



I KEPT PRESSING
THE

100 MILLION-YEAR
BUTTON AND CAME OUT ON TOP

~ THE UNBEATABLE REJECT SWORDSMAN ~

3

SYUICHI TSUKISHIMA

Illustration by **MOKYU**

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“Follow me, maggot!”

“You are the Allen Rodol I’ve heard so much about?!”

Claude Stroganof

The captain of the Vesteria Royal Guard. Has looked after Lia since she was a little girl. Truly talented with the blade.

Gris Vesteria

The king of Vesteria and Lia’s father. A doting parent, he takes Allen for a con man who has deceived his daughter.

“Father! Listen to what Allen has to say!”

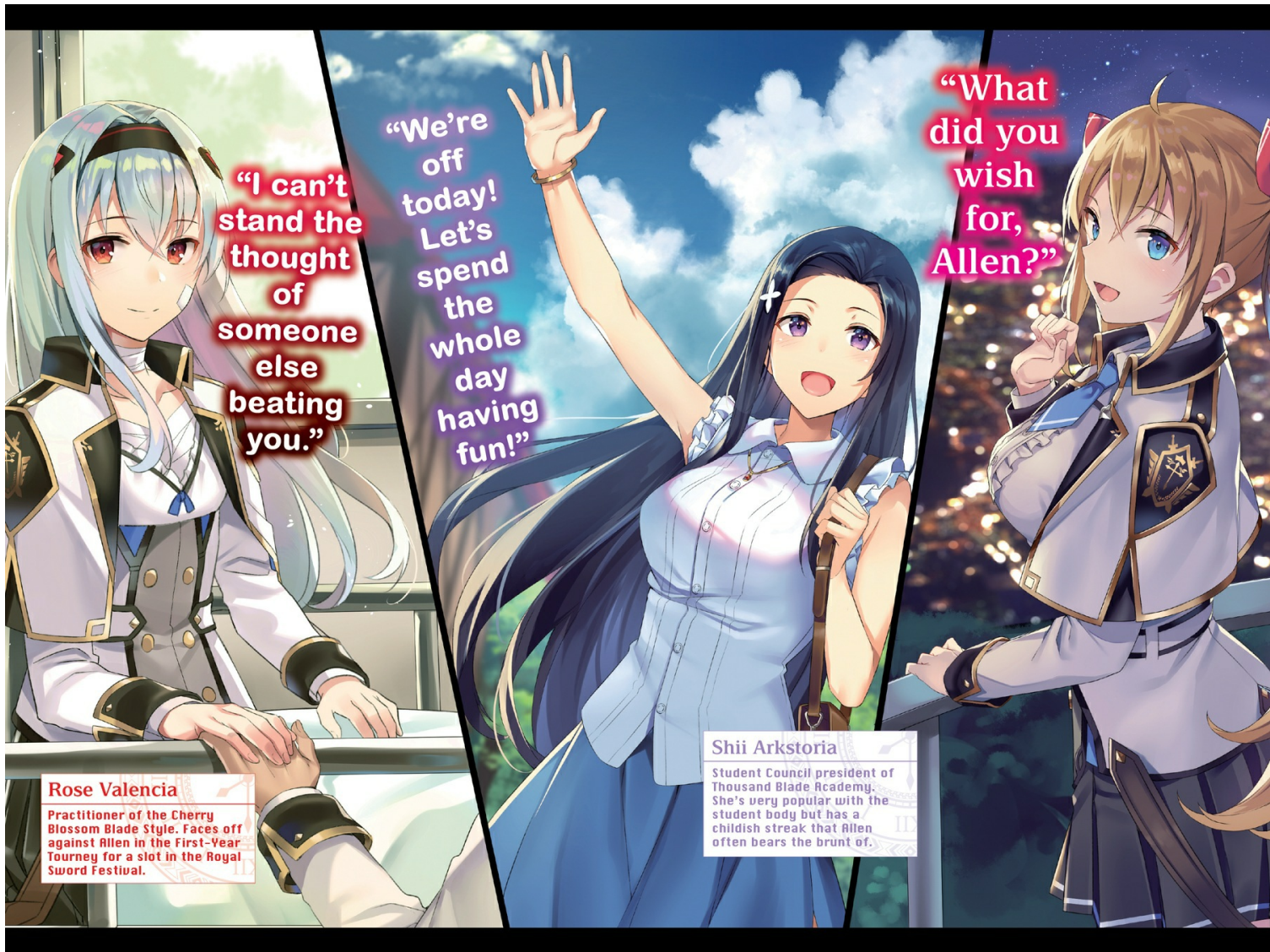
Lia Vesteria

The princess of Vesteria Kingdom and Allen’s classmate. Claude unearthed the nature of her relationship with Allen. Very talented, but a bit of a klutz.

“Y-Your Majesty, please hear me out! I think there’s been a major misunderstanding—”

Allen Rodol

A boy who kept pressing the 100-Million-Year Button until he became the strongest swordsman in the land. He was summoned to Vesteria Kingdom after his relationship with Lia was discovered.



Rose Valencia

Practitioner of the Cherry Blossom Blade Style. Faces off against Allen in the First-Year Tourney for a slot in the Royal Sword Festival.

