



I KEPT PRESSING
THE

100-
MILLION-YEAR
BUTTON AND CAME OUT ON TOP

~ THE UNBEATABLE REJECT SWORDSMAN ~

9

SYUICHI TSUKISHIMA

Illustration by **MOKYU**

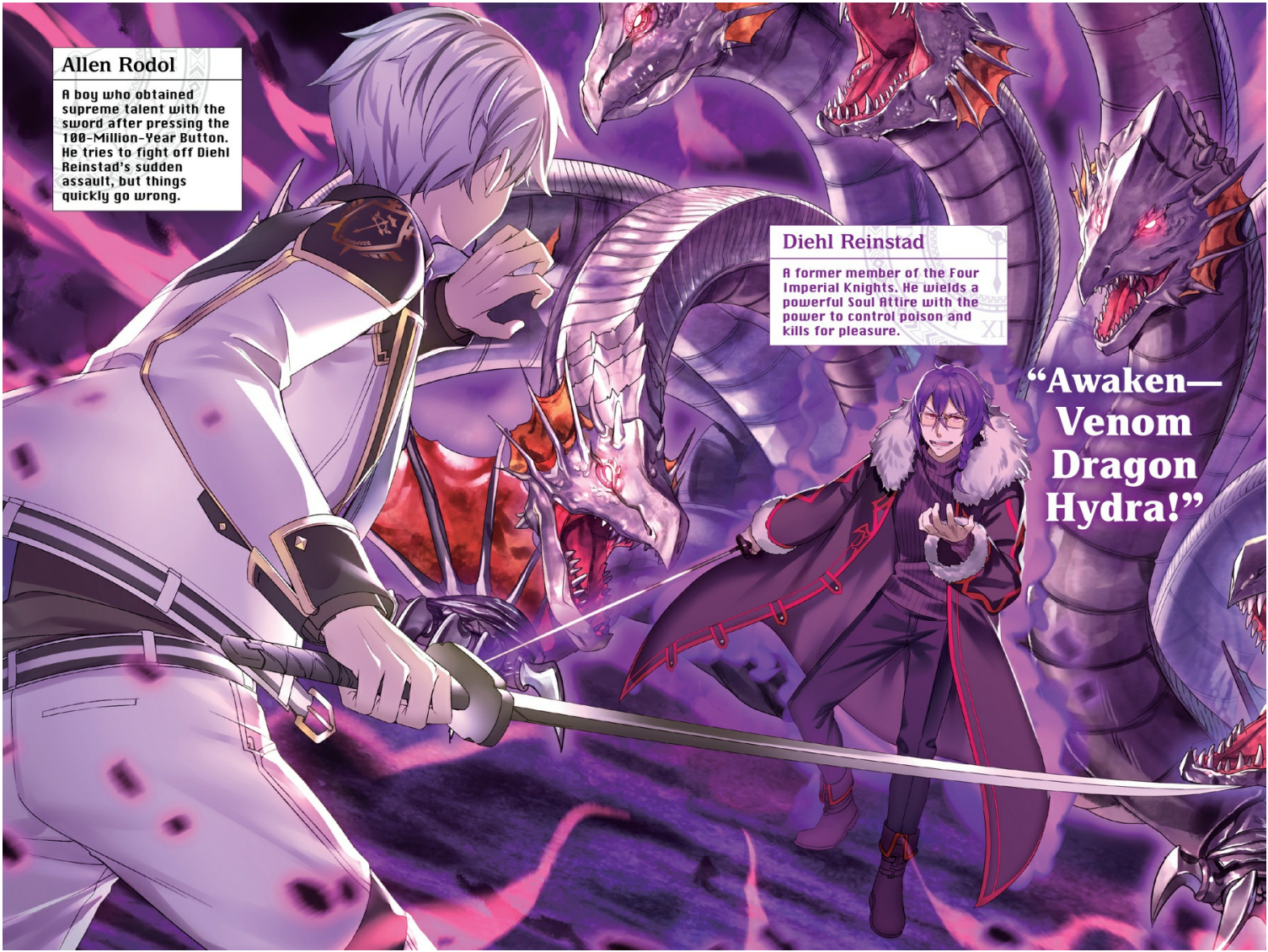


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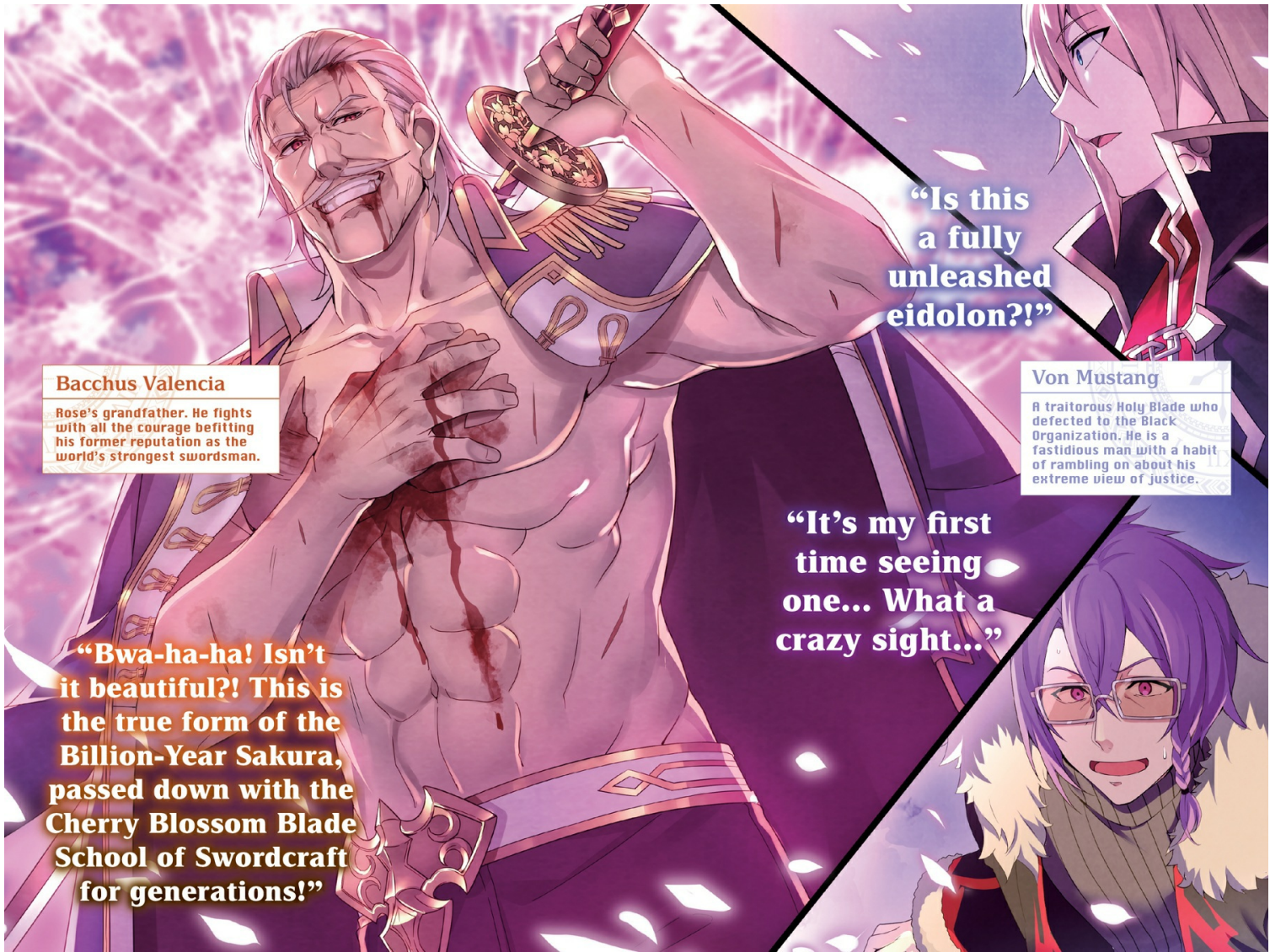
Allen Rodol

A boy who obtained supreme talent with the sword after pressing the 100-Million-Year Button. He tries to fight off Diehl Reinstad's sudden assault, but things quickly go wrong.

Diehl Reinstad

A former member of the Four Imperial Knights. He wields a powerful Soul Attire with the power to control poison and kills for pleasure.

“Awaken—
Venom
Dragon
Hydra!”



Bacchus Valencia

Rose's grandfather. He fights with all the courage befitting his former reputation as the world's strongest swordsman.

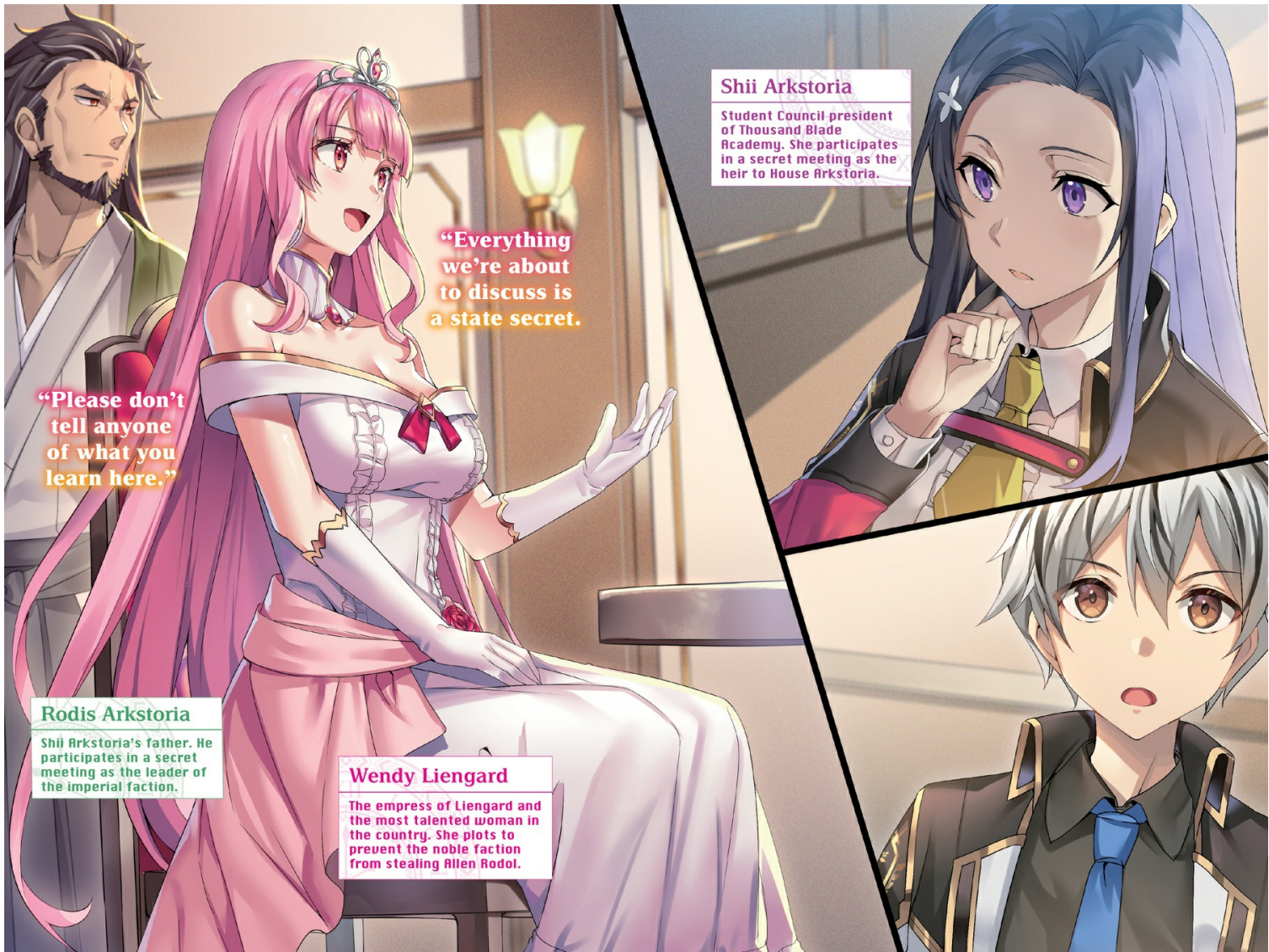
Von Mustang

A traitorous Holy Blade who defected to the Black Organization. He is a fastidious man with a habit of rambling on about his extreme view of justice.

“Bwa-ha-ha! Isn’t it beautiful?! This is the true form of the Billion-Year Sakura, passed down with the Cherry Blossom Blade School of Swordcraft for generations!”

“It’s my first time seeing one... What a crazy sight...”

“Is this a fully unleashed eidolon?!”



“Please don’t tell anyone of what you learn here.”

“Everything we’re about to discuss is a state secret.”

Rodis Arkstoria

Shii Arkstoria’s father. He participates in a secret meeting as the leader of the imperial faction.

Wendy Liengard

The empress of Liengard and the most talented woman in the country. She plots to prevent the noble faction from stealing Allen Rodol.

Shii Arkstoria

Student Council president of Thousand Blade Academy. She participates in a secret meeting as the heir to House Arkstoria.



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New York

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1 OKUNEN BUTTON WO RENDA SHITA ORE HA, KIZUITARA SAIKYO NI NATTE ITA
Vol.9 *RAKUDAI KENSHI NO GAKUIN MUSO*

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CHAPTER 1

A Deadly Battle

Von Mustang, traitor to the Seven Holy Blades, looked sharply at Bacchus and commanded him to hand over the eidolon he was concealing.

If I remember right, eidolons are monsters that terrorized the world long ago...

I thought back to my conversation with Fuu Ludoras, one of the Thirteen Oracle Knights, in a library in the Holy Ronelian Empire about two months earlier. According to him, a number of countries were concealing eidolons as powerful weapons. The Black Organization was currently trying to collect eidolons, and they had sent multiple assassins after Lia to remove the eidolon residing within her—the Dragon King Fafnir.

But did he really just call the Billion-Year Sakura an eidolon? Is that giant tree Bacchus's Soul Attire?

I was thoroughly confused.

“Bwa-ha-ha! Welp, guess I’ve been found out!” Bacchus admitted, laughing heartily. “But how d’you intend to ‘collect’ it from me? By force? You do know I’m the strongest swordsman in the world, don’t you?”

Bacchus looked at Von with a menacing smile that made my hair stand on end. But the other man just shook his head calmly, despite the tense atmosphere.

“It has been some time since you were considered the strongest in the world, Bacchus Valencia. Now you’re just a swordsman on the decline, suffering from an incurable disease that renders you unable to summon your Soul Attire, let alone your True Attire,” said Von. “...Am I wrong?”

“...Well, someone’s obsessed with me,” replied Bacchus. “I didn’t take you for the stalker type.”

“You don’t deny it. That means my information is accurate... How unfortunate. You have no chance of defeating Barel Ronelia in your weakened state. I doubt you could even beat any of the Seven Holy Blades or Four Imperial Knights as you are now.”

“Bwa-ha-ha! You talk a big game for such a greenhorn!”

Bacchus roared with laughter, but Von continued calmly with his demands.

“Bacchus Valencia, come with us to the Holy Empire. Don’t bother trying to resist... I’m sure you understand that, to achieve justice, one needs absolute power, and even Barel considers the Billion-Year Sakura unbeatable. It’s too much for a decrepit old fool like you to handle. We will make much better use of it.”

“...What d’you mean by that?” Bacchus asked.

“We’ll rip your Spirit Core from your body and distribute it to stronger swordsmen,” Von said coolly.

Th-they’re going to rip the Spirit Core out of his body...?! I thought with disbelief. I had heard that the Holy Ronelian Empire’s Soul Attire research was quite advanced, but was something like that really possible? What would happen to the Spirit Core’s former host? And what had he meant when he said they would “distribute it to stronger swordsmen”?

One question after another formed in my head as Von reached out with his right hand.

“Regardless, this is your final warning. Bacchus Valencia, come with us to the Holy Empire.”

“Hmm, gotta admit, most of that went over my head...but you can tell that idiot Barel this: He’ll never kill me sending small fry like you lot,” Bacchus said, waving his hand as if shooing away flies.

“...I see. I had hoped to resolve this peacefully, but you leave me no choice. In the name of justice, I will take your life.”

Von sighed quietly, and a sword of sand suddenly appeared in his right hand.

““ ...””

Bacchus and Von glared at each other, still as statues. They both radiated an intense bloodlust, overwhelming us all into silence. It felt like they could come to blows at any moment.

“Hey, boss, you got a moment? There’s somethin’ I wanna ask you,” Diehl interrupted casually. His voice sounded unnaturally loud in the quiet space.

“...Use your eyes, fool. Does it look like I have a moment?” Von responded.

“Oh, come on, all you gotta do is use your ability. Our powers are a perfect match, after all.”

“Hurry up and ask your question. Waste any more of my time, and I’ll kill you first.”

“A-all right, man. My bad. Don’t glare at me like that...”

Diehl flippantly raised his hands to calm Von down.

“Take a good look at this group of kids you blasted with your sand... They’re all somethin’ else, aren’t they?” Diehl looked at me and my five friends with appraising eyes. “The S-class threat Allen Rodol is here, and so is Lia Vesteria, Fafnir’s host. Emperor Barel will be beside himself with joy if we bring those two back with us. So what I wanna ask is, can we grab them along with the Billion-Year Sakura? I won’t bother you with this, of course. I’ll take care of it myself.”

Diehl’s lips twisted into an ugly smile. It sent a chill down my spine.

This guy is dangerous...!

I’d never felt something so...*hideous* before. A person’s spirit power was like a mirror that reflected their true nature; Lia’s spirit power was warm like the sun, and Rose’s was clear as water. Diehl’s spirit power, on the other hand, was filthy and corrupt.

“...Do as you like,” replied Von. “However, make sure to hold back if you intend to offer them to the emperor. Your abilities specialize in killing.”

“I know, I know. I’ll make sure those two are, uh...recognizable. You worry too much, boss.” Diehl smiled cheerfully as he stood before us. “Which means...I’ll be your opponent. I’m Diehl Reinstad, a former member of the Four Imperial Knights. Pleased to meet you.”

He gave us an eerie, friendly smile and pushed up his lightly tinted glasses with his middle finger. The girls and I immediately took combat stances. I lowered my center of gravity, which would let me respond to any attack, and I concentrated so I could summon my Soul Attire at a moment’s notice.

“...Huh? I thought we were doin’ introductions, but...I guess you guys ain’t in the mood.” Diehl scratched his head and laughed awkwardly.

“I hope you won’t blame us for fighting you six-on-one,” I said.

This wasn’t practice or a duel; we were about to fight with our lives literally on the line. We had a massive numbers advantage, and I intended to use it.

“Oh, not at all. You can take me on however you like... Let’s be real, though—this battle might as well be one-on-one,” Diehl said, chuckling and looking directly at me. “Okay... Let’s get this party started. Corrode—Herosbane Venom.”

Diehl threw his arms out wide, and a purple sword appeared out of a rift in the air. His Soul Attire was a horribly warped shape; the razor-sharp edge was notched like a saw, with three sickle-like blades arcing out from the top and a row of needles sticking out from the bottom. It was a repulsive Soul Attire clearly designed for inflicting as much pain as possible, and if that wasn’t already enough, upon closer inspection, I noticed the tip of the sword glistening with some sort of strange liquid.

“Given the unique shape of the blade and that liquid...he almost certainly has a poison-type ability,” the ever-knowledgeable Shii whispered so only we could hear.

“Well, aren’t you a smart cookie? Guess I should’ve expected that from an Arkstoria. I can’t believe you deduced my ability from just the shape of my blade... Well, that ain’t ideal,” Diehl said, shrugging with an exaggerated expression of worry on his face.

“It’s rude to eavesdrop on a lady’s conversation,” Shii retorted.

“Ah-ha-ha, my bad. I’ve always had killer ears. I could hear a pin drop in a crowd.”

“How troublesome...”

Shii sighed and brushed back her long hair—and right at that moment, where Diehl couldn’t see her hand, she stuck out three fingers, then made a circle with her index finger and thumb.

...Was that a hand signal? I darted my eyes left and right and saw Lilim and Tirith nod. It seemed to be a code shared by the second-years.

“Oh, damn it... Well, we’ve got no choice but to give this our all! I couldn’t care less about you being a former Imperial Knight; I’m still gonna kick your ass!” Lilim shouted.

“It’s six-on-one, and we have Allen on our side... We have at least a small chance!” Tirith declared.

They were both fired up.

“Allen, Lia, Rose. Look for chances to support us,” Shii commanded.

“Okay,” I said.

“Understood,” replied Lia.

“Roger that,” came Rose.

With our battle plan decided...

“Conquer—Dragon King Fafnir!”

“Blossom—Winter Sakura!”

“Trace—Aqua Queen!”

“Pummel—Bursting Clay!”

“Bind—Psychic Shackle!”

The girls summoned their Soul Attires and surged with incredible power.

“Wow! That’s one helluva display of spirit power!” Diehl exclaimed. He stuck his fiendish Soul Attire in the ground and clapped loudly.

“Hmm-hmm, we’ll see how long that confidence of yours lasts. Aqua Trick!” Shii lifted her sword high into the air, and a ring of deadly weapons made of water—swords, axes, spears, shields, and scythes—formed around Diehl.

“Lilim!”

“Leave it to me! Scatter, Bursting Clay!”

Lilim swept her sword horizontally, causing a large amount of explosive clay to float up into the air and stick to Shii’s water weapons. This transformed the hard-as-steel water weapons into incredibly powerful bombs. Not even a former Imperial Knight should be able to survive a barrage like that unscathed.

“TAKE—”

“—THIS!”

Shii and Lilim shouted and sent the weapons rushing at Diehl all at once.

“That’s a powerful attack, but it’s a little slow for me,” he said, drawing Herosbane Venom to intercept the weapons. But just then...

“...?! ”

...he suddenly stopped moving. No—*something* had stopped him.

“Hee-hee, you were too distracted by the weapons to look down,” Tirith said.

I looked closely and saw Tirith’s Psychic Threads trailing across the ground, restraining Diehl’s ankles.

“Well, that’s a problem...,” Diehl muttered just before he was enveloped in a massive explosion. The deafening sounds of the clay exploding and the steel-like water gouging chunks out of the earth echoed throughout the island.

“Ngh?! ” I grunted as the incredible force from the shockwave raced through the air, kicking up sand, which blanketed my vision. I couldn’t see Diehl, but that attack must have significantly injured him.

“Hmm-hmm, all according to plan,” Shii said.

“Did we get him?! ” Lilim asked.

“That was perfect!” exclaimed Tirith.

The three upperclassmen smiled with satisfaction, still holding their swords at the ready.

...That was amazing. I couldn't believe they'd managed to act in such perfect sync after just one hand signal. The three of them had always worked exceptionally well together, but they couldn't have pulled off that attack without having planned ahead to face a variety of different circumstances in battle. *They never cease to impress.*

"...This isn't over! Brace yourselves!" Rose shouted.

"Venom Diffusion."

Poisonous purple globules scattered from Diehl's location.

You're kidding... He managed to counter immediately after taking that joint attack...?!

Ten beads of poison raced toward me. While the number wasn't an issue, the problem was their speed. I couldn't believe how fast they were! They moved as quickly as an elite swordsman's thrust.

He caught me off guard, so it's gonna be difficult to deflect them... Having come to that split-second decision, I quickly summoned my cloak of darkness, which defended me from the poison.

"White Dragon Scales!"

"Scarlet Sakura Swarm!"

"Aqua Mirror!"

Lia, Rose, and Shii calmly blocked Diehl's attack by summoning a shield of white flames, a dense cloud of cherry blossom petals, and a large water mirror respectively. Meanwhile...

"Th-that's way too many!"

"I don't know if I can block these..."

...Lilim and Tirith, neither of whom had a wide-ranging defensive technique, had no way of blocking all the venomous beads.

"Oww!"

“Grk...”

Beads of poison pierced Lilim’s left shoulder and Tirith’s right leg, and they both crouched down in pain.

“Lilim, Tirith...are you okay?!” Shii shouted, rushing toward them.

“Ngh... Gaaaaaah!” Lilim cried.

“*Haah, haah...* Th-the pain... It’s unbearable...!” Tirith wheezed.

They both writhed in agony as they put pressure on their wounds. Sweat dotted the foreheads of the two girls, and their faces turned deathly pale.

“Ahh, what delectable cries. I could listen to that sound all day...,” came Diehl’s enraptured voice as he emerged from the middle of a cloud of sand *completely uninjured*.

Damn him...! I wanted to fly at Diehl with my sword—but right now, we had more important things to think about.

“Allen, please heal them!” cried Shii.

“Okay!”

I ran toward Lilim and Tirith and studied their conditions. *That looks bad...!* The beads of poison had dissolved each of the girls’ uniforms around the wound and left a nasty purple pattern on their soft skin.

“H-help me, Allen...,” Lilim whimpered.

“Please... Make the pain go away...!” begged Tirith.

Tears formed in their eyes as they clung to me, pleading.

“Of course!” I reassured them.

I summoned dense darkness and concentrated it on Lilim and Tirith’s wounds. Surprisingly, the purple marks didn’t fade in the slightest but just slowly kept on corroding their skin.

What’s happening?! I thought, panicking as I drew on more darkness.

“Heh-heh-heh, how tragic!” Diehl said with a vicious laugh. “All the poisons Herosbane Venom produces are viral in nature... Your healin’ power ain’t gonna

cut it, no matter how good it is!”

“...!”

My darkness had extraordinary healing capabilities, but it was ineffective against illnesses.

“Argh... Gah...!” Lilim groaned.

“I can’t...take much more of this...,” Tirith whimpered.

Their breathing became weaker as they fought against the pain.

Crap! What can I do to help them?!

“I wouldn’t act so relaxed if I were you,” said Bacchus, having gotten behind Diehl. His malice was palpable. “Hrngh...!”

He swept his sword horizontally with tremendous strength.

“...?! ”

Diehl went pale, but he still managed to spin around and hold up his Soul Attire in defense.

He’s really skilled... Bacchus’s attack from behind momentarily threw Diehl off, but his smooth footwork and sharp eyes had allowed him to make a perfect recovery. Sure enough, he wouldn’t be a former Imperial Knight unless he was supremely talented.

However, Bacchus’s blow was far too powerful to completely block at a moment’s notice.

“Bwa-ha-ha, is that the best you can do?!” Bacchus shouted.

“Well, this is trouble...,” Diehl muttered as the force from Bacchus’s attack sent him flying parallel to the ground until he crashed into a large tree in the distance.

“There’s more where that came from!” roared Bacchus. He started to chase after Diehl, but just at that moment, Von jumped high into the air, bleeding from his forehead.

“Don’t forget you’re fighting one of the Seven Holy Blades! Treasured Swords of Sand!” Von shouted, shooting over twenty sand swords at a speed that was

almost impossible to follow.

“Not good enough! Cherry Blossom Blade Style—Sakura Flash Chain!” Bacchus yelled, spinning around and performing a series of lightning-fast thrusts. His precise and powerful jabs pierced each of the sand swords and wounded Von in a number of places.

“Ngh...!” Von grunted in pain, then took a big jump back to collect his breath.

Incredible... This was what it looked like when Bacchus used a sword instead of a mop—when he fought to kill instead of simply to win. His presence on the battlefield was truly overpowering.

“B-boss?! Can you please hold this monster back?! He almost killed me!” Diehl complained, his expression unusually serious. Despite the incredible blow he’d just taken to his whole body, he was unhurt, just as before. He was either impossibly strong or had an ability I didn’t know about.

Von ignored Diehl’s vehement protesting and concentrated on Bacchus. “I’m surprised. To think you can still manage such power despite your age and illness... I can see how you were once called the strongest swordsman in the world.”

