree?" Patriot asked the

butler behind him.

“You speak the truth, my lord,” the butler said, bowing slightly while keeping his eyes down.

“This is a bit of a tangent…but truthfully, I once sought to become the greatest swordsman in the world,” Patriot said.

“Wow, you did?”

“Yes. However… Shamefully, I was not blessed with talent for swordcraft. And as you can see, I let myself go some time ago,” he said jokingly, squeezing his belly fat.

We continued to chat lightheartedly until someone knocked on the door.

“Lord Patriot, I have brought the drinks,” a voice called out.

“Oh, wonderful. Come in.”

“Pardon me,” the butler said. He entered the room silently and swiftly set our glasses on the table. “Here is your water and Alfredopatie Dinbrangold.”

“Thank you very much,” I said.

“Yes, thank you,” Patriot said.

The butler bowed silently, then returned to his position behind Patriot.

I stared at my water, unable to reach for it despite it being right there in front of me. There was one reason for my hesitation.

…How much is this worth?

That was no ordinary glass. It had a ruby embedded in the middle and an intricately designed handle. It was obviously worth a lot of money, and my mental alarms as a poor person were blaring.

“Umm, this might be a weird question, but…”

“Yes?”

“How much is this glass worth?” I asked.

Patriot looked taken aback. “Uhh… You wish to know its price?”

“Yes.”

“I—I see… Well, let me think… Hmm…”

He scrunched up his face, looking completely thrown off by the question. This might have been a trivial matter to him, but it was incredibly important to me.

“Perhaps…fifty million guld? Or was it sixty million? Forgive me. This is slightly embarrassing, but I don’t know how much my

household items are worth," Patriot said, rubbing his beard. He'd just casually thrown out such ridiculous amounts.

"Ha, ha-ha… Fifty or sixty million guld? Ha, ha-ha-ha-ha…"

That settled it. I was *not* touching that glass.

"Now then… I know we're both busy people, so how about we move on to the reason I invited you here?" Patriot said, seemingly having decided we'd spent enough time chatting. "Allen, do you know that this country's political landscape is split into the imperial and noble factions?"

"I do."

"I shouldn't have expected any less. Not only are you an elite swordsman, you're also knowledgeable about politics. Color me impressed." Patriot tapped his forehead and smiled. "I'm sure such an intelligent man as yourself already knows what I'm about to tell you…however, we cannot afford to have any differences of understanding between us. Would you mind if I quickly defined the imperial and noble factions?"

"Please do."

"Wonderful. First of all, the imperial faction is led by Her Majesty and House Arkstoria, and it is loyal to the empire. The noble faction, on the other hand, is led by the nobility and the general populace, and it is striving for world peace. These two forces have divided Liengard."

"I see. That's generally my understanding, too."

I hadn't heard the noble faction described as being "led by the nobility *and* the general populace," though… *I should probably take Patriot's words to mean that the noble faction's stance is that they're made up of the nobility and the citizens.* I would have to do my own research to verify that claim later.

Now that I think about it… I wonder what side she's *on.* Not wanting to pass up this opportunity, I decided to ask Patriot something that had been weighing on my mind.

"Sorry, but can I ask a question? There's something I've been wondering about…"

"Please, feel free to ask me anything," Patriot replied.

"Is Rize Dorhein of the Five Business Oligarchs part of the noble faction?"

It would make sense if Rize was a member of the noble faction, as she was the head of House Dorhein.

“…House Dorhein?” Patriot’s expression turned hard for the first time since I’d arrived. “To be frank, Lady Rize is a noble, but she is not a part of our faction.”

“Really?”

“Yes. We call it the noble faction, but the nobility is not fully unified.” He scratched his cheek and narrowed his eyes. “Allen, would you mind if I told you an old story?”

“Not at all.”

“House Dorhein used to be an insignificant noble family. They lived quiet lives in a corner of the countryside while managing farming, livestock, and sericulture, and they maintained a good relationship with their citizens.”

“Huh, I didn’t know that.”

Rize and her sister, Ferris, couldn’t look or act any more like nobles, so that was surprising to hear.

“…I miss those days. We could have had it all. Our plan was proceeding flawlessly until that damned Blood Fox showed up…,” Patriot growled, revealing his sharp canines.

““Lord Patriot!”” the two butlers suddenly exclaimed.

“Pardon the interruption, but you may have said too much, my lord,” one of them said.

“We are still unsure as to her powers, so please refrain from making any needless comments… You may be erased,” said the other.

Patriot shut his mouth, looking surprised. “Whoops… My apologies. I guess I got a little heated.” He fixed his lips into a thin smile. “Let’s not talk about Lady Rize.”

“Huh?”

“It’s best to let sleeping dogs lie. We in the noble faction try to avoid involvement with Rize Dorhein. She could have eyes and ears anywhere.”

“I see…”

It seemed like Rize was feared even in the noble faction.

“Anyway, let’s get back on topic,” Patriot said. He clapped his hands and leaned toward me. “Answer me honestly, Allen. What is your current position?”

“My position? What do you mean?”

“It is my understanding that you are close with the Empress and other members of the imperial faction, especially Shii

Arkstoria of House Arkstoria… Is this true?”

“Well… Yes.”

I honestly wasn’t close with the Empress at all, but I didn’t see the need to correct him.

“We in the noble faction have been very anxious about that,” Patriot said. “We are concerned that you will be ensnared by the imperial faction.”

“There’s no need to worry about that. At the moment, I’m neutral, not supporting either side.”

“Oh, that’s good to hear.” Patriot sighed with relief. “The imperial faction is a sinking ship. Do not make the mistake of joining them,” he said harshly. Yet the gentle smile hadn’t left his face.

“With all due respect…as a citizen of Liengard, should you really be calling the Empress’s faction a sinking ship?”

“Whoops. Perhaps I should have chosen my words more carefully. However, I pride myself on telling the truth, so I hope you can find it in yourself to forgive me,” he said with a strained smile. He really seemed to have a low opinion of the imperial faction. “I’m going to be clear with you, as there’s no point hiding anything. It pains me to say this, but the imperial faction and the Liengard Empire have no future.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“First of all, the idiots in the imperial faction are operating under a huge misunderstanding. They think Liengard is a great country that serves the masses, that it is one of the self-proclaimed ‘Five Powers,’ and that together with their allies, they have the strength to oppose the Holy Empire. That is complete and utter nonsense! Their hubris knows no bounds!”

Patriot held up an index finger as he spoke of politics I didn’t understand.

“A major war will likely start within the next year. It will be the most destructive and large-scale conflict in history.”

“You’re talking about war with the Holy Ronelian Empire, right?”

“Yes. The alliance of the Liengard Empire, the Vesteria Kingdom, the Commonwealth of Polyesta, and the Republic of Ronzo will go to war against the Holy Ronelian Empire. And

there's no doubt the Holy Empire will win," he declared without a moment's hesitation.

"You're very sure about that."

"I have my reasons, of course. I'll give you three."

Patriot held up three fingers and spoke with increased vigor.

"First, the Holy Ronelian Empire's formidable military strength will overwhelm the other powers on the continent! They have the Black Organization, an illegal militant group with a group of swordsmen known as the Thirteen Oracle Knights, each of whom possesses the strength of a nation. Four of them are even called Imperial Knights and are bona fide superhumans!"

I had fought a former Imperial Knight named Diehl Reinstad. The fact that there were still four swordsmen in the Holy Empire stronger than him was certainly harrowing.

"Second, they have an overwhelming advantage in scientific knowledge thanks to the genius magic artisan Rod Garf! His intelligence is a century ahead of the rest of humanity! He invented the microminiature sailplanes—the gliders—that the Holy Empire used during the last battle, as well as the black overcoats that shrink and expand to fit the wearer that the Black Organization uses as its standard combat uniform! He's made many other amazing discoveries that defy common sense!"

Rod Garf, the magic artisan, was a name I'd heard a few times now. There was no doubt he was one of the key people responsible for the Holy Empire's strength.

"And most importantly, the Holy Empire is ruled by the absolute monarch, Emperor Barel Ronelia! His ingenuity is deep as an abyss, his strength greater than even the Four Imperial Knights, and his matchless charisma inspires all to follow him! He is a true sovereign! No, a god among men!"

Patriot practically began to pant as he passionately praised the Holy Empire.

I'm worried about how much he seems to admire Barel Ronelia… But there was something even more pressing I needed to confirm.

"Patriot… You're quite familiar with the internal affairs of our enemy." He'd spoken as if he had seen the Holy Empire's fighting strength with his own eyes.

"Why, of course. I want you to keep this between us, but…we in the noble faction are in contact with the Holy Ronelian Empire."

“Wh—?! What?!” I exclaimed, shocked.

“It’s not what you think! I only mean that we have an independent diplomatic channel for obtaining intel!”

“Please tell me you’re not selling the Holy Empire information about Liengard.”

“We would never do such a thing. We are fiercely patriotic, virtuous citizens of Liengard.”

“…That’s good to hear.”

Unfortunately, I didn’t feel like I could trust him. Even so, cutting our conversation short here would risk offending him, so I decided to stay a little longer and wait for a good time to leave.

“You’re probably right that we’re behind when it comes to scientific capability. But I don’t think the difference in fighting strength is as great as you say. After all, we have the Holy Knights Association’s very own Seven Holy Blades on our side. They’re the strongest swordfighters in the world.”

“The Seven Holy Blades… Can you be sure they’re all allies?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“This is not public knowledge, but the Seven Holy Blades are all very eccentric. I would even go so far as to call them a group of broken people. I cannot imagine they’ll all fight for justice when the hostilities begin. Von Mustang betrayed us just recently… Some of the others may do the same,” he said forebodingly.

“The Seven Holy Blades aren’t our only skilled swordfighters. Don’t forget Chair—uh, Black Fist Reia Lasnote. She’s incredibly strong and lives here in Liengard.”

“Black Fist, huh? You’re right about her strength; she’s probably as formidable in a fight as anyone in the world. But she is currently at her peak. Once she passes her prime, her strength will steadily decline until she is but a shadow of her former self.” Patriot gently shook his head. “Additionally, she’s simpleminded and known to be a decent, sensible person. That makes her predictable and easy to suppress.”

I knew what he meant calling Chairwoman Reia simpleminded; I couldn’t agree with that assessment more. She’d caused me so much grief over the last year with her haphazard way of doing things.

But “sensible”? Was he talking about the same Reia Lasnote? Could he be referring to someone else with the same name? I was

baffled by that description of her.

"Taking Black Fist out of the picture will be easy. However, the same can't be said of you, Allen." Patriot took a sip of his drink and squinted at me. "Pardon my rudeness, but until two years ago, I had never heard your name."

"Yeah… I'm sure," I responded. Up until then, I was still getting bullied at Grand Swordcraft Academy.

"The first time I heard your name was… Yes, it was during last year's Elite Five Holy Festival. Your infamous rampage during the match against Ice King Academy."

"That was, uh… Extremely embarrassing."

"There's no need to feel that way, young man. We were all once prone to the passions of youth." Patriot smiled kindly and continued. "Your strength has grown at an absurd rate since then—and you're still getting stronger. I can't even begin to imagine what you'll be like when you reach your peak."

"Th-thanks."

"You truly are unpredictable. One day you're working as a volunteer witchblade during your suspension from school, and the next you're tied to the Blood Fox and throwing your weight around in the underworld. You become a holy knight trainee, and suddenly, you've traveled to a disputed region in Daglio and become the nation's savior. And just when I think you've returned to your ordinary school life, you *penetrate the heart of the Holy Empire* and save Shii Arkstoria. You never hesitate to rush headlong into perilous situations. Whatever self-defense mechanism ordinary people have that makes them think twice about risking their lives seems not to exist in you."

He'd clearly done extensive research into my past. I should have expected no less of the leader of the noble faction.

"Your unlimited potential and unfathomable ability to overcome any obstacle make you an unpredictable variable in this conflict. Your allegiance could tip the balance of power entirely. I assume the imperial faction is of the same opinion?"

"Well… Yes," I admitted. I felt like they had said something similar.

"It has long been believed that in war, nothing should be feared more than the unknown. For that reason, I want you to remain a

bystander in the coming conflict. Please refrain from using your powerful darkness and let the war play out as it will."

Patriot walked toward me, a newfound eloquence in his voice. This request was probably the reason he'd summoned me here.

"The foolish and radical imperial faction is running full speed down the road to war! Yet it is clear as day that fighting the Holy Empire will result in our country being devastated and conquered! That is why the noble faction is aiming to placate it and establish a joint administration! In other words, we are focusing on rebuilding after our inevitable defeat!"

He leaned forward. There was fire in his eyes.

"As wise as you are, you must see why I call the imperial faction a sinking ship! Surely you understand that those of the noble faction are the ones truly concerned for the future of this country! This is not the time to be blinded by patriotism! We must adopt a long-term perspective and pursue the greatest profit for our land! What do you say, Allen? Let's join hands and build a bright future for Liengard!"

"…"

I said nothing, and Patriot responded by softening his attitude.

"O-of course, I'm not making this request without promising anything in return!"

"…What would you give me?" I asked.

"Whatever you want! A house, land, money, power, women—you name it! Just say the word, and it will be yours! I'll give it to you right now!" Patriot said, throwing his arms wide. I couldn't believe my ears.

"I see… I certainly have a lot to gain by joining you," I responded.

"Oh, I knew you would see the right of it, Allen! You understand our country's plight!"

I now had a good idea of what Patriot Bolnard had to say, and I could assume he spoke for the noble faction as a whole. I closed my eyes and pondered everything he'd told me, then came to my conclusion.

"Patriot."

"Yes?!"

"It's out of the question," I told him.

"…What do you mean?" he asked, his smile vanishing.

“Unfortunately, it sounds like my ideal future differs greatly from the noble faction’s.”

“That’s absurd! Did your patriotism win out over the profits?!”

“I wouldn’t call it patriotism. It’s just… There are a lot of people I care about in this country. I’m going to give my all to protect them.”

Nothing he had to say could change that.

“…I see.” Patriot sighed softly and smiled as kindly as ever. “Feel free to contact me if you ever change your mind. The noble faction will welcome you with open arms.” He turned to one of the butlers behind him. “Please escort Allen out.”

“Yes, my lord. Right this way, Mr. Allen.”

I followed the butler out of Patriot’s mansion. Hiyobah was waiting outside, and she offered to drive me home in the carriage, but I politely refused. I wanted to get some fresh air.

“Man… That was exhausting,” I said to myself.

Patriot hadn’t always spoken honestly during that meeting. His polite smiles and outward displays of shock and disappointment had all been calculated. He’d spent the whole time feeling out the distance between us, treating each statement like a move in chess or shogi.

I’ve honestly never been fond of people like that.

“All right… I should get back. I’ll worry Lia if I stay out too late.”

I stretched to loosen up, then ran back to the dorm.

■

Right after Allen Rodol left…

“*Haah…* What a waste of time.”

…Patriot Bolnard sighed loudly and plopped down onto the sofa.

“You did your best, my lord,” the butler behind him said.

Patriot harrumphed in response and vigorously scratched his head. Having completely dropped the friendly act he’d adopted for Allen, his true feelings surfaced.

“What a useless boy. He’s just as dim-witted and naive as the reports said. I should never have expected to be able to speak to him like an adult.”

“Quite right, my lord.”

“One may think there’s nothing wrong with him being selfless and unsophisticated, but that also means he has no firm sense of self. He’s a sheltered brat who’s ignorant of the harsh realities of the world.”

“I could not agree more.”

Patriot gave a satisfied grunt at hearing the butler’s wholehearted agreement and opened an old cigar case. He picked out one of his favorites from a large collection and cut the head off with practiced hands. He patiently heated the foot with a match and, once it was ready, sucked in a full breath of smoke.

“*Huff*… People have long said you can find a use for any fool, but that couldn’t be less true. A fool will always remain a fool, no matter what you try to teach them,” Patriot said.

“You mean…?”

“We proceed with the original plan. We’ll swiftly dispose of that idiot. Use Shin.”

The butler hesitated. “…Are you sure he can defeat Allen?” he asked timidly.

“Huh?”

“It is true that Shin defies reason. I am well aware of his strength. However, the same can be said of Allen. I heard that he simultaneously fought Von Mustang, the traitorous Holy Blade, and Diehl Reinstad, a former Imperial Knight, and managed to gain the upper hand. So I’m simply wondering if Shin can actually defeat Allen.”

“*Haah*… Not you, too.”

Many in the noble faction were questioning whether Shin could defeat Allen Rodol, and Patriot had grown sick of hearing it.

“There’s no cause for concern,” Patriot said. “Strength doesn’t matter against Shin. It’s unthinkable that he could lose a one-on-one fight.”

“I understand. Please forgive me for speaking out of turn, my lord.”

Having corrected the butler’s preconceptions, Patriot grunted with satisfaction.

“Now, let us eagerly await the next festival.”

“Very good, my lord. I shall commence operation of the plan.” The butler bowed deeply and left the Phoenix Room.

“Ha-ha-ha! The long political struggle against the imperial faction is finally about to come to an end. Then I shall become a true noble!”

Patriot roared with wicked laughter, his eyes shining with bottomless greed and grand ambition.

■

It was April 1, and my turbulent spring break had finally come to an end, giving way to the start of a new semester.

“Okay… Have you forgotten anything?” I asked.

“Nope, I’m all good,” responded Lia.

Having finished our morning preparations and changed into our uniforms, Lia and I left the dorm together as we always did.

“That’s a nice breeze,” I said.

“Yeah, it feels great,” Lia agreed.

We walked to the Thousand Blade campus together while enjoying the warm sun and pleasant spring breeze. It had only been a month since our last day of school, but it felt much longer than that.

“Oh, the classes have been posted.”

We’d just entered the main school building to see pieces of paper with the new classes on the bulletin board by the entrance.

“Let’s see… I’m in Class A this year again.”

“Me too,” said Lia. “Oh good, so are Rose and Claude.”

Students at Thousand Blade were split into classes A through F in descending order based on their grades, but the curriculum for each class was mostly the same.

“Going to school for the first time after a break always makes me nervous,” I admitted.

“Really? I’m just excited to see everyone,” said Lia.

We continued down the long hallway, opened the door to Class 2-A…

“Yo, Allen. How’s it going?”

“Lia, it’s been ages!”

“Good morning, you two!”

…and were enthusiastically greeted by our classmates.

“Good morning,” I responded.

“Morning, everyone,” said Lia.

We waved to everyone as we walked to our seats. Just as we got there, Tessa plunked down at his desk, which was right in front of mine.

"What's up, Allen? I mastered the Slice Iron School of Swordcraft over break! I can finally give you an even match now!" he said, grinning wildly.

Tessa had gotten visibly more muscular, and his hands were callused. I could tell he'd had a productive spring break.

"That's exciting. How about a practice match after cla—," I started to propose, but I was interrupted by two classmates sitting beside us.

"I'm gonna stop you guys right there. You're not even in Allen's league, Tessa."

"Don't even bother, Tessa. You'll just get hurt."

"Oh yeah?! Ya wanna try sayin' that again?!" Tessa yelled.

He began chasing the two students through the classroom just as the door slid open.

Rose walked in, looking half-asleep.

"Good morning," I said.

"Morning, Rose. You're still very much *not* a morning person, I see," Lia teased.

"…Nrgh… Mornin'," she mumbled as she rubbed her eyes and staggered to her desk.

The next person through the door was none other than Claude.

"Good morning, Princess Lia!"

"Oh, Claude! You're back!" Lia said.

"I am! It is a privilege to see you again!"

Claude had returned to Vesteria Kingdom at the beginning of January, so we hadn't seen her in nearly three months. If I remembered right, she'd gone home to attend an important meeting as captain of the Royal Guard.

"Why didn't you contact me as soon as you got back, Claude? I'm hurt," Lia said.

"My apologies, Princess. I only arrived in Liengard on the last flight yesterday night."

"Oh. I guess I can't blame you, then," Lia said understandingly. She joyfully clapped her hands together. "But if you're here, that must mean the meetings are all over! We'll be together like old times!"

“I am very sorry to disappoint you once again… However, given the current state of the world, I believe I will be regularly returning to the kingdom for the foreseeable future,” Claude said.

“Aww, man… You really have it tough, Claude. Thanks for all your hard work.”

“I am not worthy of such praise… Your concern touches my heart…!” Claude said, tears of joy streaking her face. Her devotion to Lia was truly remarkable.

I spent the rest of the time before homeroom chatting with my classmates. We discussed a wide variety of topics including where we’d gone over spring break, whether we were seeing someone, new training methods we’d devised, and more. It felt wonderful to experience such a normal aspect of school life after everything I’d been through.

We could have kept talking forever, but eventually, the bell chimed, and the classroom door flew open.

“Morning, boys and girls! Hmm. Well, well… No one’s late or absent! Fantastic! What a perfect start to the new semester!” Chairwoman Reia exclaimed, looking around the room.

With a satisfied nod, she began homeroom.

“Okay, I’ll start with the announcements. I have two for you this time. Unusual, I know.”

Chairwoman Reia opened a black binder she was carrying and cleared her throat.

“First, it seems this school year will have a highly atypical schedule. I believe you’ll be given the details later at a school assembly, but keep that in the back of your minds for now.”

An “atypical schedule”…? Were they going to change around our classes?

“My second announcement concerns your friend and classmate Claude Stroganof. I’m sure most of you know this, but Claude is a citizen of Vesteria who holds the important position of captain of its Royal Guard. She has informed me that she will be making frequent trips back to her homeland due to this unprecedented period of international instability we currently find ourselves in, meaning she’ll be absent a lot. It’s not like she’s sick, though, so you don’t have to worry about her.”

Claude was a student of Thousand Blade Academy, but she also had responsibilities as a swordswoman of Vesteria. Something

like this was unavoidable.

“All right, that’s it for the announcements! It’s time to start your first class of the new school year! You all had better prepare yourselves; I’m gonna work you so hard this year, you’ll wish you’d never been born!” Chairwoman Reia declared.

“““Yes, ma’am!”””

■

After our rigorous morning courses, Lia, Rose, Claude, and I—the Student Council members for Class 2-A—walked to the Student Council room for our regular lunch meeting.

“Whew… Those classes were pretty tough,” I said.

“What the heck was Reia thinking? I know those were our first classes in a while, but she didn’t have to work us *that* hard…,” Lia said.

“I think you’re the only one who considers those classes just ‘pretty tough,’ Allen,” Rose said.

“Damn you, maggot,” Claude cursed. “I’ll never make sense of your insane stamina…”

Lia, Rose, and Claude all looked beyond exhausted.

We continued to talk until we reached the Student Council room. I knocked on the door, then opened it to reveal a truly shocking sight.

“Lilim, draw up a document to submit for approval at the next staff meeting. Tirith, I want you to look over this year’s budget.”

“O-okay…”

“Umm…”

Shii was briskly dishing out orders as Lilim and Tirith—both pale-faced—did their best to follow. I stared at them, dumbfounded.

“Wh-what the…? The upperclassmen… They’re actually *working*…?!”

Shii never did a lick of work despite being the Student Council president, Lilim’s head looked like it would explode any time we discussed a topic that was even slightly difficult, and Tirith often spent entire meetings lazing on the sofa. Yet here they all were, working away… And *voluntarily*, no less?!

Don’t tell me… Is this the influence of a Soul Attire?!

The thought occurred to me that they might have been attacked by someone with a mental-manipulation Soul Attire, but I quickly dismissed it. I felt no disturbance in my spirit power.

Which meant they were, for some reason, working of their own accord.

“Hey, Allen… What are you implying by that?” Shii asked.

“We’re perfectly capable of working when we feel like it!” Lilim said.

“That was kind of rude, Allen…,” Tirith said.

The three of them glared at me.

“Ah-ha-ha, sorry. This is just so novel to me that I said what I was thinking out loud…”

As the vice president of the Student Council, I was normally the one doing all the work, but I had probably been exaggerating a little.

“Still, Shii, why are you working during lunch?” Lia said.

“What inspired this sudden shift in work ethic?” Rose asked.

“Did something unusual happen?” Claude followed up.

Shii nodded, her expression troubled.

“‘Unusual’ is right. This year’s already in disarray.” She slumped in her chair and pointed at a desk. There was an academic calendar for the Thousand Blade school year on it.

“Wow, this takes me back,” I said.

I picked up the schedule and briefly read through it. All the events we’d had last year—the entrance ceremony, the Elite Five Holy Festival, the New Student Recruiting Period, the Club-Budget War, the First-Year Tourney, the Sword Master Festival, the Thousand Blade Festival, the Christmas party, and more—were slated for this year as well.

“What’s wrong with it?” I asked. I’d drawn up this schedule at the end of the last school year and had already gotten it approved by the staff.

“The schedule you put together last year…has been completely changed,” Shii said.

“…Huh?” I said, my mind going blank. What did she mean by “completely”?

“For example…the First-Year Tourney, which is used to decide the first-year slot in the Sword Master Festival, is being held in three days,” Shii said.

“Three days?!” I cried out, shocked. That made absolutely no sense. “You must be joking… We can’t possibly hold that event three days from now! What about the Elite Five Holy Festival?!”

“This year’s Holy Festival is canceled. Instead, the Sword Master Festival will be held at the end of this month,” Shii said.

“H-huh…?”

The First-Year Tourney was in three days, the Elite Five Holy Festival was canceled, and the Sword Master Festival was at the end of the month…? Shii was right. It was a total mess.

“Why was the schedule jumbled up so much?” asked Lia.

“Who the heck is responsible for this?” said Rose.

“The Holy Knights Association headquarters sent orders to each of the Five Powers. Well, I guess it’s the Four Powers now that the Principality of Theresia has been conquered, but whatever. I don’t really get why, but apparently this is an order from above!” Lilim answered.

“The Holy Knights Association’s goal is to hold the Sword Master Festival earlier than usual and find skilled swordfighters. At least, I think that’s what they’re after…,” Tirith added.

Shii snapped her fingers. “Well, Allen and the second years just got here, so how about we break for lunch?”

“I second that!” Lilim chimed in.

“I’m beyond starving!” Tirith said.

We took our seats and ate lunch like we always did. Naturally, our conversation was focused on the Student Council work we were going to do once classes were finished.

“I’m splitting us into teams to work on different events after school,” Shii said. “Lilim and Tirith, you two take care of the First-Year Tourney. Start by making a schedule for the day of the event and getting approval from Chairwoman Reia in her office. Once that’s done, make an announcement poster to put on the first-year bulletin board. That needs to be done by the end of the day.”

“Slave driver…,” Lilim said.

“I’m getting depressed just thinking about all that work…,” Tirith said.

They both looked like they’d rather do anything else.

“Lia, Rose, and Claude, you’ll handle Recruiting. That will probably be a lot of work because it’s a school-wide event…but I know you three can do it. Go to the Broadcasting Club first and

arrange for them to announce the New Student Recruiting Period schedule to the whole student body. Then divide up how the facilities are used equally between clubs so no one complains."

"Sure thing," Lia said.

"You can count on us," Rose said.

"Understood," Claude said.

I had no doubt the three of them would be just fine.

"Finally, Allen and I will adjust the entire schedule and respond to any issues that arise around campus. If any of you have questions, don't hesitate to come and ask me for help."

Shii had efficiently split us up and given us a plan of action.

"You really know how to take charge, President," I said.

"Hmm-hmm, of course I do," Shii said smugly. "Things are about to get pretty busy. I'm counting on you, Vice President."

"You got it. Okay then, let's give it our all."

■

As soon as we finished our afternoon classes, which were focused on strengthening our Soul Attires, we set to work.

It was always on busy days like this that the most problems seemed to arise.

"Hold on, man! What do you mean, 'Recruiting is in a week'?! We don't even have a poster yet!"

"I'm sorry. The Student Council only learned of this today, so I would appreciate it if you could do your best to adjust," I said.

I efficiently dealt with student complaints…

"Hey, the hell are you lookin' at?!"

"You were the one staring at me!"

"Calm down. What are you two fighting about?"

…resolved conflicts between students…

"Help me, Allen. Eighteen collapsed with a fever. My work is gonna pile up without his help…"

"Please do your job, Chairwoman."

…and denied a request for help from Chairwoman Reia. As I managed all kinds of issues, the Student Council chipped away at their tasks.

"*Haah, haah*… I'm about to collapse…," Lilim said.

"Same…," agreed Tirith.

Those two spent the whole time complaining.

“Hey, now. Stay strong. We can’t quit while our underclassmen are working so hard,” Shii said kindly, sending them back into the fray.

“Hey, Allen. Where’s the broadcasting room again?” Lia asked.

“Allen, do you think the way I assigned the facilities is fair?” Rose asked.

“Hey, maggot, where can I print the Recruiting posters?” Claude asked.

“Umm, let me think…,” I said, before politely answering them all.

…You know, this isn’t so bad. I loved spending entire days training, too, but working hard with my friends on a project was rewarding. It felt like something everyone should experience in their youth.

We spent a while longer working, each team immersed in its own tasks, until the bell chimed *ding-dong-ding-dong*. That meant it was six in the evening; time had flown by. I could see through the window that it was getting dark.

“That seems like a good place to stop. Let’s leave the rest of our work for tomorrow,” Shii said, clapping her hands. We all visibly relaxed.

“Phew… My shoulders are so stiff,” Lia commented.

“That was somehow just as exhausting as training,” Rose said.

“I must admit I’m a little tired, too,” Claude added.

The three of them stretched, relieved to be done.

“Geez, I feel dead… I can’t move an inch,” Lilim said.

“I’ve never used my brain so much in my life…,” Tirith grumbled.

They both collapsed forward onto their desks.

Unsurprisingly, we were all exhausted. Even I felt a little tired. I blinked repeatedly, probably because I’d been straining my eyes reading so many difficult documents with small text. I was gonna get back to the dorm and do some practice swings to wash away this fatigue.

“Whew…” I got up from my chair and stretched as wide as I could.

“Allen, your clothes are all messy,” Shii said. She approached and fixed my collar.

“Oh, thanks… Huh?”

I felt something drop into my uniform pocket.

“President…?”

“Shh.”