"We're off today! Let's spend the whole day having fun!"

Shii Arkstoria

Student Council president of Thousand Blade Academy. She's very popular with the student body but has a childish streak that Allen often bears the brunt of.

"What did you wish for, Allen?"



**“Wah-ha-ha-ha!
Now we’re talkin’!
What dazzlin’ light!”**

Zach Bombard
An internationally wanted man with a bounty on his head. Wields Blazing Cross, a Soul Attire that can burn anything to ashes. It seems he is after Lia.

Timidly, I grabbed the ebon sword with my right hand.
“Hng?!” I knew it instinctually—this weapon held power that far surpassed what I was currently capable of.

**Give...
me...
power!**



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SYUICHI
TSUKISHIMA

Illustration by **MOKYU**

YEN
ON
New York

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I KEPT PRESSING THE 100-MILLION-YEAR BUTTON AND CAME OUT ON TOP: *THE UNBEATABLE REJECT SWORDSMAN* SYUICHI TSUKISHIMA Translation by Luke Hutton

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1 OKUNEN BUTTON O RENDA SHITA ORE HA, KIZUITARA SAIKYO NI NATTE ITA
Vol.3 *RAKUDAI KENSHI NO GAKUIN MUSO*

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CHAPTER 1

Vesteria Kingdom & the Captain of the Royal Guard

After being summoned by Lia's father—the king of Vesteria—she and I scrambled to pack for our trip. Once we had finished, we headed for the Thousand Blade Academy schoolyard, indicated in the letter we received, where a royal aircraft was waiting for us.

This dwarfs Shii's private jet. I guess that was a government plane for you—a personal aircraft couldn't hope to match it in terms of scale.

In front of the plane stood a group of five people dressed in black ceremonial garb. They all bowed as soon as they saw Lia. The woman in the center of the group raised her head and said, "Greetings, Your Highness. And to you as well, Master Maggot. We are ready for takeoff, so right this way, please."

"Master Maggot," huh...? At least she threw in a title. Her greeting made it immediately apparent how unwelcome I was going to be on this trip.

"If you're going to speak to Allen that rudely, I'm not getting on this plane," Lia asserted, clearly offended. She glared at the woman.

"...My sincerest apologies, Your Highness and...Master Allen. This way, please," she responded, using my name after a long pause.

"Hmph. Come on, Allen."

"O-okay."

Lia grabbed my hand and led me onto the plane.



On the way to Vesteria Kingdom, Lia taught me about a number of its famous

tourist destinations, including the Hill of Hope, where any wish would be granted; the Vesteria National Museum, which displayed art, antiques, and remains of rich historical value; and the Grand Coliseum, where skilled swordfighters competed in fierce battles every day. She clearly took great pride in her home country and was having a lot of fun telling me all about it.

“Once we’re done talking to Father, we have to go sightseeing!” Lia exclaimed.

“That sounds great,” I responded.

Soon after we had agreed on that plan, the aircraft began to steadily drop in altitude until it finally touched down gently on the ground.

“We have arrived in Arlond, capital city of Vesteria Kingdom. Right this way, please.”

I was in for a shock once I’d exited the plane. Everything about this place—the atmosphere, the smells, the people—was different from Liengard. I supposed that should have been expected, given this was a foreign country, but this was my first time abroad, so it all had quite an impact on me.

Once we’d left the airport, the woman in formal attire addressed Lia. “Your meeting with His Majesty is scheduled for tonight at eight. We have an hour and a half until then, so allow us to escort you to dinner—”

“That won’t be necessary. I’m going to eat with Allen. Alone,” Lia interrupted.

“...Understood,” the woman relented, nodding reluctantly. She didn’t seem thrilled with the idea of Lia and me spending time together alone. “We will take our leave of you here, then. I’ll say this again just to be safe—your meeting with His Majesty is scheduled for eight. Please ensure you do not forget.”

“I know, I know. I’m not going to blow him off after coming all this way.”

“No, I did not mean to imply... You have just always been a bit of a scatterbrain, so if you could please keep an eye on your watch to monitor the time...”

“I—I am *not* a scatterbrain and never have been! Go! Get out of my sight!”

“Understood, Your Highness. Please be careful.”

Once the formally dressed group had left us, we joined the crowd and walked along the main street.

“The *nerve*... First, she calls me clumsy, and now she says I’m a scatterbrain... That’s totally uncalled for!” Lia complained.

“Ah-ha-ha, yeah...,” I said, forcing a laugh. As a matter of fact, Lia *did* have a tendency to be clumsy, and she *was* a scatterbrain. I’d been living in the same dorm as her for the last few months, so I knew that well. Obviously, I couldn’t say that to her face, though, so I just chuckled and went along with her.

I glanced around the street we were heading down. *There aren’t as many big stores as there are in Aarest*, I thought. Instead, a great number of small stalls lined the sides of the road. Arlong had the clear advantage in terms of the quantity of stores.

There’s still a ton of people out, considering it’s past six in the evening. A wide variety of folk were walking down the street, including people with swords at their belts, women holding shopping bags, and men humming with a bottle of alcohol in hand. It was about as lively as the Merchant’s Town of Drestia.