“I would’ve already killed you both if I was in my prime... Never grow old, kids.”

They faced each other with swords raised, and Bacchus glanced at me out of the corner of his eye.

“Listen up, boy. There are two types of poison wielders: those who produce poisons known to this world, and those who produce exotic poisons of an unknown nature. Nearly all fall into the former camp; the latter are incredibly rare. You can tell which type a poison wielder is by whether or not a healing Soul Attire can neutralize their poison. Your darkness didn’t work, which means he’s probably the annoying type that produces an exotic poison.”

“Is there any way to counteract a poison like that?!” I asked.

“Exotic poisons don’t originate from our world, but only temporarily manifest here using the caster’s spirit power as a conduit. That means if you knock out the caster providing the spirit power, the poison’ll instantly vanish,” Bacchus

explained.

“So all I have to do to save Lilim and Tirith is defeat Diehl?”

“Exactly. If you don’t wanna lose your friends, you need to cut down that man as fast as you can!” Bacchus said before throwing himself into a fierce battle with Von. He was by far the most experienced fighter here, so I was grateful for his advice.

“Well, that sucks. Seriously didn’t expect you guys to learn how to neutralize my poison so quickly...,” muttered Diehl, scratching his head with a troubled expression. “There ain’t even five people in this world with an ability like mine, but I guess I should’ve known a two-hundred-year-old menace would recognize it. He must’ve fought an exotic poison wielder before.”

Diehl shrugged and sighed loudly. Each gesture was so affected, I couldn’t help but feel like he wasn’t taking me seriously.

“...Allen, Lia, Rose. Will you lend me your strength?” Shii asked, fire burning in her eyes. She calmly readied her sword against the man who’d hurt her longtime friends.

“Yes!” I said.

“Of course!” replied Lia.

“You don’t even need to ask,” responded Rose.

Our answers came without a hint of hesitation, and we all pointed our swords at Diehl.

He incapacitated Lilim and Tirith with just one attack... Regardless, we still had a four-to-one advantage. We couldn’t get overwhelmed and let him seize control of the fight. I took a moment to calm myself, and Rose and Shii—the combat veterans of the group—spoke up to communicate our strategy and share what they’d learned from our last exchange with Diehl.

“Our opponent wields a poison deadly enough to incapacitate opponents with a single blow. Let’s fight defensively and overwhelm him with our numbers,” Rose said.

“Given the shape of his weapon and those beads of poison we saw earlier,

widespread attacks seem to be his specialty. Stay ready to defend yourself from any direction,” Shii instructed.

“Okay!” I responded.

“Got it!” confirmed Lia.

We quickly assumed combat positions and faced Diehl. Even with our four swords pointed his way, his calm smile didn’t waver.

Lilim, Tirith... Hang in there just a little longer...!

I saw them both out of the corner of my eye, the anguish visible on their faces as they fought against the pain. They were both strong, but we had no idea how long their bodies and minds would hold out.

Regardless, there’s no time to waste. We needed to defeat Diehl as quickly as possible to avoid the worst-case scenario—it was a battle against the clock.

...Let’s do this.

I concentrated thick darkness into the form of a mock black sword and firmly planted my feet.

“Hmm, it should be hittin’ you any second now... How’re you guys feeling?” Diehl asked, sounding concerned. Then, all of a sudden...

“What the...?! ”

“Huh...?”

...Rose and Shii both swayed and collapsed to the ground.

“R-Rose?! President?! ” I shouted.

“Are you okay?! ” Lia asked.

We lifted them both up into a sitting position—that was when we saw the same purple pattern that had shown up on Lilim and Tirith on the back of each of their necks.

“Urgh... How...?” Rose whimpered.

“*Haah, haah... Owww...,*” whined Shii.

They were both breathing heavily, beads of sweat dotting their foreheads.

Their cheeks were flushed feverishly, and tears formed at the corners of their eyes.

Wh-what just happened...?! They had both clearly been inflicted with Diehl's poison, despite the fact that I'd seen them block his Venom Diffusion.

"My poison is super volatile; it evaporates instantly under normal temperatures and pressures," Diehl explained. "Long story short, those girls inhaled poison gas."

""...?!""

I quickly covered my mouth with my left hand, and Lia did the same with her handkerchief. Diehl responded by cheerfully waving his hands to show that what we were doing was pointless.

"Heh-heh, it's way too late for that. You both have inhaled more than enough of the poison by now," he said with that vicious smile of his. Then he studied us from top to bottom and shrugged his shoulders exasperatedly. "That said...the diluted poisonous gas doesn't seem to be affectin' you guys. That doesn't surprise me with you, Allen, but li'l Lia over there is tougher than I expected. That might be Fafnir's self-defense abilities at work..."

Lia and I breathed a sigh of relief that the poisonous gas wasn't affecting us. If it weren't for that, we all would've been wiped out. *It's only two-on-one now...* The fight had barely begun, but four of us had already been incapacitated. To make matters worse, we couldn't leave the poisoned girls where they were—either Lia or I would have to keep them safe during the battle.

So it's essentially one-on-one... Our numerical advantage had disappeared like smoke, proving Diehl's comment before the battle to be true. The situation was growing worse by the second.

I glanced to the side...

"Cherry Blossom Blade Style—Night Sakura!"

"Sand Smash!"

...and saw Bacchus and Von locked in an intense struggle. They appeared evenly matched—no, actually, Bacchus seemed to have a slight advantage, but

we couldn't expect help from him anytime soon.

...Looks like I have no choice. I let out a sigh as I mentally prepared myself to fight this former Imperial Knight one-on-one.

"...Oh man, their cries of pain are simply scrumptious!" Diehl exclaimed, his cheeks flushing as he listened to poisoned girls' agonized cries. "Hey, Allen. You wanna know what kinda poison I inflicted them with?"

"..."

I kept silent, and Diehl happily continued.

"It's...drumroll, please...a deadly poison that kills cells! I chose the most painful poison I can produce! Take a second to imagine how that would feel. Even as we speak, their entire bodies are being racked by *excruciating* pain. *Searing* pain. Heh-heh... Oh, I just can't contain myself... It just gets me so excited...!" Diehl said, hugging himself with a hideous expression on his face.

"You're the foulest person I've ever met!" Lia shouted, the hostility clear in her voice as she held Fafnir in the middle stance.

I took a step forward to hold her back. "Sorry, but can you guard Rose and the others for me?" I asked.

Lia looked at me with astonishment, then shook her head. "No, Allen! This man used to be one of the Four Imperial Knights, not to mention the fact that he's a poison wielder so powerful, he incapacitated four of us with one attack! I know how strong you are, but he's too dangerous to fight alone!"

"I know, but someone has to protect them! They could get caught up in one of our attacks, or get targeted by Diehl or Von," I argued back.

We were fighting a top executive of the Black Organization and a traitorous Holy Blade who'd defected to their side—we could hardly expect them to fight fair. If the battle turned even slightly in our favor, they wouldn't hesitate to attack our defenseless friends.

"B-but...", Lia protested.

"Also...I don't think I'll be able to hold back, so I might end up hurting you by accident. Please do this for me, Lia?" I asked quietly, all the while burning inside

with rage.

I can't take this anymore... The agonized cries of my friends, Diehl's awful words, his affected behavior—I was sick to death of it all.

"...Fine. But don't push yourself too hard, okay?" Lia said, retreating to guard our friends.

"Okay. Thank you." I turned to walk toward Diehl. "I'll give you one chance—will you put Herosbane Venom away and dispel their poison?"

"*'Dispel their poison'*? Please tell me you're joking. Why would I interrupt such pleasant screams? How about you enjoy them with me instead?" Diehl asked, a hideous smile across his face. Just hearing his suggestion made me feel sick.

"...Forget it."

Talking any more with him would only be a waste of time. Having come to that conclusion, I reached out into empty space with my right hand.

"Destroy—Rapacious Demon Zeon!" I cried, summoning the true black sword from a rift in the air. I calmly gripped my Soul Attire made of condensed darkness and walked slowly forward.

"Ooh, now we're talkin'! Is that the black blade I've heard so much about? I can feel its overwhelming pressure from all the way over here. Guess I'm gonna have to put in some actual effort here...", Diehl said, holding his sword in a combat stance for the first time.

"I hope you're ready," I told him.

"Anytime you are," Diehl responded.

After that brief exchange, I kicked hard off the ground with a sound like crushing metal.

"Wha?! Where'd you go?!" Diehl shouted.

I got right up against him, close enough to deliver a lethal blow.

"Crap!" he gasped, hurrying to enter a defensive stance. But it was too late.

"Sixth Style—Dark Boom!" I yelled, unleashing an enormous darkness-enhanced slash from point-blank range. My attack produced an incredible

shockwave that tore up the earth and kicked up a giant cloud of dust.

“Bwa-ha-ha!” Bacchus laughed. “That boy’s such a show-off!”

“...I see why he’s an S-class threat,” said Von.

Their voices carried to me on the wind, but I tuned them out to focus on the enemy in front of me.

“*Haah, haah...* Heh. Heh-heh-heh. You’re somethin’ else, pal... It’s no wonder you were able to defeat Raine, even if he was weakened... It’s terrifying to think you managed that level of strength with just your Soul Attire,” Diehl said, slowly standing up after taking my Dark Boom from point-blank range. Hearing Raine’s name brought back memories.

There was a dark red slash carved deep into his body. It was clearly fatal.

“...That was impressively quick,” I said.

“I had to be. You nearly killed me... I had to use a crap ton of spirit power to summon Venom Coat.”

Diehl had enveloped himself in a protective purple membrane just before Dark Boom hit, barely avoiding a direct blow.

“*Man*, that was close... I was a split second from being torn to pieces...,” he said flippantly, holding a hand to his chest wound and breathing heavily.

“I wish you had been. My friends would’ve been saved.”

“Heh-heh... You’re surprisingly aggressive, pal. We might be more alike than I thought.” A creepy smile crossed Diehl’s face.

“You’re sure calm for someone who just took such a deep wound,” I said.

“Eh, it’s nothing my healing ability can’t handle. Venom Reversal.” Purple liquid formed around his chest, and the wound closed instantly. “You know what they say—‘the difference between poison and medicine is the dose.’ No ordinary attack can kill me!”

Diehl hadn’t avoided injury when my upperclassmen and Bacchus had attacked him. It seemed like he had been hurt, but then he healed himself the next instant using that ability. *He wields a deadly poison that incapacitates*

opponents with one hit and has a healing ability fit for a battle of attrition... Herosbane Venom was even more dangerous than I'd first thought.

"If you're healing yourself after being wounded, that means I just have to slice you apart too quickly for you to patch yourself up!" I shouted.

I readied my true black sword and dashed toward him as fast as I could.

"I'm used to your speed already, pal," Diehl said, turning to face me before I could get in behind him. "Venom Lances!"

He threw his arms wide, exposing himself to attack...

"...?!"

...and twelve lances shot out of his chest with incredible speed. I could tell just by looking at them that they were poisoned.

"I doubt you'll let yourself get skewered by them, but one scratch and you're done for!" Diehl yelled.

It was a perfectly timed counter; avoiding them all would be difficult, and I didn't have time to protect myself with darkness. *And there's twelve of them...!* While I could fire it off quickly, that was too many for me to block with Eight-Span Crow, and World Render or Dark Boom would take too much time. I couldn't avoid the attack, defend myself, or counter. I was finished.

Or at least I would have been before my training under Bacchus.

"Eighth Style—Eight-Span Crow Chain!" I shouted, sending sixteen slashes racing through the air in less than a second.

"What the...?!" Diehl gasped. My slashes tore apart his twelve poisonous lances and cut deep into his limbs. He scowled silently and jumped back in retreat, purple liquid appearing once again to cover his wounds.

That's Venom Reversal... Herosbane Venom's high-speed healing ability.

"Not so fast!" I said, pressuring Diehl with a fierce onslaught of attacks so he wouldn't have a chance to heal. "Haah!"

"Ngh?!" Diehl whipped his sword up horizontally to block an overhead strike. Now that I was close enough to hear his breath, our eyes met.

...That's good to know. I looked at his limbs and saw that the wounds from my sixteen slashes still remained. The need to defend himself had forced Diehl to suspend his healing.

“Herosbane Venom... It's a highly adaptable Soul Attire, but I bet that makes it difficult to use,” I said.

“...!”

It was just for a moment, but Diehl gritted his teeth in frustration. Judging by his reaction, I'd hit the nail on the head.

It's pretty obvious now I think about it. He had to choose between different poisons that didn't exist in this world and use them at the right time to attack, defend, or heal himself, all in the heat of battle. That had to be much easier said than done.

“You can't heal yourself when I have you in a sword lock like this... That must mean you really need to concentrate to be able to use Venom Reversal.”

In other words, he couldn't heal himself while I was the aggressor. Learning that so early on in this battle would give me a significant advantage.

“...You're a real pain to fight, pal,” Diehl muttered. I could see his large gray pupils glaring at me through his lightly tinted sunglasses.

“I'll take that as a compliment!”

“...”

I forced his sword aside with my natural strength and kept pressing him back to prevent Diehl from healing himself.

“Haaaaaaa!”

I hounded Diehl with diagonal slashes, overhead slashes, thrusts, and more, varying my speed and mixing in feints to keep him off balance.

“Incredible... He's overpowering a former Imperial Knight all by himself...,” Lia murmured, her voice drowned out by our yells.

“Raaaaaaaaah!”

“Haaaaaaaaah!”

Our swords violently collided once, twice, thrice, sparks flying each time.

“Hraagh!”

“Ngh?!”

I swung my sword upward, knocking Diehl’s arms above his head, then I took advantage of the opening to spin and deliver a roundhouse kick to his abdomen.

“Haah!”

“Gah?!”

My blow sent his large, 180-centimeter-tall body flying 10 meters backward through the air.

I can do this. I can beat him! My pure physical strength and swordcraft both surpassed Diehl’s, and I found myself wondering whether crossing mops with Bacchus and Sebas, two elite swordsmen, at Drops of Sakura had made me stronger. I could read Diehl like an open book as we fought.

He still hadn’t landed a blow on me, and I kept him in the center of my vision as I assumed the middle stance. Meanwhile, across from me...

“Haah, haah...”

Diehl was panting heavily, anguish written across his face. There were gruesome injuries all over his body, including cuts on his limbs, a stab wound in his left shoulder, and a dark bruise on his abdomen.

“Well, damn... Doesn’t seem like I have much of a chance in close combat...so let’s try this instead!” Diehl shouted, raising his Soul Attire above his head. An ominous spirit power gathered around its tip.

...That’s a massive amount of power. The pressure coming from his Soul Attire prickled my skin and shook the very air. His next attack was undoubtedly going to be a heavy blow packed with an incredible amount of spirit power. Apparently, he’d given up trying to beat me with pure swordcraft and had fallen back to using his signature poisons.

He’s standing in the worst possible spot, too... He definitely did that on purpose... Lia and my poisoned friends were directly behind me. If I dodged the

powerful attack he was about to unleash, the lethal poison would hit them.

That left me with no choice but to block the attack head-on.

I have only one way to block a long-range attack of this strength: Dark Boom! I lowered my center of gravity and steadied my breathing.

“...Wha? Are you not gonna dodge my attack? You’re definitely fast enough to get away,” Diehl said, acting confused.

“Drop the act. It’s obvious what you’re trying to do.”

“Oh, geez. Nothing gets by you, does it?” Diehl looked toward the girls in that affected manner of his. “Heh-heh, in that case, here it comes. I know a nice kid like you would never even *think* of dodgin’ this! Venom Jaws!”

Diehl swung his sinister Soul Attire, sending a giant dragon made of poison racing toward me. Repulsive venom blanketed my vision, and an enormous pressure assaulted my body.

It’s definitely big and powerful, but still... Dark Boom would be more than strong enough to cancel it out. *Something feels off...* Diehl had positioned himself so that the girls would be directly behind me...and this was the attack he’d chosen to use? That didn’t seem to match his twisted personality.

No, wait. There’s more to this. Based on our battle and conversation up until now, if there was one thing I could trust about this man, it was that he was cruel to his core—so I stopped myself before unleashing Dark Boom and carefully observed the approaching poison dragon.

...So that’s what he’s doing. It turned out Diehl was just the man I thought he was. I couldn’t say I was surprised. *I can block this easily now that I’ve seen through his trick!* I quickly raised my black sword overhead.

“Fifth Style—World Render!” I shouted, unleashing my most powerful attack—strong enough to tear a rift through the world and through Diehl’s expectations. The rift I opened consumed Venom Jaws, clearing my vision of the purple poison.

“H-how...?” Diehl gasped, clearly dismayed by this unexpected development. I took advantage by closing the distance between us in one stride.

“You’re finished.”

“Gah!”

I plunged my blade deep into his chest.

“Ngh... *Haah, haah...!*”

Dark blood spilled from the corners of his mouth as he grabbed the black sword impaling him and glared at me.

“Y-you... Why didn’t you use Dark Boom?” he wheezed.

“I saw a strange sphere within Venom Jaws when I took a closer look. I assumed it would release deadly poison if I hit it.”

“Heh, heh-heh... Well, I’ll be damned... You’re the toughest opponent I’ve ever fought,” Diehl said, breathing heavily.

He stepped toward me, driving my sword farther into his chest.

“Don’t move. I didn’t hit any of your vitals, but this is a serious wound. Try anything...and you’ll die.”

“Heh-heh... You’re worried for an enemy’s life during battle?” said Diehl.

“You’re way too nice for your own good,” came another identical voice.

“Wha?!” I gasped, snapping up my head to see *another* Diehl in the distance, fully healed from his wounds. The Diehl I’d run through with my sword melted into a thick purple liquid, which clung to my arms and legs. Try as I might, I couldn’t shake it off.

“That was a clone?! So that was your plan...”

Diehl had used Venom Jaws on me to accomplish two things. One was to make me break the orb of poison within it, finishing off the already incapacitated Rose, Lilim, and Tirith. The other was to temporarily obstruct my vision and buy time for him to make a clone and hide—most likely his main reason for the attack. That had given him time to recover using Venom Reversal, and he’d even been able to restrain me by reusing the poison that had gone into creating the clone.

He planned that many moves ahead... I guess he’s not as careless as I took him

for. Diehl Reinstad was certainly a tough opponent to deal with.

“Aww, man... I wish this didn’t have to be goodbye, pal,” Diehl said, wiping away tears and making his voice tremble. “I’ve got a real soft spot for naive saps like you.” He thrust his vicious Soul Attire into the ground. “Venom Tails!”

Nine giant tails shot out of the ground, rising so high, it looked as if they were touching the sky. Those distorted forms seemed to reflect the ugliness of Diehl’s heart, and their vile, venomous color filled me with revulsion.

“You’re dead!” Diehl shouted, sure of his victory. He waved his right hand, and the nine poisonous tails all turned toward me.

“A-Allen!” Lia shouted. She hurried toward me, but she wouldn’t make it in time.

“Restrict your opponent’s movement, then finish them off with more blows than they can handle. It’s a textbook maneuver...but your strength is a little lacking,” I said. A quiet sigh escaped my lips, and I let all of the anger I’d been building up toward Diehl explode out of me at once. “Dark Shadow.”

An abyssal darkness surged forth from my body and consumed the approaching poisonous tails.

“Wow, not even that was enough to kill you... You sure are full of surprises.” Diehl let out a deep sigh and gave me an exaggerated shrug. “I thought *my* ability was about as versatile as they come, but yours is out of this world. You can use it to attack, defend, strengthen yourself, and even heal. Is there *anything* it can’t do?”

He shook his head in disbelief; it looked like he’d sorely misjudged me.

“...Hey, Diehl,” I said.

“What’s up?” he asked.

“You look pretty relaxed right now...but my attack isn’t finished.”

Dark Shadow and Venom Tails hadn’t canceled each other out—instead, my darkness had torn his poison to shreds.

“?!”

Diehl picked up on my meaning and quickly entered a defensive stance.

“Venom Co—”

“Too late.”

Ten sharp tentacles of darkness crashed into Diehl with a large bang, kicking up a cloud of dust that obstructed my vision.

...Sweet, that was perfect. I’d been watching Diehl closely and saw that he hadn’t been able to summon his Venom Coat in time. The direct blow from Dark Shadow should have seriously injured him.

What’s he gonna do next? I watched the cloud of dust carefully—and sensed an unusual quiver of spirit power from within it. *I recognize this feeling... Oh, he’s using that again!*

Having seen through Diehl’s plan, I quickly channeled darkness into my black sword. “First Style—Flying Shadow!” I yelled, launching a black slash into the cloud of dust. It cleaved through Diehl’s body, cutting it into two pieces, which melted into purple liquid to reveal another heavily wounded Diehl behind it.

“You were trying to use a poisonous clone to buy time to heal yourself again, weren’t you? You won’t fool me with the same move twice.”

“Y-you...,” he seethed, grinding his teeth and looking at me with hatred in his eyes. He was bleeding from a number of deep wounds.

He was in no condition to continue fighting—I had won.

“Remove the girls’ poison and allow me to tie you up...and I’ll spare your life,” I said, giving the former Imperial Knight one last warning.

“Heh, heh-heh-heh... Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

Diehl suddenly burst into mad laughter.

“You’re stupid strong... And you ain’t even moved on from Soul Attire yet. I don’t even wanna *think* about your potential... I can see why Emperor Barel personally named you as someone to watch out for,” he said admiringly. He thrust Herosbane Venom into the ground, which disappeared into particles of light. “You’re only gonna get stronger, pal. Keep improvin’ at your current rate, and you’ll reach the level of an Imperial Knight or Holy Blade in a decade or two.

You might even become more dangerous than 'em all..."

Diehl shook his head and muttered, "Crazy as that sounds."

"That's why I need to nip you in the bud and kill you now while it's still possible!" he declared.

"...?!"

A dreadful chill ran down my back.

What...is this...?! Diehl had taken a direct hit from Dark Shadow—he should barely be able to stand. How is he projecting such powerful pressure?! I gripped my black sword and watched him with maximum caution.

"Awaken—Venom Dragon Hydra!" Diehl shouted.

Sludge-like poison rose from his body and formed into a giant dragon with nine heads.

"Wh-wha...?! I stammered as its nauseatingly wicked spirit power swelled.

I had crossed blades with many tough foes in my life. Dodriel, Zach, Fuu, Raine, Gega—they'd all been fearsomely strong. *But this...is different.* The power Diehl had manifested was unlike anything I had ever seen before.

"D-don't tell me... Is that—?"

"My True Attire. It's the pinnacle of a swordsman's strength, achievable only after mastering one's Soul Attire," said Diehl, suddenly standing right beside me.

"?!"

I jumped back reflexively.

"Come on, pal. Don't run away from me!" Diehl said with a vicious smile, closing the gap between us in a single step.

How is he so fast?! Summoning his True Attire had increased his speed dramatically.

"Take that!" Diehl shouted. He gave a powerful wave and scattered a large amount of the deadly poison that covered his body. In the blink of an eye, the poison morphed into ten swords, which swung at me with tremendous force.

“Damn... Eighth Style—Eight-Span Crow!” I yelled, wide-eyed as I cut down the approaching poisonous swords. *Five, six, seven, eight!* I swept away eight of the swords in less than a second and twisted my body in midair to dodge another. However...

“Ngh...?!”

...the last sword took a deep gouge out of my side. The wound began to bleed, and I took one step back, then another, and another, searching for a safe distance.

“Oh dear... That’s a poisonous slash you just suffered, pal!” Diehl said, clapping. His mouth twisted into a grin.

“Grk?!” A grunt escaped my lips as the wound suddenly began to burn and an indescribably intense pain raced through my body. A sickening purple pattern had formed around the gouge.

Crap... He got me... I had been poisoned just like Rose and my upperclassmen. God, this hurts like hell... Ow, ow, owwww... This pain is unreal!

The agony was worse than I could have possibly imagined. I instinctively concentrated darkness on the wound to heal it, but... *Yep, nothing...* It had no effect. No healing ability could counteract this poison.

“Hey, pal. Tell me somethin’. How does my Hydra taste? I’d love to hear what you think if you got a sec,” Diehl said crassly, stroking the dragon heads sticking out of his shoulders.

“...It’s not nearly as bad as I expected,” I told him.

“Pfft, ha-ha-ha! You’re pale as a sheet and dripping with sweat. If you’re gonna bluff, at least *try* to do it convincingly,” Diehl chastised me, waving his hands dismissively. He was really getting on my nerves. “Hydra’s poison is in another league compared to Herosbane Venom... You’re strong, pal, but you ain’t gonna last long.”

“Really? Then I’ll have to hurry.” I did my best to bite back the intense pain and dashed at Diehl, closing the gap in one stride.

“...Huh?”

“Seventh Style—Draw Flash!”

I attacked him with my swift draw slash, which I’d improved under Bacchus’s training.

“Whoa!” Diehl gasped, stepping back and sucking in his stomach to just barely avoid my blade.

Crap, I missed... His physical abilities had improved in leaps and bounds since he summoned his True Attire.

“Good lord. Did you really just counterattack right after being poisoned by Hydra? You’re not human...”

“Unfortunately for you, persistence is my best trait.”

If I had confidence in any aspect of myself, it would be the mental fortitude I had cultivated over my billion-plus years of training. *But his Hydra’s poison is ridiculously powerful...* The wound in my side was still throbbing intensely. I thought I could still manage to fight if I emptied my mind and cut myself off from my emotions...but I didn’t know how long my body would hold out.

“Hoo... Haah...”

I let out a deep breath, cleared my thoughts, and quickly assessed the situation.

Lia was behind me to the left, still uninjured. She couldn’t fight because someone had to protect our poisoned friends. Rose, Shii, Lilim, and Tirith were still lying on the ground suffering from Herosbane Venom’s poison, in absolutely no condition to fight.

A short distance from them, Bacchus was locked in an intense fight with Von. Bacchus was still uninjured and had managed to maintain the upper hand...but he was clearly slowing down. Blood was dripping from the corners of his mouth, his sword hand was shaking, and he was holding a hand to his chest in pain—most likely the result of his incurable illness. Von, meanwhile, was fighting defensively without even trying to attack, killing time until Bacchus ran out of energy.

I don’t even wanna think about it, but... If their battle dragged on, it wouldn’t

be long before Bacchus was defeated.

We were fighting on an uninhabited island; unfortunately, there was no chance of reinforcements. That meant I had to overcome Diehl and his True Attire in the brief amount of time I had before his poison did its work. And once I was done here, I wouldn't be able to rest—instead I would have to help Bacchus defeat one of the Seven Holy Blades.

...This is about as bad as it gets. I couldn't imagine things getting any worse. But worrying about it wouldn't accomplish anything.

I gripped my black sword and shifted my weight to my toes.

"Let's do this, Diehl."

"Heh-heh, gimme your best shot. I'll help you find peace in your final moments."

And with that, I threw myself into a hellish battle.



The battle that ensued was terribly one-sided.

"You can't have much left in the tank, pal. You're lookin' real sluggish... Yah!" Diehl hounded me with a purple blade that one of the dragon heads had spat out.

"I'm not done yet..." I was exerting so much effort defending myself from his wide array of purple slashes and the deadly poison spraying from his body that I had no leeway to even look for a chance to counter.

"Dance for me—Hydra Waltz!" Diehl shouted.

The poison dragons sticking out of his shoulders extended their long necks toward me. There were nine in total, which was a lot, but they weren't very fast.

"Eighth Style—Eight-Span Crow Chain!"

I cut them all down with sixteen slashes. However, Diehl's attack didn't end there.

“Wha?!”

The severed heads of the venomous dragons regenerated, and they bared their fangs at me again.