She put a finger to her lips and winked. She must have put a message in my pocket meant only for me.

“All right, let’s go home!” Shii said. “Thanks everyone for all your hard work! Get ready to do it again tomorrow!”

With that, we all left the room and returned to our respective dorms. When Lia and I got back, we washed our hands and met in the living room.

“What do you want for dinner, Allen?” Lia asked.

“Hmm… Something really filling with beef or pork.”

“You got it.”

“Thanks as always.”

After that exchange, I casually went to my room and locked the door. I checked my uniform pocket and found a letter that had been folded into a small size.

Shii sure likes doing this kind of thing.

I unfolded the letter and found a message written in Shii’s cute, curvy handwriting:

> *Dear Allen,*
>
> *Please come to the Student Council room alone at nine o’clock.*
>
> *Shii Arkstoria*

■

After eating Lia’s homemade dinner, I got ready to go out like I did every night.

“Okay, I’ll be back in a bit,” I told her.

“Take care,” Lia replied.

I pretended like I was going out for my nightly training…but instead headed for the Student Council room on campus.

I feel bad about essentially lying to Lia… But Shii had expressly told me to come alone. That probably meant she didn’t want anyone else to know of our meeting—especially not someone from a foreign country like Lia or Claude.

I have a pretty good idea of what she wants to talk to me about, given the secretive nature of this meeting. I figured it must be about the imperial and noble factions.

I entered the main school building and walked down the long hallway.

Thousand Blade sure feels different at night… I reached the Student Council room, knocked, and heard Shii call out, "Come in." I opened the door and saw her sitting in a chair.

"Good evening, Allen. You're right on time," she said.

"Good evening, President," I responded.

"Just to make sure… You came alone, right?"

"Yes, of course."

"Good."

Shii smiled gently and breathed a sigh of relief. Sure enough, what she had to tell me must have been highly confidential.

"Make yourself comfortable," Shii said, gesturing toward one of the sofas.

"Thank you," I said, sitting down.

"Do you want tea or coffee?"

"Tea, please."

"You got it. Consider yourself lucky—this is my special recipe."

"Ah-ha-ha, lucky me."

Seeing her joke like that was a good sign. What she had to tell me probably wasn't too serious.

"Here you go," she said, setting a tea set for two on the table before me. Shii sat down on the opposite sofa.

"Thank you," I said.

Steam rose from the teacup. Not wanting to be rude, I decided to start drinking while it was still warm.

"…Do you like it?" Shii asked.

"Yes. It has a nice, mild flavor. I don't think I could ever get tired of it."

"Hmm-hmm, I'm glad to hear that." Shii smiled, looking satisfied. "Okay… Let's talk about why I asked you here."

She paused to give me a serious look.

"Allen, what did you think of the schedule change today?" she asked.

"Well, it was pretty sudden," I said.

Changing the schedule for the entire academic year with so little warning was a little…or rather, *very* inconvenient.

“Yeah. Normally, I’d agree with you.”

Shii rummaged through the contents of the table.

“This is the reason for the sudden change,” she said, pulling out a thick bundle of papers. The top page said *Top Secret* in big red letters.

“‘Plan to Hold the Sword Master Festival Early’…?” I said, reading the title aloud.

“Yep. This is the reason Thousand Blade and all other swordcraft academies have been forced to reconfigure their schedules,” Shii said. “At the end of March, the Holy Knights Association made a request of Liengard. It asked us to prepare for the upcoming world war by selecting and training our most promising young swordfighters to strengthen our military. This initiative started last year, though, so it’s not really cause for suspicion.”

“Yeah, that’s true.”

The holy knights had always strived to recruit talented swordcraft students, and they had been working extra hard to do that in recent years. The most prominent example of that initiative was the new system for fast-tracking young swordfighters to senior holy knight status. I had made use of that system myself.

“What I am concerned about, however, are the actions of the noble faction. Something smells fishy…,” Shii said.

“Fishy?” I asked, and she nodded.

“The noble faction always—and I mean ALWAYS—makes a fuss and tries to oppose any measures or politics the imperial faction tries to enact. But for some reason, its members unanimously approved the plan to hold the Sword Master Festival early. Don’t you think that’s strange?”

“Could it be…because they think it’s going to benefit the country?” I asked.

“Absolutely not,” Shii said, shaking her head. “The noble faction doesn’t care at all about benefiting Liengard. They pushed so hard for the Sword Master Festival to be held early because it will benefit *them*.”

…Now that Shii mentioned it, I did find it hard to believe that Patriot would do anything for the good of the country.

“I don’t know what they’re plotting…but something’s off about this year’s Sword Master Festival,” Shii said. “Everything’s proceeding too smoothly. The noble faction might try something.”

“That’s concerning…,” I responded.

I was distrustful of the noble faction as well after my meeting with Patriot. I couldn’t dismiss Shii’s concern as unfounded.

“As we told you before, there is only one way that the noble faction gains control of Liengard: by eliminating you from the political stage. You’re a huge hindrance to them,” Shii explained.

“I am…?” It didn’t feel great to be called a hindrance.

“They’ll do whatever it takes to get you out of the picture. For example…they might poison you. That’s the most popular assassination method among the nobility.”

“Huh… Fortunately, poison doesn’t work on me.”

The battle against Diehl Reinstad and his exotic venoms had left me almost entirely immune to poisonous substances. It was no exaggeration to say that most poisons—especially ones that would be known to the nobility—were completely harmless to me.

“Oh… Well, they could switch out your weapon! What would you do if they replaced your sword with a dull one before a Sword Master Festival match? Surely not even you can fight bare-handed,” Shii said.

“I have my black sword, so that wouldn’t really be a problem…,” I countered. I could summon the black sword from Zeon’s darkness whenever I wanted, so no one could take that from me.

“Oh, right. Well…they could, you know… Umm…,” Shii said, her voice growing weaker until she eventually fell silent. “…It really isn’t easy to hurt you.”

It seemed like she had failed to think of anything the noble faction could do to harm me.

“A-anyway! As we told you before, the noble faction has won over one of the Seven Holy Blades! You need to be careful!”

“Okay, I will. Thank you for the warning.”

We both fell silent.

“…”

“…”

The unusual circumstances of being alone in the Student Council room at night made this silence especially awkward.

…I should come up with something to talk about. I racked my brain for a good topic…and found something perfectly relevant to our conversation.

“Umm, do you mind if I tell you something?” I asked.

“What is it?” Shii replied.

“I went to Patriot Bolnard’s mansion yesterday.”

“Oh, did you? Duke Bolnard’s mansion…? Wait, *Bolnard*?!”

Shii spit out her tea.

“Hey, President! You got tea on the sofa!” I said.

“S-sorry… No, now’s not the time for that! What compelled you to go to Duke Bolnard’s mansion?! Did he approach you?! What did you talk about?!”

“We didn’t talk about anything important. He just invited me to join the noble faction.”

“Allen! That’s exactly what the imperial faction is most afraid of! We knew they would try to recruit you!” Shii yelled, her composure shattered.

“H-hey, please settle down. Have some tea,” I urged her.

“Hrmm…”

Shii sipped her tea, her expression still anxious.

“So? How did you respond to his invitation?” she asked.

“I told him it was out of the question,” I said.

“Wow… That’s a very clear rejection,” Shii said, her eyes wide with surprise.

“Yeah. I realized after talking to him for a while that our visions for the future were incompatible.”

“You make it sound like a band breaking up…”

“Ah-ha-ha, I can see that. Anyway, if I was asked whether my position is closer to that of the imperial faction or the noble faction, I would say the former.”

The noble faction wanted to support the nobility and discard the weak. Their ideal society differed greatly from mine.

“R-really? You’re leaning toward the imperial faction instead of the noble faction? Does that mean we can count you as an ally?” Shii asked.

“Yes. After all, you’re a member of the imperial faction.”

Shii had done so much for me at Thousand Blade. She helped me every day with the Student Council and, more recently, let me enjoy myself at the Christmas party…

…Wait. Something felt wrong about that thought. *She* has *done a lot for me…right?*

Now that I thought about it, I'd never actually wanted to join the Student Council. Shii had practically forced me into it with her selfish antics. And the Christmas party was *not* a good time. She'd taken advantage of the Crush Your Crush Competition to launch a dirty surprise attack against me.

Has she ever done a single thing to help me…?

No, I decided not to go down that line of thought. Shii *had* helped me out—I'd just leave it at that. Some things, it was better not to think too deeply about.

"…"

Shii watched me as I thought. Her cheeks had grown slightly flushed.

"H-hey, Allen… What exactly did you mean by that?" she asked.

"…? I meant that you're my friend, and that you being in the imperial faction is as good a reason as any to support it."

I meant it exactly how I'd said it. What was there to be confused by?

"*Haah*… Yeah. I should've known not to expect any deeper meaning…"

"…?"

And with that, my secret nighttime meeting with Shii came to a rather confusing end.

■

The next few days were taken up entirely by rigorous morning and afternoon classes, exhausting Student Council work after school, and solo training after returning to the dorm. It was hectic to say the least, and the New Student Recruiting Period—called "Recruiting" for short—arrived in a flash.

Students at the Elite Five Academies went all out for Recruiting every year, and Thousand Blade was no exception.

"Congratulations on getting into Thousand Blade, first years! Since you're so good at overcoming challenges, why not join the

Mountaineering Club?”

“Join the Swordcraft Club! We offer a trial membership! Come to the gym after school if you’re interested!”

“The Tea Ceremony Club’s tea is the best in the world! You won’t know what you’re missing until you try it!”

The clubs worked hard to promote themselves at every opportunity throughout the day, from the morning as students walked to school to the time between classes and during the lunch break. It was now after school, and all the Student Council members except Claude were gathered in our club room.

Claude had been summoned home by King Gris and would be in Vesteria for about ten days.

“Man, this year’s as crazy as ever,” Shii said with a sigh. She was looking out the window watching the clubs aggressively try to attract new students.

“Recruiting is like a festival, after all!” remarked Lilim. “It’s only a matter of time before some loser gets carried away and causes trouble!”

“Good thing the Heroes of Justice will punish those who step out of line!” said Tirith.

They both put on sashes reading, HERO OF JUSTICE. It was the Student Council’s job to crack down on those who went overboard with their recruiting efforts.

“As you all know, overly aggressive Recruiting activity has been an issue at this academy. That’s why we’re going to patrol the campus and detain any villains who use underhanded tactics to pressure new students!” Shii said, putting on her own sash that read EXECUTIONER OF JUSTICE.

There was never a dull day with my upperclassmen.

“We’re about to start patrolling the campus, but doing so together would be very inefficient. That said, acting alone could be dangerous if anything goes wrong, so I made this ladder lottery to decide groups!”

With a “Ta-da!” Shii held up a ladder lottery she’d drawn on a piece of paper.

“We’re going to split up into a group of two and a group of three, leaving one person to stay behind in the Student Council room. Write your name above one of the lines at the top, and we’ll leave our groups up to fate!” she said, writing her name

above one of the lines on the end. Shii always loved playing games of chance.

Once the rest of us had written our names, we each added one more line to the ladders on the paper to make sure it was fair.

“Hmm-hmm, I’m gonna open it. Three, two, one… Now!” Shii said, unfolding the piece of paper with childlike joy to reveal the results.

We followed the lines of the ladder to reveal the groupings: Lilim and Tirith as the team of two; me, Lia, and Rose as the team of three; and Shii by herself, meaning she would remain in the club room.

“Wh-why did I end up being the one who has to stay behind…?” Shii complained.

“Don’t let it get you down, Shii! Lady Luck is a cruel mistress!” Lilim said.

“I’m sure you’ll have better luck with the teams tomorrow,” Tirith said.

Having tried to cheer Shii up, we left the Student Council room to start our patrol duty. My team went to the right, while Lilim and Tirith went to the left.

“We ended up with our usual group,” I said.

“Ha-ha, we sure did,” agreed Lia.

“That’ll make this nice and easy,” said Rose.

We continued to make small talk until we left the school building.

“Okay… Where should we start?” I asked.

“Good question,” Lia responded. “I think starting with the closest club would make sense.”

“That would be the Cheerleading Club,” Rose said.

We hadn’t mapped out patrol routes for our two teams. According to Shii, this was to increase randomness, as patrolling the campus in obvious clockwise or counterclockwise directions would make it easy for sly students to get up to no good while they knew we weren’t around.

“Wow, they’re going all out,” I said when we arrived at the Cheerleading Club’s spot right in front of the main building.

“Let’s fight, fight, get it done! TBA is number one!”

The cheerleaders were performing for the new members. Their dance was perfectly coordinated.

“They’re so cool,” I said.

The girls’ powerful voices seemed to reverberate all the way down to my bones, while the precision and tempo of their dance displayed perfect body control. An amazing performance like this couldn’t be achieved without diligent training and hard work.

“I saw this last year too, but it’s still really impressive,” Rose said.

“They’re definitely cool, but those outfits are too revealing for me…,” Lia said, looking uncertain.

“Well, I see no problems here,” I said.

According to Shii, the clubs most likely to get carried away with their recruiting activities were the ones people weren’t as interested in. Popular clubs like Cheerleading didn’t need to break the rules to attract a lot of applicants.

“Let’s move on,” I said.

But just as we were about to head to a different location…

“Oh, it’s Allen!”

…a girl who’d been watching the Cheerleading Club’s performance shouted my name. She and a bunch of other female students hurriedly swarmed me.

“I-I’m a big fan of yours! Could I get an autograph?!”

“P-please shake my hand…!”

“Umm, do you have a girlfriend?!”

The girls all forcibly tried to draw my attention. Their youthful energy was a sight to behold.

“Umm, I’m kind of busy with Student Council business right now…,” I said, using my work as an excuse. I tried to get away, but the next moment…

“Wow, your hands are amazing! They’re so big and rough!”

“And your stomach’s as hard as steel! How much did you have to train to achieve that?!”

“You look slender, but you’re actually a total beefcake!”

…the girls started getting handsy. The feminine scents of soaps and flowers permeated my nostrils all at once, making my head spin.

“H-hey, umm, could you maybe…?” I trailed off, feeling uncomfortable.

Just then, black flames and cherry blossoms exploded into the air nearby.

“You’re all first years, right?” Lia said.

“That’s not how you behave toward an upperclassman, now, is it?” Rose chastised.

They both smiled gently, projecting a strange aura that had nothing to do with their spirit power.

Those smiles are terrifying… Lia and Rose were clearly smiling, but there was no joy in their expressions at all. I could feel their anger all the way through to the marrow in my bones.

The first years cowered before their wrath…

“S-s-sorry…!”

…then scattered in all directions like spiders.

“Good grief… I can’t let my guard down for a moment.”

“According to the romance handbook, guys find younger girls attractive. I’ll have to stay on high alert.”

Lia and Rose had dead serious expressions on their face as they murmured something to themselves. They were scaring me a little, so I bluntly changed the subject.

“U-uhh… Let’s go check out the Swordcraft Club next!”

As we made our way toward the gymnasium, Lia spoke up.

“Oh yeah, Allen. Are you sure you don’t want to recruit for the Practice-Swing Club?”

“Hmm… Personally, I don’t really see the need to,” I replied.

I would gladly welcome any first years who wanted to join…but I didn’t have any desire to make signs or run campaigns to attract them. I was fine with my club remaining a place people who genuinely loved swordcraft found on their own.

“Really? Well, whatever you say, Club President,” Lia said.

“I guess we already have way too many people,” conceded Rose.

Once we arrived at the gymnasium, we changed into our indoor shoes and went inside to observe the Swordcraft Club.

“They’re just as energetic as last year,” I said.

Over a hundred club members were in the gym. They were giving the prospective applicants a taste of what they could expect if they joined the Swordcraft Club.

“Are you all ready? Let’s move on to a three-strike chain!” yelled a girl with a drum in the middle of the gym.

“”””Hya! Hya! Hya!””””

The hundred-plus students in the gym swung their swords to the beat of the drum. As one, they raised their weapons, took a

step forward, and swung down. The students' fervor was palpable as they performed this move again and again.

…I remember feeling the same way the last time I was here, but this club's a bit too rigid for me.

As I was ruminating on that thought, the girl with the drum called out again.

"Next up, free practice! Begin!"

""""Yes, ma'am!""""

The students broke off from their synchronized movements to do their own thing. Some checked their form in front of a mirror, some practiced moves from their school of swordcraft, and others pulled textbooks out of their bags.

…Huh? Did the Swordcraft Club used to have free practice?

I cocked my head in confusion as the girl in the middle of the gym noticed us.

"Well, well, well, if it isn't Allen!"

It was Sirtie Rosette, an energetic third-year student with short brown hair and big, round eyes. I had heard that the previous president of the Swordcraft Club, Jean Bael, had appointed her as his successor at the end of last year, promoting her from vice president.

"It's been a while, Sirtie. I figure I should ask you this just to make sure, but you're not going to pull any more dirty tricks like you did last year to try to recruit new members, are you?" I asked, glancing toward the exit.

Last year, the Swordcraft Club had trapped me in the gymnasium in an attempt to force me to join them. The culprit behind that incident had been none other than Sirtie.

"Ah-ha-ha, that was a one-time thing. I won't do anything like it again!" she said with a laugh. She was always in high spirits.

"By the way…did you change your practice routine?" I asked.

"Oh, you noticed? Nothing gets by you, Allen!" Sirtie said, nudging me with her elbow. "Sword forms are very important, of course, but I've come to wonder if fixating on them too much can be a bad thing. So I decided to use my presidency to implement a looser training schedule. The freedom of your Practice-Swing Club seems popular, after all."

"Oh, that makes sense," I said. That flexibility spoke well of her.

We spent five more minutes watching the Swordcraft Club's recruiting activities without observing any problems.

"It doesn't seem like there's anything to worry about here," I said.

"Yeah, everything seems on the up-and-up," agreed Lia. "The first years look like they're having fun, too."

"Let's move on, then," said Rose.

After that, we went to the Mountaineering Club, the Swimming Club, the Art Club, and more without finding anyone breaking the rules.

"Everyone's playing by the rules this year, huh?" I said.

"I'm baffled. I heard a lot of people stepped out of line last year…," remarked Lia.

"I guess it's a good thing…but something about it doesn't feel right," said Rose.

Right at that moment…

"What was that, punk?! You think we're joking?!"

…we heard someone angrily yelling from the schoolyard.

"…That sounds like trouble," I said.

"Yeah," agreed Lia.

"It doesn't sound friendly, that's for sure," commented Rose.

We nodded to each other, then raced to the schoolyard.

"Wh-what the…?"

When we arrived, we were confronted by a shocking sight.

"Hya-ha-ha! Student Council, comin' through! Why're you wimps being so well-behaved? Last year, you didn't listen to a word we said!"

"You're free to try all the aggressive, loud, dirty recruiting techniques you want. There's just no telling what our *secret boss* will do when he hears about it."

"Eeek…!"

"D-don't worry! Everything's above board this year!"

Lilim and Tirith were walking through campus threatening all the clubs they passed. And they were using my name to do it…

"…Lia, Rose. I'm gonna go talk to them."

"O-okay," responded Lia.

"Remember they're our seniors, so go easy on them," Rose said.

I nodded and walked toward the two troublemakers from the Student Council.

“Hey guys, do you have a moment?” I asked.

“What the hell do you…want…?” Lilim said.

“You got somethin’ to say to…us…?” Tirith said.

All the color drained from their faces.

“You two are clearly having fun,” I said.

“Sh-she who retreats lives to fight another day…!” Lilim said.

“We’re goners if we don’t get outta here…,” Tirith said.

They both ran away as fast as they could without sparing me a second glance.

“Dark Shadow,” I said, summoning dark tentacles that stretched out like amoebas and wrapped around their legs.

“Eeeeeek…! Someone, hel—*hnnh*!”

“H-he’s gonna kill m—*mmph*!”

I gagged them both with darkness to stop them from screaming anything that would get me in trouble.

“All right… We’re drawing too much attention here, so let’s move somewhere out of sight,” I said.

“‘Ngh! Hngh! Hrmm!’”

Lilim and Tirith tried desperately to resist, but they couldn’t break free from the darkness.

“Oh my god… He’s gonna kill those two Student Council members…”

“Don’t stare. You could be next.”

“That’s the scariest smile I’ve ever seen…”

I carried Lilim and Tirith behind the school building, where no one would see us, and began to scold them.

“What do you think gave you the right to do that? You can’t say things to hurt a person’s reputation when they’re not around—”

“I know… I’m sorry,” Lilim apologized.

“I promise not to do it again…,” Tirith said.

They were both near tears, but I had little doubt they’d forget all about this after a good night’s sleep.

“*Haah*… I’ll be much angrier the next time you do something like this, okay?” I warned them.

My scolding done, I left them and rejoined Lia and Rose.

“Sorry for the wait.”

“It needed to be done,” responded Lia. “Talk about a disaster.”

“Those two never change,” said Rose.

With that issue taken care of, we wandered around casually observing more clubs. We were about to return to the Student Council room…

“P-please stop!”

“Wh-what do you want…?”

…when we spotted trouble right in front of the main school building. I looked closely and realized that a group of brawny guys wearing white martial arts uniforms had surrounded some first-year boys.

“You’ve got rock-hard pecs, strong quads, and well-developed hamstrings!”

“There’s no doubt about it! You guys were born for judo!”

“What’re you waiting for? Join the Judo Club! Our holy land, the Judo Hall, is right this way!”

Some Judo Club members were clearly harassing the young students to join their club.

“S-sorry, but we’re on our way to check out the Swordcraft Club…”

“If you’ll excuse us…”

The first years tried to get away, but the physically gifted older students wouldn’t let them.

“Just hear us out! The Judo Club is holding a great campaign for new members!”

“If you join during the campaign, you’ll get a month’s worth of special protein powder and a shaker bottle free!”

“You can’t pass that up, can you? If you’re still not sure, we have a trial membership, too!”

This was as pushy and underhanded as recruiting could get.

“That doesn’t look good,” Lia said.

“They’re clearly breaking the rules,” Rose said.

They both looked at me.

“Yeah, let’s go talk to them.”

Lia, Rose, and I walked up to the aggressive Judo Club members.

“Sorry, but do you guys have a moment?” I asked, speaking on our behalf as the Student Council Vice President.

But then…

“…Tessa?”

“A-Allen…!”

It was Tessa Balmond, my Class 2-A classmate and old friend. I had never seen him behave this way. He grew flustered, his gaze wavering as he looked at me.

“Wh-what…? Why are you doing this?” I asked.

During last year’s New Student Recruiting Period, Tessa had sadly been forced into the Judo Club because he couldn’t resist its aggressive recruiting methods. He should’ve known as well as anyone else how uncomfortable it was to be on the receiving end of this kind of behavior. Why was he now doing the same thing to new students?

“Y-you’ve got it all wrong, Allen! There’s a reason I—,” Tessa began to explain, but he was interrupted.

“Well, if it isn’t the Student Council. I knew you bastards would be back this year to pester us again!” said a giant, muscular guy so tall I had to look up. “I’m Maul Bison, the president of the Judo Club, which has a long and proud history here at Thousand Blade!”

Maul Bison had close-cropped black hair, thick eyebrows, and a large nose. He was nearly two meters tall and looked completely comfortable in his white judo uniform. He seemed like an intense guy.

“I’m Allen Rodol, the vice president of the Student Council. I want to talk to you about the Judo Club’s overly aggressive recrui __”

But Maul cut me off.

“Hmph! It’s always rules this, rules that with you all! Are the rules really so important?!”

“Yes, they are,” I said.

Thousand Blade’s rules existed so its hundreds of students could live comfortably during their time here. If it became a lawless place without any rules, students wouldn’t be able to study swordcraft in peace.

But more than that, I simply found bothering people with overly aggressive recruiting methods to be immoral.

“Grr… I’m sick of you stuck-up Student Council members and your constant blabbing about ‘being on your best behavior’…! It’s because you see us as your enemy and put all this pressure on us that our numbers have fallen in the first place! Do you have no compassion at all?!”

“Uh, I don’t think the Student Council has anything to do with that…,” I responded.

Years of overbearing recruiting were naturally going to harm the popularity of the club.

“Gah, I can’t take this anymore! Allen Rodol, I challenge you to a match!”

“Uhh, why?”

“If you win, I’ll immediately quit the Judo Club!”

“No, you don’t have to do that. I just want you to follow the ru__”

“However! If I win, you’ll promise to ignore our slightly intense recruiting methods!”

“But I have no experience with ju—”

“We’ll perform our match in the Judo Hall! It’s too late to back out now! Strict oppression gives rise to strong resistance… The Student Council has gone too far!”

…He wasn’t listening to a word I said. I was at a loss for what to do.

“Why not just give him a match?” Lia suggested from behind me. “He’ll have to back down if you beat him at his own game.”

“Yeah. I wouldn’t mind seeing you in a judo uniform, either,” Rose added.

“Huh…?” I said, taken aback.

Before I knew it, the match had been set, and I was in the men’s locker room of the Judo Hall putting my arms through the sleeves of a judo uniform.

Haah… Why’d it have to turn out like this?

I gave a deep sigh and checked my appearance. I’d put on the uniform by trying to imitate the people around me, and I was surprised to see I’d done it right.

“Okay… I should get going.”

I found Lia and Rose waiting outside the locker room.

“Heh-heh, you look super cool,” Lia said.

“Wow, it really compliments you,” said Rose.

The girls’ compliments raised my spirits, but just then, I heard a loud, sharp sound from one corner of the Judo Hall. I looked in that direction to see Maul slapping his cheeks.

…Is he trying to fire himself up? He was hitting himself really hard.

I need to get in the mood, too. I sat down on the tatami mat floor and started to stretch. As I did, I heard an impassioned conversation from across the hall.

"Maul, I'm sure you already know this, but Allen's strength is abnormal. Don't think your weight gives you an advantage. You'll lose immediately if you try to grapple him. The only way to win is with your technique!" Tessa advised him.

"Got it! I ain't gonna lose!" Maul responded, burning with fighting spirit.

Meanwhile…

"Hey, Allen. I'm getting ice cream with Rose once we're done patrolling for the Student Council. You wanna come?" Lia asked.

"The ice cream shop's putting out new spring flavors today. They've got strawberry, orange, and cherry. Sounds yummy," Rose said.

My friends were so sure I was going to win, they were discussing plans for later in the day.

"S-sure… I'll join you if I'm not too tired," I replied. The difference in energy between the two sides of the hall was unbelievable.

Once Maul and I were ready, we both stood in the middle of the Judo Hall.

"This match will be between Allen Rodol, the Student Council Vice President, and Maul Bison, the Judo Club President! The time limit is four minutes. There will be no overtime. Weapons and Soul Attires are prohibited. Please fight fairly and in accordance with international judo rules!"

I didn't know anything about international judo rules, but I figured you just had to grapple and throw your opponent. That wasn't too complicated.

"Are you both ready? Begin!" the official said, signaling the start of the match.

"Raaaaaah!" Maul roared, immediately charging at me.

He's seriously fired up. But I can handle this…!

I stuck out my right hand and tried to grab his collar, when—

"You fool!"

—Maul suddenly stepped back, grabbed my extended right arm, and used his momentum to turn around for a shoulder throw.

“I’ve got you now…!”

But his exaltation was short-lived.

“What the…?!” he cried out in shock, letting go of me and retreating with nimble steps.

Maul’s thoughts raced. *I-impossible… I executed that move perfectly, but I couldn’t budge him at all. Just how strong is this Allen Rodol…?!*

I felt excitement well up within me as Maul stared, speechless.

This…is interesting.

Maul’s footwork was different from any opponent I’d fought. He ran toward me at full speed and then, when he got within range, concentrated spirit power into his right foot alone and quickly stepped back. Next, he concentrated spirit power into only his left foot alone and quickly spun his back into me, attempting to transition into a shoulder throw.

He was incredibly skilled at switching his spirit power on and off and shifting his weight. His spirit power control and footwork, honed through judo, could never be learned by practicing the sword alone.

…I wonder if I could apply these techniques to swordcraft.

Now that I thought about it, going toe-to-toe with the president of the Judo Club was a rare opportunity.

This is getting kinda fun.

I wanted to see what other moves Maul had.

…Ah… On closer inspection, his center of gravity is pretty low—lower than my middle stance. That makes it hard to knock him down.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the mat…

Allen Rodol is a formidable guy. His judo stance is clearly amateurish, but something about him is really intimidating… He’s definitely a worthy opponent!

Our eyes met.

“It’s my turn to attack now,” I said.

“Come at me!” Maul responded.

I rushed directly at him and tried to grab his collar.

“Take this!”

“You’ll have to do better than that!” he yelled, deflecting my arm with a knifehand strike.

“I’m not done yet!” I told him.

I reached out again and again, stubbornly trying to grab him, but…

“It’s no use!”

…Maul skillfully used his hands to block all my attempts.

He’s fending me off with defensive techniques reminiscent of swordcraft and footwork unique to judo… I want to grab him, but he’s not giving me a chance. Judo really is amazing! I thought, impressed.

I see now what Tessa meant, thought Maul. *I* definitely *can’t try to grapple him. His strength is too monstrous… But judo is the “gentle way”! The weak can overcome the strong!*

I lost track of time as we fought. Maul tried a great variety of techniques, and just as the fatigue was starting to show on his face…

“Raaaaaah!”

…he roared loudly and rushed directly at me.

What’s his next move going to be? …Huh?

I felt a sense of déjà vu. The beginning of this technique and the position of his center of gravity both looked familiar.

Is this…?

I reached my right arm toward him as bait, and Maul responded by abruptly stopping his charge to take a big step back.

“I’ve already seen that move,” I told him.

A full-speed approach, then a half-step back and an arm grab. He’d shown me that exact sequence of moves at the beginning of the match.

“Wha?!”

Maul immediately tried to stop himself, but it was too late. I took one large step forward and grabbed his collar.

“I’ve got you this time!”

“Crap…!” Maul cursed.

Now that I had him in a grapple, the rest of the match would be a simple contest of strength. I filled both my arms with spirit power and tried to push Maul to the mat.

“Down you go.”

“Ngh… Hnnnnnngh…!” Maul strained.