I continued to let my eyes wander around the street until Lia spoke up.

“Hey, Allen. We don’t have much time, so want to go ahead and grab dinner?” she asked, clapping me on the shoulders and cocking her head slightly.

“Yeah, sure,” I answered. Since it was half past six, I was going to start feeling hungry soon.

“Is there anything you’re in the mood for?”

“Hmm, let me think... Something with meat, I guess.”

“Ah, I know just the place! It’s a restaurant I’ve been going to ever since I was a little girl!”

“Sounds good to me. Let’s go.”

“Awesome! Follow me!”

I trailed behind Lia until we arrived at a type of eatery that had been seared into my memory.

“I-it’s another one of these...,” I remarked.

“Hmm-hmm, bet you didn’t expect that. It’s authentic ramzac!” Lia exclaimed.

Ramzac was a traditional Vesterian food that consisted of bite-size triangles of piecrust stuffed with beef stew. *Ramzac is undeniably delicious. And with all the beef in them, I’ll definitely get my fill of meat...* The problem was the portion size. When I’d last eaten ramzac with Lia and Rose, I needed to raise the white flag before finishing my enormous share.

Wh-what should I do...? Should I say I don’t want to eat here? I thought anxiously.

“This place is run by a single family, and their ramzac is soooooo good. The piecrust is crisp, the beef stew is incredibly rich, and the meat is so tender, it melts in your mouth!” Lia said with breathless excitement.

“R-really...? I can’t wait to try it,” I responded with a forced smile. Given how excited she was to eat here, there was no way I could ask her if we could go to a different restaurant.

I guess I can just pass the rest of mine off to her if I can’t finish. It wasn’t healthy to force yourself to overeat. I learned that the last time we indulged in this dish. Once I felt I couldn’t pack in any more, I would gift the rest to Lia.

“All right, let’s go in,” she proposed.

“Sure,” I responded, and we entered the shop.

“Welcome to... Huh?! Princess? How long have you been back?” cried a short, elderly woman, who rushed toward Lia.

“Mrs. Ram, it’s so nice to see you again! I just got here. Something urgent came up, so I’ll be leaving again as soon as it’s resolved,” Lia answered.

“Oh, I see! I’m glad you’re doing well! So...who’s this handsome little thing you’ve brought with you? Is he your boyfriend?”

“U-um... W-well, he’s...” Lia glanced at me and began to trip over her words. She seemed uncomfortable with answering this question.

Oh yeah, this reminds me of a piece of advice Ms. Paula once gave me... “Listen up, Allen. Girls are sensitive. If you ever see a lady in trouble, be a

gentleman and help her out!”

Lia was having trouble responding. She probably wanted me to answer for her.

“Ah-ha-ha, I’m just a friend,” I answered casually.

“...Oh. Yeah, we’re still *friends*,” Lia said with a loud sigh. She looked disappointed for some reason.

“Ha-ha, is that so? Oh, the innocence of youth... I feel a few years younger myself!” Mrs. Ram, on the other hand, chuckled heartily in reply. “Do you want the usual order?”

“Oh, yes. Two extra-large servings of ramzac, please,” Lia answered.

“Coming right up. Please sit wherever you like!”

Lia and I then enjoyed a delectable, authentic ramzac dinner.



Our bellies now full of ramzac, we paid for our meal and left the restaurant.

“Man! That was so good, wasn’t it, Allen?” gushed Lia.

“Yeah, you can’t beat ramzac made in Vesteria. It was so much better than the restaurant we went to in Aurest,” I agreed.

“You didn’t eat much, though. Are you feeling okay?”

“Y-yeah, I’m fine! I’ve just been watching my weight lately.”

As Lia said, I didn’t eat too many ramzacs this time. After finishing five of them and sensing that I was about 80 percent full, I’d given my remaining fifteen to her. *I still can’t believe how many she can put away...* Lia had downed thirty-five ramzacs all by herself. It was a superhuman performance.

All right, now for the main event... Our ramzac dinner was nothing more than an incidental skirmish, a prelude to the struggle that was to come. The real battle—talking to Lia’s father—was drawing near.

“You remember what we went over, right, Lia? If he asks about you being my slave, just give him a firm no,” I reminded her.

“Don’t worry, I’ll make sure to say that this time!” she assured me.

“Lead the way, then.”

“Sure thing. Follow me.”

Lia took me through the winding streets of the capital until we arrived at a very tall castle. The five people who were with us on the airplane were there waiting for us.

“Glad you could make it, Your Highness and Master Mag—er...Master Allen,” the leader of the group said. She had started to insult me, but after a long pause, she managed to force out my name. “His Majesty is waiting. Please come this way.”

The guards glared at me as we passed them by while heading into the palace. *Man, I’m getting really nervous...* I was about to speak to a king. This was beyond overwhelming for an ordinary student like me.

It was only a few months ago that I was on the verge of dropping out of a little-known swordcraft academy in the middle of nowhere... How the heck did things end up like this? *I’m not the best at talking to people, but I’ll give it my all.*

I sighed—I’d been doing a lot of that lately—and continued onward.