“Crap...” The heads approached me from all sides. I dodged some, cut down others, but...

“Now, number three!” Diehl yelled.

A dragon that had snuck up on me from below bit my right leg.

“Oww...”

The sharp fangs pierced my skin, injecting me with their cell-killing poison.

“Get off me...!” I shouted, hacking off the dragon’s head and jumping backward in retreat. Diehl watched me without pursuing.

“*Haah, haah...*” My wounded right leg throbbed with pain. *This isn’t over... I can still move...!* I thought to myself as I gritted my teeth and assumed the middle stance.

“...Will you call it quits already, pal? I’ve injected you with Hydra’s poison in your side, left shoulder, and right leg. A normal person would’ve died ten times by now...though you ain’t normal, are you...?” Diehl said, looking completely fed up. “I doubt you know this, but True Attires are super inefficient. I’ve used a crap ton of spirit power since I summoned mine. I’m gettin’ a little tired, so I hope you don’t mind if I wrap this up.”

Diehl languidly raised his right arm.

“You’ve gotta be kidding...,” I said as he concentrated an enormous amount of spirit power around it. *I’m finished...*

The strength of the attack he was preparing was unfathomable. Not even Dark Boom or World Render would be able to stop it. The overwhelming pressure of his spirit power was enough to tell me that.

“Rest in pieces, pal. Venom—”

“Don’t get cocky, you piece of trash.”

My left hand reached out against my will. Just then, the air distorted, and ten

black swords appeared around Diehl.

“What the...?!” he gasped, going pale and calling off his attack. “Hydra Asylum!”

The nine dragons wrapped around his body, creating a thick armor of poison.

“Die.”

My left hand clenched around my sword, then ten black blades flew toward Diehl with absurd speed. They collided with a bang, creating a mighty shockwave that shook the whole island.

“Gaah...,” Diehl moaned.

The pitch-black blades had pierced through his poison dragons and stabbed themselves deep into his body. This was the first time Diehl had been injured since he’d summoned his True Attire, and they were serious injuries, too.

“Was that you...Zeon?” I asked.

“*Tch*, is that weak-ass attack really the best I can manage...? How pitiful...,” responded an aggravated voice from within me.

That looked plenty strong to me..., I thought, though Zeon was apparently unsatisfied.

“Listen up, brat. Don’t expect any more support. Spirit Cores can’t interact much with the outside world, and that goes double for me. Performin’ that one measly attack ate up a lotta my strength,” Zeon rumbled.

“Really...? Well, thanks.”

I probably would’ve died if he hadn’t interfered.

“I wanna take control of your body and squeeze the life outta that shithead... but that other goddamn loser’s constantly watchin’ us. The moment I come to the surface, he’ll take advantage of the initial petrification and kill us.”

“The ‘other loser’...?” I repeated, glancing over at Von. Our eyes met for a second; he was fighting the former strongest swordsman in the world, but for some reason, he seemed to be focusing his attention on me.

“That pisses me off like you wouldn’t believe...but I’m gonna pull back for

now. I've immobilized that poison-wielding jackass. Make a platform of darkness and cross the ocean," Zeon said, ordering me to retreat.

"Sorry, but I can't do that," I replied.

"...Huh?"

"I can't leave my friends. I'm gonna stay here and defeat Diehl."

"Are you okay in the head, brat? Was that ass-whooping not enough to convince you of how much stronger than you he is? A novice like you who can't even properly wield his Soul Attire has no chance against someone who's achieved their True Attire! Even a naive little punk should be able to see that!"

Zeon's angry yell reverberated all the way from deep inside my chest to the top of my head.

"Staying here won't change a thing—they're all gonna die!" he roared.

"...Probably."

Nothing Zeon had said was wrong; at this rate, we were all dead.

"Then get a move on! Abandon those deadweights and scram!"

"But the chances aren't zero."

"...What?"

"I'm not skilled enough to defeat Diehl. But I *can* buy us some time. You never know—if I stall for long enough, someone might come save us. Maybe Chairwoman Reia or another Holy Blade will show up."

"Were you born stupid? We're on a goddamn deserted island! No one's coming!"

"...Yeah, it's unlikely." I was fully aware of how unrealistic it was. "But if there's even a chance that my friends might survive—no matter how minuscule it is—then I'll swing my sword to help make that happen."

This swordcraft I'd cultivated for over a billion years had only one purpose: to protect those dear to me. I might save my life by running, but Allen Rodol the swordsman would be as good as dead.

"That's bullshit! How much...my time...waste...?! Your...! Who...geezer's

button...?!”

Zeon’s voice faded in and out of my mind as he ranted.

“...Sorry. It seems like talking to you...is too difficult for me right now...,” I told him.

I felt half-asleep. My vision flickered, and everything sounded distant. Either I was suffering from spirit power deficiency, or I had lost too much blood. Actually, it was probably both.

“YOU BETTER LISTEN TO ME, BRAT! YOU NEED TO OPEN THE PATH LIKE YOUR LIFE DEPENDS ON IT! ACCESS YOUR SOURCE, THE RODOL CLAN’S—”

Zeon’s fierce, rage-filled roar cut off.

“Hoo boy, that almost gave me a heart attack. Guess I shouldn’t be surprised to learn you’re packin’ such a monstrous Spirit Core...,” Diehl said as he pulled the black blades out of his body one by one.

...*So fast*. The deep stab wounds on his body had closed up before my eyes. Summoning his True Attire had apparently enhanced his recovery ability as well.

“What even *was* that? Did you capture some unknown eidolon?” Diehl asked.

“Like I’d tell you.”

“Heh-heh... Come on, pal. Surely we’re close enough by now for you to tell me,” he joked creepily, flexing his shoulder. “Though...no matter how strong a Spirit Core is, it’s just a hollow existence without any real substance. They’ve gotta expend a crazy amount of energy to interfere with the real world. I take it the lack of a follow-up attack means that monster’s outta gas?”

He seemed to know a lot about Spirit Cores.

“Hmm... I wouldn’t be so sure about that.” I did my best to smile confidently so he wouldn’t realize I was out of moves.

“I wish I could write that off as an obvious bluff...but anything’s possible with you, pal. You’ve left me no choice—it’s time to give you a glimpse of hell,” Diehl said, smiling sadistically. He held his venomous sword in the middle stance.

What followed could hardly be called a fight.

“Take that...! What’s the matter? Aren’t you even gonna try to attack?!”

“ ... ”

Diehl laid out one intricate attack after another, steadily inflicting wound after wound. *He could probably finish me with one more powerful strike...*, I thought, but it seemed like using Zeon as a bluff was working. That was the only reason I was still standing. Unfortunately, though, I was approaching my limit.

How long has it been since he summoned his True Attire? Five minutes? Ten? Or had it been less than a minute?

Regardless...I’m basically a walking corpse. His Hydra’s deadly poison was killing the very cells of my body. There was no saving me at this point. *There’s no use denying it—this is the day I die.*

Knowing that, I decided I might as well make the most of the time I had. I would swing my sword until the last moment to buy every second possible for my friends. The odds of someone coming to save us might have been microscopic, but I would still give my all for the chance.

“Stop, Allen... You’ve done more than enough...”

I could hear Lia’s sobbing voice behind me, but I had no idea what she was saying. My hearing had grown so faint, I could hardly distinguish different sounds. I could barely even walk; all I could do was rely on my dim vision and sixth sense to avoid lethal wounds.

Don’t you...collapse yet...

I gripped my sword with my poisoned, bloodied, bruised hands and held it up in the middle stance.

“Most of your flesh is already dead, but you’re still standing... You’ve got the mental fortitude of a monster. Actually, scratch that—you *are* a monster,” Diehl muttered with a shrug. I couldn’t make out what he was saying. “Oh man... I’ve just gotta know... What kinda tune are you gonna play when your strong heart finally breaks? I’ve got goose bumps just thinkin’ about it...”

He smiled repulsively—the sight of which flared a visceral hatred within me—and he walked toward Lia.

“S-stop...!” I yelled. I forced my almost entirely numb legs forward and slashed at him with all my might. “*Hraagh!*”

Diehl easily dodged my attack.

“You sit tight, pal. The show’s just about to begin!” he said, kicking me in the stomach.

“Gah!” I gasped, painfully falling to the ground. Diehl kept walked casually toward Lia until he stood right in front of her.

“Ngh... Hegemonic Style—Hard Strike!” Lia shouted.

She engulfed her sword in scorching hot flames and swung at Diehl, but all it met with was empty air.

“Ahh...Lia, Lia, Lia. Did you not watch my battle with Allen just now? You’re not gonna hit me with a slow attack like that... Hydra,” Diehl said, sounding bored. Four dragons sticking out of his shoulders leaned toward Lia.

“N-no... Stay back...!” Lia whimpered. She was frozen, overcome with fear at the otherworldly power building before her. “Hngh...?! Aaagh!”

Lia screamed in agony as the venomous dragons wrapped around her. They injected her with poison, and ominous markings appeared on her arms and legs.

“Shit...!” I fought as hard as I could to stand up, but my body wouldn’t listen. *Move, goddammit... Right now...! Get up and fight!* Yet despite my best efforts, I could only lie there and grit my teeth.

“Allen, pal. I’m gonna break your dear comrades one by one, so make sure to watch, okay?” Diehl smiled maliciously and raised his sinister sword overhead. Lia was at his feet, wrapped up by the venom dragons. It was obvious what he was going to do next.

“S-stop! Please don’t do this... I’m begging you... She’s my friend...!” I pleaded, abandoning all shame and honor. It was the only thing I could do anymore.

“Heh... Heh-heh-heh...”

Diehl’s lips curled into a grin.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha! Oh, how wonderful! That’s the kinda cry I’ve been waitin’ for!

Now...watch this!" Diehl yelled, stabbing his purple sword deep into Lia's heart.

"Agh...!"

Lia jolted with pain, and blood streamed from her chest.

"No... This isn't happening...," I gasped.

"Ahh... Nothin' beats this... The feeling of takin' a life, the sound of hope turnin' to despair... Oh, it's *bliss*...," Diehl said, closing his eyes with a look of ecstasy on his face.

"All...en... Run...," Lia wheezed, the sword sticking out of her chest. She reached her hand toward me, but then fell motionless. Her healthy skin turned as pale as a corpse, and the light faded from her azure eyes. That fire of life that always seemed to burn so brightly in Lia was fading.



“L-Lia...?” I cried out in disbelief.

“Pfft... Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Tell me, pal! How does it feel to fail to protect your friend?! What’s it like to watch someone dear to you break before your very eyes?! Come on, talk to me! Let me into that head of yours!” Diehl shouted.

For the first time in my life, I wanted to kill someone. This man couldn’t be allowed to live. I needed to erase him from this world, no matter what it took.

“...I don’t care anymore,” I said.

I might never stand again. I might never hold a sword again. But none of that mattered now.

I turned inward.

“Give me the power I need to kill Diehl, Zeon! I want all your strength!” I yelled, giving in to anger and hatred. My emotion wrenched open a path that had always been closed to me, and my body erupted with an unlimited amount of murky blackness. It was darker and more wicked than any darkness I had ever produced, and it blanketed the island in an instant, along with the ocean all the way to the horizon.

“This power... It really *is* you, boy...,” Bacchus said.

“I-is this the darkness of the Rodol Clan...?! No, something’s wrong!” Von shouted.

They had both paused to look my way.

“Ha, ha-ha... This is amazing! To think you were still hidin’ such power!” exclaimed Diehl.

“Brace yourself, Diehl,” I said.

“...Huh?”

I closed the distance between us in a single stride, raised my right fist overhead, and concentrated darkness into it.

“Oh, shit... Protect me, Hydra!” Diehl yelled. Nine poison dragons wrapped around him to create a thick armor of venom. However...

“Hyah...!”

My right-handed punch easily pulverized the dragons...

“No way... Gah!”



...and without losing momentum, slammed straight into Diehl's nose.

"Ooof!"

I'd put everything I had into that blow, and Diehl was sent flying through the air and into the forest, where his body crashed through multiple trees, cutting them down. Hydra's defensive maneuver had just barely saved him from instant death. He really was one tough customer.

"...Lia," I said, looking down at her lying silently on the ground. "...I'm sure that was painful."

I gently pulled the sword out of her chest and crushed it with my bare hands. I put my fingers against her cheek; there was a hint of warmth left, but her eyes were staring off into space, and she had no pulse.

"I'm sorry... I'm so, so sorry..."

Tears streamed down my face. I knew the battle wasn't over yet, but I couldn't stop them.

"All of this... This is all my fault... I was too weak... Too weak...to defeat Diehl..." My voice was filled with regret, and I clenched my fists so hard, they swelled with blood.

Sorrow. Despair. Hatred. Such negative emotions rose within me, causing more and more darkness to flood out of me.

I caught my reflection in the pool of blood at my feet and saw a figure that looked exactly like Zeon. My hair was white, there was a black pattern under my left eye, and inhumanly wicked darkness surrounded me. The only difference was my pupils, which were a cloudy, dark red color and appeared to be completely devoid of life.

"...Wait just a little longer. I'm gonna go kill Diehl. I'll join you right after that," I promised Lia.

The excruciating pain of the deadly poison suddenly disappeared, replaced by a massive surge of Zeon's power. My cells repeatedly died and regenerated with extreme speed, inflicting a new, intense pain that coursed throughout me. The power was too great for my immature body to handle—I wouldn't live long

fighting in this state.

But I didn't give a damn anymore.

This is enough power...to kill him...

I had one goal: to avenge Lia. That was all that mattered.

Sinister waves of purple poison surged to push aside my black darkness.

"Heh-heh... Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha... That was one *hell* of a blow. You shook my body to the core! How long has it been since I took a punch filled with that much passion...? I like you even more now, pal!"

Diehl had healed himself with Hydra, and now he slowly approached me, yelling nonsense all the while.

"Color me impressed, though. I can't believe you were able to shrug off Hydra's poison... What a shame! If you had awakened to that power just a little sooner, you could've saved your precious li'l Li—"

"Shut up."

I was sick to death of Diehl. Everything about him—his affected behavior, his annoying voice, his overly familiar way of speaking—drove me insane.

"Oh, dear. You don't like me very much, do you...?" Diehl shrugged as he raised his right hand, and the four venomous dragons growing out of his shoulders cocked their necks.

Then...

"Venom Gift."

The poison dragons bit Diehl's limbs.

"*Ahhh...* All my senses are sharpening... I *love* this feeling..." he said, drooling and hugging his body tightly.

"...A strengthening ability?" I asked.

Foreboding purple marks surfaced all over Diehl's body. He must have used Hydra's ability to create a poison that stimulated cells and injected himself with it.

“Exactly! Nothin’ gets by you! I’m many times stronger than I was before!” Diehl kicked off the ground hard, coming right up close to me in a single step. “Take this—Venom Bite!”

He thrust his sword at me with everything he had...

“...”

“...No way...!”

...but was unable to even penetrate the darkness involuntarily emanating from my body.

“That all you got? ...*Huh?*”

“...?!”

I lightly kicked out with my right foot, and he crossed his arms to defend himself. However...

“Gah...!”

My darkness-enhanced kick struck Diehl with tremendous force, sending him flying backward despite his flawless defensive maneuver. From the dull feel of the kick, I assumed I’d shattered both of his arms.

“This...ain’t...over... Venom Blood!” Crimson liquid enveloped Diehl’s entire body, immediately healing his shattered arms, which had been bent at all sorts of odd angles. It was a healing speed that not even his Soul Attire, Herosbane Venom, could rival. “Sucks, but it seems I ain’t gonna beat you in terms of strength... Venom Waltz.”

Diehl glared at me with bloodshot eyes and sicced his nine poison dragons on me.

“Heh, heh-heh...”

My laughter seemed to well up from somewhere deep inside me, but I stifled it as I charged straight for Diehl, slicing apart the dragons, crushing them with my fists, and punching them down into the ground.

“Oh, what? Are those cute little lizards all you’ve got?” I taunted him after pulverizing all the dragons in less than a second. Then, standing right in front of

Diehl, I gave him a kindly smile.

“Heh-heh... Could I convince you to go easy on me this time?” he asked hopefully, and I held back slightly as I hit him with a left straight. “Oof...!”

My punch struck him firmly in the solar plexus, sending Diehl flying as he coughed up blood.

“Heh-heh... Where the hell do you think you’re goin’?!” I shouted, tugging on the darkness I had wrapped around his right leg to haul him back toward me. “*Hraagh!*” I punched him in the face as hard as I could.

“Argh...!”

Diehl crashed hard to the ground, bouncing multiple times. The impact of my punch felt satisfying in my right fist.

“Ha-ha-ha... *Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!* Is that the best your beloved True Attire can do, jackass? I’m barely workin’ up a sweat here!” The thirst for battle had taken over my mind completely—my body, my blood, and my heart were all hungry for revenge.

After a few seconds of silence...

“Venomblade Hydra.”

A boiling pillar of poison rose in the distance. I strained my eyes and saw a purple figure emerging from the forest and walking toward me.

“...Incredible. That power’s so repulsive... So evil! I feel it, Allen... I feel your despair and your overpowering malice! You really are the greatest, pal! Let’s keep this goin’... Let’s give each other hell!” Diehl yelled, bloodied all over. He ripped off his cloak and smiled menacingly.

...His healing power ain’t keeping up, I thought. Diehl’s True Attire could instantly fix any injury, no matter how severe—but it had ceased to function as he approached me. *He healed his bone fractures and stopped his hemorrhaging, but that’s about it...* The smaller cuts and bruises still remained; it seemed like he’d healed himself just enough to continue fighting.

Is he outta spirit power...? No, he’s just using most of it for that... Diehl was holding a longsword in the shape of a hydra in his right hand, which was

exuding an incredible aura. He was probably filling it with all his spirit power.

“Heh-heh, she’s a beauty, ain’t she? Venomblade Hydra’s my most powerful sword. You’re only the second person I’ve used it agai—”

“Pfft. Ha-ha-ha...”

I burst out laughing, and Diehl frowned.

“...What’s so funny?” he asked.

“Sorry, it’s just... Has all that goddamn poison gone to your head?”

“...What do you mean?”

“Ha-ha, you’re killin’ me here... It ain’t every day you see a grown man wield a toy like that as if it’s somethin’ to be proud of... Come to me, black sword.”

A pitch-black blade appeared from a rift in the air. Its color was so deep, so dark, that it absorbed the light of the sun and seemed to return all creation to nothingness.

“Ha, ha-ha... I see... That sword is crazy...!” Diehl said, trembling in the face of my true black sword. Despite his fear, he didn’t run.

“Oh? Not gonna run? Don’t you see how hopelessly vast the difference in our strength is?” I asked.

“...Run? *Haah...*” Diehl sighed, sounding truly sad. His affected behavior was gone. “Allen, pal... You still don’t understand me after all the violent love we’ve made together?”

“Excuse me?”

“Pain, sadness, suffering—they’re all just spices that add a nice tone to a person’s voice! You’re probably about to slice me open...but what sound will I make when the life seeps out of my body? Will I be unable to bear the pain and cry out in agony? Will I look back on my sins and repent? Or will I roar with delight at having been killed by Allen Rodol, my obvious soul mate? And how will you react when your revenge is complete?! Ahh... Oh, I’m just so excited to find out!”

“Hah, that’s the dumbest shit I’ve ever heard.”

To Diehl, even his own life was nothing more than an instrument to achieve momentary pleasure. He was hopelessly broken as a person.

“It pains me to say this, but it’s about time we finish our fight,” said Diehl.

He extended his left hand, concentrated an ominous poison around it, and created a giant bow.

“Okay,” he said, nocking Venomblade Hydra as an arrow and aiming it at me. “This is an all-out attack imbued with my lifelong love for you... I hope you’ll accept it.”

“Are you sure you want that lame-ass bullshit to be your last words?”

“Heh-heh... You’re as cold as they come, pal...” Diehl smiled broadly and pulled back the bowstring as far as he could. “Herosbane Hydra.”

He released the string, shooting Venomblade Hydra toward me with great force. The sword contained a lethal poison that killed everything it touched—the grass, rocks, soil—making it appear as if it were actually an evil poison dragon.

“Huh...,” I said. He really was skilled with his True Attire; I supposed that was to be expected of a former Imperial Knight. The approaching attack was decently strong. “That move ain’t bad...for a piece of trash like you.”

I lowered my hips, took a tight grip on my black sword, and pulled it back toward me.

“Fourth Style—Ebony Lance.” Condensed darkness burst from the tip of my sword with explosive speed. This attack differed from Dark Boom in that it focused darkness on one single point, which was then used to stab at the enemy. It shot through the approaching poison dragon...

“Ha, ha-ha... Mag...nificent...”

...and blew a large hole through Diehl’s torso. His True Attire, Hydra, turned to particles of light and disappeared, and he collapsed on the spot, facedown.

“Hrgk...”

His eyes lost focus, and blood gushed from his chest wound. Diehl didn’t use his elite healing ability—he must have exhausted all his spirit power by using

Herosbane Hydra.

"Wheeze, wheeze..." His face went pale, and it looked like he was having trouble breathing.

"Ha-ha, if only you could see how pitiful you look! How do you feel now?!" I taunted.

"Heh, heh-heh... I've...never felt better... And it's all thanks...to you...", he said with a shady smile.

"Hah, you're bleedin' out and you're *still* runnin' your mouth?" I said in disbelief.

"Go ahead...and finish me off, pal... Please... If you kill me, I'll live on within you forever! I'll always be by your side...no matter where you are!" Diehl pleaded, reaching his bloody right hand up toward me.

"...You're such a goddamn creep. If you wanna die that badly, then I'll grant your wish!" I shouted, swinging my sword down to cut off his head.

"Enough."

Von Mustang blocked my black slash head-on.

The hell...? This sand's so hard.

Von was enveloped by a sphere of sand, which was what he'd used to block my attack.

"I cannot deny that Diehl is irredeemable scum; his very nature is corrupt, and he lacks any shred of honor. However, I need him to achieve true peace. I cannot afford to lose him here," said Von.

"So you're gonna get in my way?" I asked.

"That is right," Von replied.

"Then die." I increased the amount of darkness around my sword and sliced apart his sand sphere.

"...Hmph. To think you destroyed my sand sphere with one swing... You are absurdly strong," Von observed, having avoided my pitch-black slash by a hair's breadth. He quickly grabbed Diehl, who was on the verge of death, and

retreated to get him out of danger. “So this is the Rodol Clan’s darkness... It differs greatly from the intel I received, but it’s preposterously strong. I can see why even Barel Ronelia is wary of it.”

He watched me appraisingly while holding his sword at the ready. Diehl squirmed restlessly under his arm.

“I—I...wanna be with Allen...,” he wheezed.

“I care nothing for your death wish. Rest right there until Hydra’s power recovers,” Von ordered, carelessly tossing Diehl to the ground.

That piece of trash has already started healing... The bleeding from the hole in Diehl’s torso was already slowing down. His recovery speed might have been a special trait of his Spirit Core, Hydra; he was as hard to kill as a cockroach.

What happened to the old geezer anyway? I turned around and saw Bacchus breathing heavily and clutching the ground with his right hand. His left hand was over his heart, veins bulging out of his chest, and blood was streaking from the corners of his mouth.

...Is he having some kinda attack? It looked like the old man was in no state to fight.

“Allen Rodol, would you consider defecting to our side?” Von asked, catching me off guard. “The strength you have displayed here is worthy of praise. Snuffing out your life would be such a shame... It is no exaggeration to say that it would be a loss for the world.”

He continued without waiting for an answer.

“This may be arrogant of me to say, but I am strong—much more so than that filth lying behind me.” Von’s face looked completely at ease, and his voice was calm. “You have no chance of defeating me, inexperienced as you are. I can assure you of that. Choosing to fight me would be tantamount to suicide. Knowing that, will join me in my quest for jus—”

“Shut the *hell up*,” I said, cutting him off.

“...What?”

“I’m gonna kill Diehl. Get in my way, and I’ll kill you, too. I’ve got nothin’ more

to say,” I declared, thrusting my black sword at Von.

“...There is only one way to deal with those who oppose justice. In the name of peace, I shall use my True Attire to make an example of you.” The spirit power surrounding him swelled.

“Hah. Looks like you’re not *all* talk...,” I said.

His tranquil yet hostile aura was sharp as a blade, and his very presence prickled my skin and rustled the leaves on the trees. He clearly wasn’t boasting but was every bit as strong as the Seven Holy Blades were advertised to be.

Von spread his arms wide, a sharp glint in his eyes.

“Swim Through the Void—Cleansing Sand Whale,” he said, and fist-sized whales rose into the sky all around him.

...Another unusual power. The whales had brown skin and a single horn on their heads. Most problematic of all, though, was their number—there were over a hundred of them. I tried to grab a whale that was floating near me, but it turned to golden sand, which drifted on the wind and re-formed a short distance away.

Sand whales...? This was probably the sort of ability that could be controlled from a distance.

“Now then, shall we get started?” said Von.

He held a short sword in his right hand and a large shield that covered half his body in his left, both made of sand, which made him look more like a knight than a swordsman.

“This is the first time I’ve ever fought an opponent with a shield,” I said.

“Well, I shall be your first and your last. I recommend you enjoy it to the fullest,” Von replied.

“Bah! Let’s see just what the Holy Knights Association’s Seven Holy Blades are made of!”

I dashed toward Von to enter striking range, but...

“You’re a fool if you think charging directly at me like that will work... Whale

Mochi.”

...a large number of the whales swimming in the air blocked my path.

“Sand ain’t gonna stop me, dumbass!” I yelled, swinging my blade to mow down twenty of the whales in front of me.

“You thought this was just ordinary sand, did you?”

“What?!”

The whales suddenly transformed into extremely sticky quicksand, which clung to my entire body.

It’s...so heavy...! There probably wasn’t even enough sand on me to fill a bucket, but somehow, my body felt heavy as lead. Each grain of sand seemed to contain an unbelievable amount of mass.

So that’s how his ability works... Cleansing Sand Whale’s ability wasn’t to control sand but to change its nature. Whale Mochi made the sand heavy and sticky—and there were likely all sorts of other ways he could change the sand’s nature as well.

“Heavy, isn’t it? That is a special sand that has been imbued with my spirit power. Now, here’s one more—Whale Bullets.” Von swung his short sword down, and a pod of over a hundred sand whales rushed toward me with incredible speed.

“*Tch*, annoying little shits...!” I shouted, gripping my black sword tightly as I began to strike back at the approaching sand whales. But just like last time, wherever I cut them, the whales transformed into sticky quicksand, which wrapped around my limbs.

I can’t cut them all..., I thought, my movement growing sluggish.

“I think we could use a few more, don’t you?” Von said, creating more sand whales and firing them all at me as bullets.

“Haaaaaaarrgghh!” I roared, desperately swinging my sword, but there were too many for me to handle with effort alone.

“ ... ”

It felt like it was raining sand whales as they completely engulfed my body. Their horns pierced my thick cloak of darkness and inflicted more than a few injuries.

“You bastard... For all your lecturin’ about ‘justice,’ you sure do fight so goddamn dirty...”

I had cuts all over my body, but they wouldn’t hinder my ability to continue fighting; the powerful recovery ability of Zeon’s darkness would heal them in seconds.

“I’m dumbfounded by how tough you are. My whale bullets can punch a hole through plate iron,” Von said, sighing softly and shaking his head. “You leave me no other choice—I will need to go one step further. Sand Blast.”

Von hid behind his shield, and the sand stuck to my body began to glow.

“No freakin’ way, you can’t be—”

The sand exploded before I could finish my sentence. White light blinded me, an enormous boom rocked my eardrums, and powerful shockwaves assaulted my body.