Surprisingly, he held out. He’d concentrated all his spirit power into his legs and spine, giving him just enough strength to remain

on his feet.

He's stronger than I expected.

I slowly increased my strength, holding back to avoid breaking his spine.

"You…monster…," Maul said through gritted teeth. *He's too strong… At this rate, he's gonna force me down to the mat… Crap! I've worked so hard on my judo skills, but they aren't good enough to beat Allen Rodol…!*

The fighting spirit started to fade from his eyes.

"You can't lose, Maul!"

"Without you, the club's doomed!"

"We're gonna win nationals this year, remember?!"

Sensing that Maul was about to give in, the Judo Club members throughout the hall shouted their encouragement. As they did, the dying embers of his fighting spirit flared back to life.

"…We're gonna…win nationals …! *Haaaaargh*!" Maul shouted.

He regained his balance, grabbed the sides of my collar with both hands, and fought with renewed vigor in our contest of strength. His spirit power was greater than it had been before, likely as a result of a fight-or-flight response.

…He's strong. Maul was a formidable opponent, but unfortunately for him, the pure volume of his spirit power didn't match the Thirteen Oracle Knights, let alone the Seven Holy Blades or Four Imperial Knights. *I'm surprised he hasn't gone down yet, but I can still overpower him without issue.*

I started to up my strength but then caught a glimpse of Maul's expression.

"Haaaaaaaaarrgghh!"

There was such desperation on his face. He was clearly going all out, and most importantly, he was fighting fair and square.

This match was between a swordsman and a judoka. Our paths were different, but we both strove for the same thing: to become the strongest.

…I can't do that. As we grappled, I couldn't help but feel that as the Student Council Vice President, it would be wrong to defeat Maul and crush the future of judo at Thousand Blade Academy.

So I came to a decision.

…Sometimes, it pays to hold back.

A *thud* sounded around the Judo Hall. Maul and I hit the floor at the exact same time, and a buzzer sounded to announce the end of the match.

A brief silence fell over the room.

“It’s a tie!” the official declared.

The time had run out without either of us scoring a point, meaning the match had ended in a stalemate.

“HELL YEAH! I TIED WITH THE FAMOUS ALLEN RODOL!” shouted Maul.

His fellow club members began to cheer.

“Whoa! No way…!”

“I’m crying, man. I almost fainted toward the end!”

“We can really do it this year! We can win nationals!”

A crowd of first years who’d been lured into the Judo Hall by all the commotion looked just as stunned.

“I know Allen didn’t use his Soul Attire, but tying with him is insane!”

“That was amazing… I don’t know what I just watched, but it was amazing!”

“Judo, huh…? I might as well at least give the trial membership a shot.”

Afterward, Maul and I bowed to one another, signaling the end of the match. A tie meant that Maul didn’t have to quit the club, but he also couldn’t harass new students. The Judo Club also came to the compromise that its members would follow the rules set down by the Student Council.

“Whew… I’m pooped,” I said, returning to Lia and Rose now that that unforeseen issue had been dealt with.

“Allen, why didn’t you overpower him at the end?” Lia asked.

“You could’ve easily forced him to the ground, right?” added Rose. “Why did you choose to draw?”

I may have been able to fool everyone else, but I couldn’t fool my two friends.

“Hmm, how should I put it…? I just felt like winning would be a mistake,” I said.

“Heh-heh, that sounds like something you’d do,” responded Lia.

“I really like that side of you,” said Rose.

I wasn’t sure why, but they both smiled happily.

“Well, then… I’m gonna go change,” I told them.

“Okay,” said Lia.

“We’ll wait outside,” added Rose.

“I’ll be quick.”

I went into the men’s locker room and started changing into my uniform. But just as I did, someone spoke to me from behind.

“Yo. That was a good match.”

“Oh, hey, Tessa.”

Tessa was wearing his judo uniform, and he tossed me a bottle.

“Here, it’s a sports drink.”

“Oh, thanks,” I responded. The match had made me thirsty, so I gladly accepted the drink. I took a sip; it tasted great after that workout.

“Maul’s a force to be reckoned with, isn’t he?” Tessa said.

“Yeah, he’s strong. Way stronger than I expected.”

“Heh, that’s kind of you.” After a short silence, Tessa scratched his head and said, “…Sorry for puttin’ you in a bit of an awkward spot.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

“Oh, don’t play dumb with me. I’ve spent the last year trying to catch up to you. There’s no way in hell you couldn’t have overpowered him at the end,” he said, giving me a gentle karate chop on the head.

“Y-yeah… I admit I went easy on him, but I didn’t mean it as an insult—”

“It’s fine. I know why you did it. So…thank you,” Tessa said.

“You do? Well, you’re welcome.”

“Heh. You’re a really simple guy, you know that?”

We shared an awkward yet friendly smile.

“…Maul’s a real taskmaster during practice and can get carried away sometimes…but he’s actually really kind. He always treats us to meals after practice, shares vegetables his family sends him, and gives the younger students advice. He’s just an all-around nice guy,” Tessa said.

“Huh, I didn’t know that.”

If his family sent him vegetables, did that mean they were farmers or something? That made me feel a certain affinity with him.

“I think he’s really worried about the Judo Club,” continued Tessa. “Our number of applicants has been decreasing every year,

and the way things are going, the club could be disbanded in the near future… Maul tends to scare away new students he approaches, and the campaigns we're running aren't working. The Judo Club has had trouble attracting students for years, which is why we've had to recruit so aggressively. But you taught me something important today, Allen."

Tessa pointed outside the men's locker room to the Judo Hall. Club members were training a number of new students who'd been watching the match and must have decided to try it out.

At the same time, I heard a conversation from one side of the hall.

"Hmm… This new method might actually work."

"If we hold a demonstration for new students to watch, they'll gather out of curiosity and see how much fun judo is!"

"You know what they say—even the best products won't sell without proper marketing… I like it! Let's strike while the iron's hot!"

It sounded like the Judo Club had found a new recruiting method.

"Thanks to your little performance, we had a chance to show people the appeal of judo. We've also found the right way to recruit new members. So…thank you," Tessa said, bowing deeply.

"Don't worry about it. I was only doing my job as Student Council Vice President."

"…Do you *have* to be so serious all the time?" He smiled wryly and patted me on the back. "Let's go out for food again sometime. My treat."

"That sounds fun."

After that, Lia, Rose, and I finished our patrol duty with no more major incidents.

■

We spent much of the next week after the intense Recruiting period holed up in the Student Council room. The academic schedule for this year at Thousand Blade needed to be revamped, and after devoting nearly every minute of our lunch and after-school time together to work on it, we were finally finished.

“Thanks for all your hard work, everyone!” Shii said gratefully. “This is gonna be another great year!”

“Heh, heh-heh… I can’t move…,” complained Lilim.

“I feel like I did a lifetime’s worth of work in the last week…,” said Tirith.

They both collapsed on the spot.

“We’re finally done…,” said Lia.

“We all worked so hard,” remarked Rose.

The relief was visible on both their faces. There was a sense of release in the room.

“Oh, it’s almost time!” Shii said as if she’d just remembered something.

She quickly turned on an LCD screen and switched it to a news channel. A large red headline read THE SWORD MASTER FESTIVAL LOTTERY WILL BE HELD MOMENTARILY!

“Phew, that was close,” Shii said with a sigh of relief before turning to face us. “We almost missed it. The draw for the Sword Master Festival is today! This is super important! Let’s watch it together.”

“Oh yeah, I forgot that from this year on, they’re doing the draw a few days before the knockout stage,” Lilim said.

“I think I heard they changed other things about the event, too…,” added Tirith.

Shii nodded. “That’s right… You know what, this might be a good opportunity. We still have a little time before the lottery starts, so why don’t we go over the changes that were made to this year’s Sword Master Festival?”

She paused to clear her throat.

“As you all know, the Sword Master Festival is being held very early this year. Three other important changes have also been made.” Shii held up her index finger. “First, the Elite Five Academies were given automatic qualification. The Elite Five Academies make it through the preliminaries nearly one hundred percent of the time, and this has always meant that any academy unlucky enough to draw one of them in the first round of the preliminaries is all but guaranteed to be knocked out early. That was a problem because the Sword Master Festival is the biggest stage for an academy to make a name for itself and gain national attention. People have been arguing for years that it’s

unfair for an academy to lose that chance simply because it was unlucky with its first matchup, and that giving the Elite Five Academies a bye for the preliminaries would fix this. The Elite Five Academies automatically being advanced to the knockout stage this year was their way of addressing those complaints."

I was pretty sure Chairwoman Reia had explained this to us in homeroom about a week ago. The Sword Master Festival's preliminary stage had ended three days ago, leaving only the knockout stage and the championship. Thousand Blade was one of the Elite Five Academies, so we hadn't had to fight in the preliminaries.

"Second, new measures were introduced to protect the swordcraft students. The Sword Master Festival has always been infamous for its very tight schedule. I don't know whose dumb idea it was to hold the preliminaries, knockout stage, and championship all in just three days, but that harsh schedule placed too much of a burden on the contestants' bodies, which led to the major problem of students breaking down and having to withdraw every year… We know the pain of that well."

"Urgh, I'm still not over last year…," groaned Lilim.

"Way to remind us…," complained Tirith.

They both put a hand to their chests, looking pained. We had achieved a historic victory against White Lily Girls Academy during last year's Sword Master Festival, but Shii, Lilim, and Tirith had been so fatigued that we'd been forced to withdraw.

"To ease the burden on the students' still-developing bodies, the schedule was relaxed, and a reserve system was implemented. The changes to the schedule were simple: The preliminaries are now a week before the knockout stage, which is three days before the championship. That'll give the participants time to recover," Shii explained.

"That was a good idea," said Lia.

"And much needed," agreed Rose.

"Next is the new reserve system. Each swordcraft academy can now register up to two extra swordfighters. A reserve can be switched in for one of the participants at any point before a match. The goal of this system is to prevent academies from having to drop out."

Both the extended schedule and the reserve system would go a long way to ensure the safety of the students. I thought they were both really good changes.

"And finally, the bracket for the knockout stage is being drawn beforehand instead of right before the event. This change was made to prevent confusion on the day of the tournament. Oh, it's starting now. That was good timing," Shii said, turning to face the screen.

It showed an enormous auditorium. An old man stood on the stage flanked by a man and woman. The space below the stage was packed with spectators and members of the media.

"All right everybody, the day has finally arrived!" announced the woman. *"It's time to perform the lottery for the Sword Master Festival's knockout stage!"*

"Eleven academies made it through the hard-fought preliminaries and will now join the stalwart Elite Five Academies to make a total of sixteen schools!" said the man. *"Today, we find out where they will all sit on the bracket! There will be no easy path to the finals!"*

Apparently, the man and woman on the stage were the hosts.

"And performing the draw is none other than…"

"The president of the Sword Master Festival Executive Committee, Duke Dafton Manay!"

"Thank you," said the old man—Duke Dafton—bowing ever so slightly.

A large white box was carried toward him from one wing of the stage.

"In this box are sixteen balls, each marked with the name of an academy!" continued the woman.

"Duke Dafton will draw a school, which will then be added to the bracket!" said the man.

Just then, a giant bracket was lowered from above the stage.

"I always get so excited by events like this," said Shii.

"I know, right?! My heart's beating out of my chest!" exclaimed Lia.

Those two were both big fans of ceremony, and their eyes shone like children's as they watched the screen.

"Now then, Duke Dafton, would you please begin the lottery?"

"Of course," responded the duke, nodding in a dignified manner.

He reached a wrinkled hand into the box, rummaged through the balls, and pulled one out. I recognized the name immediately.

"The first school taking part in the first match is… Would you look at that! It's Thousand Blade Academy!" announced the woman.

"Wow, an Elite Five Academy right off the bat!" said the man. *"Duke Dafton is wasting no time today!"*

"Thousand Blade is a true powerhouse. They have a formidable roster of swordfighters this year led by none other than the great Allen Rodol!"

"Trust me when I say that nobody wants to meet Thousand Blade in round one."

"Mwa-ha-ha, that's right!" cackled Lilim. "Our name inspires fear in the hearts of all!"

"We are pretty great, aren't we?!" said Tirith.

The two of them puffed out their chests proudly.

"All right, let's keep it going!"

"Which incredibly unlucky academy will be the one to face Thousand Blade in the first round? Drumroll, please!"

Urged on by the hosts, Duke Dafton drew the next ball.

There were two words on it: Divine Emperor.

"I—I can't believe this! What a shocking development!"

"It's another one of the Elite Five Academies, Divine Emperor Academy!"

My upperclassmen were visibly shocked.

"No way…," said Shii.

"You gotta be kidding me…," responded Lilim.

"Last year, we faced White Lily Girls Academy in the Elite Eight, and this year, we're up against Divine Emperor Academy in the first round… We're cursed," complained Tirith.

The three of them all fell to their knees.

"Oh, wow… That's a tough break for Thousand Blade…"

"All we can say at this point is 'Our condolences.'"

The two hosts couldn't even hide their pity.

"President, is Divine Emperor Academy really that good?" I asked. I knew almost nothing about the Elite Five Academies.

Shii nodded. "Divine Emperor Academy is the oldest swordcraft academy in Liengard. Not even White Lily Girls Academy has

been able to match its success in recent years, giving it a firm hold over the title of the best of the Elite Five Academies…”

“I see…” It sounded like we’d drawn the worst possible opponent in the first round. “B-but if we wanted to win it all, we’d have to face them eventually!” I said.

“Yeah, Allen’s right!” agreed Lia.

“We have to overcome them. It was only ever a matter of when,” added Rose.

The three of us tried to lighten the mood…

“…If we had to face them, I would rather it have been at the championship.”

“I can’t believe the great Lilim Chorine is going to lose in the first round…”

“I’m so depressed…”

…but Shii, Lilim, and Tirith all remained down in the dumps.

“A-anyway, there’s no point in getting discouraged now! We need to keep our spirits up!” I said, forcing it a bit. With that, we split up for the day.

Still, I can’t believe we’re facing the best Elite Five Academy in the first round…

This year’s Sword Master Festival was going to start with a bang.

■

The day after the lottery for the Sword Master Festival’s knockout stage, I decided to go to the Practice-Swing Club for the first time in a while.

“Hey, look! Allen came…!”

“It’s actually him! He’s here in the flesh!”

“Allen! Good morning!”

I casually waved to the new first-year members in response.

Wow. We have so many members now…

Over thirty new students had joined the club—despite the fact that I’d done zero recruiting—pushing our numbers over one hundred and fifty. This put us above the Swordcraft Academy as the largest club at Thousand Blade. We allowed members to join other clubs too, which probably contributed to how easily people signed up.

Well, the size of the club lets me borrow great spaces like this, so I'm not complaining. We'd only been able to use a corner of the schoolyard when I formed the club, but our growing size gave us access to other facilities. Now we had permission to reserve the gymnasium and full schoolyard.

And by chance, I had ended up coming on a day when we had the schoolyard reserved for the entire day. I'd practically been skipping with excitement as I walked to the club.

Lia and Rose weren't here; Lia was speaking to her Spirit Core in the Soul Attire Room, and Rose was training in the forest.

…Sweet, this is a good spot. I secured an area without many people around and exhaled deeply.

Man… It felt like today would never come. I had been so busy with the Student Council the last two weeks that I'd barely had any time for practice swings. I did get in five or six hours after returning to the dorm every night, but that wasn't nearly enough to satisfy my desire to swing my sword.

To be honest, I was at breaking point. I was probably a few hours—no, minutes—away from developing serious withdrawal symptoms.

…Let's do this.

Hands trembling, I drew my sword. The feeling of the handle in my palm and the sound of the blade scraping against the scabbard sent pleasure coursing through my body.

I assumed the middle stance, raised my sword, and swung it down as hard as I could.

"Hah!"

…Nothing beat this. The first practice swing always felt the best.

"Yah!"

Actually, scratch that. The second practice swing was just as good.

"Hya!"

My body had warmed up by the third practice swing, making it also indescribably pleasurable.

There was nothing in this world more addictive than practice swings. I was incapable of performing just one to clear my mind without getting stuck in an endless loop of pleasure.

…Ahh, this feels so good…

I swung my sword under the clear blue sky, my mind free of intrusive thoughts. Was there any greater joy in the world than this?

Ha-ha… Ha-ha-ha…

Joy swelled from the depths of my heart, and I reveled in it. Time lost all meaning as I continued to swing my sword. My hands grew steadily warmer on the grip, my arms grew pleasantly tired, and I developed a nice tension in my back. If only this moment could last forev—

"Hey! Maggot!"

Someone yelled from behind me, snapping me back to reality. I turned around to see Claude, who was visibly upset.

"Huh? Claude? When did you get back?" I asked. She was supposed to be in Vesteria for at least ten days.

"That's all you have to say?! Do you have any idea how long I've been trying to get your attention?!" Claude yelled.

"S-sorry. I didn't notice you. I was too immersed in my practice swings."

"Good lord. Do you really have to focus that hard…?"

"So do you need something?"

Claude hated my guts. What would compel her to approach me like this?

"…I have something important to tell you, maggot."

"You do?"

I cocked my head, confused.

"It's about Lia's health," Claude said, her expression serious.

"Lia's health?! What about it?!" I asked, shocked.

"Shh! Not so loud!" Claude put a finger to her lips and quickly looked around. "Too many people can see us here. Follow me."

"Okay."

I followed Claude through Thousand Blade's expansive campus.

"…Umm, where are we going?" I asked.

"I'm about to give you information regarding the health of a member of Vesteria's royal family. Do you really think I can do that where anyone could hear us? I have a special place prepared, obviously," Claude responded.

"H-huh…"

It was easy for me to forget that Lia was a princess of Vesteria. Information about her health would be a state secret.

We continued to walk in silence.

“Here we are,” Claude finally said.

She’d stopped on a perfectly ordinary road on the edge of Thousand Blade’s campus. There was a grove to the right and a hedge to the left, and I could hear birds chirping. True, there was no one around…but if someone happened to walk this way, they’d be able to hear everything we said.

“*Here*? Are you sure?”

“You’ll see why I brought you here in a second. Just stand there and shut up,” Claude said rudely.

She kicked one of the brick blocks below the verdant hedge—and it slid to the side with a grinding noise to reveal a staircase leading underground.

“Whoa…!”

“What are you so amazed by?” Claude asked. “It’s just an ordinary secret passage.”

“Can you really call a secret passage ‘ordinary’…?”

Now that I thought about it, there was a hidden passage in Liengard Palace, too. They must be popular among royalty and their associates.

“Follow me,” Claude said, jutting her chin forward and starting down the staircase. I followed her until we reached a room that was about ten square meters in size.

“This room is as small as a pigsty, which is still bigger than you deserve,” Claude said.

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” I said.

We wouldn’t get anywhere if I responded to each of Claude’s insults. It was best just to let them slide.

“Tch, you’re always such a drag,” she muttered. “It still boggles my mind that Princess Lia fell for you…”

“…?”

I wasn’t entirely sure what she’d said, but it didn’t matter right now. I didn’t want to waste any more time getting to why she brought me here.

“So…what did you want to tell me about Lia’s health?” I asked.

“I want to start by asking you a question along those lines. Have you noticed anything off about her condition recently?”

A couple things came to mind right away. The first was the warning that Sebas had given me in January when we’d been

fleeing Berios Castle after rescuing Shii: *“Keep an eye on your dear friend Lia Vesteria’s condition.”*

Lia had grown visibly flustered when I asked her about this.

It’s clear she’s hiding something about her health from me.

Lia had also asked me an ominous question on Valentine’s Day: *“What would you do if I told you the course of my life was determined by a god and that I couldn’t escape my fate?”* I could clearly remember the deep sadness in her eyes as she’d said that.

It must be something serious.

Claude clicked her tongue in annoyance. “Hey. Answer me *out loud*, will you? Is there anything about her health that’s stuck out to you?”

I gave her a simple explanation of what Sebas and Lia had told me.

“I see… About that…” Claude furrowed her brow in thought, then gave me a stern look. “Princess Lia has a serious illness.”

“Huh…? But… Wh-what do you mean?!”

“Calm down,” she said, her voice level. “I can’t give you any details, but…Princess Lia has been dealing with this illness from the moment she was born. It’s not immediately life-threatening.”

“Okay…”

I felt frustration and relief in turn, jumbling my brain.

“His Majesty has been trying to find a cure for her condition for years… Yet despite all his efforts, we haven’t been able to make any progress,” Claude said.

King Gris loved Lia more than anything in the world. Knowing him, I was sure he was doing everything in his power to save her.

“This should go without saying, but only the royal family and a very limited number of close subordinates know about Princess Lia’s illness. You can’t tell a soul about it,” Claude said.

“I understand.”

“Also…I need to warn you just in case, but don’t start asking her any stupid questions. Princess Lia is intentionally keeping her health issues under wraps.”

“I won’t, of course.”

Lia had chosen to keep her illness to herself, so it would be rude of me to start prying. There wasn’t anything I could do anyway; Zeon’s darkness had tremendous healing capabilities,

but it was only effective on external wounds and curses. It couldn't cure illnesses.

"Anyway, report to me immediately if you notice anything abnormal about Princess Lia's condition," Claude said.

"I don't mind doing that, but…you've been spending a lot of time in Vesteria. How can I contact you if you're out of the country?" I asked.

"You really are slow, aren't you? I haven't actually been absent because I've been going back to Vesteria. I've been in this room using the academy's security cameras to observe Princess Lia. I'm giving His Majesty regular updates on her health via radio."

"Huh? Security cameras?"

I followed Claude's gaze and noticed a great number of LCD screens on the wall. It was clear that she was telling the truth and that she'd actually been using this room to observe Lia at all times.

"You'll find me in this room morning, day, and night. If anything happens, come right here," Claude said, turning away as if she had nothing left to say to me.

"Umm, do you mind…if I ask you a question?" I said.

"What is it? If it's something stupid, I'll gut you like a fish," Claude threatened, glaring daggers at me.

I didn't cower. "What you just told me is a national secret, right?"

"Obviously."

"Why did you decide to tell me something so important?"

"…"

Claude thought for a second, clearly perturbed, then sighed in resignation.

"…You're a disgusting, irredeemable maggot. You sank your poisonous fangs into our beloved Princess Lia, and as if that wasn't enough for you, you also peeped on me as I got out of the shower and saw me naked. You're a man of untold evil and carnal lust, Allen Rodol."

"Uhh… Sorry about that."

There were a few things I wanted to say in response, but there was no denying I'd seen her naked.

"However…as I told you during one of our duels, you have respectable qualities as a man. You saved Princess Lia from the

Black Organization, retrieved Lady Shii from Ronelia, and protected the Empress from a demon. You're chivalrous, brave, and a truly formidable swordsman."

"Where are you going with this…?" I asked.

"Grk… Don't make me say it! I'm betting on you, okay?! Only the tiniest amount, though!" Claude shouted, holding her index finger and thumb as close as possible without them touching.

Even I could tell she was just trying to hide her embarrassment.

"Anyway—as Princess Lia's knight, I command you to protect her with your life. I'm counting on you… *Allen Rodol*."

■

One day after school, as the Sword Master Festival was fast approaching, Shii called for a meeting of the Student Council. Claude was absent again, supposedly back in Vesteria, but I figured she must be in the secret underground room.

"I gathered you all here because we have a very important decision to make," Shii said once we were all seated.

"An 'important decision'?" I repeated.

"What are you talking about?" Rose asked.

Lia jumped in her seat, causing strands of her hair to stand up.

"Oh! Are you talking about our Sword Master Festival team?" she asked.

"Ding-ding-ding! Correct! We need to decide who to register for the Sword Master Festival!" Shii said, and a stir of excitement went through the room. "I've invited the winner of the First-Year Tourney, who'll be fighting with us during the festival, as a special guest!"

In the interest of fostering growth in younger students, the Sword Master Festival required each team's leadoff fighter to be a first year. At Thousand Blade, that position was given to the winner of the First-Year Tourney.

"Ooo, the best first year is coming…? I'm excited," said Lilim.

"We'll need to show her the ropes, though," added Tirith.

They both seemed excited to act like proper upperclassmen and mentor the first year.

Oh right, they know who won.

While the rest of us had been busy rearranging Thousand Blade's academic schedule, we'd entrusted Lilim and Tirith with planning and running the First-Year Tourney. Obviously, that meant they knew the identity of the special guest.

"I don't want to make her wait any longer. You can come in!" Shii called out.

The door clattered open, and a girl walked inside. I was shocked when I saw her. I could never forget that face.

"I-it's you…," I gasped.

"I'm Lou Lorenti from Class 1-A. It's nice to meet you all. Hey, Allen."

Lou Lorenti was a cute girl who stood at 155 centimeters tall with medium-length flaxen hair. I'd had a minor incident with her when I proctored the Thousand Blade Entrance Examination, and I hadn't seen her since.

"It's been a while," she said.

"Y-yeah, it sure has," I responded, the memory of our incident making me feel awkward.

"Huh? Do you know her, Allen?" Shii asked, knowing nothing of our past.

"Yeah… Actually, at last year's entrance exam—"

"He grabbed my neck and strangled me until I almost passed out," Lou interrupted. "It was really something."

"Hey, Lou! Now, hang on!" I said, trying to stop her from revealing what I'd done. But it was too late…

"Y-you strangled her? That's some hardcore roleplay," Shii said, stunned. It sounded like she'd come to some sort of crazy misunderstanding.

"I wouldn't have expected Allen to be so domineering…," Lilim said.

"I can kind of see it, actually…," chimed in Tirith.

I couldn't believe the rude things they were saying about me.

"You have it all wrong! It wasn't…whatever you think it was! It was a complicated situation, so please let me explain!"

I launched into a detailed, careful explanation of the accident that had occurred during the entrance examination.

"So in short, your Spirit Core went berserk and strangled Lou?" Shii asked.

"Pretty much."

“So it really wasn’t anything more?” Lilim asked.

“No.”

“You really weren’t indulging in a fetish of yours?” Tirith asked.

“Absolutely not,” I said decisively.

“I see… Thank goodness,” Shii said.

“Tch, boooring,” complained Lilim.

“I can still imagine you acting like that, though…,” responded Tirith.

Now that I’d cleared up that misunderstanding, we moved on to introductions.

“I’m Shii Arkstoria, the Student Council president. Nice to meet you, Lou.”

“Lilim Chorine, secretary!”

“I’m Tirith Magdarote, the treasurer.”

Once the third-year students were done, we second years were next.

“…I’m Allen Rodol, the vice president.”

“Lia Vesteria, a clerk.”

“Rose Valencia, also a clerk.”

That just left the newcomer.

“Thank you for having me today. I’m still inexperienced, but I look forward to fighting alongside you all,” Lou said. Her tone was surprisingly polite, and she gave a bow.

“Okay, now that the introductions are out of the way, let’s move on to the main point of this meeting,” Shii said, clapping her hands and picking up a black permanent marker. “Each team in the Sword Master Festival has a first, second, third, vice-captain, and captain. The first team to win three out of five duels advances. We need to decide who will be on our team and what position each person will fill.”

Shii wrote each position on a whiteboard and placed a piece of paper on the desk.

“We’re facing the mightiest of the Elite Five Academies, Divine Emperor Academy, in the first round. This is their roster.”

“Huh? Isn’t that usually revealed on the day of the tournament?” I asked.

Shii nodded. “That’s normally the case, but Divine Emperor Academy is an exception. They always announce their roster and positions beforehand. I guess they’ve been dominating this

competition for so long, they don't see the need for secrecy. They also didn't register anyone in the reserve slots, deciding to compete with these five people alone."

"They announced their roster beforehand *and* they're not using reserves…? That just feels cocky. I don't like it," criticized Lia.

"Personally, I think it's quite honorable…," remarked Rose.

Those two had completely opposite reactions. They clearly had different values when it came to competition.

"Anyway, these are our five opponents," Shii said, looking down at Divine Emperor's roster.

> First: Dreyfus Einberg (First Year)
> Second: Godric Emerson (Second Year)
> Third: Nemenen Tottoru (Second Year)
> Vice-Captain: Medi Malum (Second Year)
> Captain: Shin Rex (Second Year)
> Reserves: None

One thing was off about their roster.

"…Wait, where are their third years?" I asked.

Divine Emperor Academy hadn't registered a single third-year student for the competition. It was standard practice for the Sword Master Festival to use three third years, complement them with the academy's best second year, then add one first year as required by the rules. Naturally, the jump from first to second year and second to third year made a massive difference in terms of strength.

Barring highly unusual circumstances, third years should make up most of the team… Yet Divine Emperor hadn't registered a single third-year student. I wondered if they had a good reason or if it was simply arrogance from being on top for so long.

"Divine Emperor Academy's second years are called the 'Holy Generation.' There are multiple prodigies in that class who people think could one day join the Seven Holy Blades. I've also heard they have a promising new first year," Shii said.

"Oh, okay…" So apparently, they had so many great second-year students that there was no room for any third years.

"We need to be especially wary of their captain, Shin Rex," continued Shii. "On top of everything else, he's already been

appointed to the Seven Holy Blades at such a young age."

"He's one of the Holy Blades?! As a high schooler?! That's so cool!" exclaimed Lilim.

"I've heard the benefits are out of this world…," said Tirith.

Something had clicked in the back of my mind during the conversation.

If he's the Holy Blade in Liengard, then that must mean…

I looked at Shii, and she nodded. It seemed like this "Shin" was the Holy Blade in the noble faction's employ.

"I want you to look at these next," Shii said, dropping four massive stacks of paper onto her desk.

"What are they?" I asked.

"Scouting reports. They contain exhaustive information about Divine Emperor's participants. You'll find basic facts like their height, weight, and school of swordcraft, as well as analyses of their Soul Attire abilities, fighting style, habits during combat, and even idiosyncrasies they're likely unaware of themselves."

"Wow, that's amazing," said Lia.

"How did you make these?" asked Rose.

They both looked seriously impressed.

"Tee-hee, I marshaled the full efforts of House Arkstoria to investigate each of the fighters from Divine Emperor," Shii said, looking proud.

"You must be really serious about winning this time," I said.