The royal palace towered over the rest of Arlond from its location in the center of the city. Lia and I were being led through it by the group dressed in formal attire.

This place is incredible, I marveled to myself as we walked. The interior was decorated with fine statues, lavish chandeliers, and masterful paintings that imbued the castle with the weight of history. It was a totally different world from the rural village I’d grown up in.

“It’s only been three months, but this feels so nostalgic...,” Lia remarked as we headed down the wide hallways of the palace.

“Oh yeah, you grew up here, didn’t you?” I said. We spent so much time

together that I sometimes forgot she was a princess.

“Yeah, I did. I had a ton of fun running around here when I was a kid.”

“Ah-ha-ha, I’m not surprised.”

“...Am I supposed to take that as praise, Allen?”

“Hmm, I wonder.”

“Oh, come on!”

We made cheerful conversation until the group at the lead came to a halt.

“The throne room is through here. Please take care not to offend His Majesty.”

They bowed their heads politely. It looked like Lia and I were on our own from here.

“...Let’s go.”

“Yeah.”

We then continued down the hall. *Man, I’m nervous...* Since I was born in the countryside, I could have never imagined speaking to anyone in a high position in government, let alone a king. I had no idea how I was supposed to behave, or stand, or speak, or a thousand other things, and it was really stressing me out.

“It’ll be okay, Allen. You were invited here as my friend. You’re a guest of honor, so feel free to be yourself,” Lia reassured me before patting my back.

“Thanks. I’ll try to avoid doing anything offensive,” I responded.

We continued on ahead until we reached two large, extravagant doors. On either side was a guard wearing sturdy armor. They gave me a brief, cold glare, then bowed toward Lia.

“Welcome back, Your Highness.”

“His Majesty awaits. Please enter.”

The two guards opened the massive doors to reveal the king sitting on his throne and Claude stationed behind him.

This is Gris Vesteria, ruler of Vesteria... He had large, discerning eyes, and

short hair that was the same shade of blond as Lia's. His splendid beard, speckled with white, showed his age; I guessed he was in his midforties. A golden crown rested atop his head, and he wore a red cloak over his shoulders. He couldn't have looked more like a king.

"It's my girl! Welcome home, Lia!" King Gris shouted, jumping up from his throne and rushing toward his daughter with a wide smile on his face.

"Hello, Father," Lia responded.

"Oh, how I missed you! I'm so glad to see you're well! I've been beside myself with worry for you..."

"I appreciate the concern, but I'm fifteen now. I can take care of myself."

I waited for an opportunity to speak up, then began to politely introduce myself. "I am Allen Rodol, a first-year student at Thousand Blade Academy. It is an honor to meet you. I am a friend of Lia—"

"*You* are the Allen Rodol I've heard so much about?!" the king shouted, interrupting my self-introduction. His face was full of hatred. "Claude told me everything. I know how you've poisoned my daughter's mind with your wiles. She will be your plaything no more, you wretch!"

"N-no, I haven't—"

"Show me your strength."

"Huh?"

"If you want my daughter's hand, go prove that you're the greatest swordsman in all the kingdom!" the king roared for the whole palace to hear.

That's exactly what he said in that story Lia told us at summer training camp... I didn't expect to ever be on the receiving end of that line. *This is really bad.* I needed to clear up this mess as quickly as possible.

"Y-Your Majesty, please hear me out! I think there's been a major misunderstanding—," I started, but I was interrupted yet again.

"Siiiiiiilence! I know you're a con man who can enchant anyone with your silver tongue. You won't get the opportunity to deceive me!"

Clearly, the king wasn't in a listening mood. Claude sneered mockingly from behind him. *This is all his fault...* Calling me a con man was way too dramatic.

Seeing that I was struggling, Lia raised her voice angrily. "Father! Listen to what Allen has to say!"

"I refuse! He is a fiendish man who managed to cajole even someone as strong as you! If I give him a chance to speak, he could very well ensnare me, too!"

"Allen is a good person! You'll see that if you just talk to him!"

Lia didn't cower one bit before the king's booming voice. But her efforts were in vain.

"This is worse than I imagined. To think that he would hoodwink my daughter so thoroughly... I won't stand for it. You'll pay for this, Allen Rodol!" he shouted.

The situation was growing more dire by the moment. *He's not going to listen.* I needed to say something to break the deadlock.

"Your Majesty, can you please convey to me how I can prove myself the greatest swordsman in all the kingdom?" I asked.

"Hmm, let me think... It would certainly be unfair to order a student to fight fully grown holy knights. That would be beneath me as the king of Vesteria..." He tugged on his magnificent beard in thought. "All right, I've got it. If you prove that you are superior to all the sword-wielders under twenty in this castle, I will recognize you as 'Vesteria's Next Strongest' and overlook this incident!"

"R-really?!"

"Yes. I swear it on my country's name."

If all I had to do was face the sword-wielders in the castle—and the ones under twenty, at that—I would have a chance. *No, wait... Why would he even offer me this opportunity? He's way overprotective of Lia.* It had to have been because he thought my odds of winning were slim to none. *But any chance is better than no chance, no matter how small!* I steeled my resolve.