Crap... That was stupid powerful... A massive explosion had hit me at point-blank range; unsurprisingly, I’d taken a fair amount of damage. I hid within the dust cloud kicked up by the explosion and focused on healing my wounds.

“This is a pet theory of mine...but I believe battle to be like chess. Each player must counter their opponent’s moves precisely. Make enough reasonable moves, and you force your opponent into checkmate. I believe this applies to justice as well. Performing small acts of goodness every day will eventually lead to a great feat of justice,” Von said matter-of-factly.

I had no idea what he was on about; Von seemed to be just as messed up as Diehl in his own way.

“Man, that one hurt...” The cloud dissipated to reveal me standing before Von again, fully healed from the explosion.

“Hmm... It seems I will need to use more power,” Von said, raising his eyebrows and looking at me sharply. He was giving me his full attention.

Cleansing Sand Whale is a tricky ability for sure, but it ain't nearly as annoying as his fighting style... Von had managed to defend himself and slow me down, then counter me, then hit me with a powerful attack. Every one of his moves had directly set up the next.

“Heh-heh, it’s been ages since I found a plaything so worth breaking... Dark Shadow!” I shouted, summoning twenty sharp tentacles of darkness. They would be more than enough to help me fend off Whale Mochi.

“Oh? Dark slashes that you can control remotely... That closely resembles Dodriel’s Dark Shadow ability,” Von said.

“You know that worthless bastard?” I asked.

“We worked together for a brief period. I always found him to be quite unpleasant. After him came Diehl... I really have had miserable luck when it comes to partners.” Von sighed, a serious cast to his face. “Let’s cut the idle chitchat and end this. I have another job to do.”

Von fired a giant pod of sand whales at me...

“Hah! That confident you’ll survive, eh?”

...but my Dark Shadow tentacles tore apart the whales and surged toward him.

“Take this! Eighth Style—Eight-Span Crow!” I yelled, sending eight black slashes at Von to slice him into pieces.

“Blocking my Mochi and Bullets is hardly the accomplishment you think it is.”

“Wha...?!”

My slashes were faster than the speed of sound, but he blocked them with his short sword and shield. Then, in my split second of vulnerability after performing Eight-Span Crow, Von struck back.

“Righteous Heart Style—Chain of Justice,” Von cried out, performing a merciless chain attack that I had little chance of avoiding.

“Grk...,” I grunted as the impossibly quick slashes hit me one after another.

The best word to describe his swordcraft was “precise.” There was nothing

eccentric or showy about his style; he stuck to the fundamentals, caring only for results. It was as if he had mastered the textbook holy knight style.

I need to find better footing... I jumped backward and prioritized healing myself with my darkness.

“What happened to your confidence in close combat? Is that all the rumored darkness of the Rodol Clan is capable of?” Von taunted.

“Heh-heh, don’t worry... I’m just gettin’ started!” I shouted.

I unleashed my inner spirit power and rushed at Von again. The fight intensified from there.

“Haaaaaaarrrggghhh!” I shouted.

“Not good enough!”

As we fought, Von gained a slight...no, a dominant upper hand. He was a man of unimaginable strength, but most astounding of all was his defensive prowess. He could counter any attack with Cleansing Sand Whale, and he wielded his short sword and shield with flawless precision, making his defense impenetrable. I struck at him with my black sword, sent slashes of darkness at him, tried punching and kicking him, but he blocked everything and inflicted wound after wound against me in the process.

But you know what? I was having a blast.

“Gya-ha-ha-ha! You’re amazing! You’re the strongest opponent I’ve ever fought!”

Excitement surged within me as we clashed swords.

“Righteous Heart Style—Thrust of Justice!”

Von stabbed his sword through my left shoulder, and a searing pain coursed through my veins. And yet...

“Yes, yes! What a great thrust!”

...I took one large step forward with Von’s blade still piercing my shoulder, raised my black sword overhead, and swung it down with all my might.

“You... Stay back!” Von shouted.

He blocked my strike with his shield and fiercely kicked me in the side, sending me flying backward.

“Ha-ha, I see the Holy Blades’ godly reputation is well deserved! Your swordcraft, True Attire, and physical strength are all next level!” I shouted across the space.

I was the one being relentlessly pressured, slashed, and knocked to the ground... But for some reason, I feel like there’s no way in hell I’m gonna lose!

Meanwhile, on the other side of the battle... Something feels off. I’m obviously in control of this fight...so why is it that I feel so afraid of this Allen Rodol...?

The ease in Von’s expression was gradually fading as we fought.

“...Before I left for Cherin, Barel Ronelia gave me a rare warning. He said, ‘If you encounter that monster, make sure to exercise maximum caution.’”

“Eh? The hell are you talkin’ about?” I snapped back.

“Hence, why I *should* have been wary of you since our battle began...however, I was not. I thought you were just a child who was inexperienced with his Soul Attire and naive of the world, yet I now realize that judgment to be the result of a foolish prejudice that wormed its way into my heart,” Von confessed. “Allen Rodol, I no longer see you as beneath me. I’m going to give you my very best as one of the greatest swordsmen in the world—and crush you.”

He jabbed his short sword toward me.

“Hah, you’re borin’ me. Let’s cut the chitchat and get back to fightin’!” I yelled.

“Yes, let’s. It’s time I ended this.” Von switched to a backhand grip with his short sword and thrust it into the ground. “Cleansing Sand Whale: Second Form—Shifting Sands.”

The huge number of sand whales swimming through the air began to spout silver sand, which formed into swords before my very eyes.

“Damn, that’s one hell of a sight...,” I said as close to three thousand silver swords formed a semicircle around me.

“My True Attire’s first form, Whale Cloud, is for observing opponents to

determine their strength and fighting style. Its second form, Shifting Sands, is for destroying them.”

Von lifted his right hand high and swung it down.

“Prelude: Silver Dance.”

A sword raced toward me at tremendous speed from my blind spot.

“Nice try!” I shouted, having deduced its location from the sound of the blade whooshing through the air. I raised my black blade to defend myself, and the silver sword collided with it.

“Hellfire Sand.”

The silver sword burst, its sand turning into scorching-hot quicksand, which flew at me too rapidly to avoid and landed all over my body.

“Gaaaarrggghhh!” Hellfire Sand lived up to its name, and it continued to rain on me, melting my skin and burning my bones. “God...dammit...!”

I enveloped myself in a thick shield of darkness to heal my hideously burned skin.

“Not so fast,” came Von’s voice.

Von swung his right hand, and I immediately heard two more *whooshes* from behind.

“Pain in the ass...!” I grumbled, turning around and sweeping my sword horizontally to intercept the approaching silver sand swords.

“Ice Crystal Sand, Thunderbolt Sand!” Von yelled.

The swords burst just like before, assaulting me with chilling ice and purple lightning.

“...!”

There was no telling what Von’s sand would transform into. Trying to block it at point-blank range was too dangerous.



“That means I’ve just gotta cut ‘em all down before they get close! Dark Shadow!” I roared, summoning twenty sharp, dark tentacles and aiming them at the silver sand swords floating around me.

“Sealing Song: Golden Dance.”

“What the...?! ”

A giant whale emerged from below my feet and swallowed me whole. The inside of the whale was dark, cramped, and solid, and it was covered in a viscous liquid.

I gotta get outta here fast, or I’m dead meat...!

I gripped my sword tightly and prepared to unleash a slash that could cut through anything.

“Fifth Style—”

“Finale: Whale Song.”

“?! ”

Before I could use World Render, thousands of sand swords imbued with a variety of different elements pierced through the whale’s skin.

“Gah...!”

The swords slashed, stabbed, gouged, struck, burned, melted, and froze me. I trembled, overcome by emotion, as I was tortured in every possible way.

So this is a Holy Blade—one of humanity’s best swordsmen, prized by the Holy Knights Association... The combination of Von’s attacks was perfectly calculated. He was immensely strong, with such precise, delicate swordcraft. He had mastered his Soul Attire yet had the insatiable ambition to strive for more. He had trained relentlessly until he surpassed the limits of human power.

Ha-ha, this guy’s one hell of a swordsman...

I slid out from inside the whale, having sustained countless stab wounds. My vital organs were badly damaged, and I couldn’t feel my arms or legs—yet the darkness rising within me still wouldn’t let me break.

“Heh-heh... Gya-ha-ha-ha! That was an incredible attack, Von Mustang! I

actually thought I was gonna die for a second there!”

I healed my ragged body in an instant, and an inexhaustible supply of spirit power coursed through me. The more absorbed I became in combat—and the more power I desired—the more of that limitless darkness would flood into me.

“...No human should have survived that,” said Von, his thoughts racing. *His recovery speed significantly surpasses Hydra. Actually, that’s underselling it—it rivals the regenerative ability of eidolons...*

The sludge-like darkness oozed endlessly out of me, coalescing into protective armor around me and a second black sword in my left hand.

“All right, keep it up! I want us to go at each other with everythin’ we got!” I yelled.

“...At this point, you’re already an eidolon in human form,” said Von.

Our eyes met, and I raced at the former Holy Blade with a black sword in each hand.

“Whale Mochi, Shield Whale, Swamp Whale, Thorn Whale, Bubble Whale!” Von shouted, giving his sand whales a variety of different properties and launching them at me.

“What the hell? You outta spirit power or somethin’?! Those’re way weaker than before!” I cried, using my two blades to cut through the sand shapes like butter.

“Ngh. Shut your mouth!” Von responded. *It’s not that I’ve become weaker... You’ve just gotten stronger...!* He grimaced and cut his own left hand with his short sword. “Secret Song: Bloody Sand Dance!”

The next instant, bloody sand whales shot toward me with tremendous force. Yet I knew instinctively that they weren’t nearly strong enough to hurt me.

“Did you really think that would be enough to slow me down?!” I roared, swinging my left fist as the bloody whales turned to quicksand.

“Don’t be so sure of yourself! Hellfire Sand, Thunderbolt Sand, Ice Crystal Sand!”

“Have you gone deaf or somethin’? I told you those attacks won’t work on

me!”

The sand’s heat, lightning, and ice all hit me, but I didn’t feel any pain.

“No way... Have you developed a resistance to those elements?! Oh, I understand. I know your true identity. You’re—”

“The hell’re you mutterin’ about?”

I swung a sword up from the left, knocking his sand shield into the air.

“No!” Von gasped, thrown off-balance. He quickly tried to dodge...but he was too late.

“I’ll be takin’ that arm,” I said, swinging my sword in an arc and slicing off one of his arms.

“...!”

Von’s face contorted in pain, but he managed to jump back and put some distance between us.

A thought flashed through my mind: *Cleansing Sand Whale doesn’t have a healing ability*. Now was the time to press him.

“Fourth Style—Ebony Lance!”

I took one step in and thrust my sword forward, the destructive power of my darkness concentrated at its tip.

“Don’t underestimate the power of my sand, you monster. Ultimate Defense—Circular White Whale!” Von shouted, extending his right hand and producing a giant whale shield.

My strongest lance collided violently with his toughest shield, rippling the air and producing a loud shockwave.

“Haaaaaaarrrggghhh!”

“Raaaaaaarrrggghhh!”

In the end, it was my black sword that shattered first.

“...Damn, that’s hard,” I said.

Von’s whale shield was so tough, it was hard to think it was made of

something from this world. Not even my Ebony Lance was strong enough to pierce it.

“*Haah, haah...* Naturally. I stand atop the Seven Holy Blades when it comes to defensive prowess,” responded Von.

“Huh, is that so? I’ll need to up my strength a bit, then.”

“What...?”

I reached for even greater power...

“Heh, heh-heh... Now that’s what I’m talkin’ about!”

...and a murky strength rose from deep within my chest.

“Where is this strength coming from...?” Von muttered. *He’s stronger than an eidolon... Did Barel know about this?! No, that doesn’t matter. I just need to survive so I can return with what I’ve learned about Allen Rodol’s true identity...*

I calmly held out my one remaining black sword in my left hand. Darkness flooded out of me endlessly, and I condensed it into the blade, then expelled it all at once to perform a wide-ranging slash that annihilated everything in its path.

“Tenth Style—Clear Black Sky.”

“You... You’re a monster...!”

My pitch-black slash surged out in all directions, instantaneously causing untold destruction and painting everything black. Space warped, the air groaned, and massive fissures raced through the ground—it was an attack with all the power of a natural disaster.

“Circular White Whale!” Von yelled, simultaneously producing three giant shields in one last desperate struggle to protect himself.

“Hah, you’re full o’ surprises. I didn’t think you had that much strength left!”

“Please, spare me... I can’t die here...”

Von poured spirit power into his shields, frantically trying to strengthen them. However, his limited spirit power was no match for my unlimited darkness.

“*That’s* the ‘defensive prowess’ you’re so proud of? *Seriously?* Don’t tell me

you're tired already."

"Damn it...!"

Von's pure-white shields were stained black. One broke, and then another, leaving only one.

...Guess it's finally over. With one more swing of my blade, Von and Diehl would vanish from this world. I meant that literally—they would be annihilated so completely that no trace of their bodies would remain. Then, having achieved my revenge, I would die as a result of recklessly using my power. This was finally...truly the end.

"GYA-HA-HA-HA! DIE, VON! DIE, DIEHL! DIE, DIE, DIE!"

I poured all the darkness I had into my black sword and unleashed my most powerful attack.

"Is this...the end?" muttered Von.

His final shield cracked, but...

"...Huh?"

Suddenly, a sacred darkness welled up from deep within my soul and held me back.

"The hell is this...?!"

My connection to that immense power was cut off, as if a giant boulder had been put in place to block the path. My black sword and armor dispersed into particles of light, and the limitless darkness vanished.

"What happened...?" I asked, stunned.

"Haah, haah... I'm saved... The Rodol Clan Seal finally activated..." Von said, collecting his breath. He looked like he knew something. "That was truly impressive, Allen Rodol. I never would have expected you to overwhelm a former Imperial Knight and a current Holy Blade all by yourself... I hate to admit it, but you would beat me in a contest of pure strength. You should be proud as I send you to the next life."

Von raised his sword overhead with his one remaining arm, certain of his

victory.

“Crap...” I urged myself to dodge the attack, but both my legs were as heavy as if they were made of mud and refused to listen.

“Farewell,” Von said coldly, swinging his sword down.

“Cherry Blossom Blade Style—Sakura Flash!”

A lightning-fast thrust rushed at Von from behind me.

“?! Shield Whale!” With only a split second to react, Von produced a small shield and just barely blocked the slash. “Bacchus...! You can still move?! You should be dead!”

“*Haah, haah...* Don’t underestimate me...youngster!” Bacchus yelled, spinning quickly to perform a powerful horizontal kick.

“Gah?! ”

His foot crashed into Von’s side, sending him flying backward.

“*Haah, haah...* Hrk?! *Cough, cough...*”

Bacchus coughed up a wad of blood and fell to one knee. His half-closed eyes looked dull, and his face was pale as a corpse. He was in no condition to fight.

“M-Mr. Bacchus...”

“Good job stalling, boy... We still have time, thanks to you...”

“...What?”

I had no idea what he meant.

“Bwa, ha-ha...! Don’t gimme that blank face. Have you forgotten my nickname?”

Bacchus Valencia—or Bacchus the Immortal—was once the strongest swordsman in the world. If his unrivaled Soul Attire had an ability that matched his nickname... And if he could grant that power to other people...

Y-you don’t think...?

A certain possibility occurred to me, filling my despair-ridden heart with warm hope.

“My Soul Attire, Billion-Year Sakura, wields the ability of complete restoration. It’d be faster to show you what I mean than to explain it. A picture’s worth a thousand words, as they say.”

Bacchus smiled weakly and gestured behind me with his chin. Turning around, I saw that he was looking at Lia, who was lying face up on the ground. Upon closer inspection, I could see something odd—tree roots had wrapped around her ankles, and her stomach was moving slowly up and down.

“L-Lia...?”

I dragged my heavy feet toward her. Color was returning to her skin, and when I strained my ears, I could hear the soft sound of her breathing.

“Ha, ha-ha... Am I dreaming?” I asked out loud. I timidly put my hand to Lia’s chest and felt a strong, steady heartbeat. “I can’t believe it... She’s really back...!”

I trembled, overcome by emotion at this unforeseen miracle. Lia’s eyelids flickered and opened to reveal her beautiful azure eyes.

“Ngh... Allen...?” she said weakly.

“...Lia!” I shouted.

“Huh? Ahhh!”

I impulsively grabbed her and held her tight.

“Thank goodness... Thank goodness you’re okay...”

Emotions welled within me, and large tears streamed down my face.

“H-hey, Allen! People can see us! Can’t you wait until we’re...alone...? Wait... How am I alive...?” Lia’s blushing face had turned into a look of confusion, and she tilted her head up at me. She’d just woken up, so it seemed like she hadn’t fully grasped the situation yet.

“About that—,” I began, but I was interrupted.

“Urgh, what happened to me...? Ah...! Where’s the enemy?!” shouted Rose.

“Didn’t we inhale exotic poison...? Oh yeah, where *are* Diehl and Von?! ” echoed Shii.

They both jumped to their feet.

“...Whuh? What the heck just happened...? Was that all a dream?” Lilith asked.

“Why do I feel like the Billion-Year Sakura just woke me up...? Urgh, my head is pounding...,” Tirith grumbled.

Lilim and Tirith slowly sat up next.

“Rose, President, Lilim, Tirith!” I exclaimed.

The purple marks on their bodies were gone. I looked down and saw tree roots wrapped around their ankles as well.

“Bwa-ha-ha... *Cough, cough*... You’re finally up. I’m glad to see you’re all okay,” Bacchus said. He coughed violently as he spoke, but he looked relieved.

Rose, who was most likely familiar with his ability, looked horrified. “These roots... Don’t tell me, Gramps. Did you use the Billion-Year Sakura?!” She immediately realized what happened, and her face went pale.

“Don’t gimme that look. I’m Bacchus the Immortal, remember? This is hardly enough to affect me.”

“That was true decades ago, but not now! You completely restored five people... You’re too ill for that...!” Rose said, trembling and clenching her fists.

“What was I supposed to do? Let my darling granddaughter and her friends die?” asked Bacchus, scratching his cheek as blood streaked from the corner of his mouth.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Bacchus... Thank you...from the bottom of my heart,” I said, bowing to him.

“I did what anyone would’ve done, boy. It’s nothing to thank me for. Get ready to run, now. The sand wielder is still ali—”

“Cleansing Sand Whale: Third Form—Sin-Eating Black Whale.”

“Awaken—Venom Dragon Hydra!”

A giant sand whale and a wicked poison dragon rose up in the distance.

""""""""What?!"""""""""

“The poison wielder’s back on his feet, too. Those two don’t know when to quit,” Bacchus said with a heavy sigh.

“Allen Rodol. I *will* kill you, even if it costs me my life. You must die before the Rodol Clan Darkness awakens and the Rodol Clan Seal is released...”

“You weren’t thinkin’ of leavin’ without me, were you, pal? You sure know how to make a man cry...”

The one-armed Von Mustang and blood-soaked Diehl Reinstad slowly approached us, both holding their True Attires and radiating bloodlust.

“That’s impossible...,” Lia said, dumbfounded.

“...We can’t fight them. They’re on a whole other level...!” gasped Rose.

The two of them seemed frozen to the spot, paralyzed in shock.

“So this is what True Attire wielders are capable of...,” said Shii.

“Ha, ha-ha... I’m not sure even the great Lilim can beat them...,” admitted Lilim.

“We’re clearly goners...,” grumbled Tirith.

Even my resilient upperclassmen seemed to think we were going to die.

Crap... What can we do?! Our situation could not have been worse. Bacchus was on the verge of collapse after using the Billion-Year Sakura’s power, and for some reason, I had lost access to my darkness.

What gives, Zeon?! I felt like I could defeat Von and Diehl together if I could just use that limitless darkness. But no matter how many times I called out for Zeon, he didn’t answer. The “Rodol Clan Seal” that Von had mentioned might have had something to do with that.

...No... I can’t give up! Not under any circumstances! Think! We’re dead if I don’t come up with something. There must be a way out of this... There has to be... I racked my brain for a solution.

“...Two hundred and fifty years. That’s a long life, even for me,” Bacchus said, a hint of resignation in his voice. “Boy, take Rose and the others and flee. I’ll handle these two lunatics.”

Bacchus stepped forward alone, standing in the way of Von and Diehl.

“M-Mr. Bacchus...?”

I couldn’t believe my ears. Taking on two True Attire wielders in his weakened state was suicide.

“You’ll get yourself killed!” Lia protested.

“Gramps...,” said Rose. Sadness filled her face, and she shook her head.

“Do you have a plan?” Shii asked.

“You don’t have a death wish, do you, old man Bacchus?!” Lilim asked bluntly.

“I don’t see any advantage in fighting alone...,” Tirith pointed out with a look of concern.

Instead of giving us a straight answer, Bacchus responded with his usual jolly laugh.

“Bwa-ha-ha! Hurry on over to those weird flying doohickeys and get off this island. There’s nothing to worry your little heads about. I promise to live up to my reputation as the greatest swordsman in the world and help you all make a safe escape!” he declared, pointing to the gliders in the distance.

“.....”

His readiness to give up his life to help us escape left the six of us speechless. Rose broke the silence.

“...Gramps.”

“Hm? What is it?”

“Thank you so much...for everything...you’ve done for me...” Her voice trembled, and she gave him a deep bow.

“Of course,” Bacchus replied, patting Rose lovingly on the head. “Take care, kid.”

“I will... Goodbye...” Tears fell from Rose’s eyes as she offered her grandfather these parting words.

She turned to the rest of us, muttered, “Let’s go,” and ran toward the gliders.

“...Mr. Bacchus, I hope you’ll teach me swordcraft again sometime,” I said, trying to force him into a promise for the future.

“We...we’ll have to...have a proper drink together next time...,” Lia mumbled, barely holding back tears.

“I will never forget this debt of gratitude,” Shii said solemnly with a deep bow.

“Let’s meet again someday, old man... That’s a promise, okay!” Lilim cried out, sniffing the whole time.

“Thank you so much...,” said Tirith, biting her bottom lip.

Once we had all said our farewells to Bacchus, we raced toward the gliders.

“...Bwa-ha-ha, Rose sure has made some wonderful friends... Thanks to them, I can die in peace.” He smiled from the bottom of his heart, flexed his bloodless muscles, and threw himself into a hopeless battle.



Just as Allen and the girls ran toward the gliders...

“Who gave you permission to flee? Crush them, Black Whale!”

“Don’t ignore me, pal! Venom Waltz!”

A giant sand whale fell toward them from high in the sky, and nine venomous dragons pursued them.

“Ngh—White Dragon Scales!” Lia shouted.

“I hope this is enough—Aqua Mirror!” Shii yelled.

They both quickly summoned their Soul Attires and performed wide-ranged defensive maneuvers. They produced their shields to deflect the oncoming attacks at an angle rather than block them head-on, but Diehl and Von were too strong.

“Raaaaaaaaah!”

“Hyaaaaaaaaah!”

The two girls cried out as they fought off the attacks, but the sand whale’s

huge body snuffed out Lia's white flames, and the poison dragons clamped their jaws around Aqua Mirror, which started to shatter.

"No... They're way too strong," said Lia.

"Damn it, I can't hold out...!" strained Shii.

Their shields both shattered—but just at that moment, Bacchus stamped his right foot on the ground.

"Thousand-Root Kannon!" Bacchus roared, summoning seven giant roots out of the ground, which easily crushed the sand whale and poison dragons.

"That's the eidolon, Billion-Year Sakura...," Von said, gritting his teeth.

"To think you can manage this kinda strength while knockin' on death's door... No wonder you caught Emperor Barel's eye," Diehl muttered bitterly.

"Bwa-ha-ha, are those weak attacks all you've got?" Bacchus taunted with a confident smile. He did that to draw their attention and give Allen and the girls time to escape. In truth, however, he was approaching his limit—or rather, he had gone past it long ago.

Haah, haah... That was pathetic..., Bacchus thought. Thousand-Root Kannon was supposed to skewer enemies with one thousand roots, but in his near-death state, seven was all he could manage.

"Pursuing the kids with you getting in our way will be difficult. We'll take you out first, old man," declared Von.

"We don't got a lotta time, so we'll make this quick!" shouted Diehl.

They both dashed toward Bacchus, closing the gap in a single leap. Bacchus lifted his long-cherished sword overhead to meet them. However...

"Cherry Blossom Blade...Style—?! *Cough, cough...!*"

Using Thousand-Root Kannon had taken more out of Bacchus than he realized, and he fell to his knees, wheezing as Von and Diehl moved to end his life.

"Hmph, you just gave up what little life you had left for no reason. Righteous Heart Style—Thrust of Justice!"

“Your heart’s all mine! Venom Bite!”

Von and Diehl’s sharp stabbing attacks pierced Bacchus straight through the heart.

“Gah...,” Bacchus gasped.

““Mr. Bacchus...!”” Allen and Lia shouted together.

“...!”

“No way... Not old man Bacchus...”

“This isn’t happening...”

Shii, Lilim, and Tirith went pale and stopped in their tracks.

It was hard to blame them for their reaction. While they were all elite swordfighters, Allen and his friends were only teenagers—they were much too young to process the cruel reality of watching someone they knew get brutally murdered before their very eyes.

Damn it, damn it, damn it...! Allen thought, gloom and hatred building in his heart.

“Just run! Don’t waste the time that Gramps bought for us!” Rose ordered. She clenched her fists so hard, they went bright red. Then she ran for their only hope of escape—the gliders.

“.....”

Allen and the others all gritted their teeth and followed Rose, spurred on by her strong resolve. Von and Diehl’s evil shadows loomed.

“You’re not getting away!” Von yelled.

“Wait, pal!” Diehl shouted.

Filled with tremendous amounts of spirit power, sand and poison swords arced through the air...

“How are you...?!”

“Hold on, that ain’t possible!”

...but they were forced to swing them in the opposite direction of Allen and

his friends.

“Cherry Blossom Blade Style—Night Sakura!” yelled a furious, white-haired giant with a hole in his chest, swinging his huge sword.

“Grk...?!”

“That’s some serious strength...”

Von and Diehl just barely managed to block Bacchus’s blow, leaping back to lessen the impact.

“Mr. Bacchus!” Allen yelled joyfully, but Bacchus just gestured with his chin for them to hurry.

“*Haah, haah...* Bwa-ha-ha! Did you really think piercing my heart would be enough to kill me?!”

There was no question that Bacchus had been stabbed through the heart, but still he stood with his sword raised, looking like a mighty warrior ready to take on an army.

“...I see. That abnormal recovery ability must be the true essence of the Billion-Year Sakura eidolon,” Von observed.

“Gettin’ stabbed through the heart’s not somethin’ you’re supposed to survive...,” Diehl said. “‘Bacchus the Immortal’ is right.”

They both readied their swords, obviously wary of Bacchus.

Bacchus’s Soul Attire, Billion-Year Sakura, had the ability of complete restoration. It worked by drawing upon the immense life energy of the Billion-Year Sakura, which could be used to fully heal a person’s wounds. Bacchus had used this power to restore Lia’s heart, remove the deadly poison ravaging Rose and her upperclassmen, and heal the wound he had just suffered. His Soul Attire’s ability was the sole reason he had been able to lead a normal life despite his incurable illness. The only drawback was the enormous amount of spirit power the ability consumed...

It had taken Bacchus less than a second to heal his heart, yet this ability went beyond recovery and into the realms of restoration—the reason why his Soul Attire had once been feared as unrivaled. With the Billion-Year Sakura in hand,

he would not die until he ran out of spirit power.

“Hraaaaaaaaaaah!” Bacchus roared.

“He’s a monster... Your era is long past, old man! Accept your fate and die!” Von yelled.

“I can’t believe you can still move in that ragged state...,” said Diehl.