Shii had seemed to give up hope the other day when we'd found out who our first-round opponent was going to be. What had changed?

"This is the last Sword Master Festival for us Third-Years. We'll regret it forever if we don't go all out."

"Oh, right…"

I hadn't really thought about it, but Shii, Lilim, and Tirith were graduating this year. Our fun days in the Student Council with the current roster were numbered.

…That's kinda sad to think about. Shii had forced me into the Student Council, but I'd ended up making a ton of happy memories here. Thinking about how that would all end once this year was over made me feel melancholic.

"H-hey… There's no reason to get all gloomy! Let's read up on our opponents!" Shii said, clapping and pointing at the scouting

reports. “Oh, I almost forgot! We have one major problem, and it concerns their captain, Shin Rex. We couldn’t find out a single thing about him. We don’t know anything about his Soul Attire or even his fighting style.”

“Wow, so he’s a total mystery…,” mused Lilim.

“That’s kind of cool,” said Tirith.

For some reason, they both clearly found that exciting.

“I have a recording of one of his duels. It’s honestly an unpleasant watch…but do you all want to see it?” Shii asked, uncertainly taking out a videotape.

“Ooo, there’s video? Heck yeah, I want to watch it!” Lia said eagerly.

“It would be fascinating to watch one of the Seven Holy Blades fight,” Rose agreed.

“Okay, then.” Shii put the videotape in the VCR player and turned on the LCD screen. “This video is of last year’s Elite Five Holy Festival championship match.”

“That’s the tournament where Allen went berserk and almost killed a guy!” exclaimed Lilim.

“I was cheering you on from the stands. Your inhuman cruelty kind of freaked me out, though…,” admitted Tirith.

“Urgh…”

Their words tore open old wounds. I wasn’t prepared to hear them talk about what had happened at last year’s Holy Festival. I could practically hear the life draining from my soul.

I seriously regret what happened. It was due to my own inexperience that Thousand Blade was disqualified from the Elite Five Holy Festival. And a year later, I’m still a good-for-nothing who can’t control his Spirit Core…

I descended into a spiral of self-loathing.

“Hey, stop making him feel bad!” chastised Lia.

“That was an accident. If Shido from Ice King hadn’t broken the rules first, Allen never would have lost control,” Rose said, defending me.

“Lia, Rose…” Touched by their kindness and warmth, I felt myself tear up.

“All right, that’s enough joking around,” said Shii. “Let’s watch the video. This is the captain’s match between Divine Emperor Academy and Flame Emperor Academy.”

“Oh yeah, Flame Emperor was really good last year,” commented Lilim.

“I think they got lucky with the lottery, too,” said Tirith.

Shii nodded. “That’s right. Flame Emperor had a lot of outstanding new students last year, and they complemented one another very well. They had a very impressive run to the championship.”

A thought suddenly crossed my mind.

Once I watch this video, I’ll have seen matches involving all the Elite Five Academies. These were the five most famous swordcraft schools in Liengard, consisting of Thousand Blade Academy, Ice King Academy, White Lily Girls Academy, Flame Emperor Academy, and Divine Emperor Academy.

Divine Emperor was the undisputed leader. White Lily was forever the runner-up. Flame Emperor held steady in the middle of the pack. Ice King wanted badly to unseat the three above it. And Thousand Blade was perpetually at the bottom. That was the hierarchy based on the last ten Sword Master Festivals.

“Ready? I’m hitting play,” Shii said.

She pressed a button on the remote control, and a static-filled video began to play.

“The video quality is kind of bad, as you can see. The person on the left is Shin Rex from Divine Emperor, and on the right is Colesta Bowen from Flame Emperor.”

The video showed two swordsmen facing each other on a stone stage, keeping plenty of distance between themselves.

“The match between Shin Rex of Divine Emperor Academy and Colesta Bowen of Flame Emperor Academy is about to start!” announced an official. *“Are you both ready? On my mark… Begin!”*

Colesta immediately summoned his Soul Attire.

“Sway with the Rising Flames—Flaming Wheel Dance!”

His Soul Attire burned with blue fire that looked so hot I could almost feel it through the screen.

Shin responded by slowly lying down on the stage.

“…What the hell do you think you’re doing?” yelled Colesta.

“Isn’t it obvious…? I’m taking a nap,” replied Shin.

“I can see that! I’m asking why you’re taking a nap! You’re besmirching our holy duel!”

Colesta was livid, yet Shin looked totally unconcerned.

“Can you keep your voice down…? Last I checked, there’s no rule against sleeping.”

“You think this is a joke…?! Official! He’s down, isn’t he? Start the count!”

“Well…according to the rules, a fighter isn’t considered down unless their abdomen or back are completely on the ground,” responded the official.

“Yeah, what he said. So I’m perfectly free to take a nap if I want!” Shin said, cackling. *“I’m lying on my side, so this is perfectly legal!”*

“That’s a ridiculous technicality! Duels between swordfighters are serious business! Stand up and face me with honor!”

“God, you sound like a stuffy old man… Cut the chit-chat and come at me,” Shin said, clearly not taking Colesta seriously.

“You bastard… You only have yourself to blame for what happens next,” Colesta cried, his patience spent. He held his blazing sword aloft and charged at Shin. *“Take this! Flaming Demon Style Secret Technique—Scorching Hellblade!”*

But the next second…

“Wh-what…?” Colesta gasped.



…his sword shattered into tiny pieces. Shin had destroyed it with a casual flick of his wrist, as if shooing away an insect.

“Ah-ha-ha, you should see your face… Kneel,*”* Shin commanded. Vast spirit power poured out of his body, forcing Colesta to his knees.

“Grk…,” Colesta grunted. He did his best to resist the overwhelming spirit power pressing down upon his head, but it wasn’t long before he collapsed to the floor.

“C-Colesta is down!” announced the official. *“Starting the count! One…two…three…!”*

“Huh? Whatcha doing down there, buddy? What were you saying about duels between swordsmen?” Shin taunted.

“Haaaaaaaaaaah!” roared Colesta.

He clenched his fists so tightly they bled. Bubbles foamed at the corners of his mouth, and tears of blood leaked from his eyes. But no matter how hard he fought, he couldn’t get up to stop the count.

“Eight…nine…ten!” the official yelled, bringing the duel to an anticlimactic finish. *“W-we have a winner! Divine Emperor’s Shin Rex! Divine Emperor Academy takes this year’s Elite Five Holy Festival!”*

“Fwah… That was boring,” Shin said. He lazily got up and yawned, having won the duel without breaking a sweat.

“I—I can’t believe it… Have all my years of tireless training…been for naught?” Colesta muttered. He couldn’t stand up, but instead stayed on all fours and sobbed.

Shin casually walked up to him.

“Uh, it’s Colesta, right? Sorry you wasted all that time and effort!”

And with that mean-spirited remark, the video cut off.

“““…”””

A disturbed silence fell over the room. After a short pause, Shii spoke up.

“After their duel, Colesta dropped out of Flame Emperor Academy and gave up swordcraft for good.”

That didn’t surprise me. He’d been horribly embarrassed by the overwhelming difference in power between him and Shin in front of a massive audience.

“Shin Rex… I’ve never met him, but I already hate him,” spat Lia.

“Yeah. He’s rotten to the core,” said Rose.

“He definitely went too far,” agreed Lou.

The three younger girls all spoke with an intense hatred.

“The great Lilim Chorine is going to give him divine punishment!” declared Lilim.

“That guy really disgusts me…,” muttered Tirith.

Shii clapped her hands. “I know how you all feel, but let’s focus on analyzing our opponents’ Soul Attires and fighting styles for now.”

We did as she said and delved into the scouting reports. We familiarized ourselves with the basic physical information on each participant—including their height, weight, and reach—then studied their Soul Attire abilities, individual quirks, and unconscious habits. Once we were all up to speed on our opponents, we predicted their offensive, defensive, and evasive strategies and discussed how to counter them. Analysis of Divine Emperor’s first, second, third, and vice-captain went smoothly, but it was there that we reached the problem: Shin Rex.

“…This is it?” I said.

Shin’s scouting report was only a single page—a huge shock after reading the other scouting reports, which were all over fifty pages.

“Shin Rex is one of the Seven Holy Blades, so any information about him is closely guarded… We had to work really hard to get that video,” Shii explained.

She picked up his scouting report and began to read off the page.

“Shin Rex, Divine Emperor Academy, Class 2-A. He’s 168 centimeters tall and 50 kilograms, making him very skinny for a swordsman. A prodigy with the blade, he joined the Seven Holy Blades at the age of ten, making him the youngest person ever to do so. Soul Attire: Unknown. Tactics: Unknown. Battle Habits: Unknown. Unfortunately, there’s almost no helpful information.”

About the only real information we had to go off was his height and weight.

“Judging by the video, his physical strength is unremarkable,” continued Shii. “The problem is his abnormal spirit power…”

Even a swordsman who did no strength training whatsoever could break an iron plate with their fist if they had enough spirit power. If Shin covered his entire body with the massive spirit power he'd demonstrated in that duel, he would become impossibly strong and fast.

"It scares me that we don't even know what kind of Soul Attire he has," commented Lia.

"In a duel, there's no greater threat than the unknown," said Rose.

They both looked worried.

"Not to mention, Divine Emperor knows Allen's gonna be our captain," added Lilim.

"Allen is super famous. They'll already know everything his Soul Attire can do…," said Tirith.

This was sounding worse and worse.

"That means we're at a massive disadvantage in the captain's duel in terms of information," Shii summarized.

""""""""""…"""""""""

The mood in the room turned heavy.

"Anyway, all we can do is wish Allen luck!" said Shii.

"So it's no different from normal!" remarked Lilim.

"Give it your all," said Tirith.

The three third years clenched their fists excitedly.

"We've got nothing to worry about," said Lia optimistically. "Allen has stomped every tough enemy in his path so far!"

"I can't imagine you losing," said Rose.

"Ah-ha-ha, I'll do my best," I responded, not exactly sure where they were getting their confidence from. I felt a little embarrassed by their faith in me.

Now that we were done carefully examining the scouting reports, it was time to decide the Thousand Blade lineup.

"The first has to be a first-year student, so that's you, Lou," Shii said.

"I'll do my best!" Lou said.

The reason for having a first year in this position was to encourage growth among the younger students. Lou Lorenti had earned that spot when she'd won the First-Year Tourney.

"Next is the second. I feel like that's a good matchup for me… but what do you all think?" Shii asked.

Divine Emperor's second was a second-year boy named Godric Emerson. He was massive, but not actually very physically strong. Instead, he relied on his intelligence, delicate swordcraft, and crystal-producing Soul Attire to wear down opponents.

"I agree. I definitely think you can handle him," I said.

Shii wielded her blade with unparalleled precision, and her Soul Attire, Aqua Queen, made her an extremely versatile swordswoman. A duel between her and Godric would be a highly skilled affair decided by finesse.

"You can counter any type of attack with your water ability," said Lia.

"I can't see you losing a duel of pure skill," added Rose.

"I struggle against intricate swordcraft, so he's all yours," conceded Lilim.

"Same," said Tirith.

We were all in agreement. Choosing our first and second had been surprisingly easy, but that couldn't have been further from the truth for the third and vice-captain spots.

"Nemenen has the ability to produce trees and use them to attack his opponents! My Fafnir would have a massive advantage!" Lia said.

"No, listen to me!" argued Lilim. "That couldn't possibly be a better matchup for *my* Bursting Clay! I can blow a whole forest to smithereens with one explosion!"

"Medi has a simple self-strengthening Soul Attire. The best way to counter that is with another Soul Attire of the same type, such as my Winter Sakura. I'll be able to bring out its full potential," Rose said.

"I disagree," countered Tirith. "I think it'd be better to tie Medi up with my Psychic Shackle and prevent her from using her strength in the first place…"

The four of them continued to argue, Lia and Lilim each insisting they were the best matchup for Nemenen, and Rose and Tirith doing the same for Medi. It wasn't until sunset that we finally finished the Thousand Blade lineup.

First: Lou Lorenti
Second: Shii Arkstoria
Third: Lia Vesteria

Vice-Captain: Rose Valencia
Captain: Allen Rodol
Reserves: Lilim Chorine, Tirith Magdarote

“Yeah. I think this is our best formation!” Shii said, nodding with satisfaction.

“Urgh, I’m getting nervous…,” Lou said, looking anxious.

“I promise I’m gonna win! I know how important it is being third!” declared Lia, all fired up.

“I’m the vice-captain… This is a great responsibility. I’ll do my best not to let you all down,” Rose said with determination.

Meanwhile…

“Tch! How come I don’t get to fight?!” Lilim complained.

“I’m not sure whether to feel disappointed or relieved…,” said Tirith.

…Lilim and Tirith were having a hard time accepting their status as reserves.

“It has nothing to do with your fighting prowess. There simply isn’t a good matchup for either of your abilities,” explained Shii.

Lilim’s and Tirith’s Soul Attires were at their best when teaming up with other Soul Attires. They didn’t seem to have a clear advantage over any of the Divine Emperor participants’ abilities, either, which was why they’d ended up as reserves.

“Okay everyone, it’s not long now till the Sword Master Festival! We’re absolutely going to win it all this year!”

“““““““““Yeah!”””””””””

CHAPTER 2
The Sword Master Festival

The next few days were busy yet fulfilling. I spent my mornings in classes focused on strength-training, my lunches with the Student Council, my afternoons in classes focused on Soul Attire strengthening, my time after school with the Practice-Swing Club, and my nights training on my own outside the dorm. Those days passed by in a flash, and before I knew it, the Sword Master Festival had arrived.

Just like last year, we gathered in the Student Council room, then went straight to the National Crusade Coliseum, where the knockout stage was being held. Liengard had named the building an important cultural property, and it was only opened to the public for certain events like the Sword Master Festival.

“Man, this takes me back…,” I said, the sight of the coliseum reminding me of last year’s intense duel against Idora Luksmaria from White Lily Girls Academy. That was when I heard a voice with a slight northern accent behind me.

“Oh my. If it isn’t the chairwoman of Thousand Blade Academy. I thought I recognized that overly muscular physique from somewhere. How does it feel to know you’re guaranteed to lose in the first round?”

I turned around and saw Ferris Dorhein. She was being followed by a group of Ice King Academy students.

“Well, lookie here. It’s the Ice King Academy chairwoman. Remind me, wasn’t it your school that lost to some no-name opponent last year?” responded Chairwoman Reia.

Ferris and Chairwoman Reia approached each other, smiles plastered on their faces. They lasted all of about two seconds

before beginning to fight like schoolgirls.

…Haah, not again, I thought, sighing internally. These two were like cats and dogs.

“Long time no see, you piece of trash.”

“Oh God! It is such an honor to see you again!”

“Hey, Shido. Cain.”

Shido was just as unfriendly as ever, while Cain still treated me with overbearing reverence.

“We’re gonna meet in three days in the championship. Don’t you dare lose to anyone else before you get there. I wanna slaughter you myself,” Shido spat.

“Sounds good,” I said. “No slaughtering, though. Let’s have a clean fight this time, okay?”

He was clearly fired up for a rematch, and I had to admit, so was I.

“You idiot! Dummy! Cake-faced vixen!” Chairwoman Reia yelled.

“You total musclehead! Your vocabulary is sorely lacking! Is there anything between those ears of yours, you dimwit?!” Ferris shouted.

The fight between the two chairwomen had escalated to something of a climax.

Ahh… This is embarrassing. They paid no attention to the other people on the busy street as they leveled insults at each other. I found myself overwhelmed by the cruel reality that they were the leaders of our respective academies.

The other Thousand Blade and Ice King students were all determinedly looking away from the fight. I figured they probably all felt the same way as me.

“…Chairwoman Reia, that’s enough. Let’s continue to the venue,” I said.

“Madam, we should be off,” said Shido at the same time.

We worked together to cool the chairwomen’s tempers and put an end to the embarrassing commotion. The Thousand Blade group went to the west gate to sign in, while the Ice King group headed off to the east gate.

“I’m the chairwoman of Thousand Blade Academy, Reia Lasnote.”

“Wonderful. Please wait while I register you,” the receptionist responded.

As the chairwoman got us checked in, I heard someone approach me from behind.

“Oh, Allen.”

I turned around and saw Idora leading the group from White Lily Girls Academy.

“Good morning. Looks like we got here at the same time,” she said.

“Yeah. Good morning, Idora and…Chairwoman Kemmi?!”

Kemmi Fasta was in the middle of the group, her mouth gagged and her hands bound with rope. She had a sign around her neck that said I AM A CRIMINAL.

“Idora, why is she wearing that…?” I asked.

“Don’t worry about it. She fell back into bad habits, is all,” Idora said.

“Ah, then I guess it’s for the best.”

This was Kemmi we were talking about. She’d probably been up to no good again.

“You’re also a captain, Allen?” Idora asked.

“Uh-huh. Does that mean you are, too?”

“Sure am. We’ll meet in the semifinals if thing go well for both of us.”

“Yeah.”

We were on the opposite side of the bracket from Ice King, but on the same side as White Lily.

“I have something to tell you,” Idora said.

“What is it?” I asked.

“I’ve trained more than you can imagine since I lost to you. I’m *definitely* going to win this time,” she said, a determined look in her eyes.

“I’ve trained a lot, too. I look forward to meeting you in the captain’s duel,” I said.

“Same here.”

Idora and I shook hands, our competitive juices flowing.

■

Once we'd registered, Chairwoman Reia went to the seats reserved for the heads of the academies. The students participating in the tournament gathered on the stone stage and listened to the opening ceremony address.

"Hrmm, that concludes my opening comments. Thank you very much for your time and patience," the Sword Master Festival Executive Committee member said, ending his long speech.

The contestants from each academy shuffled off to the locker rooms as a female announcer addressed the crowd.

"All right, the knockout stage of the Sword Master Festival is finally here! Are you all as excited as I am?! The fierce battle for supremacy among the swordcraft academies is about to begin!" she called out, her voice carrying clearly around the coliseum.

The stadium erupted with deafening applause.

…I'll never cease to be amazed by these crowds. My eardrums felt like they were going to burst, and I felt the sound vibrate in my stomach. It was even louder than last year, which I hadn't even thought was possible.

"This year's Sword Master Festival kicks off with a match for the ages! As I'm sure you're all aware, it's a showdown between two of the Elite Five Academies! From the west gate, we have Thousand Blade Academy! They've been mired in a long slump, but an influx of spectacular talent led by the young Allen Rodol could turn their fortunes around!"

My teammates and I stepped into the arena.

"Next, from the east gate, we have the ever-dominant Divine Emperor Academy! Their team, led by Shin Rex of the Seven Holy Blades, is the strongest group of swordsmen we've seen in modern times!"

The students from Divine Emperor Academy who we'd read about in the scouting reports walked through the east gate opposite us. First came Dreyfus Einberg, then Godric Emerson, Nemenen Tottoru, Medi Malum, and finally the problematic… *Huh?*

One person was missing.

Divine Emperor's captain, Shin Rex, wasn't there.

"Uhh, I have a message from the chairwoman of Divine Emperor Academy… Their captain, Shin Rex, seems to be feeling

unwell—or perhaps just drowsy—and is sleeping in the locker room!" the announcer said.

…Would it kill the guy to show his opponent some respect?

"Okay, putting that aside, let's move on to the first duel! It's Thousand Blade's Lou Lorenti versus Divine Emperor's Dreyfus Einberg!"

The crowd went wild.

"Good luck, Lou!" Shii said.

"You only get an opportunity like this once a year, so go out there and enjoy it!" Lilim encouraged her.

"Give it your all…!" Tirith said.

The third years cheered her on…

"Do your best, Lou!" I said.

"We're with you!" cried out Lia.

"Nerves are your worst enemy. Just do what you always do," said Rose.

…and we three second years did the same.

"I will! Thank you all so much!" responded Lou. She smiled happily and walked to the stage in high spirits.

Dreyfus Einberg of Divine Emperor Academy took the stage after her. Just as the scouting report said, he had a large build and looked like a proper knight.

"Are you both ready? On my mark… Begin!"

And with that, the duel between Lou and Dreyfus kicked off.

■

"I've got you now!" Dreyfus yelled.

"Not even close!" Lou shouted back.

Sparks flew as Lou's two reddish-brown short swords clashed with Dreyfus's greatsword.

…*This is a great duel.* So far, Lou had demonstrated superior sword skills while Dreyfus had the edge in Soul Attire ability. It made it seem like an even duel…but I knew better.

"Take this! Tiger Gravel!" Dreyfus yelled, using his Soul Attire to hurl sharp stones at Lou.

"Is that…all you've got…?!" Lou shouted, gracefully dodging the stones. The attack had an incredibly wide range, however, and a few of the projectiles ended up grazing her limbs.

…She's starting to struggle. I don't know how much longer she'll last.

Lou wasn't using her Soul Attire ability. She *couldn't*. Her Soul Attire, Codependent Lover, linked her condition to her opponent's, meaning that any wound she inflicted on them would also be done to herself. If Lou cut her own right hand, for example, her opponent would be dealt an identical injury in the exact same spot. This allowed her to harm her opponent regardless of the distance between them, obstacles in her path, and difference in skill. Unfortunately, it also required her to harm herself, which made it practically unusable in a duel like this.

…That's rough. Lou hadn't used her ability once so far, and she was struggling because of it.

The duel only heated up from there until, shortly after cuts and bruises began to appear on their bodies, the moment finally came.

"Grizzly Smash!" Dreyfus shouted, swinging his sword in a powerful strike.

"Crap!" Lou yelled, her stance broken.

"You're finished! Elephant Hammer!"

Dreyfus swung his sword down, and at the same time, a giant earthen hammer appeared above Lou's head and descended powerfully toward her.

"Oh no…!" gasped Lou.

The hammer made contact with a massive *boom*, violently kicking up a cloud of dust.

"What a ferocious attack by Dreyfus! That had to hurt! Is it all over for Lou?!" the announcer cried out excitedly. A medical team prepared to head for the stage.

"Nice try!"

Lou appeared from the dust cloud, *completely uninjured*.

"I-impossible!" Dreyfus said, visibly flustered.

She sprinted toward him, seeing an opportunity to seize the duel.

"A head-on charge?! You really think something like that will… Huh?!" Dreyfus gasped. He'd been preparing to counterattack when he suddenly collapsed.

His right leg was bleeding.

"What…?!" Dreyfus said, confused.

A moment later, Lou had Codependent Lover pressed against his neck.

“Shall we keep going?” she asked coldly.

“…No. I surrender,” Dreyfus said quietly, lowering his eyes.

“Lou Lorenti is the winner!” declared the official, and the crowd erupted.

“Talk about a blink-and-you’ll-miss-it development! Just when it seemed like Dreyfus had won the duel, Lou pulls off a shocking reversal! This is truly going to be a Sword Master Festival for the ages! Don’t leave your seats for a moment, folks!” the announcer said.

Thousand Blade’s seating section cheered excitedly, but I found myself distracted. Something didn’t sit right with me.

…What happened? Lou’s Soul Attire, Codependent Lover, linked her condition to her opponent’s. She must have activated her ability in the dust cloud and stabbed her right leg to immobilize Dreyfus. But how had Lou not been injured?

Actually, more importantly… It definitely looked like Dreyfus’s attack had hit her. Escaping from that should have been impossible for anyone without a self-strengthening Soul Attire. *Is Lou hiding another ability?*

Lou was already an enigma. She was abnormally skilled for a first year and had somehow obtained her Soul Attire before taking the Thousand Blade entrance exam. Yet for some reason, she wasn’t particularly well-known.

…I’ll have to ask her some questions later.

Regardless, she’d started the tournament off for us on the right foot. Hopefully we could keep this momentum going and take the second duel as well.



The next duel between both teams’ seconds—Thousand Blade’s Shii Arkstoria and Divine Emperor’s Godric Emerson—was breathtakingly beautiful.

…I’m in awe.

Shii used her inherently delicate swordcraft and her Soul Attire, Aqua Queen, to perform a wide variety of rapid-fire strikes that gave Godric no time to catch his breath. Godric responded

with highly polished swordcraft and a Soul Attire that could produce crystals to perform multi-stage attacks from any direction.

It was a battle of finesse between two similar fighters. The fight raged on for some time until…

“It’s over! The winner is Godric Emerson!”

…Godric eventually won by a razor-thin margin.

“*Haah…* I’m sorry. I lost,” Shii said, looking down guiltily. Her body was covered in cuts and bruises from the intense fight.

“Don’t apologize. That was an amazing duel,” I said.

Shii and Godric had been evenly matched, and only the slightest of differences had decided the match. I was sure that if they fought ten times, they’d end up with five wins and five losses each.

“Ngh, you were so close…,” lamented Lilim.

“That could’ve easily gone either way…,” said Tirith.

Lilim and Tirith were as upset as if they’d lost themselves.

“You fought really well, President,” said Lia.

“That was a thrilling duel,” added Rose. “I’m exhausted just from watching it.”

“It was so amazing! I’m sure it’ll end up being one of the best bouts of the tournament!” chimed in Lou.

“Thank you, everyone. You’re up next, Lia,” Shii said.

“Yep! You can count on me!” Lia responded, fired up to represent Thousand Blade.

■

“All right, everyone, the third duel is next! It’s Lia Vesteria versus Nemenen Tottoru! Will both contestants please make their way to the stage?!” instructed the announcer.

Lia and Nemenen got into position.

“Are you both ready? On my mark… Begin!”

They both immediately summoned their Soul Attires.

“Conquer—Dragon King Fafnir!”

“Strength is Beauty—Majestic Greenery!”

Nemenen’s Soul Attire, Majestic Greenery, created a vast forest that he could manipulate at will.

This duel would be black and white flames against trees, meaning that Lia should have the advantage. However, it soon became apparent that something was wrong. Lia's Soul Attire hadn't appeared.

"No way… This…isn't supposed to happen…yet…," Lia said. She clutched her chest and fell to her knees.

"Lia?!" I yelled.

"PRINCESS LIA!"

Claude jumped out of the stands and rushed toward Lia in a panicked frenzy.

"H-hey now, that's not allowed! Security, grab that kid!"

The holy knights entrusted with security moved toward the stage as a buzz erupted around the coliseum.

"Princess Lia! Are you okay?!" Claude asked.

"*Haah, haah…* Yeah…," Lia said between pants.

"What about Fafnir?!"

"I…managed to suppress him. This is way ahead of schedule, so he must not have built up enough strength yet…"

We all rushed toward Lia, who was still breathing heavily, while explaining to the holy knights that Claude was a Thousand Blade student.

"Lia! Are you all right?!" I asked.

She nodded firmly. "Yeah, I'll be fine… I just need some rest."

The Sword Master Festival was temporarily suspended as the officials gathered to discuss how to handle the third duel. Eventually, they announced that Thousand Blade had lost due to a rule violation, as Lia had been the cause of the offense. It sucked…but all we could do was accept the ruling.

About fifteen minutes later, Lia's condition stabilized.

"I can't believe that happened… I'm so, so sorry…," she said, bowing and biting her lip. She was being extra hard on herself because of her great sense of responsibility.

"It's okay. You didn't do anything wrong," said Shii.

"That's right," agreed Lilim. "We can't say anything after the way we dragged Allen down at last year's Sword Master Festival!"

"Don't blame yourself," said Tirith.

The third years smiled kindly at her.

"But because of me, we're…" Lia trailed off, her hands clenched tightly into fists.

Rose patted her on the back. “You don’t have to worry about that, Lia.”

“…Huh? What do you mean?” she asked.

“Allen and I haven’t fought yet. Do you really think we’re going to lose?” Rose said confidently, giving Lia a fearless smile.

■

“Eh-hem!” came the announcer’s voice. “That was an unexpected delay, but let’s regroup and move on to the vice captain’s duel! Next, we have Thousand Blade’s Rose Valencia against Divine Emperor’s Medi Malum!”

The crowd cheered, excited for the tournament to continue.

“Rose is the sole inheritor of the famous Cherry Blossom Blade School of Swordcraft! She relies on a level of technical skill very few can match, which she uses to overwhelm her opponents! Facing her is Medi, who has achieved mastery of another famous school of swordcraft, the Tachibana Blossom School of Swordcraft! Unlike Rose, she relies on her formidable strength to beat her opponents into submission!”

Rose and Medi took the stage as the announcer enthusiastically introduced them. They locked eyes, and their gazes sent sparks flying.

So this is Medi Malum, the vice-captain for Divine Emperor Academy…

Medi Malum was about 170 centimeters tall. Her long blond hair was tied up at the back of her head with a hairpin shaped like a tachibana orange. She was beautiful, with amber eyes, pure white skin, and a distinctive strong-willed cast to her face. Her large chest, thin waist, and long legs gave her an incredible figure.

She wore a white shirt, a red tie, a beige cardigan tied around her waist, and a black miniskirt—a dressed-down version of the girls’ Divine Emperor uniform.

According to Shii’s scouting report, her skills stood above the other students even at the fiercely competitive Divine Emperor Academy, where she was the clear number two behind Shin Rex.

“Are you both ready? On my mark… Begin!”

Rose didn’t waste any time summoning her Soul Attire.

“Blossom—Winter Sakura.”

A giant cherry blossom tree appeared behind her, spawning a blizzard of sakura petals.

Medi whistled appreciatively. “That’s a beautiful ability,” she said, watching the brilliant cherry blossom petals dance on the wind.

“My Soul Attire is called Winter Sakura. It supplies its user with a tremendous amount of spirit power until all the petals have fallen from the tree. In short, it’s a self-strengthening Soul Attire,” Rose said.

Why was she explaining her ability?

Medi frowned. “…What’re you playin’ at? You looking down on me? Why would you tell me about your ability?”

“Don’t get the wrong idea,” Rose responded. “This is just my way of doing things. Sword duels are serious business; it doesn’t feel right knowing all about you while you’re in the dark about me.”

Rose was seeking a fair fight. I wasn’t sure that was the smartest thing to do…but it was just like her.

“Hmm, so you don’t want any unfair advantages… You’re a pretty cool chick. I like you,” Medi said with a smile.

She surged with tremendous spirit power.

“Perfume—Tachibana Flower!”