"However...if you lose, I will immediately terminate Lia's study abroad! She

will never return to Thousand Blade Academy!”

“Huh?!”

“What?!”

Grinning wickedly, the king continued, “What will it be, Allen? You are free to turn tail and flee. But of course, the moment you do, Lia will become a student of Vesteria Swordcraft Academy!”

“S-stop this right now, Father! This is terrible! I want no part of it!” Lia cried, immediately voicing her resistance. But he didn’t yield.

“I refuse! Sometimes, you just need to listen to your papa!”

“No! I will not!”

“Silence, Lia! I will not budge! As your parent, I must see this through!”

“Grr...”

“Don’t glare at me like that, young lady! You will grow into a fine swordswoman at Vesteria Swordcraft Academy! ...If I hadn’t given in to Reia back then, none of this would have ever happened...,” the king said, muttering the last part with a grimace. “I’ll ask again—what is your choice, Allen Rodol? But first, a word of warning: You don’t have a chance in hell of winning. That is not an empty threat; your victory is absolutely impossible! Fleeing now is your best option.”

The choice was in my hands.

“A-Allen...,” Lia said.

I...I don’t want to lose Lia. She also wanted to study at Thousand Blade. King Gris must have some very skilled swordfighters at his disposal to be this confident... But no matter how difficult the road ahead, as long as my chances of winning weren’t zero, I wouldn’t back down.

“I accept your challenge. I will prove to you that I am Vesteria’s Next Strongest,” I declared.

“Hmph, a moronic decision. I’ll never understand kids... Your first duel will begin tomorrow morning at ten in the Grand Coliseum. I will arrive with my

three finest swordfighters. Any objections?” King Gris asked, lifting three fingers and smirking in an effort to intimidate me.

“W-wait, three?! You didn’t mention that, Father! You can’t just change the terms after he’s already accepted!” Lia exclaimed.

“It’s fine. I have no objections,” I said to calm her down.

“A-are you sure?!”

This was a battle of wills. *I might be able to complain and get him to decrease the number of opponents to just one... But then he would never recognize my strength.* I needed to face the three sword-wielders he had so much faith in and beat them all. If I did this any other way, he would never stop searching for ways to bring Lia back home.

“Hmm... I admire your spirit, at least. Claude!” the king called out.

“Yes, Your Majesty!” he responded.

“Despite everything, Allen Rodol is a guest of ours. Please prepare a room for him.”

“Understood.”

The king sat back down upon his throne. It seemed like our meeting was adjourned.

“Hey. Follow me, maggot!” Claude commanded. Lia and I walked after him out of the throne room. After the two guards closed the imposing doors completely, I let out a loud sigh.

Geez... That went horribly. I only wanted to talk. I never thought I would end up in a situation like this. *I have to win. For Lia’s sake.*

And so I was set to participate in an important battle with my school life with Lia on the line.



Claude guided us to the first floor of the castle.

“This is your room, maggot,” he announced, stopping in front of a door.

“Claude. His name isn’t *maggot*. It’s Allen! *A-L-L-E-N*! How many times do I have to tell you that?! You’re really ticking me off!” Lia shouted, veins bulging in her head.

“I—I apologize, Your Highness. But this is one order with which I cannot comply,” he said, bowing apologetically.

Not even Lia could get him to stop calling me that. *Well, I don’t really mind that much...* After putting up with the title of *Reject Swordsman* for three years straight, *maggot* didn’t have much of an effect on me. Deciding it wasn’t worth bickering over, I moved on and opened the door to my room.

“Wow, this is really nice,” I remarked.

The room was spacious, and the bed, sofa, and the rest of the furnishings were luxurious. After stepping inside and glancing around, I noticed that the luggage I’d brought on the aircraft was here as well. The king was true to his word—I was being treated as a guest.

“One more thing. I was tasked with sp—er, attending to you,” Claude informed me. He had definitely been about to say *spy*. “I live directly across the hall, so make sure to let me know if you ever leave the room. If you fail to report... Let’s just say you’ll regret it.”

He flashed the sword at his hip threateningly.

“Don’t worry, I’ll make sure to keep you posted,” I assured him.

“Hmph, good. Rest up for tomorrow... Not that it will do anything to save you from your unsightly defeat,” he sneered and started to leave the room.

“Just you wait, Claude! There’s no way Allen’s going to lose!” Lia fired back, pouting. Then she made a grave mistake—she started to close the door while she was still in the room.

“Y-Your Highness, what are you doing? Your quarters are on the top floor...” Claude trailed off. Lia must have done that out of habit from living with me. His question was a reasonable one.

“...Oh, right,” Lia realized. Her clumsiness had emerged at the worst possible moment.

“Y-you filthy maggot... Do you invite Lia into your room every night?!” he accused, his face going ashen.

He’s not going to take this well... There was no way we could tell him we lived in the same dorm.

“N-no, of course not! Right, Lia?”

“Y-yeah! We’d never sleep in the same room!”

We got our story straight quickly, but it was to no avail.

“Oh my god... You bastard... You filthy, low-life maggot...!” He fought to control his temper, clenching his fists with bloodshot eyes. Then he turned to Lia with drooping shoulders, his anger quickly turning to despair. “...I will lead you to your quarters, Your Highness.”