Bacchus charged, assaulting them with a fierce flurry of attacks that Von and Diehl only barely managed to hold off.

I can’t die yet... Not until the kids fly to safety...! Bacchus thought, willing himself to keep fighting despite the two-on-one disadvantage as his consciousness faded.

“Cherry Blossom Blade Style—Sakura Flash Chain!”

“Ngh, Shield Whale!”

“Why you... Venom Strike!”

“Bwa-ha-ha... You’ll have to do better than that!”

The old warrior fought splendidly, more than living up to his title as the former strongest swordsman in the world. But with every polished Cherry Blossom strike he performed, beautiful petals scattered from the Billion-Year Sakura. Those petals represented Bacchus’s remaining life; his death drew nearer with each one that fell. One minute passed, then two, then three...

“Bwa...ha-ha...! You’ll never...reach them now...!”

Bacchus grinned, having achieved his goal. Allen and his friends had boarded their gliders and flown far enough away that Von and Diehl couldn’t reach them. They were out of range of both Cleansing Sand Whale and Venom Dragon Hydra, their safety guaranteed.

“Yes, you are right. They are too far away for Diehl and me to reach with our abilities,” admitted Von. “However, the reverse is also true.”

“...Whaddaya mean?” Bacchus asked.

“Hmph. You don’t see it? *You* can’t reach *them*, either.” He smiled boldly and pulled a small transceiver out of his pocket. “This is Von Mustang. Our primary

target has now changed, from Bacchus Valencia to Allen Rodol's group. They are currently crossing the ocean. Summon your Soul Attires and eliminate the targets with extreme prejudice."

"Wh-what...?!" Bacchus gasped.



Innumerable gliders emerged from the thick clouds and surrounded Allen and the girls on all sides.

“Damn it!” Allen cursed. “After Bacchus risked his life for us to escape, too...”

“There’s so many of them...,” commented Lia.

“This...is the end,” lamented Shii.

“We can’t beat a force this large...,” said Lilim.

“I’m too young to die...,” complained Tirith.

The five of them had given up. And who could blame them? There was a wall of enemy gliders to their left and right, each one piloted by a swordsman in a black overcoat. There were around ten thousand in all, and each swordsman had summoned their Soul Attire. Three of them even appeared to be Oracle Knights. Allen and his friends clearly stood no chance.

“We’re fine. Just press on,” Rose urged. As the others imagined the worst, she simply stared ahead, not looking afraid in the least.

“R-Rose...I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Allen said.

“Yeah, that’s clearly suicide...,” Lia agreed.

They both shook their heads, but Rose didn’t budge.

“It’s okay. Gramps is the strongest swordsman in the world. He said he’s going to help us escape, and that’s exactly what he’s going to do.”

Just then, the Billion-Year Sakura started glowing with an intensity unlike anything it had ever shown before.



The three men on the island watched as Allen and the girls worried over their hopeless situation.

“We have ten thousand reinforcements led by three of the Thirteen Oracle Knights. This is checkmate,” Von boomed, smiling boldly.

“When did you gather that many troops?!” Bacchus asked.

“Don’t misunderstand. We brought them to ambush you and ensure your demise. Diehl and I were the first wave, and the second was to be that army of ten thousand Soul Attire wielders. They came in handy, but not in the way I expected.”

“Hrgh...,” Bacchus groaned, faced with the strength of the Black Organization.

“Regardless, the death of Allen Rodol’s group is guaranteed,” Von continued. “That leaves only you, Bacchus. You’re a ghost from a bygone era, and it’s far past time you departed this world!”

“You pushed your old bones to the brink, and what happened? Heh-heh... You saved nobody. I almost feel for you, pal,” said Diehl.

They both readied their weapons, sure of their victory. Bacchus looked to the sky and sighed loudly.

“*Haah...* Something you should know about me...is that I’ve never lied once in my long life.”

“...How is that relevant?” asked Von.

“What’re you tryin’ to say?” said Diehl.

They were both confused.

“I told those kids I would help them escape...so there’s no way in hell I’m gonna sit back and watch as those soldiers block their path,” Bacchus rumbled, his voice filled with rage. A staggering amount of spirit power suddenly surged from his body.

“No way... That’s impossible!”

“Get outta here... Don’t you think that’s overkill?!”

Neither Von nor Diehl could believe their eyes. An eidolon was not a simple Spirit Core—it was a monster with a strong sense of self and power that surpassed human understanding. Tearing off a piece of its power and manifesting it as a Soul Attire was impossible without an incredible amount of training and immense spirit power. Unlocking an eidolon further and obtaining a True Attire was unthinkable—something that could be done only by putting oneself through hell.

The most naturally gifted and elite swordsmen in the prime of their life could invest all their spirit power and end up able to touch only a fraction of that power. A 250-year-old man like Bacchus had no business being able to manifest a True Attire from an eidolon.

Then how...? How is he emitting such a tremendous aura?! Von wondered. He gritted his teeth and watched Bacchus Valencia closely. It made absolutely no sense for an old man suffering from an incurable illness and possessing only a meager amount of spirit power to produce this kind of strength. *Th-there's no way... It shouldn't even be possible...!*

Time seemed to stop as a momentary silence befell them. Then, the old warrior, who had so far looked common sense in the face and laughed, let out a shout.

“Link—Tree of Life Sefirot!”

At Bacchus's command, the Billion-Year Sakura grew an eternity's worth of time in an instant and entered full bloom. The sturdy branches grew, creaking noisily as they did, and produced flower buds that opened to reveal bright cherry blossom petals. It was a manifestation of new life, the triumph of which reverberated throughout the Land of Sakura.

“Is this a fully unleashed eidolon?!” Von gasped.

“It's my first time seeing one... What a crazy sight...,” Diehl said.

The two men gulped.

“Bwa-ha-ha! Isn't it beautiful?! This is the true form of the Billion-Year Sakura, passed down with the Cherry Blossom Blade School of Swordcraft for generations!” Bacchus roared with laughter.

The old man's body coursed with explosive vitality. It was a breathtaking sight—his muscles were as hard as steel, his eyes as sharp as a hawk's, and he gave off an overwhelming aura. He had used up the entirety of his spirit power to draw immense life energy from the Billion-Year Sakura. That meant he would no longer be able to use the complete restoration that was keeping him alive; as soon as the battle ended, he would die almost immediately.

Yet in this brief amount of time that Bacchus had bought by trading his

remaining lifespan, he would return to his prime—a time in which he had earned the title of the greatest swordsman in the world.

““...!””

Von and Diehl stepped back, intimidated by the older man’s imposing figure.

Now this takes me back..., Bacchus thought, as the jewel-like cherry blossom petals painted the world pink. A memory surfaced in his mind from when he had traveled with an old friend to grow as a warrior.

“Hey, Barel. Is the Child of Destruction really so powerful?”

“Where’s this coming from?”

“It’s just that you’re searching so desperately to find them... It makes me curious why a swordsman of your caliber would do such a thing.”

“...They are a cursed child who will destroy all reason and order of the world, bringing about a revolution. They house a holy darkness and a wicked monster within their body and could be considered a bitter legacy of the world. I need to find them before the Time Hermit does and eliminate them. We can’t let him use that repulsive 100-Million-Year Button to remove the seal.”

“Ooh, a revolution, huh? That sounds kinda fun!”

“...Hey, you’re not getting any bad ideas, are you?”

“Okay. I’ve got it, Barel! I’m gonna find this kid before you and teach them the Cherry Blossom Blade School of Swordcraft!”

“Bacchus...did you hear a word I just said? The Child of Destruction is evil incarnate. Their very existence is a crime. Do you realize how much damage you could do by making them even stronger? Do you want the world to be destroyed?”

“That’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard! Life is never a crime. And children only turn out to be good or bad depending on the environment in which they’re raised.”

“I assume you’ve heard the saying ‘like calls to like’? Wicked people attract others of the same nature. By the time you meet the Child of Destruction, they’ll be an irredeemable villain.”

“Haah... Oh, Barel... You’ve always been a glass-half-empty kinda guy. Even if they’re raised to be a bad kid, teaching them the joy and essence of swordcraft will surely turn them into an honest person! Then they’ll bring about a positive revolution!”

“...Our ways of thinking and how we live our lives have always been at odds. We couldn’t have less in common.”

“Bwa-ha-ha! Let’s make a game of it! Will you find the Child of Destruction and kill them in the name of world peace, or will I find them and teach them swordcraft so they can bring about a revolution? This is gonna be fun!”

Bacchus smiled with satisfaction as he reflected on that conversation with his old friend—Barel Ronelia, the emperor of the Holy Ronelian Empire.

“Sorry, Barel! Looks like I won our game! This one move will change the world forever!” he yelled, declaring his victory slightly early. He reached out his right hand, and cherry blossom petals from the Billion-Year Sakura gathered around it and formed a vibrant sakura longsword.

“This is your final lesson, boy! Watch and learn!” Bacchus roared with everything he had. He slowly raised his sakura sword overhead. “Cherry Blossom Blade Style Secret Technique—”

Bacchus held his blade up toward the sky and prepared to perform the final sword stroke of his life.

“I don’t know what you’re trying to do, but I won’t let you interfere!” Von said.

“You better quit ignorin’ us!” Diehl shouted.

They both rushed at Bacchus to stop him.

“Ultimate Defense—Circular White Wha— What?!”

Von had started to summon the pure-white shield of his greatest defensive ability, but he stopped at the last second. *I-it’s impossible...* He had immediately realized how foolish it would be to try to block Bacchus’s attack.

“Heh-heh. You may have an eidolon’s True Attire, but we still outnumber you... Venom—”

“Stop, you imbecile! Can’t you see we’re no match for him?!” Von yelled. He sent Diehl flying with a kick and leaped away in retreat.

The next second...

“Mirror Sakura Slash!”

...hundreds of millions of sakura blades tore through the air, as if reflections of each other.

“Wh-what in the world?!” Von gasped.

“Sakura *blades*?!” Diehl shouted.

“All soldiers, retr— Gaaaah!” Von cried in pain.

Bacchus’s sakura slash seemed to have been taken straight from the pages of myth. It ripped apart the sky, parted the seas, and took down an entire army—in one swing, he had defeated the force of ten thousand troops, including three Oracle Knights.

“That’s...absurd...,” Von muttered.

“Is this a nightmare...?” Diehl asked, dazed.

They could only stare in stunned amazement at the unreal sight before them.

Meanwhile...

“I-incredible...”

Allen recalled his conversation with Bacchus at the Drops of Sakura bathhouse, when the old man had told him about his prowess back in his heyday.

“I could part the seas or tear a rift in the sky with one swing of my sword, and I ended up defeating thousands...tens of thousands of opponents! There was no one in the world who could beat me!”

Everything Bacchus said was true! Allen thought. *But...why does this sight seem familiar?*

A memory surfaced in his mind as the world was dyed pink.

“Haah, haah... You’re strong as a demon... You’re the first person to ever

defeat me...”

“Hah. You’re not bad, yourself... And just so you know, I’ve never lost, and I sure as hell never will.”

“Bwo-ho-ho! You’re endlessly arrogant, you fear no one, and you have godlike strength... I like you! I’m Rochs Valencia, the founder of the Cherry Blossom Blade School of Swordcraft! What’s your name?”

“Huh? Why the hell would I give my name to some sorry-ass excuse for a swordsman like you? Put that tiny brain of yours to work and know your place.”

“Bwo-ho-ho! You’re just as rude as you are strong! Fine by me if you don’t wanna tell me your name. More importantly, I’ve got some mighty fine liquor from my home country! Let’s share a drink!”

“...Hmm. It’s been ages since I’ve had a drink...”

“Oh? You sound like someone who can hold their booze! Well then, bottoms up! Nothing beats a drink after using Sefirot as an appetizer!”

“Tch... If this stuff tastes bad, I’ll kill you.”

It was the memory of a night when a young Rochs had drunk with a terribly arrogant man.

Is this Zeon’s memory...? If so, then how did a Spirit Core meet someone in this world? Only Zeon or the very few people involved with him could answer that.

“Now’s our chance! Fly away as fast as you can!” Rose ordered.

Allen and the others poured all their spirit power into their gliders and shot across the sky at maximum speed. A hearty laugh echoed from the distant horizon.

“Bwa-ha-ha! My era ends here! Allen Rodol—Child of Destruction! It’s time for you to forge your own era!” Having used up all his strength, Bacchus gave a satisfied smile and vanished into particles of light—leaving Allen and his friends to safely escape from Cherin, the Land of Sakura.



“Damn, he bested us... Bacchus Valencia was our enemy, but I must admit he was quite the man...,” Von said, shaking and grinding his teeth in frustration.

“Whadda we do now, boss?” Diehl asked. “We ain’t catchin’ them with that much of a head start...”

“We need to kill Allen Rodol as fast as possible, by whatever means necessary... He was heavily wounded and nearly died in this fight, which undoubtedly strengthened his connection to Zeon and weakened the Rodol Clan Seal... Next time I encounter him, he will be too strong for me to fight alone. For now, we head back to the capital. I have many questions for Barel.”

“Oh my. Ye shouldnae be spoilin’ your handsome face with such anger...Von,” said a cool female voice from behind him.

“...Rize Dorhein, the Blood Fox. And that must be crazy Clown Jester.”

“It’s a relief tae see ye in good health. We havenae seen each other since we spoke with Barel in Belios Castle... That must have been almost exactly a year ago.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m flattered that you know my name... What an honor!” exclaimed Clown.

They were both as aloof as ever.

“I’m sorry, but I happen to be very busy. If you have business with me, make it quick,” snapped Von.

“Business, eh? Yes, I suppose we do... We’re here tae silence ye, if ye catch my drift.”

Von adopted a combat stance...

“...?! Are you fools here to keep Allen Rodol’s identity hi—”

...but he was interrupted when Hydra’s venom blade emerged from his abdomen. “Diehl...? Why?!”

“Sorry for that, boss... But I’ve been a member of Ms. Rize’s faction all along.”

Cell-killing poison coursed through Von’s body, utterly ravaging it.

“Ngh, Cleansing Sand Wha...,” Von said, trying to summon his True Attire.

Instead, his sand whales crumbled, and he expired within seconds, never to speak another word.

This was what typically happened when a person was injected with Hydra's deadly poison—the reason why it was so surprising that Allen Rodol had been able to fight like he did.

“Okay, we've purged the traitor. Presenting Von's corpse tae the Five Powers and the Holy Knights Association should allay their doubts about us. Peace has returned tae the world,” Rize said, clapping and smiling gently as she always did.

“Who are you to call someone a traitor?” Clown said with an exasperated smile.

“He's the real traitor for bein' foolish enough to oppose Ms. Rize,” Diehl said, ever Rize's loyal subject.



“Ye truly were strong, Bacchus... If only ye hadnae gotten sick,” Rize said in a rare show of emotion. She gazed absently at the Billion-Year Sakura.

“...Hey, Clown-man,” Diehl whispered, tugging on Clown’s sleeve. “Ms. Rize looks pretty down in the dumps... Did she know old man Bacchus?”

“Hmm... Honestly, I don’t really know. She doesn’t talk much about her past.”

“Really...?” Diehl asked, going pale. If Rize and Bacchus were old business partners or friends, then he might have made a terrible mistake. “Umm...Ms. Rize? Did I go too far?”

“Nae need ta worry about that. That idiot and I go way back, but we werenae close,” Rize said, smiling kindly. Diehl breathed a sigh of relief. “Besides... Bacchus noticed me during the fight, but that *blockhead* told me he didnae need my help.”

In the middle of that fierce battle, Bacchus and Rize’s eyes had met for the briefest of moments. The old man had smiled savagely and shook his head, conveying a silent message: *This is my fight. I don’t need your help.*

Rize had responded by dispelling her Soul Attire, Withered Umbrella, and watching over him for the final moments of his life.

“His body was failing him... Not even the eidolon Sefirot’s power was gonnae keep him alive much longer. Even without today’s fight, he might have only had a wee few days left... And no one knew that better than him. That was why he chose a fittin’ place to die and pass everythin’ on tae the next generation—Allen Rodol.”

Rize picked up Bacchus’s beloved sword and stuck it into a hill overlooking a beautiful view.

“He went out takin’ down thousands of opponents and stickin’ to his principles, all with a great big smile on his face. He sure was one crazy old man.”

Rize pulled a bottle of liquor out of the sleeve of her kimono. It was a local label from Cherin, and one of Bacchus’s favorites.

“Ulp... Phah...!”

She drank half the bottle and poured the rest onto Bacchus’s sword.

“We were like oil’n water because of how straightforward ye were, but...I’m eternally grateful tae ye for saving my sister,” Rize said from the bottom of her heart, placing the empty bottle on the ground. “Clown. Buy this island later and make sure tae give Bacchus a fittingly grand grave.”

“Got it... What should we do with Von’s body?” Clown asked.

“We need to make sure it doesnae rot. I’ll have my men collect it. Hey, come carry this away!” Rize called out, clapping her hands.

A group of black-clothed men ran up and efficiently collected Von’s corpse, then bowed and ran off.

“All right, Bacchus. I’ll come back whenever I feel I got some gripes tae vent. You’d better be ready tae listen. Hee-hee, don’t worry. I’ll bring booze and snacks.” Rize turned her back on his sword. “Well... It isnae every day ye go to the Land of Sakura. Let’s do some sightseein’!”

“Ooh, that’s a great idea! Let’s start by buying some sakura goods!” said Clown.

“Fer sure. They say, ‘A man away from home need feel no shame’... We should embrace our inner children and let loose!”

Clown and Rize grew excited, but Diehl looked dejected.

“Um, Ms. Rize? I kinda nearly died in that fight with Allen...”

“Oh, that willnae be an issue. Clown, give ’im one.”

“You got it!” Clown responded. He pulled a blue-and-white pill out of his pocket and gave it to Diehl.

“This is my newly developed third-generation soul-crystal pill! Along with instantly healing wounds, this one recovers some spirit power, and I vastly improved the issue of Soul Attire stability! It’s a work of art! I even impressed myself with this one! Pop it down, Diehl!”

“Are there any side effects I should know about...?” Diehl asked.

“Well, funny you should ask... There might be a, uh...small chance of death.”

“That’s kind of a big risk...”

Diehl gave a strained smile and turned the pill over in his hand.

“Oh, you’ll be fine! And in the unlikely event that something does happen, you should be able to handle it with your Hydra ability.”

“I guess that’s true.”

If Diehl suffered serious side effects, he could just create a poison that neutralized the components of the soul-crystal pill and circulate it through his body. Knowing that, he bit down on the pill with a crunch.

“...Wow, this stuff works fast!”

“Right? Isn’t it amazing? And a massive leap from the previous generation?! You don’t know how hard this was to make. I had to directly petition Emperor Barel for some high-quality soul crystals mined in Daglio, then negotiate with various parties to lend me test subjects—” Clown rambled on quickly like a mad scientist, but Rize interrupted him.

“Stop. We dinnae need tae hear the whole story. Think of Diehl, and dial yer enthusiasm back a bit,” she said, annoyed.

“Whoops, sorry... Almost got lost in my own little world there...”

“Don’t worry about it, man,” chimed in Diehl. “You’ve helped me a lot with your inventions, so I’ll lend an ear anytime you want someone to talk to.”

Rize clapped her hands. “All right, let’s get goin’! I want some sakura goods!”

They went to a store, where Rize bought a stylish sakura-patterned folding fan, Diehl bought a bottle of liquor with a blizzard of cherry blossoms on the label, and Clown bought a hat with a sakura design. Afterward, they walked through the crowded streets.

“So...what’re yer thoughts after fightin’ him directly?” asked Rize. “Oh, mister! Can I get one set of sakura takoyaki? With extra sauce, please!”

“He’s a real powerhouse; I didn’t stand a chance. His body’s approachin’ that monster’s, and the seal has loosened a lot... I’ll have the same thing as her, pal,” said Diehl.

“Once he masters the Rodol Clan’s darkness, he’ll be a match for the Seven Holy Blades!” exclaimed Clown. “I’m no good with hot food, so I’m gonna get

some sakura yakisoba over there!”

“Everything’s goin’ according tae plan... *Munch, munch...* But we cannae get complacent. Dalia Rodol of the family’s main branch has been behaving suspiciously. I doubt she’ll make it in time, but we shouldnae underestimate that family’s mysterious power... Wow, this is delicious! The sauce is so rich! We also need tae keep an eye on the Time Hermit’s movements. We must stay focused... Let’s go tae Drops of Sakura next! It’s one o’ the top three hot springs in the world!”

And so these three denizens of society’s underworld strolled casually through Cherin and enjoyed their trip to the fullest.



After escaping from the Land of Sakura, we used the communication terminals in our gliders to contact the empress and Rodis Arkstoria at the royal palace. A joint force of the empress’s guards and House Arkstoria’s private soldiers took us into protective custody upon our arrival, ensuring our safe return to Liengard.

They rushed us to a large hospital, where we were admitted on the spot due to the exotic poison we’d been exposed to. We were examined thoroughly with expensive-looking medical equipment, treated by skilled Soul Attire wielders with healing abilities, and questioned by a well-renowned doctor. Afterward, we were moved to a large room with six beds. The original plan had been to give us individual rooms, but Shii negotiated with the hospital, saying, “Rose is strong, but that’s exactly why we can’t leave her alone with her injuries right now,” and they put us all in the same room.

It was currently nine at night. I had been given special permission to leave the hospital, so I went to a nearby store.

“I’ll get this and this, and...I might as well get this, too.”

I didn’t have much money to spend, but I picked out some items that I hoped would cheer up the others, including apples, bread, fruit juice, candy, and entertainment magazines.

“That’ll do.”

I took the items to the register, bought them, and returned to the hospital.

“I’m back, everyone. I got some fruit and other stuff from the store,” I announced, walking into the room. Lia and the others were sitting on their beds talking in their blue hospital gowns.

“Thanks, Allen,” said Lia.

“Thank you for doing that,” responded Rose.

They both smiled at me gently.

“Thank you, Allen,” added Shii. “That’s a big help.”

“Oh man, I’ve been craving some junk food! Our hospital dinner was super bland,” complained Lilim.

“I’m eternally grateful...!” said Tirith.

Lilim and Tirith’s eyes shone with excitement.

“It was nothing. I’m glad to see you all have your energy back,” I replied.

The girls had been so weak when we got back to Liengard that they’d even needed help standing up. Mental exhaustion was partially to blame, but the bigger issue was the considerable amount of spirit power they had used. We’d flown as fast as we could for hours after leaving Cherin to ensure that Von and Diehl couldn’t catch us. *Those gliders already drain a lot of spirit power when flying at a normal speed...* Lia and the others had suffered from severe spirit power deficiency after flying them for as long as we had.

I, on the other hand, was shockingly fine. My spirit power had recovered at a significantly faster rate than my glider consumed it.

What is this...? I felt two massive powers churning deep within my chest. The first was Zeon’s wicked power, while the second...was a pure power that I didn’t yet understand. I felt them clashing within me as if they didn’t get along.

Thinking about that now wouldn’t do much good; I could save it until things calmed down.

“Okay, I peeled you all some apples,” I told the girls, carrying plates of apple

slices that I'd cut into rabbitlike shapes to their beds.

"Munch, munch... Mmm! They're so juicy!" exclaimed Lia.

"Yeah, they have this mellow sweetness. It's such a calming flavor," Rose said.

They both beamed joyfully.

"...Come to think about it, why are you the one looking after us?" Shii asked, frowning as she gracefully nibbled at her apple slices.

"Let's give these a try... Wow, they're delicious! And don't let it get you down, Shii. You know Allen's built like a brick wall," Lilim said, unbothered.

"It's better for your mental health if you just think of him as a different species altogether...", Tirith said just as casually. "Mmm, these really are good."

Soon after, Lia, Rose, Shii, Lilim, and Tirith were called to the examination room one by one. The doctor looked the girls over and spoke to them all individually to maintain their privacy.

"Haah, thank goodness..." Lia sighed.

"Sorry for worrying you. They found no issues," Rose said.

"Your big sis is just fine, too," Shii said.

"The great Lilim Chorine is the picture of health!" Lilim declared.

"My results were good, too," Tirith said.

The girls were all ruled to be in perfect health after their examinations. It seemed that Bacchus's recovery ability had completely neutralized Diehl's cell-killing poison.

"That just leaves you, Allen. I hope you're okay...", Shii muttered, sounding concerned.

"I guarantee you there's nothing to worry about with this freak of nature," Lilim said, clearly much more optimistic.

"This monster's on another level compared to the rest of us. He'll be fine," Tirith said, sharing Lilim's stance.

"'Freak of nature'? 'Monster'? *Really?*" I asked, glaring at them both, and the

two girls averted their gazes.

Shortly after that light banter, a knock came at the door and a nurse walked in.

“Mr. Allen Rodol, please follow me.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I got up to leave but felt a tug on my sleeve.

“Allen...you’ll be okay, right?” Lia asked falteringly.

“The power you used in the last fight far surpassed human capability... I’m worried,” Rose said, also sounding hesitant.

“I’ll be fine. See you in a bit, okay?” I said kindly to calm them down.

I followed the nurse out and into the examination room, where I saw an elderly doctor sitting down and looking over my medical records.

“Excuse me,” I said, snapping him out of his daze.

“Oh, you must be young Allen! Hmm...hmm... Wonderful!” exclaimed the doctor. “Nothing beats the real thing! How can I put this...? It’s like you’re positively *bursting* with life!” He jumped up and grabbed my hands, his eyes blazing with excitement.

“U-umm...”

“Oh, how rude of me! I haven’t introduced myself. I’m Happ Torne! You can just call me Dr. Happ!”

“Nice to meet you. I’m Allen Rodol.”

Happ Torne was a bald man with white tufts of hair sticking out on either side of his head. He was very short, at about 130 centimeters tall, and looked to be over eighty years old. His thick glasses, large bulging eyes, and neat white beard combined to make his face as distinct as any I’d ever seen. His clothes were equally eye-catching; he wore a snug white coat, a too-tight black shirt, and a fancy pink tie.

So this is Dr. Happ Torne... Shii had told me with an anxious expression that he was an excellent doctor, although a little eccentric.

“Take a seat, take a seat. You know what they say: Time is money, and walls

have ears,” quipped Dr. Happ.

“H-huh...,” I said, unable to manage a better response to his strange proverb. I sat down on a stool, and Dr. Happ cheerfully plopped down into a legless chair opposite me.

“Oh, you have no idea how happy I am right now! I never thought the day would come so soon when I’d get to examine you!” he exclaimed.

“You know about me?” I asked.

“Of course I do. Why, I doubt there’s a doctor in the world who doesn’t know your name. And if there is, I’d wager they’re a quack.”

“...?”

“A curious reaction... It seems you’re not aware of just how famous you’ve become. Here, read this.”

Dr. Happ pulled out a piece of paper from his desk, laminated on both sides.

“...‘Medical News’? What in the world?!” I said, shocked. The article featured a huge picture of me and Kemmi Fasta, the chairwoman of White Lily Girls Academy.

“That is from a special edition of the paper that was sent to every medical doctor in the world! It details the success of your and Dr. Kemmi Fasta’s top secret Curse Cure Research Project!” Dr. Happ gushed excitedly. He smiled at me and continued, “About two months ago, myself, along with a team of doctors and healing Soul Attire wielders from all around the world, began searching desperately for a cure for curses. A preposterous number of people had just been cursed in the sudden demon attack, you see.”

He was referring to when Seele Grazalio and other demons had attacked the Five Powers on New Year’s Day.

“The Holy Knights Association responded to the attack by gathering immense funds and the greatest thinkers from all over the world. I spent so much time researching that day and night lost all meaning. There were endless heated debates between old and young doctors alike, but no progress was made; we couldn’t even figure out where to start. Then, out of nowhere, I received this.”