A pure white sword appeared from a rift in the air. She grabbed its handle, and a giant tachibana orange tree sprang from the ground behind her. With its lush leaves and ripe oranges, it felt like an incredible breath of life—and I felt enormous waves of spirit power surge from it.

“My Soul Attire is called Tachibana Flower! It sounds like you know this already, but it’s a pure and simple self-strengthening type!” Medi said honestly.

She wasted no time charging directly at Rose.

“Tachibana Blossom Style—Yuzu Slice!” Medi shouted, swinging her white blade down with all her body weight behind it. It was a simple strength attack without any feints or other kinds of trickery.

“Cherry Blossom Blade Style—Night Sakura!” Rose yelled, swinging her blade with a full-strength attack of her own.

Pink and white swords collided violently, producing a ferocious shockwave that filled the coliseum with their spirit power.

“Ha-ha, now that’s what I’m talkin’ about! You’re actually a match for me!” Medi said.

“Same to you… Hah!” Rose shouted, planting her feet firmly on the stone stage and using the reaction force to push Medi back. “Cherry Blossom Blade Style—Sakura Flash Chain!”

Rose seized the opportunity to attack before her opponent regained her footing, launching a combo of fierce thrusts. She aimed for Medi’s neck, side, thighs, and other vital areas.

“You’ll have to do better than that! Tachibana Blossom Style—Kumquat Circle!” Medi yelled, deflecting all of Rose’s thrusts with a circular slash.

Their pure self-strengthening duel only heated up from there.

“Haaaaaaah…!”

“Raaaaaaah…!”

Their pink and white swords collided again and again, sending bright sparks flying through the air.

What an intense duel… Rose and Medi were both putting the entirety of their body weight, arm strength, and leg strength into every single attack, creating a tempest of slashes that frequently came away leaving wounds. Their respective Soul Attires immediately healed their injuries, allowing them to continue attacking without rest.

It was a deadly duel in which every millisecond mattered.

So far, they were even in terms of physical strength. Medi’s Soul Attire was slightly more powerful, but Rose’s skill with the blade was far superior.

“Cherry Blossom Blade Style—Lightning Sakura!” Rose shouted, hitting Medi on the shoulder with a lightning-quick slash.

“Ngh… Dammit… Tachibana Blossom Style—Hassaku Thrust!” Medi cried out. She gritted her teeth against the pain and countered with a fierce series of thrusts, but Rose dodged them all with flawless footwork.

“Cherry Blossom Blade Style—Sakura Flash!”

Rose evaded all of Medi’s attacks, moving as little as possible, and countered with perfect precision. She consistently stayed one step ahead by watching Medi’s breathing and predicting her thoughts. The Cherry Blossom Blade Style of Swordcraft was

designed for real combat, and Rose was exercising its full potential.

That's our Rose… Bacchus's training had elevated her swordcraft to even greater heights.

"Dammit…," Medi cursed, drawing spirit power from Tachibana Flower to heal a cut on her hand.

…It's getting a little slower, I observed. Medi's healing was taking longer than it had at the beginning of the duel. The essence of self-strengthening Soul Attires was, of course, the ability to strengthen their wielder. Healing was only a side effect. That was true of my darkness too; healing required much more spirit power for me than increasing my strength.

Rose constantly switched up the speed of her attacks, while Medi remained determined to go head-to-head with her. It wasn't long before it became obvious who was taking more injuries and healing more frequently.

"…You said your name was Rose, right? You're crazy strong," said Medi.

"Right back at you," replied Rose, maintaining a set distance from her opponent.

They probably felt a connection as two swordswomen of the same age with the same type of Soul Attire.

Rose can do this! Winter Sakura has plenty of petals left, so her Soul Attire will last a while longer. As long as nothing goes wrong, she has this in the bag! I thought, clenching my fists excitedly.

That was when I noticed the air around Medi shift.

"…Aww, man," grumbled Medi. "I wanted to keep this a secret so I could use it to kick Shin's stupid ass…but you've left me no choice. Never in my wildest dreams did I think I'd face an opponent as good as you."

She thrust Tachibana Flower into the stone stage, and it erupted with an incredible amount of spirit power, far more than it had been producing until now.

It can't be…!

I recognized this feeling. There was only one thing that power could signify. But that shouldn't have been possible.

"Devour the Magical Fruit and Reminisce Drunkenly on the Fragrance of Eternity—Timeless Tachibana!" Medi yelled.

The tachibana orange tree towering behind her burst into full bloom. The thick trunk and branches creaked as they grew; new leaves sprouted; white, five-petaled flowers bloomed; and ripe citrus fruits formed all over the tree.

That's…a self-strengthening True Attire… The spirit power emanating from the tree was off the charts. In terms of pure output, it probably surpassed even Von's Cleansing Sand Whale. Self-strengthening abilities were straightforward and unlikely to catch an opponent off guard, but they significantly increased all their wielder's basic stats, including spirit power, physical strength, and reflexes. There was no better weapon in a duel of pure swordcraft and spirit power.

I guess we shouldn't have assumed we knew everything about the vice-captain of Divine Emperor Academy… None of us had had any idea she'd manifested her True Attire.

"…I'm surprised. I didn't know you had your True Attire," Rose said.

"Heh-heh, you should be honored. You're the first to see it," Medi replied with a fearless smile. She drew her pure white sword from the stage. A vast amount of spirit power amassed within it, causing it to glow with a faint white light. "Now the true battle begins."

"A True Attire wielder… You're a worthy opponent!" Rose said.

She assumed the stance of the Cherry Blossom Blade School of Swordcraft, but just at that moment, Medi vanished into mist.

"Tachibana Blossom Style—"

"…!"

Rose's mind raced. *She's behind me…? If I spin around fast enough, I can still block her!* She swung her sword behind her without turning around, but Medi had already moved.

"Too slow! Iyokan Revolt!" Medi cried out, having circled behind Rose again. Knowing she'd been outmaneuvered, Rose instinctively dove forward, but…

"Ngh!"

…Medi's flurry of slashes had been too quick and accurate, and Rose found her body covered in cuts.

"Haah, haah…" She's ridiculously fast. I didn't see her move at all…, thought Rose.

She took three steps back to put some distance between herself and Medi.

Medi gave an impressed whistle. “I gotta admit, I’m surprised. I thought that would be enough to finish you off!”

Divine Emperor’s vice-captain pressed forward aggressively, forcing Rose into combat at extremely close range.

“Take that, and that! I’m not slowin’ down anytime soon!” shouted Medi.

“Grk…”

Rose was just barely managing to hold on thanks to her godly reflexes and the extra spirit power from Winter Sakura, but simply defending herself and dodging Medi’s attacks were taking all her effort. She was completely on the defensive. The difference in strength between Rose’s Soul Attire and Medi’s True Attire was too great.

Come on, Rose… Hang in there…, I thought, clenching my teeth nervously.

“Tachibana Blossom Style—Yuzu Slice!” Medi shouted, swinging her sword down overhead. It was the same attack she’d performed at the beginning of the duel.

Rose responded by holding her sword up horizontally. It was the perfect defensive maneuver for the situation; the angle of the blade, Rose’s posture as she prepared for impact, and the position of her center of gravity were all straight out of the textbook.

However…

“You really think that’s gonna stop me?!”

…Medi used her tremendous spirit power to break Rose’s defense and knock her off-balance, then land a merciless side kick.

“Gah…!” Rose gasped as the air was knocked out of her lungs. “…Grk. Cherry Blossom Blade Style—”

She quickly stood up and tried to counterattack, apparently having decided that defeat was inevitable if she didn’t do something.

“I already told you. You’re too slow.”

But Medi took half a step forward and interrupted Rose’s attack with perfect timing.

“No way…” Rose’s eyes were wide with shock. Not even her expert sword skills stood a chance against the unbeatable

strength of a True Attire.

"It's over," Medi said. "Tachibana Blossom Style—Yuzu Slice!"

"Gah…!"

Medi swung her sword down for the third time, inflicting a deep slash on Rose's chest and knocking her blade from her hands.

"Rose!" I cried out just as the final petal on the cherry blossom tree dispersed into mist. Winter Sakura vanished, and Rose collapsed on the stage.

…*She really fought well.* Rose had given her all against a superior opponent wielding a True Attire, fighting desperately to try to seize her miniscule chance at victory. Yet Medi Malum had far surpassed our expectations.

Everyone in the coliseum had assumed the duel was over, but Rose slowly staggered to her feet.

It's okay, Rose… You've done enough…

If she kept fighting, she might actually die.

"…Give up, Rose. You're strong—no one can doubt that. You're the ideal swordswoman in mind, body, and technique. I wish I could get that idiot Shin to think more like you. But a Soul Attire Wielder can't defeat a True Attire wielder. That's just a fact," Medi said unsympathetically.

But Rose responded with a smirk.

"Heh. I admit, I used to think that way too."

"…You 'used to'?" responded Medi.

"I saw a guy defeat one Soul Attire Wielder after the next without having yet acquired his own. He even defeated a True Attire wielder while still using his Soul Attire…"

"Wow, sounds like a catch. Who's the guy?" Medi asked.

"Heh. You'll find out soon enough," Rose said. She smiled proudly—and just then, waves of vitality burst from her body.

"N-no way…!" Medi said, shocked.

"You should be honored. You're the first person to see this," Rose said. "Link—Billion-Year Sakura!"

A cherry blossom tree so large it completely blocked out the sky grew and erupted into full bloom behind Rose. Cherry blossom petals fell and drifted on the wind, carrying the smell of springtime with them as they painted the venue pink. The

contestants, officials, and spectators were in awe of the Billion-Year Sakura's beauty.

There's no doubt about it… That's Bacchus's Spirit Core, the Billion-Year Sakura!

I wasn't sure how Rose had inherited her grandfather's power, but it probably had something to do with the Valencia family's special blood and their "binding vow."

"What the…?! Unless my eyes deceive me, that's the national treasure of Cherin, the Billion-Year Sakura! What's it doing here?! Was Rose hiding it?! What is going on right now?! I have no idea!" the announcer said breathlessly once she remembered to speak.

Rose, meanwhile, had been fully healed by the immeasurable spirit power of the Billion-Year Sakura. She calmly assumed the middle stance, bursting with vitality.

…That tachi looks just like his. The pink tachi in Rose's hands was on the smaller side, but it looked identical to the one Bacchus had used.

"Hah, you're a True Attire wielder!" Medi cried out happily, a ferocious smile on her face.

"No, this is still at the Soul Attire stage. I'm not experienced enough to summon Sefirot," said Rose.

"What's this, then?" Medi asked. "You have two Soul Attires?"

"My family is kind of unique," Rose said, not elaborating further. She lowered her center of gravity. "Now, shall we continue? This power won't last long."

"Hmm, that must mean your weapon has a time limit. In that case…we'd better get started. We can't have a genuine duel unless we're both at our best!" said Medi.

They smiled at one another, then closed the distance separating them without so much as pausing to take a breath.

"Haaaaaah…!"

"Raaaaaah…!"

Sakura and tachibana collided as the two swordswomen locked blades.

"Hah!" Rose yelled. *I can get the best of her!*

"Holy crap…," Medi gasped. *She's overpowering my True Attire?!*

Rose won the contest of strength, sweeping her blade and sending Medi crashing into the wall of the arena. But as Rose

went to chase after her, the giant tachibana orange tree shook itself, scattering a swarm of white petals.

"Take this!" yelled Medi. "White Fan Dance!"

Tachibana flowers packed with an incredible amount of spirit power raced toward Rose with terrifying speed. But even that didn't stop her. Rose charged through the flurry of petals, which left long gashes in her flesh.

"Wha?!" Medi gasped, unable to believe what she was seeing. It was only then that she realized. *You gotta be kidding me… How can she heal that fast?!*

The huge number of wounds covering Rose's body all fully healed in less than a second. The Billion-Year Sakura was an eidolon with an incomprehensibly powerful regeneration ability.

"Cherry Blossom Blade Style—Sakura Flash Chain!" Rose shouted, unleashing another flurry of thrusts.

"Hngh!"

Medi's reaction was a beat late because she was still thrown off by Rose's unexpected charge, but she stepped back once she'd gathered herself. She focused on avoiding the thrusts aimed for her vitals, just barely doing so, and moved out of Rose's range.

"*Haah, haah…* That was hardcore," Medi said, panting. "You must have a lot of confidence in your healing ability…"

"I'm literally invincible when the Billion-Year Sakura is active," replied Rose.

"There must be limits to it… The more powerful a Soul Attire or True Attire ability is, the stricter its limitations tend to be. So the weakness of your Billion-Year Sakura is its short duration, right?"

"Yeah. The Billion-Year Sakura is inefficient and quickly consumes my spirit power, so I can only use it for a short amount of time. So what are you going to do? Wait until the time limit's up?"

Medi snorted. "Please. Why eat an apple after it's all shriveled up? It only makes sense that I'd want to chow down when it's ripe and juicy!"

"Heh, that's what I wanted to hear!" Rose smiled belligerently and stomped her feet on the stage. "Thousand-Root Kannon!"

Three giant roots burst out of the ground and rushed toward Medi.

“Hah! Do you really think you can hurt me with some tree roots?” She swiped her white blade at an approaching root, but…

“Wh-what…?!” Medi gasped. *They look like ordinary roots, but they’re packed with a ridiculous amount of spirit power…*

The Billion-Year Sakura was made of spirit power, with roots so hard that not even Timeless Fruit could cut them.

“Dammit… I won’t go down that easily!” Medi used her exceptional strength and swordcraft to dodge the three roots, then rushed at Rose, bringing the fight back to close quarters.

“Haaaaaaaah…!” yelled Rose.

“Graaaaaaah…!” roared Medi.

Neither girl budged as they fought at point-blank range. Their blades collided again and again, their spirit power surging and blood flying whenever one of them managed to land a hit. They even punched and kicked each other when they had the chance, not wanting to miss even the smallest gap in their opponent’s defense.

The duel had devolved into a simple battle of attrition. Whoever ran out of stamina or spirit power first would lose. They fought as if their lives depended on it, until one of them finally began to slow.

It was Medi.

“Take this…!” Rose shouted, landing a fierce side kick.

“Crap— Gah…!” Medi cried as she was knocked down on the stage. “…Damn, you’re strong.”

Medi wiped blood from the corner of her mouth and slowly got back to her feet. The numerous cuts and bruises on her body didn’t heal; her supply of spirit power from Timeless Fruit must have run out. She had to be in terrible pain, clearly so heavily injured she couldn’t even swing her sword, yet she gave Rose her biggest smile yet.

“Well then… It’s time for a last-ditch attack!” Medi yelled loudly enough for the whole coliseum to year. The tachibana orange tree bloomed fully again, filling Timeless Fruit with a vast amount of spirit power. “Listen up. I’m gonna put everything I have into my next swing!”

It was normally a bad idea to invest all your spirit power into a single strike, and it was an even worse idea to announce you

were going to do so beforehand. If your opponent dodged the attack, that would mean instant defeat.

However…

“Then I’ll do the same,” responded Rose.

Rose Valencia didn’t want a cheap victory like that. She was determined to defeat Medi when they were both fighting at their peaks. Medi had likely announced what she was going to do because she knew Rose would react that way. Such was the strong bond of trust they’d developed during their intense fight.

“”…””

The two swordswomen fell silent as they prepared. The tension in the arena was palpable.

“Okay… Are you ready?” Medi asked.

“Anytime!” Rose replied.

Their gazes met, and Medi swung her white sword down.

“Tachibana Blossom Style Secret Technique—Heavenly White Silk!”

An enormous burst of white light shot from her sword. It looked like a bolt of lightning out of myth, and it flew straight at Rose, obliterating everything in its path.

“Cherry Blossom Blade Secret Technique…”

At the same time, Rose calmly readied her pink tachi. Time seemed to stretch as she prepared her attack.

N-no way… The sight reminded me of something. Rose’s stance, her bearing, and even the way she breathed made her the mirror image of Bacchus Valencia, who’d once been known as the greatest swordsman in the world.

“…Mirror Sakura Slash,” she said, calling forth blades of sakura that painted the world pink.

Rose’s and Medi’s attacks collided violently, producing an enormous shockwave and obscuring the stage in dust. The Billion-Year Sakura and tachibana orange tree disappeared simultaneously.

When the dust cleared, it revealed the two swordswomen on the stage, Rose uninjured and Medi heavily wounded.

I couldn’t believe it. *You’re kidding… How is Medi still standing with those injuries?! I guess that’s the power of a self-strengthening True Attire…*

Medi had managed to stay on her feet despite being covered in injuries that could have killed her. No one in the coliseum could believe their eyes.

"…Rose Valencia… You're the coolest person I've ever met…," Medi said. She gave a satisfied smile, then collapsed facedown on the stage.

"M-Medi Malum has been incapacitated! The winner is Rose Valencia!" declared the announcer, and the crowd erupted with deafening cheers and applause.

"That was insane!"

"Rose Valencia is incredible!"

"Medi was amazing, too!"

"This duel will undoubtedly go down as one of the greatest battles in Sword Master Festival history!"

The spectators gave a generous standing ovation.

…That's Rose for you. She really is one of the most skilled swordfighters I've ever met! That was as fair and honorable as a duel could be. It had been so satisfying to watch. Rose and Medi were both incredible swordswomen.



As the crowd continued to buzz excitedly, four members of the medical staff rushed to Medi's side.

"Holy cow… I've never seen injuries like this…"

"She'd be long dead if not for her self-strengthening True Attire…"

"Bring a stretcher! Quickly!"

"Call doctors with healing Soul Attires! Tell them to summon as much of their spirit power as possible and wait in the infirmary so we can begin treatment in one minute!"

The medics carefully and efficiently performed first aid.

"Rose…," Medi said weakly from atop the stretcher, holding out her right hand.

"What is it?" Rose asked.

"*Haah, haah…* Let's do this again…next year!" Medi said, smiling happily. Her expression was open and honest, without a trace of regret.

"Absolutely. I was just about to say the same thing," Rose replied. She smiled and grasped Medi's hand. It looked like the two of them were going to develop a strong rivalry.

Rose descended from the stage and slowly made her way back toward us. Her fatigue was clear to see.

"Good job, Rose. That was the best duel I've ever seen!" I said.

"Way to go, Rose! You were so cool!" cried out Lia.

"I should've known you could handle a True Attire wielder," remarked Shii.

"Even I was flabbergasted when the Billion-Year Sakura appeared!" exclaimed Lilim.

"It was stunningly beautiful!" added Tirith.

"Your swordcraft was mesmerizing, Rose!" said Lou.

We were all equally amazed by what Rose had done.

"Heh. I told you there was nothing to worry…about…" Rose suddenly stumbled and fell onto my chest.

"A-are you okay?!" I asked.

"Yeah… Sorry. I'm just suffering from a mild spirit power deficiency. I'll feel fine again after a little rest." She slowly steadied herself, then sat down on a nearby bench and took a sip from her water bottle. It looked like she'd be just fine.

Anyway, the score between Thousand Blade and Divine Emperor was now tied at two wins each. Our fate would be

decided in the captain's match between me and Shin Rex.



With the vice-captain's duel between Rose and Medi now finished, a buzz filled the National Crusade Coliseum.

"What's going on? I've never seen Divine Emperor lose two duels in one round…"

"Thousand Blade's been impressive… It was only a few years ago that they were stuck at the bottom of the Elite Five Academies. Talk about a meteoric rise."

"The Golden Age has come again!"

"This rapid turnaround started when Reia Lasnote became chairwoman, didn't it?"

"That girl always seemed like a total airhead, but did she actually develop into a good teacher…?"

"I guess stranger things have happened!"

The spectators couldn't contain their excitement at Thousand Blade's two stunning upsets.

"What a day it's been already! Are you all having as much fun as I am?! Thousand Blade is currently holding steady with Divine Emperor at two wins apiece! Who could have seen this coming?!" the announcer said, firing up the crowd even more. "Ready or not, this is the final battle! Would the captain for Thousand Blade Academy, Allen Rodol, and the captain for Divine Emperor Academy, Shin Rex, please take the stage?!"

At that, I began walking toward the stage, while the announcer continued the preamble.

"Thousand Blade's Allen Rodol is a swordsman who fights with pitch-black darkness! He looks like a gentle boy who wouldn't hurt a fly, but don't let that fool you! His personality is as black as his power, and he has deep connections with the underworld! That said, he's also demonstrated a humane side by providing a precious sample to help find the elusive cure for curses! He truly is an enigma!"

Did my introductions always have to be so terrible? At least it wasn't all negative this time. That was a slight improvement.

"Divine Emperor's Shin Rex is a member of the Seven Holy Blades, a group touted by the Holy Knights Association as the best

collection of swordfighters in the world! He's a prodigy with the blade! I haven't been given any information about his fighting style, his Soul Attire, or his school of swordcraft! He's just as mysterious as Allen!"

I reached the stage and saw Shin Rex on the other side.

Shin had medium-length brown hair, a handsome face, and innocent eyes. He was 168 centimeters tall and had a slender build, which lined up with the scouting report. His aloof expression was matched by the casual way he wore the white Divine Emperor uniform.

Our eyes met as I studied him.

"Fwah… So you're Allen Rodol. I heard you're super strong, but…now that I've got a good look at you, I'm not gonna get my hopes up," he said, yawning loudly.

It was seriously rude.

"You don't seem very excited to be at the Sword Master Festival," I said.

"Of course I'm not," Shin replied. "Are you kidding? I'd rather be lazing around at home right now than fighting in this lame festival. But if I didn't come, those pigheaded geezers would never have let me hear the end of it… Hence why I'm here."

By "pigheaded geezers," he must have been referring to the leaders of the noble faction.

"What's even the point of the Sword Master Festival, anyway?" Shin continued with an innocent smile. "It's supposed to decide the best swordfighter and the best swordcraft academy…but everyone already knows that I'm the best, which also makes Divine Emperor the best school."

Shin didn't mean that as a taunt; he truly believed those words.

…That's kind of amazing, actually. I'd met a number of extremely talented swordsmen who were confident they were the best in the world, including Dodriel and Shido. Yet Shin differed from them in one fundamental way: He wasn't just confident that he was the best—he was *convinced* of it. In his eyes, it was an undeniable fact that he was the best swordsman alive.

"It's dangerous to let yourself grow conceited. You never know when someone could pull the rug out from under you," I warned him.

“Impossible. There’s no way the riffraff could do something like that,” Shin said flippantly.

“…”

“…”

We locked eyes silently.

“The captain’s duel between Allen Rodol and Shin Rex is about to start! Are you both ready? On my mark… Begin!” shouted the official.

“Destroy—Rapacious Demon Zeon!” I yelled, immediately summoning my black sword and assuming the middle stance.

Shin, meanwhile, just stood there and gave me an appraising look.

“Wow. Would you look at that? I’m kinda surprised there’s another kid in my year who has this much spirit power. I’ll give you a point for that,” he said, drawing the sword at his waist.

“…Huh? Are you not going to lay down this time?” I asked.

“Pfft… Ha-ha-ha! Man, you’re funnier than you look, too!” Shin burst out laughing, holding his belly. “Yeah, I’d normally do this lying down, but I feel like that’s not gonna cut it with you. Though I don’t think I’ll have to go all out, either. We’ll see.”

Shin tapped the stage with the toe of his shoe.

“Now then, shall we get started?” he said.

“Hrk…!”

The next thing I knew, I was slammed into the wall behind me. I felt the impact a moment later, from the top of my head all the way down to my toes, feeling as if I’d been hit by a piece of heavy machinery. It took a moment for my brain to realize that Shin had charged at me and sent me flying.

He’s so fast. And unbelievably skilled, too…

Shin had just accelerated from zero to full speed. His elite control of his spirit power and ability to shift his weight had allowed him to perform that attack without any visible buildup.

“You might wanna start paying attention. I’ll crush you if you don’t,” Shin said. Standing in front of me, he unleashed his immense spirit power.

Is this guy for real?!

He was using his spirit power to try to crush me.

“Aaaaaaaarrgghh!” I yelled, countering with my own spirit power. I forced him back with my darkness and managed to

escape.

"Wow. I didn't think you'd get out of that. I underestimated you," Shin said, his eyes wide as he clapped his hands.

"No way… He actually overwhelmed Allen with spirit power…!" gasped Lia, shocked.

"Shin Rex… He's completely unserious, but his skills are the real deal," said Rose.

They both watched intently from our team's seating area.

"You're good… I shouldn't have expected any less from an active Holy Blade," I said, spitting out blood and gripping my black sword. "Now it's my turn!"

I dashed across the stone stage, closing the distance between us in a single step.

"Eighth Style—Eight-Span Crow!"

"That's not gonna work, bud. Our base stats are just way too different," Shin said. He casually swung his sword down and deflected the eight slashes.

"What?!" I gasped.

"You don't have time to act surprised!" Shin said, immediately swinging his sword at me with astounding speed.

Such force… There was a greater weight behind the blade than I would have thought possible given Shin's slender build.

"Ah-ha-ha, try and keep up!" Shin said, suddenly becoming more aggressive. He hounded me with a relentless barrage of thrusts and slashes from every direction.

"Ngh…"

I dodged, parried, and blocked them as I tried to come up with a plan.

So this is how Shin Rex fights…? Every strike contained deadly force. The absurd amount of spirit power he put into each attack made that possible. *But how can he possibly be* this *strong?!*

I'd fought many types of opponents. Some were blessed with natural talent, some had inhuman reflexes, and some had fought with polished swordcraft. They were all elite swordfighters who boasted vast amounts of spirit power. Yet that was just a drop in the ocean compared to Shin's. I couldn't remember facing anyone who had such extraordinary reserves of energy.

"Enjoy the flight!" he said, casually kicking me. I lowered my elbow to block it, but I couldn't stop the impact and was thrown

backward through the air.

Haah… What a pain. Shin's strategy was incredibly simple: overpower me with his spirit power. That simplicity was exactly what made it so difficult to counter.

Damn. I don't think I can beat him this way. Unless I committed my full strength, he would wear me down with that ridiculous spirit power of his and eventually finish me off with a critical blow. *I don't want to use that power…but I don't have a choice.*

Shin Rex was a Holy Blade and significantly stronger than I'd expected. I couldn't afford to be picky.

"*Hoo*…" I let out a long, thin breath and stood up straight, giving up my middle stance.

Shin cocked his head with a look of surprise. "Huh? Are you giving up already?"

"No. I just decided it's time I get serious, too."

"Pfft… Ah-ha-ha-ha! You make me laugh, Allen! You're just now deciding to get serious? You mean to tell me you've been holding back against a *Holy Blade*? Ha-ha, you could have a real future in comedy!"

"Trust me, I have my reasons."

I hadn't been going easy on Shin or taking him lightly. I just didn't like entering that state.

"*Haah…* Well, go ahead and show me your true strength, then!" Shin said. He smiled fearlessly, closed the distance between us in less than a second, and swung his sword down at me, which was imbued with tremendous spirit power.

"Allen…!"

As the white blade closed in on me and Lia screamed my name, I reached out with my consciousness deep into the depths of my soul, to the world where my Spirit Core resided.

…Remember.

I thought back to when Diehl's poison had put me at death's door.

Back to the power I'd grasped hold of when I was about to die.

To the method of drawing strength from the darkness Zeon had taught me.

…Find it. Reach out to your source…!

I searched deep within my soul—and there it was. That same murky, wicked power as last time.

I took hold of it.

“…Huh?” Shin said flatly.

He would have never imagined I’d stop his full-strength strike by catching his blade in my bare hands.

“You wanna keep going, you little twerp?” I said, yanking his blade toward me and concentrating darkness into my right fist. “Ha-ha, enjoy the damn flight!”

“Oof!”

I sank a pitch-black punch deep into Shin’s gut and sent him flying like a ball. He crashed into the wall of the coliseum.

“Gah…”

Half of Shin’s body was lodged in the wall, and he coughed and spat out blood. I raced toward him and fired a giant mass of darkness in his direction.

“What was that about you being stronger than me?” I taunted.

Shin responded by firing a massive amount of his own spirit power, which collided with mine to create a deafening roar.

“Geez, that was close…,” Shin muttered after just barely escaping. He turned toward me with an expression of shock. “Who are you…?”

“The hell you mean?” I asked.

“Your hair turned white, and there’s a weird black pattern on your face. Your attitude’s completely changed as well… Do you have a split personality?” Shin asked.

“Uhh… You could say I’m a little ‘mixed up.’”

My thoughts had merged with Zeon’s, making me somewhat belligerent. I was still in control, however, so there was no risk of my Spirit Core taking over and going berserk.

“Hmm… I see. It seems like you’re special, too,” Shin said, sounding satisfied for some reason. “You should be proud, Allen Rodol. You’re truly strong. Just not quite at my level.”

I could feel something… It seemed like Shin was also getting serious.

“Inscribe—Imperial Decree!”

His proclamation was followed by a shrill sound, but nothing else changed. The sword in his hands looked exactly the same, and its spirit power hadn’t increased at all.

The only difference I noticed was in Shin’s eyes, which shone with even greater confidence than before.

“This is the end for you, Allen Rodol!”

“Hah. I don’t know what kinda ability you have, but I’ve just gotta pummel you until I find out!”

I filled my legs with spirit power and ran at him. The best thing to do against an opponent whose ability you didn’t know was to attack them relentlessly. You pressed and pressed and pressed until they were forced to use their ability for defense.

“You’re just as simple-minded as Medi. That’s why neither of you can beat me,” Shin said. He thrust the tip of his sword into a stone on the stage and flung it at me.

“The hell’s that supposed to do?!” I shouted. He couldn’t expect a pebble to slow me down. I waved my left arm to knock it away.

“*Stones pierce through all things*,” Shin said.

“What the…?!”

The tiny pebble had torn through my arm, which was enveloped in dark spirit power. Shin’s ability must have enabled that.

I immediately took a step back and cured my ravaged left arm.

“…You bastard. What did you do?” I asked.

“Come on, don’t kill the mood. It would be boring if I just up and told you. The fun part of Soul Attire battles is not knowing each other’s abilities… Yah!” Shin yelled, dashing toward me with explosive speed and unleashing a torrential assault of attacks.