“Good night, Allen. See you tomorrow.”

“Y-yeah, night.”

They left my room. Now in the calm after the storm, I let out a loud sigh. *Haah... They’re going to hate me even more now.* I was positive Claude would tell the king about this. Sighing once again, I shut off my brain.



I brushed my teeth and took a bath to get ready for bed. A glance at the clock told me it was half past nine. It was a little early to go to sleep, but... *I have an important fight tomorrow, so I should probably call it a day.*

After turning off the light, I got under the covers. But something felt off when I did.

“...I’m alone today.”

Lia and I always slept in the same bed, so I had subconsciously left the space to my left empty, where she would normally be. *This feels weird.* Typically, we would chat about anything from friends to swordcraft until we eventually ended up falling asleep. Turning in without her felt rather lonely.

I should get to sleep early, I thought, closing my eyes and relaxing.

The ticking of the second hand on the clock filled the room, its regular beat gradually making me drowsy, which was further spurred by the calming chirps of the insects outside. Both the relaxing sounds and the plush bed made this the perfect environment to nod off. Despite that, a severe feeling that I was lacking something was keeping me wide-awake.

“...I didn’t get enough practice swings in today,” I said aloud. Although I’d performed my morning routine, I’d needed to rush to pack for the trip afterward, and then our flight to Vesteria took up most of the rest of the day. Once we got off the plane, Lia and I had eaten ramzac and had our audience with King Gris—and now I was already in bed.

There hadn’t been a single opportunity for me to swing my sword since morning. Actually, I hadn’t even *gripped* a blade. *I already took my bath, though...* If I got up to train and then took another bath, I would lose out on a lot of sleep.

“But still...I’ve gotta do it.” Once I thought about wielding my sword, there was no escaping that desire.

Getting out of bed, I looked at the clock on the wall. The hour hand was pointing right at ten. I really didn’t have much time. *It’ll be fine. I’ll only practice for a little bit, then take a quick shower and get back to bed.* That would mean less rest, but the higher-quality sleep resulting from getting my swings in would make up for it.

“Let’s do this!” I changed out of my pajamas into my Thousand Blade uniform and quickly got ready. “I need to let Claude know I’m leaving the room.”

I walked up to the chamber across the hall and knocked on the door three times. There was no response.

“...Claude? Are you in there?” I called out. I rapped louder but again got no reply. “What should I do...?”

I couldn’t leave to train without his permission. *Maybe he’s already asleep...* I turned the handle, and the door opened without a sound. It was unlocked.

“...I’m coming in, Claude,” I announced before stepping inside. The light was on, showing a room with the exact same furniture and layout as mine.

“Hmm-hmm-hmm.”

Suddenly, I heard pleasant humming and the sound of a shower. He was in the bathroom. *So that’s why he didn’t hear me knocking.* I decided I would go back to my room and try again ten minutes later. He would be furious with me if he learned that I’d come in here without his permission.

Just as I quietly stepped toward the door, I heard the shower stop and the curtain being pulled open. *Talk about bad timing.* If I fled now, there was a chance Claude would mistake me for a thief. Given that, the best thing to do was to stay put and explain myself. I positioned myself in the middle of the room and waited. Shortly afterward, Claude emerged from the bathroom, stark naked.

I couldn’t believe my eyes.

“C-Claude?!”

“...Huh?”

He had a more delicate frame than I had expected. The greatest surprise was his chest, which bulged on either side like a girl’s.

“Wh-what the hell are you...?”

His—no, *her*—cheeks flushed a deep shade of scarlet.



Her face painted crimson, Claude quickly covered her chest with her arms.

“D-don’t look at me!” she shouted.

“I-I’m sorry...!” I yelped in apology, turning around the moment I came to my senses. She ran back into the bathroom and yanked the curtain shut.

C-Claude is a girl?! I had completely misread her as a boy because of her appearance and manner of speaking. As I attempted to calm the pounding in my chest, I heard her quivering voice from behind the curtain.

“Wh-wh-what is wrong with you?! Why are you in my room?! W-were you planning to creep into my bed as I slept?! Is that how you got your hooks into

Lia?!” Claude accused.

“N-no! That wasn’t what I was doing at all!” I denied immediately. That was a misunderstanding I wanted no part of.

“Then why are you in here?! If I don’t like your answer, I’ll hand you over to the holy knights!”

“I—I wanted to get in some practice swings, and I thought I should let you know! But you didn’t respond when I knocked, and the door was unlocked, so —”

“So you thought it was okay to just barge into a girl’s room?”



It would have been extremely rude to tell her that I'd mistaken her for a boy. Even I was aware of that.

"Well, uh... Sorry," I apologized. In the interest of not offending her, I decided it would be best not to answer the question.

"..."

"..."

An uncomfortable silence fell between us. The drops of water coming from the shower were practically deafening. After a little while, Claude spoke up.

"...You need to take responsibility."

"What?"

"You saw a girl naked... And there's only one way a man can make up for that!"

"Y-you can't mean...?!"

The word *responsibility* brought only one thing to mind.