Dr. Happ pointed to the headline of the article: LIENGARD RESEARCH TEAM DEVELOPS CURE FOR CURSES CALLED THE ALLEN CELL! CHIEF RESEARCHER: KEMMI FASTA! SAMPLE DONOR: ALLEN RODOL!

“All of us were astonished. We devoured Ms. Kemmi’s thesis, though while we were thrilled about the scientific advancement, our overriding reaction was that of extreme jealousy. After all, our own research was driven by the ambition of wanting to be the ones to save humanity from the terror of curses...” Dr. Happ’s tone held a hint of self-mockery. “Anyway, humanity has conquered curses thanks to your and Ms. Kemmi’s research! Ms. Kemmi was already known as the best medical doctor in the world, and now her fame has soared to even greater heights! And you, Allen Rodol, provided the sample that was used to develop the cure. The new drug was even named after you—the Allen Cell! Trust me, everyone in the medical community knows your name!”

“I...I see...”

“I want to inspect your body inside and out! I guarantee you, every doctor feels the same way! In fact, the Medical Association just asked its members ‘What creature would you most want to dissect?’ and you were number one by a landslide! Your votes more than tripled second place, which was a demon!” Dr. Happ exclaimed. His eyes twinkled mysteriously, and his hands twitched as if he was eager to reach out and grab hold of me.

“R-really...”

Now *there* was a ranking I’d rather didn’t exist. *Am I really gonna be okay with this guy doing my checkup...?* I thought, feeling a ripple of unease.

“Whoops, I didn’t mean to ramble on like that. Ahem... We have examined your body using our state-of-the-art equipment and found no issues,” Dr. Happ told me.

“Oh, that’s goo—”

“Now that we’ve gotten that trifling matter out of the way, let’s move on to the main topic I want to discuss!”

“Huh...?”

I didn’t consider my health trifling... But Dr. Happ apparently had something

else he'd much rather talk about.

"Take a look at this!" He handed me a bulky stack of papers that were full of medical jargon. Just looking at them made my head hurt. "Hee-hee, what do you think? Stunning, right?!"

"Sorry, but I don't understand a lot of this...," I admitted. Unfortunately, I didn't have much medical knowledge. Pretty much all I knew was what we'd been taught at Thousand Blade—simple stuff like first-aid treatment for lacerations and stab wounds and how to look after a cold, a headache, or a stomachache.

"Whoops, my apologies! I let my eagerness get the best of me!" Dr. Happ said, slapping his head and bringing his face close to mine. "This is the record and results of an experiment!"

"An experiment?" I repeated.

"Yes, exactly! I hope you won't tell a soul about this, but...I've been growing your cells in secret and stimulating them in various ways to study their reactions."

"O-okay...?"

Why had he been growing my cells in secret? And why was he testing them to study their reactions? Doing that to a person's cells without their permission had to be against some ethical or legal code. There was a lot that bothered me about this, but I decided to hear him out for now.

"My experiments have revealed a remarkable discovery! Your cells contain an inhuman adaptability which enables them to develop tolerances to various threats!"

"They can build up...tolerances...?" I asked, unsure what he meant by the word.

"Precisely!" Dr. Happ said, nodding enthusiastically. "If your cells are poisoned, they create antibodies! If I burn them with intense heat, they develop heat-resistant properties! If I chop them up, they join together and harden! To put it simply, you grow stronger every time you're injured, and there seems to be no limit to this!"

Dr. Happ's breathing grew heavy with excitement. I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

"Have you had similar experiences in combat? Do you remember attacks that injured you the first time but, for some reason, were ineffective after that?" he asked.

"Oh, now that you mention it..."

Whether it was Lia's flames, Claude's bombs, or most recently, Von's sand whales, there were many attacks that had hurt me the first time and barely scratched me after that. If what Dr. Happ said was true, I hadn't just *felt* like those attacks were hurting me less—they actually were.

"There was one other thing that caught my attention. Would you please grip this for me?" Dr. Happ requested, pulling out a sturdy hand dynamometer. "Squeeze it as hard as you can!"

"O-okay..."

Unsure of the point of this, I squeezed the dynamometer, which made a worrying *crunch*.

"...Huh?"

"Oh-ho...!"

I looked down and saw that I had completely crushed the handle of the machine. It was broken beyond repair.

"S-sorry. I think I broke it..."

I had spent a fair bit of money sightseeing in Cherin, so I didn't have much left. *How much does a hand dynamometer cost?! Isn't hospital equipment really expensive?!* I panicked as I considered the possibility of taking out a loan to pay for the damages.

"Your strength is immeasurable... Incredible! That hand dynamometer was designed to be extraordinarily durable, and you crushed it without any effort! Your physical power surpasses my wildest imagination!" Dr. Happ exclaimed, his eyes shining. It sounded like he had half expected this result.

"Umm, Dr. Happ...?" I began, intending to ask for an explanation.

“Oh, sorry,” he said, smiling. “I actually discovered something interesting during your examination! Your muscle fibers are one hundred times denser than the average person’s! You have what we in the business call a ‘unique constitution’!”

“Huh...?”

“It means that the makeup of your body is different from that of other people. Let’s see... Shido Jukurius, with whom you shared an intense duel at the Elite Five Holy Festival, also has his own unique constitution!”

Shido Jukurius was a prodigy who attended Ice King Academy.

“I guess you’d could say Shido’s idiosyncrasy...is his flexibility! I examined him after he was gravely injured during your duel and was amazed by the flexibility of his muscles! I told him his skin was as soft as a girl’s, which he did *not* take kindly to... Oh, that punch was so wonderful...” Dr. Happ blushed, a look of ecstasy painted across on his face. “You’re the polar opposite of Shido. If he’s ‘softness,’ you’re ‘hardness.’ Your muscles are like steel! They’re uncommonly dense. I can only remember one swordfighter whose muscles even came close to yours!”

Dr. Happ continued, his eyes wide.

“She was a stunningly beautiful girl who, along with Black Fist Reia Lasnote, carried Thousand Blade in its Golden Age! Her name was... Err, her name was... Gah...! Oh, confound it. It seems I’ve forgotten her name over the last decade. Don’t grow old, Allen.”

“You said this person was a girl?” I asked. I would have expected a person with muscles of steel to be a guy.

“Yes. She was this sweet little girl with a petite figure. Her nickname was Ironblood! She suddenly disappeared from public view after winning the Sword Master Festival! Oh, the mystery!” Dr. Happ cried out passionately. “Thousand Blade was so unique at the time! All three of the swordswomen responsible for its Golden Age fought barehanded! Their decision to forgo swords at a school specifically dedicated to swordcraft spawned a bit of a Swordless-Style craze at the time!”

The doctor rambled on, telling me all about Thousand Blade's rivalry with Ice King, the history of the Shadow Thousand Blade Festival and other insane events, anecdotes from the Golden Age, and more. It turned out he was an alumnus of Thousand Blade himself. He said he had graduated seventy years ago and decided to pursue medicine once he accepted that he would never be a great swordsman.

When the conversation had died down, Dr. Happ sighed softly. "I'd love to ask you to let me follow you around and monitor you for a full twenty-four hours... but I'll refrain for now."

"Umm... Why?" I asked.

I was surprised. Forget twenty-four hours—this man seemed curious enough to want to follow me around for a full year. Why was he letting me go so quickly?

"I have my reasons, though they don't particularly relate to you. Hmm... Well, why don't I show you? Foretell—Enlightenment Crystal," he said, suddenly summoning his Soul Attire.

"Wh-what are you doing?!"

"Ha-ha, relax. Enlightenment Crystal is meant entirely for support rather than combat. It's a Soul Attire that can divine a person's fortune."

"It can?"

"Yes. Unique, don't you think?"

"Y-yeah."

I had never heard of such a Soul Attire. That had to be a rare ability.

"I once aspired to be the greatest swordsman in the world, so I was quite disappointed when I manifested a Soul Attire unrelated to combat...but now I think it was for the best. This ability has helped me through many crises during my life."

Dr. Happ held Enlightenment Crystal—which resembled a clear gem—in the middle stance.

...It's beautiful. His stance was natural and refined; I could tell he'd gone to

Thousand Blade.

“You know what they say—‘A picture is worth an early worm.’ It’ll be over in a flash, so watch carefully,” Dr. Happ said.

He concentrated spirit power into Enlightenment Crystal. It immediately turned a murky black color, and a large crack ran down its length.

“?!” The doctor’s eyes went wide, but then he sighed with relief. “Phew, that was close... I thought as much; this is as far as I can go.”

“What do you mean?”

“The divination revealed that if I examine you any further, someone will kill me.”

“What?!”

That caught me off guard.

“I admit, this divination even scared me. It appears I really am standing right at the edge of the line,” Dr. Happ muttered, staring at his cracked blade. He could apparently tell the results of the divination by the state of his sword. “I always consult Enlightenment Crystal when making a decision. I want to know what fate has in store for me before I decide whether or not to go down that path.”

Apparently, the doctor could change the future based on his reading of Enlightenment Crystal.

“I first knew something was off three days ago, when I chose to travel to Aurest, and a shadow appeared in my blade, warning me of minor misfortune,” Dr. Happ explained. “I’ve received many such warnings in the past, so I decided to come here anyway while keeping an eye out for anything untoward that may happen.”

“Okay.”

“I made many decisions after assuming my position here in Aurest, but nothing changed—Enlightenment Crystal still warned me of minor misfortune. However, earlier today, when I volunteered to perform your examination, the blade suddenly turned a murky black, warning of a terrible calamity to come.

That in itself was enough to know that meeting you would be like stepping on a land mine.”

Dr. Happ took a sip from the coffee cup on his desk.

“But as I said earlier, I’ve wanted *so badly* to examine you. The world’s most delectable carrot was being dangled in front of me; I knew reaching for it would be dangerous, but I just couldn’t resist... And before I knew it, a sample of your cells was in my possession. I probably extracted it without thinking during your physical.”

“Wh-what...?”

This man clearly needed to learn better self-control.

“I then secretly examined the makeup of your cells and discovered their unusual hardness and exceptional ability to develop tolerances. That was when *this* happened,” he said, staring at his blade. It still looked like it was going to break. “This large crack in Enlightenment Crystal is an omen of death.”

“That’s how you reached the conclusion that someone would kill you if you examined me any further?” I asked.

“Precisely. Good to see you’re keeping up.” Dr. Happ smiled and nodded. “To be perfectly honest, I’m *far* from satisfied! I want to study you from head to toe, examine every last hair on your body! Alas, I cannot take the risk... I must let you go, as much as it pains me. I would very much like to remain in the world of the living.”

He slumped disappointedly, his eyes filled with desire and regret.

“Y-yeah! I think that’s for the best, too!” I agreed. This man scared me in more ways than one. He clearly had a few screws loose.

Dr. Happ clapped his hands. “Oh, yes. Since you’re here, I might as well divine your future, too!”

I was stunned. “I appreciate the offer, but isn’t that risky? You should keep your distance from me...”

“Oh, don’t you worry about that. The danger most likely stems from your body. There must still be a big secret hidden within you, so I should be fine as

long as I avoid it.”

“I see.”

Enlightenment Crystal was his Soul Attire; he obviously knew it better than me.

“I also have a great interest in your future,” the doctor told me. “So please, don’t hold back on my account! Give it a try!”

Dr. Happ handed me Enlightenment Crystal, his eyes shining like a child’s. The blade became clear again, and the crack disappeared.

“I’m sure you’ve got a vague idea of how it works already, but I’ll give you the basic rundown. Holding Enlightenment Crystal and filling it with spirit power will give you a divination revealing either fortune or misfortune in your future. The blade displays the result. The brighter it shines, the brighter your future. A dark color or cracks signify a dark future. And if the blade breaks...”

“If the blade breaks...what?”

“That means you’ll die in the near future.”

Dr. Happ’s expression was grave.

“H-how accurate is it?” I asked.

“It’s never once been wrong.”

“Not once?!”

I’d agreed to this without too much thought because I didn’t put much stock in fortune telling, but hearing that from the person who knew this ability best made me a little nervous.

“Ha-ha, there’s no need to overthink it. It’s very rare for the blade to break. Just treat it as a little test of luck,” Dr. Happ said.

“Y-yeah! I shouldn’t be worried about something that has such a minute chance of happening!” I breathed out to calm myself. “Hoo... Okay. Can I go ahead?”

“By all means.”

I poured spirit power into Enlightenment Crystal, and it shattered.

“...Huh?” I said blankly.

“No way...,” Dr. Happ gasped.

The entire sword—blade, guard, handle, and all—had broken into minuscule pieces.

“D-Dr. Happ...? What does this mean?” I asked.

The doctor had said that Enlightenment Crystal’s blade breaking was an omen that death was near. If that was true...then what did its shattering into tiny pieces signify?

“I’ve performed divinations for thousands upon thousands of people, and I’ve never seen a result like this...,” Dr. Happ said, wide-eyed. He shook his head in disbelief. “One thing is clear, however... This is *bad*. I’m guessing that in the near future—likely within a year—you will suffer a fate more painful and despair inducing than death.”

“Really...?”

A divination device with unfailing accuracy had just revealed that I would go through something worse than death within the next year. That was a lot to process.

““ ... ””

The hospital room grew oppressively silent.

“Uh, well, you know how these things work! I told you that Enlightenment Crystal has never been wrong, but that may not always be true! You could be the first to defy the fate it has revealed for you! In fact, I’m sure you will be!” Dr. Happ insisted.

I could tell he was only trying to comfort me. That was something an eccentric doctor like him would do only if the result was truly as hopeless as it seemed.

“...I appreciate that,” I told him, taking a deep breath to clear my head. *Hoo... It’s okay. No matter how accurate it is, this is just fortune telling.* I would decide my own future. No one else. That’s how I’d made it this far, after all.

“Well, that concludes your examination,” Dr. Happ said, abruptly changing the subject. “You can leave the hospital if you wish. Your body and spirit power are

in perfect condition.”

“Thanks very much.”

Between my examination, our chat about Thousand Blade, and the divination, it had been an eventful ten minutes.

“I should be the one thanking you. Our time together was quite enlightening. I hope we meet again...and next time, as friends, rather than doctor and patient.”

“Ah-ha-ha, that would be nice,” I replied. “I’m sure you have many more interesting stories to share.”

“Why, of course.”

I left the room, relieved to learn I was in good health. *So that’s Dr. Happ...* Shii was right to call him eccentric, but he hadn’t seemed like a bad person.

Everyone was waiting for me when I got back to our hospital room.

“Are you okay, Allen?!” exclaimed Lia.

“That took a while...,” mused Rose. “Were there any issues?”

“How did the examination go, Allen?” asked Shii.

The three of them rushed toward me.

“It’s okay. I’m perfectly healthy,” I told them.

“Thank goodness...”

“That’s good to hear.”

“We can all rest a bit easier now.”

Lia, Rose, and Shii were all visibly relieved. Meanwhile...

“See? I told you Allen would be just fine,” said Lilim.

“What Lilim said,” Tirith agreed.

...the other two crunched on candy, looking as relaxed as could be.

“Oh yeah... He told me I can leave, but what about you all?” I asked.

“He said they need to monitor me for three more days, just to be safe,”

replied Lia.

“Same here,” said Rose.

“I also need to stay until my spirit power recovers,” Shii said.

“Believe it or not, even I’m gonna need a few more days to recover...,” Lilim admitted.

“Apparently, I still need to rest, too,” Tirith said.

It sounded like they would all have to stay a few more days.

We spent a while chatting, happy that we’d all escaped any serious damage. The conversation focused on trivial things, like the unfamiliar hospital food and the comfortable hospital gowns, but that was perfect for now. It felt like a ritual for returning to our everyday lives after the bloody battle we had survived.

“Okay... I think I’m gonna head out,” I said to the girls.

It was half past ten at night, which meant that visiting hours were almost over.

“Will you come see us tomorrow, Allen?” Lia asked.

“I feel more relaxed when you’re here...” admitted Rose. “I’d like it if you came tomorrow, too.”

“Yeah, of course I will,” I promised.

“Good night, Allen,” Shii said.

“Good night, President,” I replied.

“Hey, Allen,” Lilim called out. “When you come tomorrow, can you bring us some junk food? I’m sick of all this healthy crap!”

“And some more magazines to help pass the time would be nice...,” added Tirith.

“Sure, I’ll see what I can find.”

I left Aures National Hospital without telling the girls about Enlightenment Crystal’s ominous divination. There was no reason to worry them when they were already so physically and mentally exhausted.

Three days later, Lia and the others were discharged in perfect health. After momentarily returning to our dorms, everyone except for Rose gathered in a Thousand Blade classroom.

“I think Rose is putting on a brave face for us...,” I said. The others nodded silently.

Rose hadn’t shown any sign of being upset since returning to Liengard. She had to be having a really hard time after losing the grandfather she adored, but since Rose was so strong and kind, she was trying not to worry us.

“She’s so hard on herself, and tends to bottle things up, too... What should we say to her?” Lia asked, looking troubled.

“We can’t let her kindness go to waste. But how do we cheer her up?” Shii wondered aloud.

“Hmm... What if we distracted Rose by challenging her to an intense duel or something?” Lilim asked, ever a believer in solving problems with her fists.

“That’s a little drastic, Lilim. That kind of thing only works with dumb jocks like you,” Tirith said, shooting her down immediately.

After talking for a while longer, we decided that it would be best if we just acted our usual selves around Rose. If she didn’t want to burden us, it would be best to respond by keeping things as normal as possible. Still, we would keep a close eye on her, and if she seemed upset or stressed, we’d try talking to her. At least for now, that was the plan we settled on.

We also had the idea of making a grave for Bacchus in Cherin. Although his body had vanished into particles of light, I wanted something to remain of the strongest swordsman in the world. And most of all, I wanted to thank him for saving our lives. We couldn’t just make a grave for our own selfish reasons, however—we needed to prioritize Rose’s feelings.

The question is, how do we broach the topic...

“I think we should ask Rose sooner rather than later about how she feels on this matter,” Shii said.

“I agree,” said Lia.

“Four of the greatest swordsmen in the world—Allen, Bacchus, Diehl Reinstad, and Von Mustang—just crossed blades; it won’t be long before the Holy Knights Association sends people to Cherin to investigate,” explained Shii. “There’s no way an organization working toward world peace would ignore a fight that had enough spirit power to rival a small country’s army. They might even restrict entry into the country.”

“Considering their traitor, Von, was there, the holy knights are gonna spend as much time as they can analyzing the spirit power residue. That uninhabited island could be closed off for a matter of years...,” Lia speculated.

“Yeah... We should move fast, then,” I said.

It wouldn’t be that big a deal if Cherin’s borders were closed temporarily, but it definitely *would* be if it went on for years. Knowing that, we all walked to Rose’s dorm, and I knocked on her door.

“Hey, Rose, it’s Allen,” I called out.

“...Allen?” Rose said, emerging from her room wearing casual clothes. “Why are you...? Oh, the rest of you are here, too.” Her eyes were a little red and swollen; she must have been crying. I almost asked her if she was okay, but I swallowed my words.

“What are you all doing here?” she asked, tilting her head in confusion.

I told her about our idea to build Bacchus a grave.

“...So yeah, that’s why we wanted to talk to you. What do you think?” I asked.

“Thank you... I appreciate the thought, but won’t that be risky? Diehl or Von or someone else just as dangerous could still be hiding in Cherin,” Rose said.

“That won’t be a problem,” I assured her. “Chairwoman Reia’s gonna come with us this time.”

We’d happened to run into Chairwoman Reia right before leaving campus. After giving her a simple rundown of the situation, she had immediately volunteered to accompany us. Reia Lasnote, also known as the Black Fist, was one of Liengard’s greatest weapons. She had her fair share of faults, but there was nobody more reliable in combat. We would be perfectly safe in Cherin with

her by our side.

“Really...? Thank you. Gramps always loved a spectacle, so I want to give him a big, eye-catching grave. And...I know he’d be overjoyed if you all came to visit,” Rose said.

And so we set out once again for Cherin, the Land of Sakura.



The next day, Lia, Rose, Shii, Lilim, Tirith, Chairwoman Reia, Eighteen, and I all boarded the Arkstoria private jet and traveled to Cherin.

“Hmm... The people still seem pretty panicked,” Chairwoman Reia muttered as we walked down a noisy street.

“Who can blame them?” Eighteen responded. “Their national treasure, the Billion-Year Sakura, disappeared.”

...We’ll never get to see that beautiful cherry blossom tree again... The Billion-Year Sakura, which only days ago had been in full bloom, had vanished without a trace, likely due to Bacchus’s death.

“Gramps...,” Rose said sadly, putting a hand to her chest.

We remained vigilant of our surroundings as the chairwoman led us through the streets.

“Is that it?” she asked, looking back at the rest of the group. We nodded in response.

In front of us was the uninhabited island where we had gone up against Von Mustang, Diehl Reinstad, and their True Attires in a life-or-death battle. The island was completely isolated; a peculiar ocean current surrounded it, making it inaccessible by water, and no air route had been established there, either. We had flown to the island with gliders previously, but this time, to avoid standing out, I used Zeon’s darkness to create a simple bridge.

“Wow, a path of darkness... The versatility of your ability never ceases to amaze me,” Chairwoman Reia said, impressed.

I had gotten the idea for this trick after watching Bacchus make a bridge using

the roots of the Billion-Year Sakura.

Once we'd reached the island, Chairwoman Reia turned to her servant. "Eighteen, watch the perimeter and contact me as soon as you see anyone suspicious."

"What would you like me to do if I am engaged in combat?" Eighteen asked.

"I give you permission to summon your True Attire *only* if you are facing a True Attire wielder. However, I want you to make two portals in prominent spots, retreat if you can't finish the fight quickly, and *under no circumstances* are you to get fired up and lose control. Follow those orders even if it means your death. Got it?"

"Yes, ma'am." Eighteen nodded reverently and got straight to work.

Judging from that conversation, Chairwoman Reia and Eighteen were also True Attire wielders. I couldn't say I was surprised, but it was reassuring all the same.

We parted ways with Eighteen and ventured deeper into the island. After walking in silence for a while, we started to see the traces of our battle through the trees. Zeon's darkness had stained the ground, Diehl's deadly poison had ravaged the forest, and Von's sand had worn away the rock. The chairwoman couldn't help but gulp, seeing the scars from our violent battle.

I feel traces of a repulsive spirit power, Reia thought, looking troubled. *Did Zeon emerge into this world...?! No... I sense Allen's powerful anger from this darkness...*

She picked up some of the blackened soil in her fingers. *Allen maintained his sense of self while drawing on this much of Zeon's power...? Did he open the path...?! No, that's impossible. If he had, he wouldn't have chosen to retreat. He would've cut Von and Diehl to pieces within seconds.*

Chairwoman Reia fell silent, unmoving as she examined the traces of spirit power.

Then what does this mean? How is Allen okay after using this much of Zeon's spirit power? ...Daria. Are you hiding something from me...?

“Umm, Chairwoman? Is something wrong?” I asked.

“...Sorry. I was just thinking,” she replied evasively. “Come on, let’s keep going.”

We continued mostly in silence. Before long, we reached the spot where Bacchus had performed his final attack—Mirror Sakura Slash, the secret technique of the Cherry Blossom Blade School of Swordcraft—and disappeared into particles of light. Shockingly, the most extravagant grave I’d ever seen in my life was already standing on that very spot.

Carved into the stone was Bacchus’s name and a short epitaph.

HERE LIES BACCHUS VALENCIA, SIXTEENTH INHERITOR OF THE CHERRY BLOSSOM BLADE SCHOOL OF SWORDCRAFT.

“Who...put this here...?” Rose murmured.

“You have three seconds to put your hands up and show yourself. Try anything, and I won’t hesitate to kill you,” Chairwoman Reia said with a malice I’d never seen from her.

“.....!.....”

The aura coming from the chairwoman was overwhelming. It was hard to think of her as the same woman who sat around all day cackling at *Weekly Shonen Blade*.

“My Jewel Beetle Head is an invisibility-type Soul Attire... I know your reputation, Ms. Lasnote, but I still didn’t think you would be able to see through it so quickly,” a man in black said, emerging from the dense forest behind us.

I’ve never seen a Soul Attire that can turn a person invisible. I hadn’t been able to sense the man at all until he decided to show himself. His ability wasn’t suited for direct combat, but it had a wide range of other uses, including assassination, scouting, and raiding.

She really is incredible... The man’s invisibility was impressive, but Chairwoman Reia had seen through it instantly. She was normally a lazy, problematic person who pushed all her work off onto others, but there was no denying her combat prowess.

“That’s a Fox Financing uniform... What do you want?” the chairwoman asked.

“I have been waiting for Rose Valencia on the orders of my mistress, Rize Dorhein,” said the man. He walked calmly toward Rose with his hands up to show he meant no harm, then bowed. “Silver hair and crimson eyes... You must be Ms. Rose.”

“...What does a messenger from Fox Financing want with me?” Rose asked warily.

“My mistress owes a great debt to Mr. Bacchus, which she chose to repay by erecting a grave befitting the world’s greatest swordsman, pressuring Cherin to buy this state-owned island, and giving it to you, the inheritor of the Cherry Blossom Blade School of Swordcraft. I am here to carry out her orders and present you with the deed to this island.”

The black-clothed man took out an envelope and gave it to her. Inside, Rose found the title to the land with her name written as the owner.

“W-wait... Gramps knew the Blood Fox?! And what do you mean she ‘owes him a great debt’?!” Rose exclaimed.

“Forgive me, but I am simply a messenger. I know nothing more than you,” the black-clothed man said emotionlessly. “Now, if you will excuse me, I have another job to attend to.”

He bowed politely and left.

“...Ah, so that’s it. She owes him for that incident with Ferris,” muttered Chairwoman Reia.

“Ferris...? Do you know something?” asked Rose.

“Yeah. Ferris Dorhein is Rize’s little sister and the chairwoman of Ice King Academy. Back when she was a student, that idiot got caught up in a big incident and was kidnapped. Old Bacchus ended up saving her. Apparently, he challenged her captor because they seemed strong, but they ended up being far from a worthy opponent, which was a huge letdown for him.”

...That sounded just like Bacchus.

“Rize is a detestable woman...but she wouldn’t use a gesture like this to deceive us. This extravagant grave and the deed are her way of repaying him. You can accept them in good faith,” reasoned the chairwoman.

“I see... In that case...I guess I should be grateful to her,” said Rose.

I actually thought that Rize was a nice person. I couldn’t imagine her betraying the Five Powers and the Holy Knights Association by leaking information to the Holy Ronelian Empire.

We turned back to the grave now that the man from Fox Financing had left. *It really is impressive...* The stone was engraved with a blizzard of cherry blossoms, and set beside it were Bacchus’s longsword, his best blue *haori* jacket, and a bottle of liquor from Cherin. I couldn’t imagine a grander grave; it perfectly suited his larger-than-life personality.

“Everyone came to see you, Gramps,” Rose said, smiling gently.

We all took turns setting flowers, liquor, snacks, and other mementos by the grave, saying prayers and offering a few heartfelt words.

“Mr. Bacchus... Thank you so much for saving my life. I’ll always treasure the week we spent together,” I said, bowing.

“Thank you for protecting my precious students, Bacchus. We didn’t always get along...but they’re all good memories now. Let’s share a drink again someday,” Chairwoman Reia said sadly.

“I’ll never forget my debt to you, Bacchus,” said Shii. Tears welled up in her eyes as she bowed in front of the grave.

“*Waah...* Old man Bacchus... I’m gonna get stronger... I’m gonna become the greatest swordfighter in the world, just like you... So, so...watch me from up in heaven!” cried Lilim, tears streaming down her face.