“Tch…”

I dodged all his slashes, going out of my way to twist into unnatural positions to avoid attacks I could’ve easily blocked or parried. I was hesitant to touch Imperial Decree without knowing what it was capable of.

“Ah-ha-ha, I didn’t take you for such a chicken!” Shin said, smiling threateningly. He swung his sword, leaving a gash in the stone stage and sending fragments of rock flying at me.

Crap, those stones are bad news…

I leaped back to what I thought was a safe distance.

“*The stone stage becomes a swamp*,” Shin declared.

“Huh?!”

When I landed, my feet sank. I looked down and saw that the stage had become slushy like a mire.

“The wind turns to blades.”

Shin swept his sword like a conductor's baton, sending sharp gusts of wind my way.

"Shit…!" Immobilized by the swamp, I was forced to summon my cloak of darkness to defend myself.

"*The wind penetrates darkness*," Shin said.

"Hrgh!"

The blades of wind passed right through my darkness and cut me up.

…This is bad. Shin has total control of the tempo of this battle. I need to reset…!

I clenched my fists, determined to stop his momentum.

"First Style—Flying Shadow!" I yelled, summoning a full-strength Flying Shadow at my feet to pull me out of the swamp and into the air. Next, I created a platform of darkness and landed on it.

"Ah-ha-ha, what a creative escape. You can come back down, though. The stage won't sink anymore. There's no need to be scared," Shin said gently, as if soothing a small child.

I'd normally be able to ignore a cheap taunt like that. But right now, I felt a burning irritation rise within me. That was probably the influence of Zeon's short temper.

Whew… Calm down. I need to keep control of my emotions. I let out a deep breath to try and cool my head.

Now that I'd regained my composure, I reached out to the stage with my darkness and tapped lightly on it.

…It's definitely hard. Shin had told the truth; the stone stage had regained his solidity. *It could become a swamp again at any moment, though… I should cover the bottoms of my shoes with darkness just in case.* That way, I'd be able to stand on the darkness if Shin turned the stage to slush again.

I descended to the stage and reflected on the fight so far.

…I think I've figured out what he's doing.

Imperial Decree had the ability to impose rules.

During his first attack, he imposed a rule that granted pebbles the ability to pierce through anything. Then he turned the stage into a swamp so my feet would sink into it. Next, he gave gusts of wind the properties of a blade and enabled them to pass through my darkness. He can apply rules to anything. Given how the stage quickly returned to normal, it's safe to say his stipulations don't

last forever. There's clearly a way to dispel them. I just don't know if Shin did that on purpose or not.

Shin began to chuckle as I silently analyzed his ability.

"Ha-ha, have you figured out what my perfect Soul Attire, Imperial Decree, can do?"

"More or less… It seems pretty useful."

I could definitely see why he was so convinced he was unbeatable. *But no ability's perfect. His Soul Attire must have a weakness!*

I needed to learn more about Imperial Decree's abilities if I wanted to defeat Shin. The best way to accomplish that was to attack. Conventional wisdom said to relentlessly hound your opponent until they were forced to reveal their secrets to defend themselves.

I let out a shallow breath and began my assault.

"Dark Shadow!"

Tentacles of darkness soared into the sky, then swooped down toward Shin to crush him.

"I've gotta hand it to you, you have a lot of impressive abilities. Not that they'll do you any good. *Dark Shadow turns to mist*," Shin commanded.

Shin slashed one of the dark tentacles with his sword, and they all turned to mist and dissipated. That wasn't all; I tried to summon another Dark Shadow, but it didn't work. The darkness turned to mist the moment it appeared.

I see… Once he applies a rule to a target, all instances of that target are affected until the rule is dispelled. That was a valuable piece of information. Time for my next move.

"Sixth Style—Dark Boom!" I yelled, sending a pitch-black slash at Shin. But even then, he remained calm and completely at ease.

"I told you, nothing you do will work… *Dark Boom vanishes*."

At Shin's decree, Dark Boom disappeared without a sound, but then he let out a surprised gasp.

"What the…?"

A lethally sharp Flying Shadow imbued with a huge amount of spirit power was right before him. I had stealthily placed it behind Dark Boom.

Now then, how's he gonna deal with this? I leaned forward, ready to charge and engage him in close combat. However, Shin

glanced at me and cut Flying Shadow in half with a single swing of his sword.

"You're definitely strong, Allen Rodol. But it doesn't matter. I exist above the very concept of strength," Shin said.

"Oh yeah?" I responded, deciding to ignore his nonsense. I thought as fast as I could.

…It seems like Imperial Decree has three limitations.

First, Shin had to cut a target with his sword before he applied a rule to it. He'd sliced the pebble, the stage, and the wind with Imperial Decree before imposing rules on each one. That was undoubtedly a requirement.

Second, he had to state the rule out loud. After slicing each target, he'd said its name and specified the effect he wanted to apply to it. That was probably the trigger that activated Imperial Decree's ability. He wouldn't say what he was about to do out loud if he didn't have to.

As for the third limitation… This is just a theory, but I think I'm probably right about it.

Shin had been calling Imperial Decree a perfect Soul Attire and constantly showboating with its power. He was as arrogant and confident as a person could be, yet for some reason, he hadn't used its power just now.

He turned Dark Shadow to mist and made Dark Boom vanish, but instead of applying a rule to Flying Shadow, he chose to cut it with his blade. He also quickly glanced at me. I was leaning forward, so he was probably watching me in case I decided to rush at him.

The third limitation could be that Imperial Decree could only maintain two rules at a time. If he went over two, the existing rules would be disabled in order from oldest to newest.

That would explain a number of things. If he had applied a rule to Flying Shadow, then the rule that turned Dark Shadow to mist would have been overwritten. I used Flying Shadow exclusively as a long-range attack whereas I could use Dark Shadow from long or short range, so it was clear which of the two he was better off eliminating.

Essentially, Shin elected to cut down Flying Shadow without using his power because he didn't want to lose the rule that caused Dark Shadow to turn to mist.

I'd seen this limitation in action when he turned the stage into a swamp as well. After he applied two rules, giving wind the sharpness of a blade and allowing it to penetrate darkness, the stage had become hard again.

In summary, Imperial Decree was extremely powerful, but it had three limitations: rules could only apply to objects Shin had cut, rules had to be declared out loud, and only two rules could be maintained at a time.

…I've finally figured it out. My careful analysis had revealed this duel to be much less difficult than it initially seemed. To overcome Imperial Decree's defenses, all I had to do was perform three different kinds of attacks at once.

"*Haah…* I see your brain working, but don't bother. There's no point; nothing you do will work. I'm unbeatable," Shin said. He swept his sword horizontally. "*Space compresses*."

The next thing I knew, Shin was standing right in front of me.

"What?!" I gasped.

He hadn't moved toward me; the distance between us had been erased—or compressed—until we were inches apart.

"This is gonna hurt," he said before hounding me with a torrent of slashes imbued with an absurd amount of spirit power.

"Ngh…!" I was late to react because his approach had caught me off guard, and I was swept up in the storm.

How are his thrusts so powerful…? I tried to retreat, unable to properly defend myself, but Shin pursued me.

"I'm not letting you get away! *Shockwaves become raging storms*."

Shin lifted Imperial Decree overhead and slammed it into the stage. The impact didn't create a shockwave as I would've expected but a storm containing massive spirit power that ravaged my body.

Crap! He can do whatever he wants with that weapon…! Common sense didn't apply to Imperial Decree, which made predicting Shin's next move impossible.

But that's two rules! He had already applied two rules during that attack, reaching Imperial Decree's limit. If my theory was correct, the rules restricting Dark Shadow and Dark Boom were gone.

Dark Shadow.

I summoned Dark Shadow inside my left fist where Shin wouldn't see it.

Sweet, it worked!

As I'd predicted, the rule that turned Dark Shadow into mist was gone. I now knew how to defeat him.

Let's not waste any time! I can end this with my next attack!

I put off healing myself in favor of preparing my trap.

"Dark Shadow!"

"That move won't… Huh?"

The dark tentacles quickly surrounded Shin from all sides, where they waited.

"Sixth Style—Dark Boom!" I roared, sending a large pitch-black slash at Shin. That was when the dark tentacles attacked.

"Hmm, you actually put some thought into that attack, didn't you? But two attacks isn't enou— What?!"

Astonishment showed on Shin's face for the first time. I'd circled around behind him, hiding behind the Dark Boom.

"I've figured out how your ability works, sucker! Tenth Style—Clear Black Sky!"

Dark Shadow surged at him from below, my full-strength Dark Boom rushed at him from the front, and I'd just performed a vicious Clear Black Sky from behind, resulting in three attacks from different angles. That left Shin with nowhere to escape. My attacks were too powerful to block because I'd invested all my spirit power into them, and they were three different kinds of slashes, so he couldn't erase them all with rules.

"You're dead!" I shouted, sure of my victory.

"Not so fast, bud," Shin said, laughing repulsively.

It all fell apart in the blink of an eye. One moment Dark Shadow, Dark Boom, and Clear Black Sky were raging toward Shin, and the next they'd disappeared like magic.

"…Huh?" I said, flabbergasted.

"Too bad, so sad. We'll have to do this again next year," Shin said, swinging Imperial Decree.

"Gah…!" I gasped as his violent slash tore through flesh and broke bones.

I had devoted nearly all my darkness to those attacks, leaving me to take Shin's attack undefended. It was too much, and I collapsed to my knees, bleeding heavily.

“How…?” I mumbled.

“How, indeed? Are you hopelessly confused? *That* is the true power of Imperial Decree!” Shin said joyfully, throwing his arms wide.

Belittled by Shin’s words and actions, something clicked in my mind. He had been playing a dirty trick on me this whole time.

“You bastard… Did you deflect that Flying Shadow with your sword just to…?”

“Huh? Oh yeah. I did that to mess with you. I saw how hard you were working that puny brain of yours to figure out my ability, so I thought I’d have some fun. A reckless idiot like you could never beat Imperial Decree.”

He’d deflected Flying Shadow and glanced at me simply to mislead me about his ability.

I really can’t stand this guy… He’d been screwing with me the whole time as I frantically tried to search for Imperial Decree’s weakness.

“I told you at the start, remember? Imperial Decree is a perfect Soul Attire! There’s no limit on the number of rules it can maintain, and I don’t have to say them out loud, either! I don’t even need to slice the target! All things in the world must adhere to my rules! My power is almighty!” Shin declared.

“That kind of ability shouldn’t be possible…,” I said.

“Yeah, it really shouldn’t be. And yet it’s mine. That’s what makes me special,” he said cheerfully. “Anyway…I think that’s enough messing around.” His expression suddenly turned cold. “The noble faction told me about you. They said you have a savage Spirit Core. That sounds like a massive pain, so I’m gonna finish you off now before it emerges.”

“Like hell you are!” I shouted, firing darkness downward to propel myself into the air. “Die!” I filled my black sword with as much spirit power as I could and performed my strongest attack. “Fifth Style—World Render!”

“Haven’t you been listening? There’s nothing you can do. *Your black sword becomes brittle*.”

My black sword shattered as it made contact with Shin’s body.

“What…?!”

My strongest attack—which was able to cut through the World of Time and had gotten me out of so many tough spots—failed

completely as my sword broke to pieces.

"Do you finally understand?" asked Shin. "The strongest people in any world are those who make the rules."

He pulled back Imperial Decree …

"Grk…"

…and stabbed it deep into my chest.

Shit…!

He'd stabbed through the one vital part I couldn't afford to lose —my heart.

No, no, no. I can't let him pull his sword out…

I fought down the intense pain and tightened my chest muscles so he couldn't withdraw Imperial Decree, leaving it lodged in my heart.

"Ah-ha-ha, clever. Tightening your muscles is certainly one way to prevent me from drawing my sword," Shin said with an innocent smile. "But that's just as useless as everything else you've tried."

He thrust his sword deeper into my chest.

"Allen Rodol's heart…stops."

"U-urk…"

This was different from any attack I'd ever suffered.

It wasn't just life-threatening.

It was life-ending. And there was nothing I could do about it.

What's…happening…? My body feels…heavy. I can't…think…

Oxygen ceased to reach my brain. My mind dulled.

Sensation grew…distant…

My vision flickered…and grew dark.

I can't…die here…

And so, the swordsman named Allen Rodol perished.

■

An eerie silence fell over the National Crusade Coliseum, where the high-profile Sword Master Festival was being held.

"Allen…?" Lia whimpered.

"N-no…," Rose said, her eyes darting about.

As a stir swept through the venue, Reia found herself speechless. Her mind went to a warning she'd once received from Daria Rodol.

…This is a disaster, Reia thought. *This is the one scenario we were supposed to avoid at all costs.*

The 100-Million-Year Button made by the Time Hermit had weakened the seal. Allen had unintentionally formed a pipeline to Zeon through a series of deadly battles against formidable foes.

The vessel was just destroyed in an extremely unstable state with the seal still in place…

The worst-case scenario was Zeon fully recovering. He may have been reduced to a Spirit Core, but he was still an otherworldly monster. If he was reborn in this world with his old strength back, he would bring about incredible, irreversible destruction.

Slow down. What's the priority right now?

Reia suppressed her grief for Allen, her anger at Shin, and her fear of Zeon and sprang into action.

"Listen up, everyone! We need to get out of here! There's no telling what could happen next!" she yelled to warn the people around her.

It was then that Reia noticed something.

"What the…?!"

A beautiful darkness had started to spill from Allen's body. It was smooth as black silk and didn't feel the slightest bit evil. The best word to describe it was "holy."

It was what Emperor Barel Ronelia of the Holy Ronelian Empire feared more than anything: the Rodol Clan's darkness.

■

"Huh…? Where am I?"

I awoke in a world of white. The brightness extended forever in all directions.

"Umm… I was fighting Shin, and then…," I said, trying to remember what had happened.

"Hey, you finally made it here," a female voice said behind me.

I turned around and saw a figure made of faint white light. It was human in shape but too hazy for me to make out its face.

Yet my instincts told me I could trust this person.

"Umm, who are you? And where am I?" I asked.

“Oh… Right. You wouldn’t know, would you?” she replied, a great sadness in her voice. “I’m a guardian. And this is another world. A secret base not even that idiot Zeon knows about.”

“U-uhh…”

Guardian? Another world? Secret base? I had absolutely no idea what she was talking about.

“…Still, you took quite the detour getting here…,” she said, seeming to stare off into the distance. “That button really threw everything off… I’m sorry, Allen.”

The faintly glowing woman smiled apologetically, but then a repulsive blackness began to rise from below us.

“So this is where you were hiding, you bastard?!” Zeon’s voice cried out, angry enough to make my hair stand on end. It came from the abyssal black substance.

“Wow, you already found us. That was fast,” the woman said.

It sounded like they knew each other.

“What the hell d’you think you’re doin’? You wanna die?!” Zeon threatened.

“Oh, how scary. There’s no need to glare like that,” the woman said, seemingly unbothered by his anger. “Zeon, you’re probably the strongest person in the world. I mean that literally. But you’re a Spirit Core now, and in this world, I have the advantage.”

She snapped her fingers, causing a flood of holy darkness to surge forth from the white world. It gently wrapped itself around Zeon’s darkness.

“Goddamn it… I’ll make you pay for this! Don’t think you’re gonna have your way for much longer!” Zeon bellowed angrily before the darkness fully enveloped him.

An earsplitting roar rang out, causing cracks to form all across the white world. The cracks became tears, which broke open into large holes, and the whole world began to shake.

“*Haah…* He’s been reduced to a Spirit Core and had his strength greatly shackled, and yet he still manages this much power in a world under my control… That man defies understanding,” the woman said.

Despite her sigh, she sounded slightly happy for some reason.

“Now, then… I wanted to tell you so much more, Allen, but that will have to wait for another opportunity. We’re clearly out of time.”

She looked up at the crumbling world, smiled sadly, and reached a hand enveloped in white light toward me.

"This is for you. It's the Rodol Clan's darkness. That buffoon has been hiding it from you all this time."

The woman pressed her index finger to my chest, and holy darkness that shone with a faint white light erupted from my body.

"What the…?!" I gasped.

It was warm, gentle, and clear as the sun—completely different from the wicked darkness I'd been using until now.

"This is the King's Power. It will let you fight Zeon on even footing and draw out the true strength of your Soul Attire, Rapacious Demon Zeon. Use it well."

The world crumbled around us as the woman spoke. There were now massive holes everywhere, which grew larger as pieces of the world continued to shatter and fall.

The woman waved, and she began to sink into the ground while I was sucked upward toward the sky.

"H-hey, wait! What am I supposed to do? I need more of an explanation! …Mom!" I cried out. I wasn't sure why I called her that.

"You're the center of everything, Allen. The coordinates to fixing the world. Don't worry, I know you'll overcome the trials ahead of you. I—*we* believe in you."

■

"Ngh…"

I opened my eyes to see clear blue sky.

"Oh… I'm back."

I raised my legs above me, then swung myself to my feet.

"…I feel weird."

Information I hadn't been conscious of until then—the scents of spring, the smell of the air, the feeling of the breeze on my skin—seemed to slam into my body. I also felt incredibly refreshed, like a weight I'd been carrying for years had been lifted off my chest.

It was like I was seeing the world in a brand-new light.

"*Haah*… The air tastes so good," I said, taking a deep breath.

The next moment, cries of shock erupted throughout the coliseum.

“Huh… WHAT THE HELL?!”

“H-how is that possible?!”

“He was stabbed through the chest, wasn’t he…?”

Shin was no exception as he stared at me, his mouth agape in shock.

“I-impossible… I know Imperial Decree worked! Your heart should have stopped!” he cried.

“…It did,” I told him.

Now that I thought about it, my heart wasn’t beating.

“Then… Hah!”

I concentrated my power into my chest. Bright light spilled out of me, and my heart started beating again.

“There we go.”

It was a temporary measure, but it would hold for a while.

“Did you just…*will* your heart to start back up again?” Shin asked, dumbfounded.

“Wh-wh-what in the world just happened?!” the announcer shouted excitedly. “Allen Rodol has made a full recovery after being stabbed through the heart! Is he truly human?! Actually, I think we all know the answer to that! He’s definitely not!”

I calmly held my black sword before me.

“Let’s get back to it, Shin,” I said.

“…For someone who was just killed, you’re raring to go. Where’d you get that confidence from?” Shin asked.

“It’s actually curiosity, not confidence, that’s driving me right now. It took me ages, but I think I’ve finally become a Soul Attire Wielder.”

“…Are you right in the head? You’re already holding your Soul Attire.”

“Ah-ha-ha, sorry. Don’t pay that any mind.”

I had been mistaken about the power of Rapacious Demon Zeon. I’d always believed it to be a versatile self-strengthening Soul Attire that wielded darkness, but it was capable of much more than that.

I solved one mystery, too. The darkness didn’t belong to Zeon; he’d stolen it from the Rodol Clan.

I'll save that for the next chat I have with Zeon. For now, I simply wanted to enjoy this moment and use the darkness and Soul Attire ability I'd just obtained.

I'll start with the Rodol Clan's darkness.

I slowly exhaled and enveloped my body in the gentle, holy darkness.

Shin gave me a puzzled expression.

"…*White* darkness? Are you trying to change your image?" he asked.

"Ah-ha-ha, something like that," I replied. "Shall we begin?"

I leaped lightly off the stage toward Shin…

"Huh…?"

…and before I knew it, his severed left arm was flying through the air.

I-incredible…!

I had only meant to step close enough to try out a practice swing, but I'd ended up getting right in front of him and chopping off his arm.

This new strength was unlike anything I'd ever experienced before. The white darkness's self-strengthening ability greatly surpassed my expectations.

"Ah! Ngh! Aaaaaaah…!"

Tears streamed down Shin's face as he held his shoulder, and he started to bawl like a child. He was crying loudly during a duel despite all the people watching… He truly didn't care about proper decorum.

"A-are you okay?" I asked.

Shin answered by glaring hatefully at me. His breathing heavy, he picked up his left arm and held it to his shoulder.

"Haah, haah… Shin Rex's arm attaches!"

His severed arm perfectly reconnected to his shoulder.

Interesting, he can do even that with his ability… Imperial Decree truly was an almighty Soul Attire.

"That hurt… That really freaking hurt!" he screamed shrilly, erratic spirit power bursting from his body.

…That's absurd. Shin was practically a mass of spirit power in human form. There was no doubt that he had the highest volume of spirit power of anyone I'd fought, and it wasn't even close.



"…I'll kill you," Shin muttered quietly, his voice nearly drowned out by the wind. He slashed at me, his face contorted in rage.

"Whoa, there." I whipped my black sword up diagonally to defend myself, and our blades locked.

"I'm done going easy on you! I'm gonna impose the most unfair rules I can think of and prove I'm the strongest! *Rapacious Demon Zeon's darkness is disabled!*" Shin yelled.

He tried to use Imperial Decree to get rid of my darkness, but it didn't work. That was because the holy darkness blazing cloaking me didn't originate from Zeon but from myself.

"Dammit! Why didn't that work…?!" Shin said. *Did I get the target of the rule wrong? Yeah, this feeling… This new glowing darkness isn't coming from Rapacious Demon Zeon! There's a new source! But what is it?!*

Something occurred to me as I watched Shin grow frustrated.

"I finally figured out Imperial Decree's weakness. You can't impose rules on things you don't understand. Right?"

"…"

"You just tried and failed to disable my darkness. Or are you going to claim you failed on purpose again?"

"Allen Rodol… You really are obnoxious, you know that?"

"Ah-ha-ha, I get that a lot. Hah!"

I hit Shin as hard as I could with my sword and sent him flying through the air. The white darkness enveloping my body gave me an overwhelming advantage in close combat.

Okay, next I'm gonna test out the true power of my Soul Attire! I reached for the long-awaited main course, but just then…

"Water explodes!"

…white blanketed my vision, and I felt my body get ravaged by the blast and heat from an explosion.

That was really intense…, I thought once it was over. That hadn't been a normal explosion, but one strengthened to a fearsome degree by Shin's bottomless spirit power.

"*Haah…* I slice up your entire body, and you recover immediately. I stop your heart, and you revive. I blow up your face, and you survive unscathed. What do I have to do to kill you?" Shin asked.

"Beats me. Maybe the king of the dead hates you," I said, brushing off his question so I could analyze the last sequence.

“That last attack… Oh, I see what you did. You imposed a rule that makes the moisture in the air explode.”

“That’s right,” Shin confessed readily. He threw his arms wide. “I took a moment to consider the best way to defeat the monster that is Allen Rodol. I have a brain to match my power, you see. After some thought, I arrived at an answer.”

“What’s that?” I asked.

“I’m gonna chip away at you. I’m gonna wear down your body, mind, and spirit power until you have nothing left! You’ll be a ragged piece of tissue paper fluttering helplessly in the wind when I’m done with you!”

Shin gave me a carefree smile.

“You’re not invincible, Allen. You bleed when you’re cut, you get knocked down when you’re hit hard enough, and you feel pain when you’re in an explosion. The only thing that sets you apart is your unbelievable toughness. And where does that toughness come from? The defensive and healing capabilities of your darkness, which is maintained by your spirit power. In other words, if you run out of spirit power, you lose your darkness and become a run-of-the-mill swordsman. Do I have that right?”

“Yeah, pretty much,” I admitted.

I was pretty tough, but I was still just an ordinary person. Without the spirit power to fuel my darkness, I wouldn’t last long.

“Ha-ha, I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but this duel is about to become a living hell for you. I’m gonna torture you with a never-ending chain of the most basic, annoying attacks. They’ll come thick and fast, and you won’t be able to avoid them! I’m gonna cut, crush, tear, and beat you until you can’t take any more! Just like this!”

Shin snapped his fingers. The world turned white again as explosions assaulted me.

“…!”

Making water explode is one of the most annoying rules he could’ve come up with…

The source of the explosions was the small amount of moisture in the air. Shin had essentially planted bombs all around me that were too small for the naked eye to see, and the explosions happened without warning, making them impossible to dodge.

Those explosions are extremely powerful and have endless range, plus they're impossible to avoid… That's actually insane.

So why did I still feel confident I was going to win?

"Now dance for me!" Shin yelled.

He pressed me with a tempest of ten, twenty, thirty explosions.

Okay…

I reached out with my consciousness, going deep into my soul and searching for the power I needed to get through this situation.

…Nope, that won't work. Neither will that.

I wouldn't have had to take the time to search for solutions every time I got into trouble if I'd already achieved mastery of Rapacious Demon Zeon's power. This was a first for me, though, so I couldn't be too hard on myself.

"Eh? What's with the silence?" Shin asked. "Are you trying to think of another dumb plan?"

"…"

"…What do you think gives you the right to ignore me when I'm speaking to you? Hah!"

Shin swung his left hand down, and a giant ball of light appeared before my eyes. It contained a vast amount of spirit power and was clearly about to explode.

That was when I found the great power I needed to overcome his current assault.

"I'm gonna borrow this, Lia," I said, concentrating spirit power into my black sword. "Conquer—Dragon King Fafnir!"

Black and white flames swept up around me and vaporized the moisture in the air. With the source of the explosions now gone, the ball of light dissolved.

"Wh-what…?!" Shin said, stepping back with a dumbfounded expression. "Th-that's impossible… You control darkness, so why are you suddenly able to summon flames?"

The ability of my Soul Attire, Rapacious Demon Zeon, wasn't the manipulation of darkness, but the power to consume anything and make it a part of my own flesh. It could prey upon anything in the world, including Soul Attires, Spirit Cores, living creatures, inanimate objects, phenomena, and more.

It feels like there are a few steps to copying a Soul Attire ability, though…

Rapacious Demon Zeon matched Imperial Decree in terms of freedom and versatility.

"What the hell *is* your ability?!" Shin yelled, pointing at me.

I knew just the right response to that question.

"Come on, don't kill the mood. It would be boring if I just told you. It's not knowing each other's abilities that makes Soul Attire battles fun, right?" I said, throwing his own words back at him.

"…!"

"All right… Ready for my counterattack?"

I closed the distance between us in one step and swung down my black sword—which was blazing with black and white flames—as hard as I could. Shin made the perfect defensive maneuver by whipping his sword up horizontally, but the flames ignited his uniform and burned his skin.

"Dammit! *The black and white flames disappear!*" Shin cried, pain on his face as he jumped back and imposed a rule to get rid of the fire.

He countered Fafnir. So what should I use next…?

I searched among the powers residing deep within my soul and picked the next one.

"Fulfill—Neba Grome!" I shouted, channeling Idora's Soul Attire to imbue my sword with bright lightning.

"This time it's electricity…?!" Shin shouted, shocked.

I ignored him and thought back to my duel with Idora.

"Hmm, how'd that move go again? Oh yeah. Flying Thunder—Fifty Million Volts."

That was the special ability Idora had used to imbue her body with blue lightning and significantly increase her speed in combat.

Wow, this is so cool!

The ability was rapidly stimulating all the cells in my body. I felt like I could even outrun lightning.

I want to test this out… Just how fast was I with this ability?

I began to sprint in circles around the stage to mess with Shin.

"What the?!" Shin shouted, trying and failing to follow me with his eyes. He was clearly no match for my speed. "Will you stop mocking me?! Take this!"

Shin's slash landed accurately—that is, if he were aiming for my afterimage.

“I’m behind you,” I said.

“Huh?!” gasped Shin.

I sliced his back with an electricity-imbued slash.

“Damn you…!”

Shin frantically swung his sword, trying his best to hit me, but his blade found only air. He was no match for my speed, and I inflicted wound after wound on him.

Shin’s mind raced. *This is bad. This is really, really bad. I’m losing too much blood… I have to use that move. It takes a huge toll on my body, but I have no other choice.*

“*Shin Rex surpasses all limits!*” he declared, trying a new tactic.

His speed increased significantly. Actually, that wasn’t all—his arm strength and leg strength had been amplified as well.

“I should’ve known a Holy Blade would have more tricks up his sleeve,” I said. *He increased his physical strength by leaps and bounds. His Soul Attire really can do anything…*

“Ha, who do you think you’re talking to?!” Shin responded. *Crap, I only managed to match his speed…*

Our physical strength was now completely even.

“““Haaaaaaaah!”””

We both shouted, our breath turning white in the air, as we clashed our blades again and again with violent force. Every millisecond mattered as we each tried our best to gain the upper hand. The fight appeared to be at a deadlock…but little did Shin know, I was performing an invisible attack as we fought.

…I think it’s about time, I thought.

I stepped toward him and yelled, “Eighth Style—Eight-Span Crow!”

“Ha, that’s not gonna…work… Huh?!” Shin cried. *Why does my body feel so heavy…?*

He deflected seven of the slashes, but the one he missed sliced deeply into his shoulder.

“Hnngh!”

Realizing something was wrong, Shin jumped back. He looked down, and his eyes widened in shock.

“What in the…?”

His hands had turned a light purple color.

“Are you familiar with hypothermia, Shin?” I asked.

The area around us had grown cold. While we were clashing blades, I had been stealthily channeling Shido's Soul Attire, Ice Wolf Vanargand, to spread cold air around us.

"Dammit… *Shin Rex's body temperature increases!*" he said.

As he healed, Shin left himself vulnerable, and I took the advantage.

"Vanar Thrust!" I shouted, piercing his side with my black sword coated in ice.

"Nrgh…"

Shin held his side with his left hand and desperately jumped backward.

…I cut him deep that time. The ease disappeared from Shin's face as he bled heavily onto the stage. Vanar Thrust had obviously been effective.

"*Haah, haah…* You're a monster…," Shin said. *He's lightning fast, and there's no limit to the kinds of attacks he can use. I don't have the time to impose any rules…*

He was now a good distance away from me, so I channeled Soul Attires that specialized in medium- and long-range attacks.

"Draw Breath—Abio Troupe! Trace—Aqua Queen!"

The Soul Attires I'd chosen were Claude's Abio Troupe, which could convert inorganic matter into bombs, and Shii's Aqua Queen, which could freely manipulate water. I wasted no time in preparing my assault, starting by slicing the stone stage with my sword. A light blue crest appeared where I struck.