"You'd better believe it. Now show that you're a man and accept your fate...," Claude hissed, before throwing something from behind the shower curtain. It hit the ground with a *clang*.

"What's this...?" I asked.

"It's a dagger for self-defense. All right, now use it to disembowel yourself," she commanded.

"Y-you want me to kill myself?!" I exclaimed.

I truly was sorry about seeing her naked. But disemboweling myself was way too harsh a punishment.

"O-obviously! You saw an innocent maiden naked! Get on with it, maggot! Pay with your life, and I'll forget this ever happened!"

"I—I, uh... Is there some other way?"

"Quit whining and gut yourself already! I'm gonna catch a cold here!" she screamed.

...This is on me for mistaking Claude as a boy. I deserved all the blame for this embarrassing incident. I did not, however, deserve to die for it.

“S-sorry!” I said, before fleeing the room.

“What?! Hey, wait!” she shouted after me.

I dashed into my chamber across the hall and barricaded the entrance with a chair and a dresser. Tomorrow was a very important day for me and Lia. I didn’t want to fight without a wink of sleep.

“*Phew...* There’s no way Claude can get through this barricade without making a commotion... Or at least I hope so anyway.”

Forcing the door open would cause the objects in front of it to crash to the floor, which would wake me up right away. That meant it would be nearly impossible for her to attack me unawares. *This’ll let me get some rest, at least.* Focusing my attention on the entrance, I got into bed.

The next morning...

“Good morning, Allen... Are you okay? You’ve got bags under your eyes,” Lia noted, peering into my face. She had come to wake me up.

“Hey, Lia. I...had a little trouble sleeping last night,” I responded. Ultimately, I’d been so worried that Claude would sneak into my room and attack me that I hadn’t even dozed a bit. “One all-nighter is nothing for me, though. I’ll be fine.”

My record for consecutive days without sleep was thirty-five. I’d achieved this during my final trip to the World of Time, when I’d been working intently to develop an attack that could rend through the fabric of reality. A night without slumber wouldn’t set me back much.

“Really? That’s good, but...just don’t push yourself too hard, okay?”

“Yeah, I’ll be careful.”

As we chatted in the hallway, the door across from mine opened, and Claude emerged.

“Good morning, Your Highness,” she said.

“Good morning, Claude... Huh? Did you have trouble sleeping, too?” Lia

asked.

Claude had bags under her eyes as well.

“Yes. I got a little worked up over something, so I was up all night,” she answered. Probably because she’d been quivering with rage. “Anyway, it’s time for breakfast. Please follow me, Your Highness... You too, perv worm.”

Claude glared at me for a moment, then strode briskly down the hall.

Perv worm? The incident last night had earned me an even worse nickname.



After eating breakfast in the dining hall, we headed for the Grand Coliseum in a horse-drawn carriage.

“Wow, it’s so cool...,” I said.

The Grand Coliseum was one of the famous Vesterian tourist spots that Lia had told me about on our flight here. It was a giant, oval-shaped amphitheater made of stone. Though there was a good amount of wear and tear from the weather it had endured over the years, the structure nevertheless projected a real sense of history and strength.

“Come on, we don’t have much time before the duel begins,” Claude urged.

We followed quickly behind her and arrived in a waiting room for contestants. A great variety of weapons adorned the room, including swords, hand axes, lances, and hammers.

“The rules of this coliseum stipulate that contestants cannot bring their own weapons. You are expected to choose one of the combat implements in this room to fight with,” Claude explained.

“Got it,” I responded. They’d probably made that rule to prevent matches from being decided by the quality of each contestant’s armament.

“I’ll find the perfect weapon for you, Allen!” Lia announced as she headed toward a section of the room with countless instruments of combat on display.

...She probably won’t be able to hear me from over there. I took this

opportunity to whisper to Claude.

“Um, so... About yesterday...”

“What is it, perv worm?”

She glowered back at me with disgust, as if I truly were vermin.

“I’m really sorry—”

“Don’t think you’re going to get away with seeing me naked. I’m going to make you pay,” she insisted, turning away in a huff.

Claude hadn’t even let me apologize. Making amends with her seemed utterly hopeless. *What does she mean by “make me pay”?* It sounded as though she was planning some kind of assault. *Why do these things always happen to me...?* I thought with a sigh, drooping my shoulders.

“Hey, Allen, how about this one?”

Lia rushed over to me with a sword.

“That’s a nice one,” I admired. The blade was a perfect length and engraved with a striking pattern. The grip felt comfortable, too. “Thanks, Lia. I’ll use it.”

“No problem! Good luck out there! I’ll be cheering for you,” she said.

Shortly after I took the sword, I heard the voice of an announcer reverberate throughout the arena.

“Thank you for your patience, everyone! Today’s spectacle in the Grand Coliseum is about to begin! All the duels we had scheduled are being canceled in favor of a very special event!”

Deafening cheers erupted. I couldn’t see the stands from here, but it sounded like an enormous crowd.

“From the west gate, representing the lowest dregs of humanity, we have the con man who poisoned the mind of our beloved Princess Lia! Allen Rodooool!”