“Thank you...from the bottom of my heart...,” Tirith said, biting her lip and bowing deeply.

“I heard you saved my life with the power of your Soul Attire. Thank you so, so much. Let’s share a drink for real once I’m old enough,” promised Lia.

“Gramps...your final Mirror Sakura Slash was stunning. I’ll do my best to

succeed you as the seventeenth inheritor of the Cherry Blossom Blade School of Swordcraft,” Rose said, closing her eyes and touching the cherry blossom petal mark on her chest.

We all stood there silently reminiscing about Bacchus, and Rose turned to face me. “Gramps was really strong, wasn’t he, Allen?”

“Yeah. He was incredible. That final Mirror Sakura Slash might be the strongest attack ever performed,” I said.

That incredible sight, as if the very world were shaking; Bacchus’s valiant figure; his powerful slash that scattered hundreds of millions of cherry blossom petals—I would never forget any of it.

“Hee-hee, you think so? I’m sure Gramps is smiling down on us after hearing you say that,” Rose said, looking happy. “Will you all visit his grave again with me sometime? He always liked a crowd.”

“Yeah, of course,” I said, and the others nodded firmly.

I’ll see you next year, Mr. Bacchus.

Having said our farewells, we returned to Liengard and went back to our everyday lives.

CHAPTER 2

A Meeting at the Palace & Going Home

It was March 27, and today, an important meeting would be held to decide upon the imperial faction's plan of action. It was to be attended by the empress; Rodis, the head of the imperial faction; Shii, the next head of House Arkstoria; and for some odd reason, me. I guessed if you had to give me a position, it would be the representative of Goza Village or the voice of the common people.

"I'm heading out, Lia," I said as I left home that morning.

"Okay. Take care."

Lia was a Vesterian princess, so it was no surprise that she wasn't allowed to attend; this was an important meeting for Liengard's future.

But why me? I wasn't proud of it, but I knew nothing about politics. *I don't have anything to add to this meeting...* Shii had told me a lot about the current political situation, such as how the imperial faction and the noble faction were fighting, how the Four Powers couldn't come to an agreement, and how there might have been a traitor...but most of that was beyond me.

I'll just have to do my best not to say anything weird and throw off the meeting..., I thought as I walked through the streets of Liengard. Before I knew it, I had arrived at Liengard Palace.

"Hey, Allen! Over here!" Shii called out. She was standing before the palace's large doors wearing her school uniform. It looked like she had been waiting for me.

"Good morning, President," I said.

“Morning, Allen. Thanks for coming. You didn’t have to reschedule plans or anything, did you?” Shii asked.

“No, not at all.”

I’d had no plans beyond getting in my practice swings, and I’d already taken care of that this morning.

“It’s a little cold today... I had trouble getting out of bed this morning,” Shii admitted.

“Ha-ha, somehow I find that really easy to picture,” I said as the sight of Shii lazing in bed wrapped in her covers popped into my mind.

“Hmph... What’s that supposed to mean?” she asked.

“Ah-ha-ha, I was just joking.”

We continued to chat as we headed to the upper floor of the palace, where the empress was waiting. We went up a spiral staircase to the north, crossed a connecting passageway to the east, strolled down an outdoor ramp to the south, and climbed back up a large staircase to the west. *This is crazy... It’s like we’re walking through a maze.* The layout of the palace was probably intentionally confusing to throw off invading enemies. Reaching the empress was no easy task.

After walking for a while longer, Shii suddenly stopped.

“We’re here,” she said.

“Really...?” I asked.

We were in the middle of a long hallway. There was nothing resembling a room in sight.

“Hmm-hmm, just watch,” Shii said with a proud smile.

She knocked a distinctive rhythm on the right wall—one long knock, followed by two short, two long, then two more short knocks—and I heard a loud *clunk*. The large white wall on the other side of the hallway slid apart to reveal a huge set of doors.

“There’s a secret room here?! ” I asked, incredulous.

“Hee-hee, isn’t it amazing? Liengard Palace has a lot of hidden areas, emergency escape routes, and shelters, all of which are unknown to the general public. I don’t know them all, either, of course,” Shii said, turning to face the room. “Let’s go inside. Her Majesty and Father are waiting.”

“Okay,” I responded.

We opened the stately doors to reveal a small, tidy room. The only furnishings were a round table with chairs in the center of the room, a few shelves, and lights. It was incredibly sparse and gave off the impression that it had never been used before.

The empress sat in an elegant chair in the back of the room. Rodis Arkstoria stood behind her.

“Greetings, Mr. Rodol. Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to come to the royal palace,” said the empress.

“Oh no, it was no bother. Thank you for your kind invitation,” I replied courteously. The empress was a problematic person, but she was the ruler of Liengard; I had to be as careful as possible not to be rude to her.

“Hee-hee. Please, don’t be so formal. We’re friends, after all.”

“But I must be formal. You are the empress of Liengard.”

“If you insist. Please, be seated.”

“Thank you.”

I bowed, pulled out a chair, and sat down.

“I apologize for the cramped room. I wish we could have met somewhere more spacious, but there are eyes and ears everywhere these days,” the empress said with a sigh.

“Then, this room is safe?” I asked.

“Yes. There are special soul crystals in the walls and rare blood diamonds in the pillars supporting each corner. Thanks to that, we are completely cut off from the outside world—no electronic signals can leave this room, nor can any flows of spirit power, however small. There is absolutely no chance of our conversation being overheard.”

“I see. That’s a relief.”

It sounded like they had taken every precaution to prevent a leak.

“May I ask you a question, Mr. Rodol?” the empress asked.

“Of course.”

“I heard you suffered grave wounds in your last battle... Have you made a full recovery yet?”

“I have. Thank you very much for all of your help.”

The empress and Rodis had arranged for us to be admitted to the hospital as soon as we returned from Cherin, which had allowed Lia and the others to rest and recover from their injuries. I was incredibly grateful for that.

“That’s good to hear.” The empress smiled softly and cleared her throat. She seemed ready to talk business now that we had exchanged pleasantries. “Okay... Everything we’re about to discuss is a state secret. Please don’t tell anyone of what you learn here.”

“Understood,” I said.

The empress fixed her sharp gaze on me, and I braced myself.

“There are three main topics I wish to discuss. The first is some good news,” she said.

“Really?”

“Yes. I assume you’re aware that world leaders suspected Rize Dorhein of Fox Financing to be the traitor who leaked the location of the top secret conference?”

“Yeah...”

Shii had told me about that when we were in Cherin. It was way too upsetting for me to forget.

“There has been a development... This morning, the Holy Knights Association sent a report that Rize Dorhein has been cleared of suspicion.”

“...Huh?”

Rize was cleared of suspicion? That meant she wasn't the traitor. I was thrilled to hear that her name had been cleared, but...how had they gone from pinning the blame on her to declaring her innocent so quickly?

The empress continued, seeing my doubtful expression. "The report said that she took a gift to the Holy Knights Association's headquarters yesterday."

"And that was what proved her innocence?" I asked.

"Yes. Her *gift* was none other than Von Mustang's embalmed corpse."

"What?!" I gasped, shocked. "Von is *dead*?!"

Von's swordcraft was precise, his tactics were sharp, his strength was superhuman, and most important, his True Attire—Cleansing Sand Whale—was absurdly powerful. He was undoubtedly among the strongest opponents I'd ever fought. And yet...he was dead.

I could hardly believe it.

"Th-there was a Black Organization member who had a Soul Attire that could create copies of people and objects. She could've used that ability to create a perfect copy of Von's body! Are you *sure* it was him?!" I asked.

"You're talking about Tor Sammons, I assume. The Holy Knights Association is well aware of the abilities of her Soul Attire, Shapeshifter. However, the DNA sample they extracted and the spirit power reading matched their records exactly... The corpse Rize delivered is undoubtedly Von's."

"So...does that mean Rize killed him?"

"I do not know; that is currently still under investigation. But it would be natural to assume it was Rize or a member of Fox Financing."

I had heard rumors that Rize and Fox Financing possessed incredible strength, but I never would have imagined they could take out a Holy Blade.

"Next is some bad news. All-out war with the Holy Ronelian Empire has become inevitable," declared the empress. "Within the next few years—and possibly as early as this year—a world war will break out."

"Th-this year?!" I repeated.

Everyone knew that international politics were in complete turmoil...but that sounded way too sudden.

“Just the other day, Vesteria Kingdom and the Republic of Ronzo—both of which have taken a hard-line policy against Ronelia—convinced the Commonwealth of Polyesta to join the faction championing for war. That leaves Liengard as the only one of the Four Major Powers still holding out. I intend to continue arguing for a peaceful resolution through diplomacy...but worldwide public opinion will be against me. War may be inevitable.”

The empress paused, her expression sorrowful.

“The Holy Ronelian Empire has been rapidly increasing its influence in recent years. They established the Black Organization militant group, formed a secret pact with powerful demons, and conquered the Principality of Theresia. I’m sure that, even now, they’re reaching out to strong swordsmen all around the world to increase their fighting strength. The other nations argue that we should launch a full-scale war now, rather than sit and watch our enemy grow stronger, and I do admit, I see their point,” the empress said, sighing loudly.

War, huh... That doesn’t feel real, but it sounds like it’s actually gonna happen...

A dark cloud settled over the room.

“There is one more topic I wish to discuss. This is what I most wanted to tell you,” the empress said. She spoke slowly, making sure I didn’t miss a word. “In your battle the other day, you defeated Diehl Reinstad, a former Imperial Knight, and drove Von Mustang, a Holy Blade, to the brink of death. When they caught wind of this, the noble faction was sent into a panic the likes of which I’ve never seen before, and they held an emergency conference a few days ago.”

“...? Why are they panicking?” I asked.

I failed to see how my fight had anything to do with the noble faction.

“Simple. The noble faction has been using the support of one of the Seven Holy Blades as a weapon to undermine Liengard. So when you very nearly killed Von, they inevitably began to doubt whether their Holy Blade could defeat you.

They've been arguing back and forth, day and night, over how they can win you over."

"H-huh..."

It made me feel weird to think that people were talking about me without my knowledge.

"By the way...have you had any contact with the noble faction?" asked the empress.

"No, none at all," I replied.

It had been early January when Chairwoman Reia summoned me to her office and the empress warned me about the noble faction. It had been three months since then, but the nobles hadn't made any moves.

"That's strange. My spy in the noble camp reported that they had already sent an assassin," the empress said, looking anxious.

Just then, Rodis leaned forward and whispered in her ear.

"What if they defected to the enemy?"

"No, it would be hasty for us to assume betrayal. We should perform a careful investigation first," the empress replied just as quietly.

I couldn't tell what they were saying, but their expressions were serious.

"Oh, pardon my rudeness. We were discussing a private matter," the empress said, giving me her usual gentle smile. She put her hands together. "The greatest fear of the imperial faction is that the noble faction will find a way to win you over. We will do whatever it takes to prevent that worst-case scenario from occurring. Would you be willing to help us by taking a simple test?"

"A test?" I asked.

"Yes. It's a simple psychological examination designed by a renowned psychologist. Proper application of the test will reveal your latent desires."

"Uhh, would there be any point to that?"

The empress nodded. "Certainly. The noble faction excels at uncovering people's weaknesses and taking advantage of them. They'll almost certainly use

every method they can to ensnare you. We in the imperial faction will do our best to obstruct them, but that will be difficult without knowing your true desires. Would you mind? It will only take four or five minutes.”

“H-huh... Okay.” I wasn’t really following her logic, but it sounded like it would be pretty simple.

“Thank you very much. Rodis?”

“I shall take it from here, Your Majesty.” Rodis nodded and pulled out a thick stack of papers. “I will now begin a simple examination. Are you ready, Allen?”

“Sure.”

“Good. First question: What do you want more than anything else?” Rodis asked. “Don’t think about it too hard; just say the first thing that comes to mind.”

“Hmm... More time to train, definitely.”

During my life-and-death battle on the island, I had connected with what felt like the “path” for the first time in my life. Infinite darkness had poured into my body, which I’d used to overwhelm two superior True Attire wielders. Mastering that power would enable me to reach much greater heights.

If I’m being totally honest, I want to go to the Soul World and speak to Zeon right now. But without Chairwoman Reia here to act as a deterrent, I couldn’t risk Zeon taking over my body and causing some sort of horrific disaster. I had decided for that exact reason to resume training in earnest when the new semester began.

“Huh... In that case, let me ask you something else. Question two: What is your greatest wish?”

“To get stronger, of course.”

If I had been stronger, Lia wouldn’t have suffered a life-threatening injury, the other girls wouldn’t have been poisoned, and Bacchus wouldn’t have died. I needed to become a better swordsman to protect all the people I cared about.

“Hrmm... I see. Let’s try this one. Question three: What is the strongest impulse or desire you feel in your everyday life?”

“That would have to be...my desire to perform practice swings.”

I thought I had gotten that out of my system with the three hours of practice swings I'd done this morning, but I was already itching to get back to it. I was gonna pick up my sword as soon as this meeting ended.

“Grk... You fool!” Rodis yelled. “Are you a man or not?! Healthy boys your age are supposed to want money, girls, fame! There must be some luxury you desire!”

Why was he so mad at me? I didn't think my answers had been that weird.

“Calm yourself, Rodis,” the empress scolded.

“*Huff, huff...* My apologies,” said Rodis, taking deep breaths. “Can I ask you one more question, Allen?”

“Go ahead.”

“What physical object do you want the most?”

“A *physical object*...? That's a hard question.”

I had my black sword, and my cloak of darkness was all the armor I could want. That left... Hmm, this was a surprisingly difficult question.

“I guess if I had to choose something, it would be my own house,” I said.

“That's an admirable answer. What kind of house would you like? I imagine —”

“Two rooms—ten square meters—would be perfect. Add a yard I can use for practice swings, and I couldn't ask for more.”

I had always wanted to build a nice house in Aures and live there with my mom. She was getting older, and I worried that her body wouldn't be able to take the harsh life in the countryside much longer. She deserved to enjoy a comfortable life in the capital before she broke her knees or back.

The only problem is the crazy increase in land prices. I'd heard that the cost of land in Aures had soared recently. This was especially true of the prime real estate near Liengard Palace, which was known for its safety and convenience; the prices were jaw dropping. *That'll be hard on a holy knight's salary alone.* I

was planning on working full time as a holy knight and as a witchblade on the side to make enough money, but I didn't yet know if even that would be enough.

"T-ten square meters...?" the empress repeated in shock.

"Yeah... Am I dreaming too big? I was afraid of that."

"N-no...I just, uh... Never mind. I hope you get your ten square meters one day."

"Thank you."

The empress, Rodis, and Shii huddled up.

"...That's the most plebeian dream I've ever heard," whispered the empress.

"Hmm, I can't believe he'd wish for something so plain... Where is his ambition? Aren't all great men known to be lustful?" said Rodis quietly.

"That's just the kind of man he is. Aside from his extreme obsession with swordcraft, Allen is remarkably ordinary...which is precisely what makes him so fascinating," whispered Shii.

I felt like they were saying rude things about me...but I could hardly intrude on the empress's conversation. I needed to be mature and wait.

Rodis asked a lot of other questions after that—including how I spent money, my taste in the opposite sex, and what I wanted to achieve in my life—before finally ending the examination. As soon as he was done, the three imperial faction members huddled up again.

"...Bribing him with gifts is going to be impossible," admitted the empress quietly.

"His perspective on life is way too mature for his age. It feels like he's lived many lives already...," whispered Rodis.

"As I told you before, Allen isn't the type to take that kind of bait. We should be more worried about the enemy using dirty tactics like capturing the people he loves to use as bargaining chips," said Shii.

"It seems that way," whispered the empress.

"I also agree with my daughter. We should make finding Allen's relatives and stationing trustworthy guards to watch them our priority," Rodis said quietly.

After about a minute of whispering, the empress turned toward me and smiled.

"Thank you for your cooperation today, Allen. This meeting has been illuminating."

"Really? I'm honored I could help," I responded.

The meeting ended, and I went straight home, not stopping once along the way.



It was the morning of March 30. Spring break was almost over, so I decided I should spend the day visiting my home in Goza Village.

I wonder how Mom's doing. The last time I saw her must've been when I went home to discuss whether or not I should enroll at Thousand Blade. *Time sure does fly. It's already been more than a year...* I hadn't meant to go this long without visiting home, but every time I considered it, something had happened to make me put it off.

I washed my face, brushed my teeth, changed into my uniform, grabbed the steamed buns I'd bought as a souvenir, and was finally ready to go.

"Wanna head out?" I asked.

"Yeah!" Lia responded excitedly.

I was going home with my friends this time. I had first brought it up a few days ago while eating lunch with Lia...

"Hey, Lia, do you have a moment?" I'd asked.

"What is it, Allen?"

"I'm thinking of visiting my home in Goza Village... Would you want to come with me?"

"A-are you saying you want to introduce me to your mom?!"

“No, it’s not that big a deal. I just want it to be a fun trip. I’ll go alone if you don’t like the country—”

“I’ll go! You’re not leaving without me!”

“O-okay. Great.”

I hadn’t expected her to be so excited about it.

“It’s finally happening...! Meeting the parents is a once-in-a-lifetime event! Phew... Calm down, Lia. It’ll be okay. I’ve read a lot of books in preparation for this moment. I just need to dress nicely, be polite, bring a gift... Good, my mental simulation went perfectly!” Lia had muttered under her breath as she clenched her fists.

I had no idea she wanted to go to Goza Village that badly... She must be more of an outdoor person than I thought.

“Oh, right. I wanted to invite Rose, too, but...what do you think?” I’d asked at the time.

Rose had lost someone very dear to her in Cherin. I had hoped that experiencing the abundant nature of Goza Village would help take her mind off things and cheer her up a little. I hadn’t wanted to make her feel like she had to come, though; I left the invitation open for her to refuse if she wanted to.

“What? You can’t be... Oh. Uh, yeah. Rose will definitely be happy to be invited... I think that’s a good idea,” Lia had said with a mixed expression for some reason.

I’d asked Rose later, and she had also been surprisingly excited to go with me. That settled it—the three of us were going to Goza Village.

It was currently nine in the morning on the day of the trip.

“Man, the weather’s beautiful today,” I said.

“Yeah, it’s a perfect day for going out,” agreed Lia.

We enjoyed the nice spring breeze as we headed for the Thousand Blade front gate, where we’d agreed to meet up. When we got there, we found a drowsy Rose struggling to stay awake.

“Good morning, Rose,” I said.

“Rose, it’s dangerous to sleep outside,” chastised Lia.

“Nnn, *fwah*... Mornin’...,” Rose seemed to mumble, yawn, and rub her eyes all at the same time.

“Do you want to stop by Ms. Paula’s dorm first?” I suggested. “We can go to Goza Village after that.”

“Okay,” said Lia.

“...Sure,” mumbled Rose.

We left Aurst and followed the road straight, making small talk along the way.

“Oh yeah... Ms. Paula’s the one who took care of you while you were in middle school, right, Allen?” Lia asked.

“You once told me she’s crazy big...,” Rose said.

“Yeah, she was,” I replied. “Ms. Paula’s a little scary when she’s mad, but she’s a very kind, reliable person... And yeah, she’s also the biggest woman you’ll ever see.”

We crossed fields and mountains untouched by human hands and entered a thick forest.

“H-hey, Allen...are you sure this is the right way? This doesn’t look anything like a road...,” observed Lia.

“You said your village was in the middle of nowhere, but I never imagined this...,” Rose said in shock.

“Come on, you’re exaggerating. We’re not even halfway there yet,” I told the girls.

““WHAT?!””

We continued on through the dense forest until a two-story wooden building came into view.

“All right, we’re here. This is Ms. Paula’s dorm,” I said.

"Haah, haah... S-slow down...," Lia panted.

"Phew... This has been one heck of a workout," said Rose.

They both looked totally exhausted. Walking those rough forest trails must have taken more out of them than I'd realized. I supposed I couldn't blame them; there was definitely a learning curve for traversing undeveloped roads.

"Hmm... The air here tastes different," Lia said after catching her breath.

"Yeah, it smells like the forest," Rose agreed.

The pleasant smell of garlic drifted toward us on the warm spring breeze. Ms. Paula was probably cooking fried rice.

"Let's go inside," I said.

"Okay," agreed Lia.

"Sure," added Rose.

I knocked on the giant Paula-sized doors...but there was no response. She was probably too immersed in her cooking.

"I'm coming in!" I called out before opening the door and entering the familiar dorm. I took off my shoes at the entrance, walked down the main hall, and went into the kitchen, where I found Ms. Paula making dinner.

Paula Garedzall was the matron of the dorm here, where I used to live. She was a giant at over two meters tall, and her face had powerful features. Standing there in her black shirt and apron, she looked exactly the same as I remembered. Today, as always, she had her sleeves rolled up to reveal arms four times bigger than mine.

"Hmm-hmm-hmm!"

She shook her frying pan, humming so loudly, she sounded like a chorus of people. The sight gave me a warm, nostalgic feeling that sent me back to my middle school days.

That's weird, though... Is she a little bigger than the last time I saw her?

It...definitely wasn't my imagination. The rugged hand holding the frying pan was enormous, as was the tree trunk of an arm connected to it. Ms. Paula was

noticeably bigger than she had been when I last visited... She must still be growing.

“Th-that’s not a bear, right...?” Lia asked.

“Sh-she’s enormous... I never thought I’d see someone as big as Gramps, and especially not a woman,” Rose said.

They both looked at the matron in shock. I knew exactly how they felt.

“Hey, Ms. Paula. Long time no see,” I said loudly.

The matron turned her head toward me while continuing to shake the frying pan.

“Hmm? Oh, Allen!” she exclaimed. “Did you come for din... Oh? Who are those two beauties? Are they your friends?”

“Yes, they’re my classmates at Thousand Blade.” I nodded and looked at the girls.

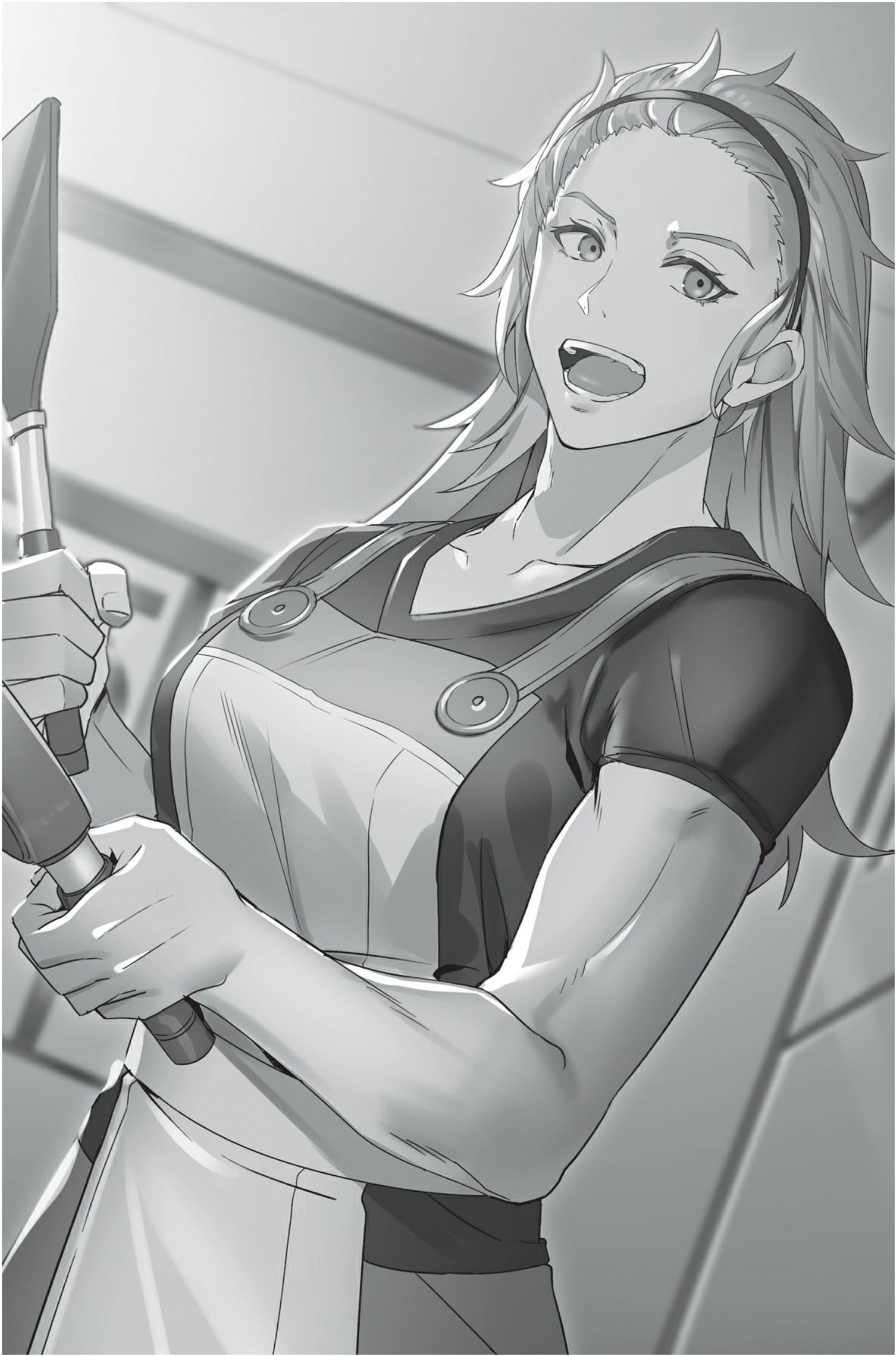
“I’m Lia Vesteria. It’s nice to meet you, Ms. Paula.”

“I’m Rose Valencia. A pleasure.”

Ms. Paula smiled broadly. “Lia and Rose! I’m Paula Garedzall, the matron of this dorm. I can’t really leave the stove right now, so would you please wait over there for me?”

““““Yes, ma’am.””””

We sat down at the table to avoid getting in her way. Ms. Paula continued shaking the frying pan with practiced movements, using her other hand to stir a pot and make a side dish of boiled vegetables.



Impressive as always, I thought. Ms. Paula was a warrior, and the kitchen was her battleground. She looked so cool cooking a bunch of different foods all at the same time.

It took her another three minutes to finish preparing dinner, and once she'd turned off the stove, she joined us at the table.

"Phew, sorry for the wait. So what brings you here today?" Ms. Paula asked.

"Well, actually—," I began, intending to give her the rundown of what we were doing, but she held out a strong arm to stop me.

"No, wait. Lemme guess!"

"O-okay..."

"I've been obsessed with detective fiction lately. I'm spending all my time between chores reading."

"Oh, that's cool."

I followed her gaze and saw a bunch of mystery novels on the middle shelf of a bookcase.

"Hmm... Hmmm... Today is March 30. There's only a couple days left of spring break. You brought friends with you, which is a first. You're all carrying a lot of luggage, too... Oh, I've got it! You're going to Goza Village!" Ms. Paula declared.

"That's right," I said.

"Hmm-hmm, my powers of observation are second to none!"

She crossed her arms and laughed.

"I haven't been able to make it home in a while, so I thought I'd take this opportunity and visit. I also wanted to drop in to see you, since this place is on the way," I told her.

"Oh, that makes me so happy!" Ms. Paula said, smiling and scratching her head. "Your timing's not the best, though, unfortunately."

"What do you mean?"

“Daria took Ol’ Bamboo and the rest of Goza Village to Drestia to sell their freshly harvested crops. See all those vegetables over there?” Ms. Paula pointed to stacks of cardboard boxes that were crammed with spring vegetables including onions, cabbage, and bamboo shoots. “They were kind enough to leave them when they passed by.”