""""Tweet, tweet!""""

""""Cawww! Cawww!""""

"Hoo!"

A huge number of stone swallows and crows, as well as one giant owl, rose from the stage and flew overhead. I'd decided to use Claude's Soul Attire for its excellent offensive and defensive capabilities.

"Aqua Trick."

Next, I summoned black water and morphed it into a variety of weapons, including swords, axes, spears, shields, and sickles, that floated in the air.

If Shin kept his distance, I would assault him with waves of bombs and water weapons. If he tried to approach me, the owl

would block him with a massive explosion. If he managed to reach me, I would fight him using my white darkness.

I could fight him off from any range.

“Let’s do this, Shin,” I said.

“…!” *What in the world* is *his ability…?* Shin thought. *No, now’s not the time to think about that. I need to apply some rules… But which of his powers do I disable?! …I can’t do it. I can’t beat someone this exceptional…*

I raised my left arm, ready to send forth my bombs and water weapons, when…

“I—I surrender!”

…Shin threw down Imperial Decree and fell to his knees.

“Ha, ha… Ah-ha-ha-ha…” He laughed like a madman as his reality crumbled. He clearly didn’t know how to handle the knowledge that he *wasn’t* the best swordsman in the world.

The venue fell silent upon the end of our intense duel.

“We have a winner! The captain’s duel between Thousand Blade Academy and Divine Emperor Academy goes to the dark swordsman Allen Rodol!” the announcer declared, her voice echoing far and wide.

CHAPTER 3
Assault

“I can’t believe what we’ve just witnessed! This might be the biggest, most shocking upset in the history of the Sword Master Festival! Allen Rodol’s victory has propelled Thousand Blade to a three-to-two victory over Divine Emperor in a blistering series of duels that will never be forgotten!” the announcer said, pumping up the crowd to fever pitch.

“You’re the best, Allen! You fought so well!”

“That duel was absolutely insane… It’s bound to be the best match of the tournament!”

“I’ve been watching the Sword Master Festival for decades, and this year is on another level!”

“I can’t believe Divine Emperor Academy just lost. I guess no one can remain on top forever.”

“These students are starting a new Golden Age for Thousand Blade!”

As the spectators cheered at the top of their lungs, I breathed a sigh of relief.

Haah… Thank goodness.

That duel had me worried for a moment, but I’d managed to win. I dispelled Rapacious Demon Zeon, took a big stretch—and locked eyes with two swordfighters in the stands directly in front of me.

“I can’t believe he imitated my Neba Grome… Is there anything Allen can’t do?” Idora said while clapping, a smile on her face.

“That bastard… How dare he steal my Vanargand…,” Shido said angrily.

Idora doesn't seem mad at all that I borrowed her Soul Attire ability, but Shido looks like he wants to kill me…

I descended from the stage, only making it a few steps before Lia threw herself at me.

"Allen…!"

"Whoa!" I cried, caught off guard.

"I was so worried… Thank goodness you're okay…"

Lia continued to mumble in relief, tears running down her cheeks. It seemed like I'd really scared her. I gently patted her head and saw Chairwoman Reia approach me from the special seating area.

"Allen, did your memories come back?" she asked.

"Huh? What're you talking about?" I replied, confused.

"…Never mind," she said, shaking her head and falling silent. Her expression was grim.

I wondered why she was acting so weirdly, but I quickly dismissed that thought. When was Chairwoman Reia *not* acting weird?

"You were amazing, Allen. Not that I expected any less," Rose said with a smile.

"You defeated a Holy Blade in a duel… Your prowess knows no bounds," Shii said.

"What the heck *was* that at the end? You kept bringing out one new ability after the other! I couldn't believe my eyes!" exclaimed Lilim.

"You're still alive after being stabbed through the heart… You're not just inhuman, you're a god…," murmured Tirith.

"You're so strong it's a little scary, Allen," said Lou.

"Hey, maggot… How did you manage to copy my ability?" Claude asked, seething.

But just then, I heard the beginnings of a commotion in the arena.

"Whoa… What the heck is that?!" someone shouted, pointing up at the sky.

The people around them looked up and reacted in the same way, causing a wave of noise to ripple through the crowd.

What are they yelling about…?

I followed their eyes and looked at the sky to see a black vortex.

Oh no! Is that what I think it is?!

A sludge-like shadow rose from the vortex, and a person enveloped in a sinister spirit power flew out of it.

“SALUTATIONS, DEAREST ALLEN RODOL!”

It was Dodriel Barton, my old classmate at Grand Swordcraft Academy and a swordsman with the powerful ability to wield shadows.

“D-Dodriel?!” I said, shocked.

Next thing I knew, dark spots covered the sky, and swordsmen wearing black overcoats appeared from each one. They descended onto a shadow platform Dodriel had made and looked down at us.

The Black Organization. There’s so many of them… At a glance, it looked like there were over a thousand members on that platform.

Tension swept through the National Crusade Coliseum. As we all watched, a mysterious, black-robed figure stepped out of a particularly large spot.

“Right this way, Your Majesty!” Dodriel said, quickly making a throne out of shadow.

“Thank you,” the new arrival said before sitting down.

The black-robed swordsmen all kneeled to him.

…That must be Barel Ronelia. He was the emperor of the Holy Ronelian Empire, the founder of the Black Organization, and an evil man who was trying to bring ruin to the world.

Barel wore a pitch-black robe, and a black haze obscured his face.

“Hmm…,” Barel said, looking down from his throne. Surprisingly, his gaze settled on me. “…I see. You certainly bear a close resemblance.”

He had a strange voice. It sounded simultaneously both young and old, warm and cold, and I felt like I’d heard it somewhere before. The pitch of his voice identified him as a man, but I couldn’t tell anything else about him.

So this is his natural voice… I had never heard it before, as he had used a voice changer for the video message he’d sent during the New Year’s Jubilee. Barel Ronelia was rumored to be so secretive that he never appeared in public, and he even hid his voice. Despite that, he had chosen to appear in Liengard and speak for all to hear.

I wonder if he had a change of heart, or if there's some special reason for his appearance here. Regardless, this isn't normal.

As I was thinking, two men from the VIP section yelled out hoarsely.

"Your Majesty! We are honored that you have made the long journey to join us here!"

"I must offer my humblest apologies, Your Majesty. That incredible fool, Shin, failed to kill Allen Rodol… However, he's on his last legs! If we strike now, we should easily be able to finish him!"

The first man to speak was Patriot Bolnard, and the second was Dafton Manay, the president of the Sword Master Festival Executive Committee. I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

Barel responded by shifting his glance slightly to the side.

"Dodriel."

"Sure thing, boss!" Dodriel responded casually. He held Shadow Sovereign overhead and formed black clouds beneath Patriot's and Dafton's feet, which carried the men toward Barel.

"They just called him 'Your Majesty'… Did those two betray Liengard?!"

"What did he mean Shin 'failed to kill Allen Rodol'?! Was that the whole purpose of this Sword Master Festival?!"

"Explain yourselves, you skeevy nobles!"

The spectators jeered deafeningly at Patriot and Dafton, but the two noblemen were unbothered.

"You're all fools! Why can't you see that Liengard is a sinking ship?!" shouted Patriot.

"We're going to be reborn as nobles of the Holy Ronelian Empire and rule the world!" cried out Dafton.

They both roared with laughter but fell silent when their clouds stopped before reaching the Black Organization members.

"Y-Your Majesty…?" Patriot said.

"I-I'm not great with heights, so would you mind quickly moving us to that stable platform up there…?" Dafton asked.

Their voices were anxious.

"Dodriel," came Barel's voice again.

"With pleasure," responded Dodriel, forcing his wicked shadows into Patriot's and Dafton's mouths.

""Mrrrgh?!""

A massive amount of shadow flooded into their bodies until they both exploded from the inside. Pieces of dark red flesh went flying in all directions, and the venue fell silent.

“The impure are rotten inside and out,” Barel said, having brutally disposed of the two nobles.

He snorted and cast his eyes appraisingly around the entire venue.

“I see the eidolon Fafnir, and… Oh, how nostalgic. I wouldn’t have expected to find a pup from that isolated island here. And is that the Billion-Year Sakura? What is it doing here? …Ahh, a memento of that old fool Bacchus, is it?”

Having finished scanning the crowd…

“Cough, cough…”

…Barel was overcome with a coughing fit. Blood fell through the black haze covering his face, and his aides began to panic.

“Y-Your Majesty!”

“I feared you weren’t yet ready to leave the castle…!”

Barel halted them with a wrinkled hand and wiped blood from his mouth.

“I am fine. I’m just not used to being outside yet. I’ll get over this soon.”

I couldn’t make out much of what they were saying because of the distance, but there was no mistaking my eyes. *He coughed up blood?* It looked like Barel might be ill.

“Barel Ronelia, you’ve got guts appearing here before me,” Chairwoman Reia said from beside me, her voice thick with hostility. Her fist turned black—which must have been the source of her nickname—and it looked like she might attack him at any moment.

“Greetings, Black Fist. True, the presence of a Transcendent is quite troublesome. Not just anyone can overcome the curse of that button. That’s why I’m going to prevent you from taking the stage,” Barel said.

“Excuse me?” the chairwoman said dubiously.

The announcer suddenly spoke up with panic in her voice.

“I—I have an emergency message from the Empress! A large host of demons has appeared from shadow spots in the sky and attacked Liengard Palace! Black Fist Reia Lasnote is ordered to return to the palace at once! To repeat, a large host of…”

Chairwoman Reia gritted her teeth, yet Barel appeared completely at ease.

“Please hurry, Ms. Reia! The Empress is in danger!” the announcer pleaded.

The chairwoman turned to me. “Allen, I need to go save Her Majesty. I’m sorry about this, but can I leave this situation in your hands?”

“Yes, ma’am!” I replied.

Chairwoman Reia ran off in the direction of Liengard Palace. Barel watched her go, then stood calmly from his shadow throne.

“Gauron, Dodriel, take care of the rest.”

“Understood.”

“I’ll make you proud, boss!”

Just before he stepped back into the shadow, Barel glanced back at me.

“Allen… Make sure you discover the truth. I am not your enemy. The King’s Power exists to help us defeat our true foe,” he said mysteriously before vanishing into the black vortex.

A giant shadow then appeared above the stage, from which a large number of limp objects began to fall, landing on the ground with loud thuds. I realized with horror that they were human.

“Must kill…swordsmen… Kill, kill, kill…”

“Oooooo…”

Their muscles had swelled to abnormal sizes, and they held unstable Soul Attires.

“Those people must have been fed soul-crystal pills…,” I said, grinding my teeth in anger.

“Ah-ha, that’s correct! A gold star for you, Allen! You’re so smart… Wait, when did you…? Oh, right! You’ve fought swordfighters enhanced by soul-crystal pills multiple times now! I read about it in a report a while back,” Dodriel said cheerfully.

He looked down upon the horde of squirming people.

“These swordfighters have all been enhanced by soul-crystal pills. Well, it sounds nice when you put it that way, but they’re really just the subjects of failed experiments, their bodies ravaged by the effects of the drug.”

“You… Do human lives really mean nothing to you…?!” I shouted.

“Nah, not really,” he said without hesitation. There was a shocking lack of emotion in his words. “Anyway, who cares about whether they’ve been ‘enhanced’ or ‘horribly disfigured by experiments gone wrong’? There’s something I want to tell you!”

Dodriel leaned forward, his eyes shining like a child’s.

“Today, the Holy Ronelian Empire declares war on Lien—”

He was interrupted when an ice spear struck him in the face.

“…Who threw that?”

Dodriel was uninjured, having used Shadow Sovereign to step into the Shadow World, but he looked livid at having his speech interrupted. I could see his eyebrows twitching from a distance.

“Do you ever quit runnin’ your damn mouth? Come down here so I can beat the shit out of you, you piece of trash!” Shido yelled, beckoning Dodriel toward him. He was just as short-tempered as always.

“All who disobey the will of God shall be struck down!” Cain yelled.

“I don’t give a damn about the Holy Empire or the Black Organization, or whatever the hell else you have to say!” another Ice King Academy student yelled.

“If you want a fight, you’ve got it, asshole!” shouted another one.

All of Ice King’s students yelled angrily at Dodriel.

I then noticed a group of students banding together.

“The enemy has attacked. Lend me your strength, everyone,” said Idora, who was leading a group of White Lily Girls Academy students.

“Gladly!”

“Follow Idora, everyone!”

“We’ll strike down these villains, who wish to bring chaos to the world, and make them see the error of their ways!”

The White Lily girls cheered.

“Shido, Idora…!” I gasped. Two reliable forces of students had risen up to fight—and it didn’t stop there.

“M-Medi, stop! You need to rest!”

“You almost died, remember?!”

“Oh, shut up! I can’t laze around in bed while the enemy’s attacking! Thanks for healing me, but I’ve gotta go!”

A girl argued with members of the medical staff and dashed out the east gate. It was Medi from Divine Emperor Academy. She stood before her classmates and spoke in a clear, loud voice.

“Listen up, you lot! The enemy’s here! I hope you’re not scared!”

“As if! Who do you think we are?!”

“All right, everyone! Follow President Medi!”

“Let’s show them the might of Divine Emperor Academy!”

Medi fired up her fellow students. It seemed like she was the school’s true leader.

“Hey, we can’t let the other Elite Five Academies outshine us! It’s time to show them Flame Emperor’s righteous spirit!”

“”””YEAH!”””

The Flame Emperor Academy students shouted with deep voices, equally determined to demonstrate their worth.

Students from the Elite Five Academies—Thousand Blade, Ice King, White Lily, Divine Emperor, and Flame Emperor—stood side by side, ready to oppose their common enemy.

That’s right… I—we—*are not alone!* Some of the best swordfighters in Liengard were gathered in this very arena. Together, we made a truly formidable force.

“Ah-ha, you all look ready for some sweet, sweet violence! This is gonna be one heck of a party!” Dodriel smiled wickedly and raised his arms. “Are you ready, everyone?! Our exhilarating invasion of Aurest begins…NOW!”

He clapped his hands, and the Black Organization members all summoned their Soul Attires.

“Incinerate—Blazing Cherub!”

“Entwine—Weaving Wand!”

“Disorient—Ethereal Mountain Pass.”

The rest of the Elite Five Academy students and I all responded by summoning our own Soul Attires.

“Destroy—Rapacious Demon Zeon!”

“Consume—Ice Wolf Vanargand!”

“Fulfill—Neba Grome!”

We all prepared ourselves for combat. Just as we were about to attack the Black Organization members, however, they shocked us all by turning toward the city outside the coliseum.

“Hya-ha-ha! Burn, burn, burn! Hell’s Hymnal!”

“I’m gonna zap you! Stray Lightning!”

“Ah-ha-ha! Don’t you want to be my friend? Doll Garden!”

Instead of us, the Black Organization members started attacking the regular citizens of Aurest. They were ransacking the city without even looking our way.

“Wh-what’s happening…?! EEEEEK!”

“Someone… Help me…”

Heartrending screams sounded from outside the coliseum, and I saw smoke rise in multiple directions.

“Ah-ha, ah-ha-ha! Yes, yes! Just like that! Destroy everything in your path! Trample the land underfoot until there’s nothing left!” Dodriel yelled, clapping his hands.

Four swordsmen, most likely members of the Thirteen Oracle Knights, led Black Organization members and enhanced swordfighters over the coliseum’s walls in every direction.

“Tch, you evil bastards…!”

Shido clicked his tongue hatefully and turned toward the rest of the Elite Five Academy students.

“Listen up! Our enemies are being annoying as hell and have made it their primary goal to weaken Liengard as a nation! We in Ice King Academy are gonna go north and send those bastards to hell. You all split up so that one school goes east, one goes west, one goes south, and one stays in the coliseum to murder the dregs that remain here! I’d better not goddamn see anybody get stupid and try to fight alone! Find some of those idiot local holy knights and work with them! This should go without saying, but people with healing and remotely controlled Soul Attires should support the others from the rear! Water wielders, gather around Shii Arkstoria, split into four groups, and fight fires in the city!”

Foul language aside, Shido’s orders were precise and efficient. Ferris had told me during our summer training camp that he was smart, and I could now see that she was right.

After some discussion, Ice King went north, White Lily went south, Divine Emperor went east, and Flame Emperor went west. Thousand Blade remained in the National Crusade Coliseum to fight Dodriel and the few hundred enhanced swordsmen who’d stayed.

“Eighth Style—Eight-Span Crow!”

“Hegemonic Style—Annihilation!”

“Cherry Blossom Blade Style—Sakura Flash!”

Lia, Rose, and I used three attacks to tear through a group of enhanced swordfighters, but…

“”””GUHHHHHHH!”””

…they continued to run at us despite their injuries, none of them faltering. The soul-crystal pills might have completely numbed their sense of pain.

“DIIIEEEE!” one man yelled, swinging his sword down at me with a grotesquely enlarged arm.

The haphazard nature of the swing made it easy to dodge, which I did with a casual step to the side. The man’s blade struck the ground, sending up chunks of dirt and causing an enormous shockwave.

That’s some power…

His physical strength wasn’t all that made the attack dangerous; when his sword struck the ground, his Soul Attire activated and caused a hot semisolid substance to burst up and fly out in all directions.

Does he have the ability to create magma?!

…No, it wasn’t magma, but regular fire that had taken on a viscous quality. The flames rippled violently, then turned blue, then became luminescent, never remaining in the same state for long. His Soul Attire probably had a fire-type ability, but the soul-crystal pill had made it unstable.

Shoot, this won’t be easy to deal with.

The enhanced swordfighters were difficult opponents. They weren’t particularly skilled—about equivalent to or below the average Soul Attire Wielder—but their abnormal strength, inability to feel pain, and unstable abilities combined to make them unpredictable.

The biggest problem was their numbers. *Ten or twenty of them would be no problem, but fighting hundreds at once is another story…*

I spurred myself to fight through my exhaustion as I cut down the enemies before me. I defeated ten, twenty, thirty of them before I heard a voice address me from above.

“Hey Allen, my dear, do you have a moment?” Dodriel called out.

“Sorry, but I’m a little busy. I have nothing to say to you anyway!” I shouted back.

“Ah-ha, don’t be so cold. We honed our swordcraft at the same middle school. Such bonds are for life.”

Dodriel waved his hands and smiled; I had no idea what he found so amusing. His facial expressions, words, and tone of voice were *really* getting on my nerves.

“Allen, would you happen to remember a country called the Principality of Theresia?” he asked. “It’s ancient history now, but it used to be one of the Five Powers. We conquered it at the beginning of the year.”

“What about it?” I said.

“All these enhanced swordfighters were taken from there.”

“What?!”

My sword hand froze.

Dodriel grinned at my reaction and continued.

“According to that clown scientist, ‘scientific progress cannot be made without sacrifices.’ He told us he wouldn’t be able to improve the soul-crystal pills without tens of thousands of test subjects. The problem was, he needed healthy Soul Attire Wielders under the age of forty, and you can’t find people like that just anywhere, especially in those numbers.”

He crossed his arms and nodded to himself affectedly.

“Do you know how hard it is to train someone from novice to Soul Attire Wielder? How much *money* that costs? That’s hardly worth it if we’re just gonna hand them over to the clown so he can horribly disfigure them in his experiments, right? So we decided that raising such a force of Soul Attire Wielders ourselves was just unrealistic. It threw a real wrench in our plans until our wise emperor came up with a solution: Why not just conquer a country and use *their* swordfighters?”

Dodriel created a shadow copy of Barel and gave it a round of applause.

“It was the perfect solution. After thorough investigation, we chose to invade Theresia! They had the weakest military of the Five Powers yet were brimming with people and resources! It was like they were *begging* to be invaded. The plan went smoothly from there. The Black Organization conquered Theresia, succeeded at upgrading the soul-crystal pills, and

obtained a sizable force of fodder in the form of these enhanced swordfighters… And all's well that ends well!"

"You're vile…," I spat.

But the next second, my attention was diverted as the enhanced swordfighter I was fighting began to swing his sword with reckless abandon.

"GUUUUH! DIIIEEE!"

I dodged his mindless swings…

"Hmph!"

…and hit the back of his head with the butt of my black sword to knock him unconscious and avoid killing him.

"Hmm? I don't know what you think you're doing, but there's no point trying to save them. Once soul-crystal pills have sent someone berserk, there's no medical technology in the world that can bring them back," Dodriel said.

"Don't worry. We have a secret weapon," I snapped back.

The secret weapon I spoke of was Kemmi Fasta, Liengard's genius scientist. She was a despicable person who I deeply detested, but her intellect was undeniable. She had achieved some truly incredible things, from the development of microminiature sailplanes to the discovery and mass production of a wonder drug for curses.

If we entice Kemmi with a massive cash reward, I'm sure she'll be able to find a way to return these enhanced swordfighters to normal!

I held that hope in my heart as I incapacitated the enhanced swordfighters.

"Grrr… That's very *you*. Those honest eyes, that unyielding heart, that endlessly positive mindset… You haven't changed at all from when you used to spend all your time swinging your sword alone in a corner of the schoolyard… That spirit of yours is something else. And I've always hated you for it!"

Dodriel leaped off his shadow platform toward me.

"Die."

"…!"

He swung Shadow Sovereign at me, and I blocked with Rapacious Demon Zeon. The pitch-black shockwave shook the very air.

"…You're good," I admitted.

He has so much more spirit power than he did during the Union Festival.

"Ah-ha, we've both gotten stronger since we last met!" Dodriel said.

Now that he was close to me, I noticed that his robe was embroidered with the pattern only given to members of the Black Organization's top management.

"You're an Oracle Knight now?" I observed.

"Hmm-hmm, impressive, right? I worked my way up in the organization from an expendable pawn to a real big shot!" Dodriel boasted.

"Does your new title really make you happy?" I asked.

Dodriel's smile vanished in response to my question.

"…You're mean. You already know the answer to that. Of course I don't care about this worthless title. All I want in life is for you to suffer and die a more painful death than anyone in human history!" he yelled, his eyes wide with anger. Dodriel was about to draw on his shadow power when an angry yell from above pounded my eardrums.

"Dodriel! What are you doing on the front lines, you fool?! Have you forgotten His Majesty's orders?!"

"Grk… Oh, fine. Whatever," Dodriel said, scratching the back of his head. "Sorry, Allen. I've gotta support our invasion from the rear today."

He retreated without argument, and a man jumped down from the shadow platform to take his place.

"That boy gives me the creeps… He's gotten way too big a head since earning His Majesty's favor," he muttered reproachfully. Then, he turned his eyes to me, a discerning look on his face. "I am Gauron Leisenberg, one of the Four Imperial Knights. I've come here to conquer Aurest on orders of His Majesty the Emperor. I assume you're Allen Rodol?"

"Yeah, that's me."

Gauron smiled eagerly and sucked in a massive breath.

"Hrngh…!" he grunted, his voice deep and rumbling. Immense spirit power filled his muscles and caused them to grow significantly in size.

Gauron Leisenberg was about 190 centimeters tall and looked to be in his mid-seventies, with short white hair that stood up on

his head. His sharp black eyes, white mustache, and wrinkled face combined to give him a distinctively stern look. There were overlapping slash wounds on his forehead and old scars all over his tanned body, making him look like a grizzled veteran of many battles. He wore a simple black shirt and black pants under his black overcoat. The outfit favored practicality above all else.

He's one of the Four Imperial Knights… It was safe to assume he was as strong as Sebas, the former Vice President of Thousand Blade Academy. He was likely the most formidable foe in this invading force. The extent to which I could restrain him would have a massive impact on the damage done here today.

Whew… This isn't gonna be easy. I'd expended a lot of spirit power fighting Shin… *But complaining won't get me anywhere.*

I refocused, coated my body in white darkness, and held my black sword at my navel in the middle stance.

Gauron put a hand to his chin, eyebrows raised. "Wow… That's a masterful stance. Your spirit power is formidable as well. I can see that you're an even better swordsman than I've been told."

"Thanks," I said.

"Holding back against an opponent of your caliber would be foolish. I'm going to summon my True Attire and beat you into submission! Enter Subspace—Aurum Cube!"

Gauron went straight past his Soul Attire and summoned his True Attire.

What is that…?!

A storm of violent spirit power swept up, within which a giant golden cube appeared by tearing through a rift in the air. It looked dignified and powerful as it shone and floated above Gauron's head. Upon closer inspection, I saw the giant cube was made up of a number of smaller cubes that spun in irregular patterns.

Between Diehl, Von, and Shin, all the opponents I've fought lately have had confusing abilities…

I bit my lip as two small cubes descended into Gauron's palms.

"Armis," he said.

The cubes melted and formed around his arms into gauntlets. Gauron clenched both fists, smiled with satisfaction, and lowered his center of gravity.

“Prepare yourself,” he said before rushing at me with shocking speed.

Crap, what kind of ability does he have?!

I was left with no choice but to counterattack without knowing what he could do.

“Hah!” I shouted, swinging my sword down as hard as I could.

“Hmph,” Gauron grunted, using the golden gauntlet on his right arm to block the strike.

“““…”””

We ended up in a stalemate, yet something had startled me when my blade had met his gauntlet.

That felt totally wrong…

Normally, when you hit something with your sword, the impact travels from your blade to your arms and then to the rest of your body. The heavier the resistance your blade meets, the greater recoil you feel.

However, when my sword had collided with Gauron’s fist…I hadn’t felt anything. I’d swung my sword as hard as I could—and I could tell he’d done the same with his fist—but I’d felt as little impact as if I had sliced through cheese or cotton.



“Your strength is impressive. But it’s not enough to overpower my Aurum Cube!” Gauron said.

He clenched his free left fist and swung at me with a full-strength straight. I tried to defend myself with my black sword, but that was the wrong decision.

“Nrgh!”

That’s some power… Wait, why was that punch sharp*…?!*

Gauron’s blow had been heavy, sharp, deep, and strong. The incomprehensible impact knocked aside my sword and sent me flying parallel to the ground. I crashed through the wall of the National Crusade Coliseum and landed in the streets of Aurest.

“Haah, haah…”

What was that…?

His punch felt simultaneously like a blunt blow and a slash.

“Dammit…”

The fatigue of all this fighting is catching up to me… My legs feel dead…

I planted my shaking legs and forced myself to my feet.

That was when I noticed the tragic sight around me.

“No…”

People were lying facedown in the street, and buildings were on fire. I heard screams, swords clashing, and the sounds of destruction. Aurest had turned into a hellscape.

“Taking in the scenery during a duel?” said Gauron’s voice from above me.

“…”

Making a split-second decision, I rolled to the side, and a pair of military boots thudded to the ground where my head had been a moment before.

He just tried to flatten me without hesitation…

Before I could regain my balance, Gauron came at me even more aggressively than before.

“Royal Fist—Rakshasa!” he shouted, hounding me with golden punches that blanketed my vision.

He’s fast…but I can still keep up!

I swung my black sword, perfectly guarding against every punch. I felt the same odd sensation as earlier.

Again, his punches were weirdly light… In fact, “light” didn’t even cut it; I’d felt no impact at all, as if he’d stopped each punch

right before it hit my sword.

My eyebrows knitted together in thought, and Gauron gently placed his elbow against my blade.

“This is gonna hurt.”

My vision blurred as I was knocked off my feet.

“Gah…!”

What’s with that power…?!

A massive impact traveled from my blade to my arms, my chest, and up to my brain. It took all my effort to remain conscious.

“You’re surprisingly tough. The reports of you being unkillable as a cockroach were true, it seems,” Gauron said. He cracked his neck, totally composed.

I decided to buy time to heal by talking to him.

“…I figured it out. Aurum Cube’s ability is absorbing and ejecting attacks, isn’t it?”

“Wow, you figured that out quickly. You’re surprisingly smart, too,” he said, not bothering to hide his ability. His praise also spoke volumes of how unthreatened he was by me. “However, understanding my ability doesn’t mean you know how to best it. True strength lies in one’s capacity to solve problems.”

He dropped his center of gravity low and assumed a combat stance.

A True Attire that uses absorption and ejection certainly sounds difficult to deal with…but I have plenty of options up my sleeve. Right now, he was only attacking and defending himself with those golden gauntlets, so I just needed to focus on those to avoid any devastating blows.

I think I should give up on close combat. The golden gauntlets will absorb my attacks, allowing him to perform an exponentially more powerful counter. This situation called for an ability that specialized in surprise attacks and middle-to-long range attacks.

I let out a short breath and channeled a new power.

“Conquer—Dragon King Fafnir!” Black and white flames enveloped my whole body, raising the temperature around us.

“What? Fafnir…? Oh, you’re imitating it,” Gauron said.

His eyebrows raised slightly, but he maintained his stance. No matter the situation, Gauron simply kept his eyes on his opponent and remained calm. He’d likely been through many

more battles than I due to his age. The difference in our experience was clear.

"It's my turn to attack now! Draconic Rage!" I shouted, swinging my sword up to send black and white flames high into the air.

"Huh…," Gauron said as the scorching hot flames rained down around him, trapping him inside.

I prepared my next attack without a moment's delay.

"Dark Shadow!"

Black and white flames smothered him from above while dark tentacles approached from below. There was no way he could block a multidirectional attack like this with just his two gauntlets.

At least, that was what I thought.

"Hah! Effugio!" Gauron shouted.

A giant golden cube appeared around him and absorbed the flames and tentacles.

"What?!"

"Hmm-hmm, I expected you to try a wide-ranging attack like that," Gauron said. He snapped his fingers. "Dimittis."

A golden cube appeared over a distant street. It unleashed my Draconic Rage and Dark Shadow on a crowd of fleeing innocents and the holy knights who were escorting them.

"What's that…? Gaaaaaah!"

"I-isn't this Allen Rodol's darkness?!"

"Wait, really?! We have to fight him, too?! How could this situation get any worse?!"

Gauron's redirection of my attack spread a great deal of confusion on the battlefield.

"My True Attire, Aurum Cube, has power over subspace," he said calmly. "It allows me to absorb and eject anything. I'll give you a warning: From now on, all your attacks will be diverted onto the people and buildings of Aurest. Keep that in mind as you fight me."