“Ahh... I should’ve known.” It had completely slipped my mind until now, but it was that time of year.

“That’s too bad. We must’ve just missed them,” commiserated Lia.

“I’m not surprised. Drestia is the Merchant’s Town, so there’s no better place to sell goods,” commented Rose.

They were trying to make me feel better, but I was still shocked at myself. *After everything that’s happened recently, I completely forgot... I should’ve sent a letter first.* I sighed softly, and Ms. Paula clapped me on the back to cheer me up.

“Gah...!”

A shock ran through my body, so strong I thought I’d broken my spine, and I nearly fainted.

“Hey, don’t be too hard on yourself. It’s not like you’ll never see her again. You can visit her over summer break if you want,” said Ms. Paula.

“Th-thank...you...,” I grunted, just barely holding myself back from saying she should learn how to be gentler.

“Plus, Daria said she was gonna stop by again on the way back. I’ll tell her you’re doing well and that you brought two cute girlfriends with you.”

“Wh-what do you mean...girlfriends?!”

I blushed, and Ms. Paula grinned teasingly.

“Oh, what sort of ideas are you jumping to? They’re girls who are your friends, hence *girlfriends*.”

“You were clearly implying more!”

“Oh, boys your age...”

“Ms. Paula!”

Lia and Rose both seemed to be enjoying this.

“Ah-ha-ha,” laughed Lia. “You look just like a regular schoolkid, Allen.”

“Hah, this is a new side to you,” said Rose, giggling.

“All right, that’s enough joking around... What are y’all gonna do now?” Ms. Paula asked.

“Uh, good question...” If Mom, Ol’ Bamboo, and the rest of the villagers had gone to sell their crops, there was no point in going to Goza Village. *Hmm, what should we do...?*

“If you don’t have any other plans, how about you stay here?” Ms. Paula offered.

“Huh? You don’t mind?” I asked.

“Of course not! This place has been quiet as a cornfield lately, but it’s still a dorm. There are more empty rooms than I know what to do with.”

That sounded like a great idea to me.

“Lia, Rose, what do you think?” I asked.

“I’m all for it!” exclaimed Lia. “Let’s take her up on the offer.”

“I’d hate to let Ms. Paula’s hospitality go to waste,” said Rose.

That settled it.

“Then we’ll stay, Ms. Paula. It’ll be just like old times,” I told her.

“Thank you for having us,” said Lia.

“Yeah, thank you,” chimed in Rose.

“You’re very welcome!” boomed Ms. Paula. “I enjoy the company!”

And so we ended up staying at Ms. Paula’s dorm.



We each went to the rooms that Ms. Paula prepared for us.

“This takes me back... It looks exactly the same,” I said to myself.

I had been given the room I’d stayed in during my three years in middle school. The shelves, bed, desk, and everything else were exactly as I’d left them; it felt like I’d traveled back in time.

I used to do push-ups in here every day... Most of my days at Grand Swordcraft Academy had followed the same pattern: I’d spend school hours training alone on campus, perform practice swings outside the dorm in the evening, then work out in my room at night. It had been tough...but I was glad I’d persevered.

“Whoops, this isn’t the time to get sentimental.”

I left my luggage on the bed and joined up with Lia and Rose in the hall.

“Okay... What should we do now?” I asked.

“I want to do something we can only do here,” Lia said.

“Me too,” agreed Rose. “It’s not often I go this far out into the countryside. I want to experience nature.”

They both wanted to do something outdoorsy.

“Hmm... How about we go fishing?” I suggested. “That way, we can enjoy nature, and we get to eat.”

“That sounds great! I’m in!” said Lia.

“Nice idea. No objections here,” added Rose.

Once we’d decided on our plans, I got right to work.

“Ms. Paula, do you still have the fishing rods I made?”

“Yeah, they’re in the shed. Take however many you want.”

“Thank you.”

I led Lia and Rose to the shed.

“Here we go,” I said, opening the large iron doors to reveal the sprawling interior of the shed. It was filled with strange paintings, dignified stone sculptures, thick old books, and more. I was always amazed by the variety of stuff Ms. Paula kept in here.

“What the...?” gasped Lia. “This looks like a museum.”

“I don’t know much about archaeology, but there are a lot of things in here that look like they’d have historical value,” said Rose.

I looked around as they both gawked at Ms. Paula’s collection.

“Now, where’s the fishing stuff...? Ah, there it is.” I spotted the rods leaning against a large bookshelf straight ahead.

I had carved all the fishing rods out of wood by hand. Ms. Paula would often get overexcited and break her rod when we fished together, so I made a lot of spares.

“I’ll take this one, this one, and...this one,” I said, taking three fishing rods, extra fishing hooks, and a small wooden chair for each of us. As I did, a picture fluttered down from the top of the shelf. “Hmm? What’s this?”

It was a picture of a slender, pretty girl, and it looked to have been taken at the entrance to this dorm.

“Wow, she’s beautiful,” Lia said, peeking over my shoulder.

“Was she a student who lived here?” Rose asked, also taking a look.

“Hmm... I don’t know, but staring at a stranger’s picture feels kinda rude. We should put it back.”

I put the picture back on the shelf, and we exited the shed.

“Let’s see, what do we need next...?” I was going through the list in my head when I suddenly heard Ms. Paula call out to me.

“Allen, come here a sec.”

“Sure. What is it?” I asked.

“I got your stuff ready for you,” she said, looking toward the dorm’s entrance. Ms. Paula had set out paste fishing bait, a knife, a few simple seasonings, and everything else I’d been looking for.

“Thank you. You didn’t have to do that,” I told her.

“I was happy to,” responded Ms. Paula. “Go fish your hearts out!”

“We will!”

Lia, Rose, and I walked to the river behind the dorm.

“This is it,” I said.

“Wow, this water is so pretty!” exclaimed Lia.

“It’s so clear. You can see the bottom!” observed Rose.

Their eyes shone excitedly.

“Have either of you fished before?” I asked.

“A few times with my dad,” said Lia.

“Only for fun, really,” replied Rose.

“Oh, good. I’m sure you’ll both be fine, then.”

The fish in this river weren’t wary of people at all, so unless you were a total amateur, it was easy to have a good time fishing here. We put the special paste bait on our hooks and dropped them into the water.

A few minutes later, I felt a tug on my rod.

“Got one.”

I yanked my rod out of the water, pulling up a gorgeous white fish.

“That’s one,” I said.

It was an amyu, a river fish that had a large population around here, and our main target today. I removed the hook from its mouth and placed it in a bucket of water.

“Whoa, fresh amyu! It looks delicious!” cried out Lia.

“Yeah, it’s nice and fat,” added Rose.

We enjoyed fishing for another hour or so. Once we were done, I counted how many we’d caught.

“One, two, three...ten. That’s a good haul,” I told the girls.

The fresh amyu swam energetically in the bucket.

“Hmm-hmm, that’s a lot of fish!” said Lia happily.

“It feels good to catch so many,” Rose said with a smile.

“By the way, Allen... How do we eat these?” Lia asked.

“Amyu can be used for all sorts of dishes. They make nice, chewy sashimi, you can create a delicious stock if you put them in miso soup, and they’re often simmered, as well. We’re gonna take advantage of how fresh they are and grill them with salt,” I said.

“Wow, really?!” Lia exclaimed, her eyes shining like a child’s.

“Ooh, that sounds interesting,” Rose said, equally excited.

“All right, I’ll start prepping them,” I said.

I took an amyu out of the bucket and got right to work. I killed the fish, scraped the scales off with a knife, then used water from the river to wash the slime coat off its body. Next, I used a piece of paper towel to wipe off the moisture and lightly sprinkled it with salt, then finished it off by skewering it.

“Wow, you’re so good at that,” said Lia.

“You can cook, Allen?” asked Rose.

“Yeah. I grew up in the countryside, after all,” I said with an awkward smile.

Growing up in a place like Goza Village, where most of the people were older, you had no choice but to learn how to support yourself. Whether it was farming livestock, cooking, or household chores, there were a lot of things you had to learn to do on your own.

“Now I just need to start the fire,” I said, looking for dry leaves and sticks.

Lia’s head snapped up.

“Leave that to me!” She waved her finger, shooting out black and white flames, and in no time at all, we had a fire crackling. “Hmm-hmm, fire is my specialty. I don’t even need to summon my Soul Attire.”

“Thanks for that.” I lined up the amyu over the fire and waited as they cooked. Before long, the pleasant smell of grilled fish filled the air. “They’re cooking nicely.”

“They smell so good... My mouth is watering!” Lia said.

“Yeah, they look delicious,” added Rose.

After about another minute on the fire, the fish had turned nice and brown, and we were ready to eat.

“““Let’s dig in!””” We clapped our hands together and sank our teeth into the salt-grilled amyu.

Wow, this is delicious! The plump fish had a nice amount of fat on it and was perfectly salted. Each of the flavors came together to create a perfect harmony.

“*Mmm!* This is the best amyu I’ve ever had!” exclaimed Lia.

“No kidding. This is incredible...!” agreed Rose.

Rose and I had one each, and Lia gobbled up the other eight.

“““Thank you for the food,””” we said together, giving thanks to nature.

“Man, that was really good,” I said.

“Yeah!” agreed Lia. “I’m a little thirsty, though.”

“Me too. That fish was salty,” said Rose.

My throat was dry, too, now that I thought about it.

“Hey, Allen, is this water safe to drink?” Lia asked.

“It looks very clean...,” Rose said, gazing out at the river.

“Yeah, of course. But I have a better idea,” I told them, pointing to a large tree ahead of us.

“What’s that?” wondered Lia.

“Why are you pointing at that tree?” questioned Rose.

They both tilted their heads in confusion.

“Ah-ha-ha, not the tree. I was pointing at this,” I said, walking up to the tree and grabbing a vine wrapped around the trunk. “This is a gurgle vine. They absorb and store water from deep underground, meaning if you cut one like this...you get water.”

I cut the vine, and a clear liquid rushed out of it. When I put it up to my mouth, cool, refreshing water poured down my throat.

“Ahh... That’s so good!”

It really was unbelievably delicious.

“Y-you look like some sort of feral child...,” gasped Lia.

“You seem like you’d be able to survive anywhere, Allen,” said Rose.

“Why don’t you give it a go?” I suggested.

Lia and Rose shared a glance, then nodded to each other. They both cut a vine and put them to their mouths.

“Mmm!”

“Wow...”

They looked up for a moment, making me think they were done, but then they put the vines back to their mouths and began to chug the water.

“Isn’t it good?” I said.

“It’s amazing! The naturally sweet taste is so refreshing! I could drink this forever!” Lia gushed.

“This is so nice after the salty fish... I could get addicted!” Rose said.

They both continued to gulp down the water.

“H-hey, that’s enough! Gurgle vine water has a lot of fructose in it, so it’s poisonous if you drink too much!” I warned them.

“B-but...it’s so good...,” complained Lia.

“Just a little more...,” murmured Rose.

Getting them to stop drinking the sweet water proved to be quite the difficult task.

Afterward, we took a stroll through the forest, had a wood-chopping competition, and did all sorts of other activities we couldn’t do in the city.

“We’re back, Ms. Paula,” I said, having finally returned to the dorm.

“Oh, welcome home! Did you have fun?” she asked.

“Yeah, we did,” I said.

“It was a blast!” Lia said enthusiastically.

“Very rewarding, indeed,” added Rose.

“Ha-ha-ha, that’s good to hear. Dinner’s almost ready, so just give me a moment,” Ms. Paula said.

We sat down at the dining table to wait. Shortly after, Ms. Paula brought out the meal.

“Whoa, this is amazing...,” I said.

“Everything looks delicious...!” gasped Lia.

“How can one woman cook so much...?” wondered Rose.

Ms. Paula set a jaw-dropping amount of food on the table, including huge stuffed cabbage rolls, a massive serving of fried rice, and a whole roast pig. Each dish was as grand as the next, which was just the way Ms. Paula liked to cook.

“Ha-ha, and there’s a lot more where that came from! Dig in!” she encouraged.

“““Thank you!””” we said, putting our hands together in gratitude.

I picked up one of the meaty cabbage rolls with my chopsticks and stuffed it into my mouth.

“...!”

The sweet flavor of the cabbage exploded across my tongue. It was absurdly delicious; the ground-meat filling should have been the best part, but the flavor of the cabbage leaf on the outside overwhelmed it as if insisting that *it* was the star of the show. It had undoubtedly been grown in Goza Village.

“Wow, this sure packs a punch!” Lia exclaimed.

“These are no ordinary cabbage rolls!” Rose said excitedly.

“Hmm-hmm, aren’t they delicious? Goza Village’s vegetables are all first-rate!” Ms. Paula said with a smile.

We enjoyed many more of Ms. Paula’s exquisite dishes, which included meat patties, even more fried rice, and beef stew.

“““That was delicious!””” the three of us told Ms. Paula once we’d finished.

“I’m glad you liked it,” she replied happily.

I was so full, I didn’t know if I’d ever be able to eat again. *I don’t usually pig out like that...* The food was just so good, I hadn’t been able to help myself.

“Whew, everything’s just so good. I think I’m already full...,” Lia said, rubbing her stomach with satisfaction. She had eaten an insane amount of food.

“You sure know how to eat, Lia! Nothing makes a cook happier than seeing someone clean plate after plate like you did!” Ms. Paula said.

The two of them seemed to have hit it off quickly, as they were soon chatting to one another excitedly. Meanwhile, Rose and I discussed which dish was the most delicious, what our favorite Goza Village vegetable was, and more.

After that short break, we each took baths to wash away our sweat and fatigue. Once we were clean and had put on our pajamas, we gathered in my room to play cards and board games.

“Whoa, I didn’t realize it was this late,” I said.

“No way!” Lia said in disbelief.

“Time flies when you’re having fun,” chimed in Rose.

It was already midnight. We needed to go to bed soon, or we’d all be tired tomorrow.

“I don’t want to, but we should probably call it here,” I said.

“Yeah. A lack of sleep is terrible on the skin,” grumbled Lia.

“I agree, unfortunately,” said Rose.

We cleaned up the messy room, and I showed the girls out.

“Good night,” I said to the girls.

“Good night, Allen,” said Lia.

“Night, Allen,” said Rose.

They each returned to their rooms. I quickly got ready for sleep and slipped into my dear old bed.

Phew... Today really tired me out. I had walked a long way, enjoyed a lot of outdoor activities, and played some board games... Now that I thought about it, I had spent the whole day hanging out with Lia and Rose. I'd been having too much fun to notice my fatigue, but it hit me all at once when I climbed into bed. *It's a shame I didn't end up going home, but today was still a blast.* I wished every day could be like this one.

Feeling content and happy, I tried to drift off to sleep...but there was one problem keeping me up.

"...This is kinda lonely."

I glanced to the side; Lia wasn't there. I was so used to the sound of her breathing, her warmth, and the sense of security she gave me when she slept by my side. Her absence almost felt like I was missing a limb. The bed was big and cold without her.

I suppose there's no substitute for human touch, I thought, yawning widely. I could feel my drowsiness creeping up on me.

"*Fwah...* Time to sleep..."

I closed my eyes and drifted off into a deep slumber.



The next morning, cheerful voices echoed around the dining table.

"That was delicious! Delectable! Exquisite!" Lia exclaimed joyfully.

"Ha-ha-ha, you're a pleasure to cook for! Here, have seconds!" offered Ms. Paula. "There's plenty more where that came from!"

"Wow, thank you!" Lia said.

Rose and I quietly munched on our bread as we watched their lively conversation.

"How in the world does she eat so much first thing in the morning...?" I asked, incredulous. I had witnessed this countless times over the last year while living with Lia, but I was still amazed by just how much she could eat.

"Fwah... I'm so jealous she can eat like that and maintain her perfect figure..." Rose muttered enviously. She was still drowsy.

"Oh... Is that something you worry about, too? Maintaining your figure?" I asked.

"Yeah. I've cut down on how much I eat, and I also massage my chest in the bath every day... Wait, what are you trying to make me say?!"

"Ah...sorry..."

I'd asked her that without thinking after she brought up the topic, but I knew better than to ask a girl about her figure; that was common knowledge recorded in even the most ancient of texts. I needed to make sure I never made the same mistake again.

The time flew as we talked, and once it had reached half past ten, I decided we needed to hit the road for Aurest.

"Oh, are you leaving already? What's the rush? You should stay for lunch," Ms. Paula said, looking disappointed.

"Sorry... The new semester starts tomorrow, so I want to get back early and prepare," I told her.

"Well, guess I can't fault you for being responsible," she said, relenting.

I looked at Lia and Rose.

"Okay... Do you both have everything?"

"Yep, I'm good," Lia said.

"Same here," added Rose.

Before we left, I decided to ask Ms. Paula a question that had been bothering me for a while.

"Umm...Ms. Paula, can I ask you a question?"

"Sure thing."

"Goza Village... It's real, right? Like, it actually exists?"

Her expression stiffened.

“Allen...are you feeling okay?” A look of concern crossed her face, and she put a hand to my forehead. She was clearly afraid I wasn’t thinking clearly.

“S-sorry,” I apologized. “That was dumb. Forget I asked.”

I’d asked that question because of something the empress had said to me earlier this year: *“There is no place known as Goza Village in this country.”*

Those words had been weighing on me ever since.

“I don’t know where you got that idea, but take care of yourself, okay? You’ve always pushed yourself far too hard,” Ms. Paula said.

“Thank you. I will.” I bowed my head to her.

“Thanks for all the amazing food, Ms. Paula!” exclaimed Lia.

“Thank you for having us,” said Rose.

“Feel free to come back anytime, girls!” offered the matron. “I’d be thrilled to cook for you again!”

Having said our goodbyes to Ms. Paula, we headed back to Aurst.



A few hours after Allen, Lia, and Rose had left for Aurst, an evil force surrounded Paula Garedzall’s dormitory.

“Phew...” Paula sighed as she efficiently folded a huge pile of laundry. She continued to work until someone banged violently on the front door—a loud knock like that clearly meant trouble.

“Where are their manners...?”

Sensing danger, Paula picked up her favorite frying pan to defend herself with and walked slowly toward the door.

“There’s no need to knock so loudly,” she said, opening the door to find an unbelievable sight. “What in the world?!”

Over one hundred master swordsmen in black overcoats surrounded the dorm. The group’s muscular leader stepped toward Paula, who was unable to hide her shock.

“Are you Paula Garedzall?” asked the man.

“...And who might you be?” Paula responded.

“Oh, my bad. I’m Wartrius Trygate, one of the Thirteen Oracle Knights,” the man said.

Wartrius Trygate was thirty-five years old. He was two meters tall, heavily muscled, and one of the most militant members of the Oracle Knights. He had a fierce mane of red hair like a lion, the sharp eyes of a dragon, and an eagle’s beak of a nose, which combined to give his face a hard, uncompromising look. His skill with the sword was so great that he was considered the closest man in the world to the Four Imperial Knights.

“An Oracle Knight... Ah, you guys must belong to that dangerous organization that’s been causing a ruckus all around in the world lately,” Paula said.

“So you’ve heard of us?” Wartrius asked.

“How could I not? You’re all over the radio and newspapers.”

“Heh, good point.”

They locked eyes and fell into a tense silence. The headstrong Paula spoke first.

“So...what does an Oracle Knight want with me?”

“We’re performing a background check on Allen Rodol under Emperor Barel’s orders. We’ve hit a snag, though... There’s a lot about his history that doesn’t make sense. We can’t return to His Excellency without first verifying what’s true and what’s not. That said, his records from middle school and earlier appear to have been heavily tampered with,” explained Wartrius. “So instead, we’ve decided to adjust our method of investigation by finding people who knew Allen Rodol in middle school and questioning them directly.”

“I see. And that’s where I come in?” Paula said.

“Pretty much. Allen Rodol stayed here during his three years at Grand Swordcraft Academy, right?”

“Sure. What’s it to you?”

“Phew... Finally, progress. I’ll cut right to the chase. Did you ever see a pompous old man around him? Or a strange button?”

Wartrius looked at Paula sharply, not wasting any time getting to the real reason he was there.

“Nope, can’t say I did,” Paula responded nonchalantly.

“...You’re sure about that?” Wartrius asked. “You have nothing to gain from lying.”

“Not the sharpest tool in the shed, are you? Even if I did happen to know what you’re talking about, I wouldn’t tell a group of dangerous thugs like you. You should try using that brain of yours once in a while.”

“Hmm... I can see we’re going to have to *make* you talk.”

Wartrius’s muscles bulged, and he radiated an incredible bloodlust.

“...”

“...”

The air grew thick with tension.

“...I like headstrong women like you, Paula Garedzall. That’s why I’m gonna give you a warning before things get messy: Our organization does not go easy on women. We’re going to take you to Berios Castle and subject you to all sorts of cruel means of torture. You’ll experience a pain worse than death, without even being spared time to sleep. It would be in your best interest to tell us everything now.”

“Hah, you’re wasting your breath... I looked after Allen for three years, and I care for him deeply. I’d rather bite off my own tongue and die than betray him! You underestimate me if you think I’ll bend to such a weak threat—and you *never* want to underestimate a dorm matron!” Paula roared, her voice echoing the pride she held for her station.

“...Well, can’t say I didn’t warn you. You only have your own bad judgment to blame,” Wartrius said before disappearing in a haze.

“Hrnn!”

He suddenly appeared in front of Paula and punched her in the solar plexus, the impact landing with an enormous boom.

“How...is this possible...?!”

Unexpectedly, Wartrius found himself gasping in confusion. He felt horrific pain and looked down in shock to see that his right arm was a broken mess.

“...!”

He did his best to cut himself off from the pain and leaped backward.

“*Haah, haah...* Paula! What the hell did you just do?!”

“Nothing. Maybe the world just punished you for punching a lady in the abdomen.”

“Gah, nonsense... Hey, quit your lollygagging! Grab her, now!”

“““Yes, sir!”””

Three Black Organization members rushed to follow Wartrius’s orders and charged at Paula.

“Stalk and Tear—Evil Spirit Severer!”

“Become Lost and Pure Forever—Wrath Oblivion Girl!”

“Spill Vermillion on the Empty Throne—Emperor’s Bloody Rule!”

These were Wartrius’s most trusted followers, each with the strength to conquer an entire village on their own; facing all three at once should have been hopeless.

“Geez, are they trying to insult me?” Paula muttered, her words carried away by the spring breeze.

She lifted her trusty frying pan...

“““...Huh?”””

...and swung it faster than the speed of sound, easily pulverizing their three Soul Attires.

“The hell... *Blurgh!*”

“What...just happened...?!”

“Impossi— *Cough...*”

Paula brought her fist down three times. She looked like an adult scolding misbehaving children, but her monstrous strength turned the strikes into deadly blows.

“...Garf? Grios? Dalton?” Wartrius couldn’t believe his eyes. His three most trusted subordinates had been incapacitated with a single strike each. Paula had knocked them unconscious and hit them so hard, their bodies had lodged in the ground. None of this made any sense, and he had to wonder if it was all just one big nightmare. “Who are you?!”

“The matron of this dorm,” Paula said without hesitation.

“Grk, don’t be absurd...!”

Wartrius ground his teeth in frustration and used his left hand to make a signal behind his back. One of the Black Organization members saw it and used the wireless transceiver in his ear to contact headquarters.

“Th-this is an urgent message from Liengard! There’s a monster at Allen Rodol’s old do—”

“Whoa now, I can’t let you do that,” Paula said. She flicked her index finger down, and a massive cage fell from the sky. Its impact shook the ground, and the immense spirit power it contained disrupted the transceiver’s signal.

“Crap, why can’t I get through?!” the man yelled, having lost contact.

“My ability tends to stand out a bit. Let’s end this, shall we?” Paula said, cracking her neck. Her frying pan transformed into a jet-black gauntlet.

Paula Garedzall—also known as Ironblood. With the strength to rival an army, she was one of the bladeless swordswomen who—along with Reia Lasnote—had carried Thousand Blade in its Golden Age, and the woman Happ Torne had gushed about to Allen in the hospital.

“...!”

Wartrius studied Paula. *Her impossibly muscular body is a work of art, her presence is overwhelming, and she has an absurd amount of spirit power... She’s undoubtedly as strong as an Imperial Knight.*

Exercising maximum caution, the oracle knight barked an order at his men.

“Surround her! We’ll overwhelm her with numbers!”

One hundred master swordsmen surrounded Paula, who looked around and sighed.

“Oh dear... Do none of you feel any shame surrounding a delicate lady like me?”

“‘Delicate lady,’ my ass...,” muttered Wartrius.

The battle that followed was completely one-sided. Wartrius’s men hit her with everything they had, but...

“Raaaaaaaaah... *Blurgh!*”

“Hyaaaaaaaaah... *Cough...!*”

“Graaaaaaaaaah...! *Urk!*”

...Paula cut them down like flies, holding them all off with tremendous ease.

This is impossible... No human could ever beat her.

The men felt as if she was another species that humanity was no match for. They all knew that she was the predator and that they were the prey. It took less than three minutes for Paula to defeat them all.

“Pierce and Rend—Beast King Flash Funeral!” Wartrius yelled, unleashing an attack with everything he had.

“*Haah...* You’re still not done?” Paula asked as his sword shattered on her abdominal muscles.

“How did that not cut you...?” Wartrius said in disbelief.

“You dummy... Did you really think a blade would be able to scratch my abs?” Paula asked.

“You’re a monster...!”

Paula countered with a body blow, knocking Wartrius unconscious.

“Sheesh... If you want to defeat me, at least bring a True Attire wielder! That’ll teach you to underestimate a dorm matron!”

Once the battle was over, Paula tied up the Black Organization members and contacted an acquaintance of hers in the holy knights, who promised to collect her assailants in a few days. Having just finished putting out one fire, Paula watched the distant horizon with a troubled expression.

“Hurry up, Daria... It’s only going to get harder for us to hide.”

Paula was looking out in the direction of Goza Village—which didn’t exist as far as the public knew—where Allen’s mother, Daria Rodol, was doing everything she could to further her plans.

Afterword

Thank you very much for purchasing the ninth volume of *100-Million-Year Button*. I am the author, Syuichi Tsukishima.

I would like to start by touching on the content of this novel. This will contain spoilers, so please be careful if you are the type to read the afterword first.

Volume 9 consists of two parts: the final chapter of the Cherin arc, and the meeting at the palace followed by Allen's journey home. As I promised in the previous afterword, this volume contains the fiercest battle in the series so far.

Allen was forced to endure a string of intense fights against two powerful True Attire wielders: former Imperial Knight Diehl Reinstad and traitorous Holy Blade Von Mustang! He struggled initially against the overwhelming advantage of their True Attires and had to watch Lia die...but then he connected to the "path" using the wrong method, drew on an infinite pool of darkness, and overpowered Diehl and Von. Zeon; the darkness; the Rodol Clan Seal—this fight is packed with mysteries to do with the very heart of the story, and writing it was a lot of fun.

Paula Garedzall makes an appearance at the end, as well! She was introduced at the very beginning of the series and is actually far more important than she seemed to be at first. She's deeply connected to Allen's mom and Goza Village, and even knows about the Time Hermit and the 100-Million-Year Button. Paula grows even larger between every appearance and is one of the strongest characters in the series! She'll definitely show off that incredible way of fighting of hers again in the future.

Next volume, we begin the "Imperial Faction & Noble Faction" arc! An assassin who has been sent to kill Allen will make an appearance, as will a character familiar to you all! And in the middle of Allen's already turbulent life, a deadly battle suddenly breaks out! I hope you look forward to it!

I'm running out of space, so I'd 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 novel—thank you very much.

And most of all, thank you to the readers who picked up Volume 9 of *100-Million-Year Button*.

Until we meet again for the next volume!

Syuichi Tsukishima

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