"That's…really dirty…," I said.

"Dirty tricks are a weapon. You may think it cowardly, but anything goes on the battlefield," Gauron said coldly. He threw his arms wide, opening himself up to attack. "Huh? Are you just going to stand there?"

"Ngh…"

He was testing me. He wanted to see if I would attack him even if it meant putting innocent lives at risk.

…Calm down. I need to think!

There was no such thing as an unbeatable ability. Even Shin's Imperial Decree had the weakness of him not being able to apply rules to things he didn't understand. Aurum Cube *had* to have a weakness, too.

His Soul Attire absorbs attacks and ejects them. The source of that power is the golden cube. I don't know its range, but I should assume it can cover anything within sight.

Aurum Cube was endlessly versatile and had a wide range… But what if there was a limit on what it could absorb?

Yeah, that might be it! I thought. *Aurum Cube can probably only absorb so much damage before it gets overloaded!*

The look on his face suggests he's already figured out my weakness, thought Gauron. *He knows about the absorption limit!*

I now had a working hypothesis about Aurum Cube's weakness, but unfortunately, I still lacked a vital piece of information: How high was the absorption limit? If I invested all my spirit power into a full-strength attack and it wasn't enough to overload Aurum Cube, that attack would get redirected onto the streets of Aurest. I couldn't allow that to happen.

Dammit, what should I do? Should I just go for it?! No, the risk's too great…

Indecision paralyzed me. Gauron watched me and let out a snort.

"If you're not going to attack, that's fine by me. I'll just resume faithfully carrying out His Majesty's orders," he said, thrusting his right arm out to the side. "Dimittus."

A golden cube appeared above the clock tower and released a bright red wave of heat upon it.

"Aaaaaaah!"

"Huh?! Where's that coming from… Gaaaaaah!"

The unpredictable attack exacerbated the panic in the city.

"What?!" I gasped.

I hadn't used that power, and I didn't remember Gauron absorbing it either. That meant it must have been a Soul Attire attack he'd absorbed at an earlier point. It seemed like Aurum

Cube had the ability to store attacks and eject them at a time of Gauron's choosing.

Crap! I can't let this keep up…

To defeat Gauron, I needed to use an attack that surpassed the absorption limit of Aurum Cube. Unfortunately, any attempt to do so would be a major gamble. If the attack wasn't strong enough, it would get diverted onto the streets of Aurest and cause major damage. That said, leaving Gauron to his own devices would allow him to screw with me by devastating the city on his own.

The best move right now would be to defeat Gauron in one hit with my strongest attack.

But can I do that right now…? I had expended a lot of spirit power fighting Shin. There was no way I could perform a full-strength Dark Boom, Clear Black Sky, or World Render. I could only manage 50%–70% at best.

The situation was only growing worse as I hesitated.

"Oh no, the fire's spread here, too…"

"Help! I need help! Are there any holy knights or witchblades nearby?!"

"Aaaaaaaaah!"

Screams sounded from all over Aurest as the city suffered the horrors of war.

"Attention, citizens! Please evacuate to Drestia!"

"No pushing! Someone will get hurt!"

Holy knights called out desperately as they did their best to guide people to safety, but they were having trouble getting anyone to listen amidst the panic.

"Group A, to the community center! Group B, to the gymnasium! Group C, to the urgent care clinic! Hurry!" I heard Shii yell.

"Leave the fighting to the others! We need to focus all our spirit power on putting out the fires!"

"Faster, faster! The flames are spreading faster than we're dealing with them!"

Shii and the rest of the Soul Attire Wielders with water abilities were frantically fighting the fires, but they couldn't keep up.

Aurest was being completely overwhelmed.

Is there nothing we can do…?! I racked my brain for a solution, then noticed something out of place in the corner of my vision.

…Why is there a small child here?!

A little girl was running through the battlefield holding a letter.

"*Haah, haah…* I need to let them know…as soon as possible…," she said, panting.

The girl had scratches all over her arms and legs and was running as fast as she could toward the mountain of bricks the city had become. I looked closely and saw a strong determination in her eyes.

A massive explosion rocked a corner of the city, sending the young girl flying and dumping her at Gauron's feet.

"Eeek!" she screamed as her blood splattered onto Gauron's black robe.

"Damn you…! How dare you defile this robe, girl?! This was a gift from His Majesty!" Gauron yelled furiously. His face turned red, and cataclysmic spirit power erupted from his body.

"A-ah…!" the girl whimpered as the immense spirit power knocked her to the ground.

"Hey, what are you doing?! She's just a kid!" I shouted.

"Age matters not on the battlefield! You'll pay for this with your life, whelp!" Gauron shouted.

He raised his fist…

"Father… Save me…"

…but just then, a sphere of water appeared and wrapped itself gently around the girl, completely shielding her from Gauron's gauntlet-enhanced punch.

"…Huh?" I gasped, shocked that the water had stopped a full-strength attack by an Imperial Knight and astounded by the incredibly dense spirit power it was imbued with.

"What the hell is this?!" Gauron shouted just as dark clouds covered the clear sky and began to drizzle. The sprinkle became a violent downpour in no time, which put out the fires in the city.

"Erode—Eternity Drop."

Next, giant pillars of water erupted from the ground.

What is going on…?!

The rumbling sound of footsteps shook the earth from below as if emanating from the depths of hell. They grew steadily louder until a man over two meters tall emerged above ground. He walked toward the girl with an anger that made my hair stand on end.

“Are you okay, Serena?” he asked.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” the girl responded.

“Really? I’m so proud of you.”

The large man smiled and patted the girl on the head.

“I-it’s you…,” I said.

I knew this man. His name was Raine Grad. He was a criminal who had brought never-ending rain to Daglio, the Land of Sunshine, and who was supposed to be in a cell in the Aurest Dungeon.



Having suddenly appeared above ground, Raine frowned and observed his surroundings.

“Such devastation… Hmm?” he said, his eyes stopping on me. “Oh, if it isn’t Allen! It’s been a while! I’m glad to see you’re doing well.”

“Raine… Are you on our side?” I asked.

“Of course. I will always be indebted to you,” he said.

“Thank you.”

Raine had committed a terrible crime in the past, but he wasn’t rotten to the core. He may have broken the law again by breaking out of prison, but that hardly mattered right now. His assistance would be a huge help.

“So what’s going on here?” Raine asked, and I gave him a quick rundown.

“The Holy Ronelian Empire has invaded Liengard with the assistance of the Black Organization. Barel Ronelia withdrew for some reason, but an Imperial Knight named Gauron Leisenberg and an insane shadow wielder named Dodriel are here. I saw a few other people who looked like Oracle Knights, too.”

“I see,” Raine said, narrowing his eyes. “I have a question for you, Allen.”

“What is it?”

“That man with the white mustache is the imbecile who tried to harm Serena, right?”

“Y-yeah…”

The pure, scorching anger underlying his words made me tremble.

“I thought so. You can leave him to me,” Raine said. He began to walk toward Gauron.

“Be careful, Raine!” I called out in warning. “That’s Gauron Leisenberg, one of the Four Imperial Knights! He wields a True Attire and is one of the enemy’s most powerful swordsmen!”

“Don’t worry. This won’t take long,” he said, sounding supremely confident.

“…Huh?”

“Hey there, Gauron, or whatever your name is. I hear you’re acquainted with my daughter.”

“You’re…Raine Grad,” Gauron said.

“Hmph. You know who I am?” Raine asked.

“Of course. You’re the screwup who lost our important strategic base in Daglio and got himself locked up in a dungeon. I guess that explains why you were never able to progress from Oracle Knight to Imperial Knight,” Gauron said, laughing scornfully.

Raine’s expression turned troubled. “Hmm… It sounds like you have quite the wrong idea about me.”

“Hah! How so? I was only stating the facts. You lost to Allen, gave up Daglio, and were thrown into prison,” Gauron said, barking with laughter.

A man in a black robe saw Raine and immediately went pale.

“Gauron! That man is no ordinary Oracle Knight!” he shouted.

“What…?” Gauron said.

“I’m serious! He’s a monster! One of the few people to ever fight His Majesty at his best and survive! I saw it myself!”

Raine closed his eyes.

“Surge, Waters of the Beginning—Origin Drop,” he said, summoning his True Attire. A colossal spirit power swept around him.

But just like that, it disappeared again, vanishing like morning dew.

“Hah, I was right after all. He’s just an Oracle Knight who can’t even properly summon his True Attire,” Gauron mocked.

Raine ignored him and tugged on Serena’s hand.

“Come with me, Serena. It isn’t safe here.”

“…? Okay,” the young girl replied.

Raine led his daughter away, just before…

“WHUH?”

…a mystical droplet fell from high in the sky. It easily pierced through Aurum Cube above Gauron's head, crushing it and everything else in its path, including Gauron.

"My True Attire is massive," explained Raine. "Summoning it for too long would turn Aurest into another Land of Rain."

He had defeated Gauron Leisenberg, one of the Imperial Knights, with a single attack. A single raindrop, even.

R-Raine is so strong… He's like a different person compared to when I fought him…

Now that I thought about it, though, that was to be expected. Raine had used his Soul Attire, called Eternity Drop, to turn the Land of Sunshine into the Land of Rain. He'd invested enough spirit power to change the weather of an entire country and maintained it for years without rest. By the time we'd fought, he'd probably been suffering from severe spirit power deficiency.

"You did it, Raine!" I cheered, starting to run toward him.

"This…isn't over…"

Gauron forced himself to his feet. He was heavily wounded but still barely breathing.

"I have a next-generation soul-crystal pill, gifted to me by His Majesty… With that, I can still fight!"

He felt around in his pocket with a trembling hand and took out a blue pill.

"No way… Is that a soul-crystal pill?! Raine, don't let him take that!" I yelled.

"Understood!" Raine said. He ran at Gauron, but he was too far away.

"Ha, ha-ha… You're too late!" Gauron yelled. He bit down on the soul-crystal pill, and it exploded in a flash of blinding light.

"Did he…blow himself up…?" I asked.

"…What just happened?" Raine said.

We both stared in confusion as the dust cloud slowly cleared.

"Argh…"

Gauron was sprawled on the ground, breathing raggedly. He looked like he was at death's door.

"Why, Your Majesty…? Why did you…do this to me…?" he said, his voice strained. Tears streaked his grief-stricken face. It looked like his world had been turned upside down.

…Oh, so that's what happened? Gauron had thought he'd been given a soul-crystal pill by Barel Ronelia to use in an emergency, but it had turned out to be an explosive.

The emperor had disposed of him.

How cruel…

We were enemies, but I still found myself feeling bad for him.

Gauron's insides had been burned up, and he was heavily wounded. It was clear he was already dying—which made it all the more cruel when Dodriel stomped on his head.

"Ah-ha-ha! You've seen better days, Gauron," he said.

"Dodriel…," Gauron mumbled.

"You're old, Gauron. *Ancient*. Those traditional values of yours—leadership by seniority, the need for absolute loyalty to commands, the unwillingness to upset established order—are rooted to your core and grown over with mold. You've made no attempt to adapt your style or values to the times. That's why His Majesty disposed of you."

Dodriel cackled and kept stomping on Gauron's head.

"…"

Gauron didn't argue. He *couldn't* argue. The truth of Dodriel's words was irrelevant; the only fact that mattered was that the emperor had abandoned him.

Barel Ronelia had been like a god to him. Gauron had lost his will to live.

"His Majesty wants reform, change, innovation! The new era he's building has no need for old relics like you! …Hey, are you listening? Oh, he's already dead," Dodriel said.

He took the bloody robe off Gauron's corpse and put it on, humming happily to himself.

"Ah-ha… I guess that makes me one of the Four Imperial Knights!" Dodriel said. "This robe's a little baggy, but whatever."

He turned toward me.

"I'd love to stick around and play with you some more, Allen… But we've accomplished our goal here, which means it's time to go." Dodriel jumped high into the air and created a platform to land on. Shadow spots appeared all over the city behind him.

"You're running again?!" I shouted.

"This isn't running, dear. I'm setting the stage for our ultimate showdown. The time and place need to be perfect for our

passionate fight to the death.” His tone was unusually serious. “Until next time… Make sure not to die before then, okay?”

Dodriel disappeared into the shadows.

“Next time, huh…?”

It sounded like the next time I crossed blades with him, we’d be fighting to the death.

But the current danger has passed. The dangerous spirit power present throughout the city had vanished in an instant. The Black Organization members had probably used Dodriel’s shadow spots to return to Ronelia.

“Whew…”

I breathed a sigh of relief and saw a large crowd of holy knights who’d been fighting to defend the city heading this way. They were visibly exhausted. A man who looked as eccentric as ever was efficiently giving them orders.

“Squad One, search for people in need of aid! Squad Two, focus on cleaning up rubble! Healing Squad, prioritize those who are in mortal danger! Make sure to stay alert! There could be foes still lurking in the city!”

“““Yes, sir!”””

The man was Clown Jester, head of the Aurest branch of the Holy Knights Association. He was in his usual clown outfit and makeup.

Clown glanced my way and gaped when he saw Raine.

“Hold the freakin’ phone, what are you doing above ground, Raine?! You can’t just leave your cell and waltz up here as if it’s your backyard, man!”

“My deepest apologies, Mr. Clown. It was an emergency,” Raine said. He patted Serena’s head and gave a deep bow.

Clown scratched his head, looking like he’d pieced together what had happened.

“Ahh… Someone attacked Serena, huh? Guess I can’t blame you for breaking out, then. I’ll overlook it this time.”

“Thank you very much.”

Raine bowed politely and was about to return to the dungeon when…

“““…”””

…a crowd of people wearing prisoner’s clothes emerged from below ground.

You can't be serious…

Raine had broken out of prison by using his Soul Attire to open a huge hole in the ground leading to the surface. The impact had probably shattered the glass of the other cells, freeing all the prisoners.

"Umm… Mr. Clown…?" I said.

"Hmm… This is kind of a problem…," replied Clown.

We watched the prisoners nervously. Then Raine clapped his hands.

"Sorry for worrying you all. I'm all right. Let's all head back to our cells," he said.

""""Yes, sir!"""" the prisoners responded.

"I hope to see you again, Allen," Raine said before leading the prisoners back underground.

"…He's become the boss of that prison, hasn't he?" I asked.

"So that's why everyone's been weirdly well-behaved lately…," Clown said.

We both sighed with relief.

"Oh, right, Allen. If you have any spirit power left, would you be willing to help us?" Clown asked. "I would be grateful for your assistance…"

"Of course," I replied.

As a swordsman of Liengard, I couldn't deny a request for aid. Besides, Clown had done a lot to help me. I especially owed him for when he'd risked his life infiltrating enemy territory to help us when we'd gone to rescue Shii from the Holy Ronelian Empire.

I had gone to thank him the day after we returned, but Clown had insisted he had no idea what I was talking about. He probably couldn't admit that he'd infiltrated the Holy Empire, given his position as the manager of the Aurest branch of the holy knights.

Anyway, this is my chance to repay that debt! I thought excitedly.

"Allen!" a familiar voice called out from above.

I looked up and was surprised to see Kemmi Fasta on a glider.

"Huh? Chairwoman Kemmi? What are you doing up there?" I asked.

"It's an emergency! Please come to Liengard Palace right away!" she said.

I exchanged a look with Clown and bowed in apology.

“Sorry, it sounds like I need to go.”

“No need to apologize,” responded Clown. “The Holy Knights Association can handle relief in the city. You go do what only you can.”

“Thanks.”

I bent down and jumped high into the sky, landing on the glider.

“Excuse me for this, Chairwoman Kemmi.”

“Bwuh?”

I picked Kemmi up under my arm and grabbed the wheel.

“I’m gonna go kinda fast, so please be careful not to fall,” I told her.

“Huh? Actually, I’d really appreciate it if you could let me down he— EEEEEEEK!”

Channeling a huge amount of spirit power through the handle of the glider, I flew toward Liengard Palace at maximum speed.

■

I asked Kemmi about the situation on the way to Liengard Palace.

“What happened at the palace, Chairwoman Kemmi? You said it was an emergency.”

“*Urgh*… Chairwoman Reia told me…that the demons… *Urp*… Attacked the imperial guards…and…,” Kemmi said, trailing off.

She was pale-faced and shaking.

“Urk…”

“Umm, what was that?”

“Blehhhhh!”

An incredible amount of vomit was expelled from Kemmi’s mouth, creating a rainbow in the air.

“A-are you okay?!” I asked.

“Urgh… Asks the person who made me sick…,” Kemmi said.

“Oh… Sorry.”

Her awkward position under my arm and the shaking of the glider as it flew at full speed had combined to give her motion sickness. I was in such a hurry that I hadn’t even realized she was uncomfortable.

“Ugh… Do you enjoy harassing innocent maidens until they vomit? You’re a barbarian…,” Kemmi said, starting to cry.

If this had been my first time meeting her, I probably would've felt guilty. However, I had spent enough time with her by now to know her greedy, immoral nature. Her fake tears wouldn't work on me.

I knew *full* well that she could not have been less of an "innocent maiden."

"Sorry. I'll give you a thousand guld later if you stick it out," I said.

"Are you really trying to entice a woman with money? How skeevy!" Kemmi yelled.

"So you don't want the money?" I asked.

"No, I'll take it."

As expected, she stopped crying immediately.

"Tch, is a thousand guld really the best he can do? That's only enough for a beer and a snack," she muttered under her breath.

That clearly wasn't meant for my ears, but I'd heard her because of how close we were.

You'd think she'd clean up her act after an enemy invasion, but nope. She's still the same old Kemmi…

Some people in this world were truly hopeless. I had learned that cruel truth from her.

Liengard Palace came into view soon after. Its majesty was a thing of the past; the roof window had been smashed to pieces, the white walls were dotted with holes, and there were fresh bloodstains everywhere. The palace had been devastated by the battle.

…What a terrible sight.

I parked the glider in a safe location and walked to the front gate of Liengard Palace. That was where I found a mountain of demons piled atop one another.

"What the…?!" I said, lost for words.

A voice called out from above.

"Hey, up here!"

I looked up and saw Chairwoman Reia casually sitting atop the pile of demons.

"Allen, you're all right," she said.

"Yeah. I'm glad to see you're okay as well. What's the emergency?" I asked.

“Oh yeah… These demon bastards cursed people indiscriminately as they attacked the palace, and the Empress’s imperial guard suffered the worst of it. I don’t think anyone died, but they won’t last much longer. Sorry to ask this of you when you’re already tired, but could you heal them?” she asked.

“Absolutely. Do you need healing, Chairwoman?”

“I took a few curses, but I’m suppressing them with my willpower. Please prioritize the others.”

“O-okay.”

Chairwoman Reia never ceased to amaze me… I couldn’t imagine how single-minded a person had to be to suppress a curse with pure willpower.

“Whew…”

I gathered my breath to calm myself and sharpened my senses.

Twenty… Seventy… One hundred and fifty… Two hundred and seventy… Three hundred and eighty-one?

I detected 381 curses within a one-kilometer radius of Liengard Palace. That must have been the number of guardsmen who’d been cursed.

…That was easy. Curses were far simpler to detect than spirit power. I could tell where each curse was as well as their specific effects and strength.

Why can I understand all that so easily? Did the white darkness sharpen my senses?

I pondered that as I spread out my newly obtained holy darkness and healed all the curses in a one-kilometer radius.

“Okay, I’m done,” I said.

Chairwoman Reia didn’t respond.

…That must be the Rodol Clan’s darkness that Daria told me about. It really does feel totally different from Zeon’s darkness, Reia thought, furrowing her brow.

“Uhh, Chairwoman Reia?” I called out.

“Oh, sorry. I was just thinking,” she replied.

“So you *do* know how to use your brain,” I said.

“…You’ve gotten cheeky, Allen.”

“Ah-ha-ha, sorry.”

I refrained from saying, *You’ve only got yourself to blame for that*.

“Kids these days… Anyway, how’d you all fare in the city? I assume your presence here means you won,” the chairwoman continued.

“Yes, we did. But we’ve got a few problems,” I told her.

“Really? Fill me in.”

“Well, first off…”

I told her all about the fighting that had gone on in the city.

“I see. So Dodriel got away…,” she said.

“Sorry about that,” I apologized.

“It’s not your fault he escaped. His ability is special. It’s a miracle the city suffered as little damage as it did, considering the scale of the invasion… You really have gotten stronger,” she said, patting me on the head.

“Thank you,” I said, joy warming my heart. I had no idea it felt this good to be praised by your teacher.

Calm down… I can’t let myself cry. She may have been my teacher, but this was Chairwoman Reia we were talking about. If I let my guard down and let out tears, she’d never stop teasing me about it.

Whew…

I suppressed my emotions and changed the topic.

“By the way…how did things go for you?” I asked.

“Me? It was pretty easy. I’d been informed beforehand that the demons use a strange power called ex…exe…excretion? Anyway, whatever it’s called, I just gave each of them the ol’ one-two as soon as I encountered them,” the chairwoman said.

“W-wow…”

It sounded like the demons’ Execration ability hadn’t been a major threat to her. Chairwoman Reia hadn’t even had a strategy as she fought them, other than punching them in the face. Her approach couldn’t have been more muscle-headed, but she was so strong that it worked anyway. That was Chairwoman Reia for you.

“Oh yeah, where is Her Majesty? Did she get away?” I asked.

“Yeah. Rodis sent me a message. The Empress escaped the vicinity of the palace and is hiding in a safe location. He didn’t tell me where that was because of the risk of someone listening in.”

“Thank goodness.”

The Empress had a problematic personality, but her people deeply trusted her. She would be needed to rebuild Liengard.

“Okay… Now we’ll need to focus on rebuilding. Let’s return to the National Crusade Coliseum,” Chairwoman Reia said.

“Yes, ma’am,” I responded, and we walked through the streets of Aurest toward the coliseum.



It had been three days since the Holy Ronelian Empire’s attack on Liengard. The country’s leaders had made some important decisions during that time, which were communicated to the people through newspapers and other media.

First, the Sword Master Festival was canceled. It was determined that it would be too difficult to hold a festival and guarantee the students’ safety while also undertaking the gargantuan task of rebuilding Aurest.

Next, the Holy Knights Association led searches of the houses of influential people in the noble faction. The reason for this was none other than the betrayal of the influential nobles Patriot Bolnard and Dafton Manay. Full sweeps of the noble faction base and its leaders’ estates revealed multiple pieces of evidence proving a close connection to the Holy Empire. Unsurprisingly, the faction had been leaking confidential information to the enemy.

There was a mass arrest of all nobles who were proven to have dealt with the Holy Empire, which permanently destroyed the reputation of the noble faction. The Empress and the imperial faction seized full control of the government, stabilizing Liengard’s political situation for the foreseeable future.

During those days of upheaval, I devoted myself to helping with Aurest’s recovery efforts. All swordcraft schools around the city were closed for an estimated ten days, and the students were put to work to help rebuild.

“Thank you very much for gathering here again, students. Let’s make the most of today, too. Aurest isn’t going to rebuild itself! Remember, safety first!” Clown said. The rebuild progressed at an efficient pace under his leadership.

“Come this way with any ore that needs refining and any metal that needs working! Be careful of the heat!” Lia called out.

“Your Soul Attire’s fire is so powerful, miss! Thank you so much!”

Lia had been assigned the role of metalworking using Fafnir’s incredible firepower. She shaped iron plates, steel rails, metal pipes, and more. Her assistance as a literal human furnace greatly sped up construction.

“Dammit, why do I have to do this boring job…?” Shido complained.

“We can’t let these rot, Shido,” said Ferris. “Your ice powers are helping to transport food to Aurest from neighboring cities, allowing everyone to work with peace of mind.”

Shido had been positioned in a vacant lot, producing cold air to preserve food for transport. He didn’t seem happy about being used as a human refrigerator, but as Ferris said, he was performing a necessary task. Thanks to him, an inexhaustible supply of food was being delivered from nearby cities.

“Is this enough electricity?” Idora asked.

“Wow, that’s a convenient ability! Thanks, young lady!”

Idora had been assigned the job of charging all machines that needed electricity. She performed a variety of tasks, including restoring power lines and charging mobile devices.

“Hmm, we can carry that, too,” Rose said.

“Heh, leave all the manual labor to us!” Medi said proudly.

“What in the…? Do you have any idea how heavy those are? You two are amazing.”

Rose and Medi were tasked with using their self-strengthening Soul Attires to carry heavy objects. It was a simple yet much-needed job, and they ended up serving people all throughout the city.

Meanwhile, as the swordcraft students of Aurest put their skills to use, a certain Soul Attire Wielder with an overwhelmingly powerful and versatile ability sat under a tree playing tic-tac-toe by himself.

“Hey, kid! You’re that crazy strong Holy Blade, aren’t you? Could you lend us a hand?”

“…You want *my* help? Nope. Not happening. I’m not wasting my abilities on something so boring… Go ask Mr. Special over there

for help instead," he said, pointing at me.

It was Shin Rex, wearing a worn-out Divine Emperor uniform.

Shin had been arrested by the holy knights on suspicion of attempted murder during our captain's duel in the Sword Master Festival, but he'd escaped without charge due to his status as a Holy Blade and because he'd been instigated by the noble faction.

He was a person of questionable moral character, to say the least, but his strength was undeniable. Some people hoped he would prove useful in Aurest's recovery, but his spirit seemed to have been completely broken, rendering him useless.

Judging by his current attitude, I wouldn't expect him to recover anytime soon, I thought as I walked toward my post.

I had been assigned to help with the top priority during the recovery: the reconstruction of Liengard Palace. The palace was the Empress's residence and the political center. It was also the face of the country, and appearances were of vital importance to a nation. In the interest of stable governance, the palace needed to be rebuilt as soon as possible.

Okay... Time for another day of hard work!

I knew nothing of construction, so my role was that of a handyman.

"Hey, does anyone have any batteries?" someone called out.

"Oh, I can handle that!"

I channeled Neba Grome's power to charge the machine in place of a battery.

"Shoot, this steel plate's bent..."

"I can fix that, too!"

I channeled Fafnir's flames to reshape the thick sheet of metal.

"Ow...!"

"Are you okay? I'll heal you."

I used my white darkness to heal injuries.

Thanks to my newly awakened Rapacious Demon Zeon, I was able to channel multiple Soul Attires and do many different jobs. I worked for a few hours until we all stopped for lunch.

"Phew, I'm exhausted."

I carried my boxed meal and paper cup of water to the break area and found an open spot to sit down.

"Ahh... That's refreshing."

Nothing tasted better after hard physical labor than cold water.

This ice is so pretty. I wonder if Shido made it, I thought, admiring the ice floating in my cup. I reached for my lunch next.

What do I have today…? Wow, it's salmon!

I picked up my chopsticks and muttered a few words of gratitude for the meal just as a large number of workers plopped down around me.

"Good work today, boy. That Soul Attire of yours is somethin' else! I've never seen construction go this smoothly!" one of them said in a northern accent.

"Would ye like tae work for our company once the reconstruction is over? We're called Fox Construction, and we're the biggest construction company in Liengard!" another said, sounding like he desperately wanted me to join.

"Uhh…" I wasn't sure how to respond.

Another worker leaned forward and answered for me.

"Is yer helmet on too tight, mate? This kid's as strong as a national army. He doesnae have as much free time as us small folk!"

"Gah-ha-ha, good point!"

I sighed with relief after getting out of that without offending anyone.

Once we finished lunch, we got right back to work. We continued until the sun began to set in the west, at which point we stopped for the day.

"I'm so tired…"

I had learned something from using Rapacious Demon Zeon for long stretches of time. *Channeling other people's abilities consumes a lot of spirit power…* The next time I fought consecutive battles like I had with Shin and Gauron, it would be best to avoid repeatedly channeling other abilities.

"Okay… Lia's probably still at the metalworking site."

I was about to head that way when someone tugged on my sleeve.

"Hmm…?"

I turned around and saw Lou Lorenti, the first year at Thousand Blade.

"Huh? What is it, Lou?" I asked.

"I…actually have something I want to speak to you about alone. Do you have a moment?" she asked.

“Yeah, sure.”

“Thank you. I don’t want to be overheard, so let’s go somewhere else.”

I followed Lou for a short while. We cut across roads under construction, a large forest park, and deserted streets. Lou frequently looked around to make sure no one was tailing us.

She’s on high alert. Is whatever she has to tell me that important?

After a little while longer, she finally stopped in a dark alley.

“…This seems okay,” she said.

“I didn’t expect you to bring me so far. What do you have to tell me?” I asked.

“About that…”

Lou cleared her throat nervously and looked directly into my eyes.

“Allen, have you heard of the 100-Million-Year Button?”

“?!”

Of all the things I’d thought Lou might say, that wasn’t one of them.



Afterword

Thank you very much to everyone who picked up the tenth volume of *100-Million-Year Button*! I am the author, Syuichi Tsukishima.

There was about a one-year gap between the releases of volume nine and volume ten… I'm sorry for the long wait! And thank you again for purchasing this volume!

I would like to start by touching on the contents of this volume! As always, this will contain spoilers, so those of you who read the afterword first should be careful.

Volume 10 featured a wealth of exciting battles!

Rose and Medi shared a truly honorable duel. Allen and Shin's duel was a contest between two of the best swordsmen alive. Liengard had to fight desperately to hold off the Black Organization's invasion. All these battles were a blast to write, but Allen and Shin's captain's duel in particular was one of the deadliest in the series, and I'll be very happy if you all enjoy it!

It was also revealed in this volume that Lia is concealing a serious illness. Her illness had been hinted at a few times, but it may finally start to play a prominent role in the story…

Additionally, Lou Lorenti, a new student at Thousand Blade Academy, dropped a bomb at the very end! How does she know about the 100-Million-Year Button? Why did she ask Allen about it? Her motives will likely be revealed in the next volume!

Now, I would like to give some words of thanks.

To the illustrator Mokyu, the lead editor, the proofreader, and everyone else involved in the production of this book—thank you very much.

And most of all, a huge thanks to all the readers who picked up Volume 10 of *100-Million-Year Button*.

May we meet again in Volume 11. That's all from me today.

Syuichi Tsukishima

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