Once she’d finished her mean-spirited introduction, I left the waiting room and walked out onto the stage.

“Get lost, you goddamn sicko!”

“You’ve got some nerve laying your hands on our princess!”

“You’re all talk, con man! Good luck getting out of here in one piece!”

Deafening boos and jeers rained down upon me. Looking up, I realized that the majority of the spectators were guards from Vesteria Castle. This was going to be a tough crowd.

This really takes me back... This was how things always were at Grand Swordcraft Academy. Everyone loathed me. Everyone wished for my defeat. Everyone howled at my failure. Those were painful days.

But things were different now.

“You can do it, Allen!”

Amid all the boos, I heard Lia’s voice ring out clearly. I was no longer alone.

“From the east gate, we have a man who can lift absolutely anything! He has the strongest arms in all Vesteria—Galious Ranbardak!”

As soon as the announcer had finished speaking, a two-meter-tall man with a shaved head rushed onto the stage.

“HAAAAAAAAAAAAARRRRRRRGH!”

His chin was lined with stubble, and he had a scar left by a sword on his right cheek. He was extremely muscular, and in his right hand, he held a metal club that was one meter long.

This dude doesn’t look remotely like a teenager...

“Wh-what the hell?! There’s no way he’s under twenty!” Lia yelled after dashing onto the stage. She glared at King Gris, who was seated in a special seat in the stands.

“Heh-heh, tomorrow’s my twentieth birthday, but I’m still a teenager for now, Princess,” Galious informed her with a wicked smile.

Though they were cutting it as close as possible, he was technically under twenty.

“That’s hardly fair! You tricked us!” Lia accused.

“Sorry ’bout that, Your Highness. His Majesty said there wasn’t a problem, so

I'm gonna kick this kid's ass!" he proclaimed, resting his giant club on his shoulder.

"Oh, come on..."

I gave Lia a reassuring smile. "Don't worry, Lia. I'm definitely going to win."

"...Okay. I believe in you, Allen," she called out, stepping down from the stage.

I turned toward Galious, and the announcer began to speak again.

"Are you both ready? The first match begins—now!"

The moment she declared the start of the match, Galious charged toward me with surprising agility.

"You snooze, you lose! Harrrrgh!" he yelled, before swinging his iron club down with all his strength. The blow had impressive speed and weight behind it.

"Dodge it, Allen!" Lia's shout sounded very distant.

...I love spending time with Lia. I was very fond of my life with her at Thousand Blade. I couldn't stand the thought of it coming to an end due to something like this. That was why I couldn't let myself lose. No matter how strong my opponent is, I have to win!

As soon as I thought that, I felt a strange power well up from my depths.

"Hrrraaaaagh!"

Performing a quick horizontal sweep, I sliced Galious's club in two.

"Whuh?!"

As he stared dumbfounded at what remained of his club, I took the opportunity to deliver a roundhouse kick to his torso.

"Hah!"

"Gwah!"

My fierce blow sent him flying backward until he crashed into the wall of the coliseum, where he fainted. The crowd went dead silent at this shocking turn of events. After a few long seconds, the announcer declared the result of the match.

“G-Galious Ranbardak is unconscious! Allen Rodol is the winner!”

Murmurs rippled through the crowd.

“H-he sliced the club clean in half...?”

“What just happened?! The king said he was all talk!”

“Wh-who the hell is this guy...? He’s stupid strong!”

I looked up and happened to meet eyes with King Gris. He was clenching his teeth.

“Grr... You *will* pay, Allen Rodol!”

“...Sorry. I’m on top of my game today.”

After defeating Galious in a single strike, I moved on to the second match with newfound power in hand.



The second match was quick.

“Eighth Style—Eight-Span Crow!”

“Huh?! Blargh!”

Three seconds was all I needed to knock my opponent unconscious.

“Romeld Gora has been knocked out! Allen Rodol is the winner!” The announcer declared the result, and a restless atmosphere descended over the Grand Coliseum.

“Good lord... Is this guy even human?!”

“Where does that speed and strength even come from? He’s thin as a rail!”

“I-if he wins the next one...that’ll be really bad for Vesteria, won’t it?”

The announcer spoke up again. “Allen Rodol just defeated two famed swordsmen from the royal palace in a row! This international duelist is a true enigma! Just who is he?!” she cried, attempting to fan the crowd’s excitement.

I stared at the palms of my hands. *I feel a strange power coursing through me... I can do this.*

“It’s time for the last match of today’s special event! Allen’s final opponent is none other than the captain of Princess Lia’s Royal Guard, Claude Stroganof!”

Claude emerged from the east gate.

“I love you, Claude!”

“Please beat him! You’re our only hope!”

“Bury that despicable con man!”

This was the most excitement the crowd had shown all day. The captain of the Royal Guard was massively popular.

“You lecherous worm... I never expected you to make it this far,” Claude hissed.

“So you’re my final opponent,” I responded.

“Hmph. You’d better prepare yourself. I’m going to pay you back for yesterday!” she declared, drawing her blade before the match even started. Between her desire to protect Lia and the incident from last night, she had no lack of motivation.

“We’re all set to begin the final match! Are you both ready? On my mark—begin!”

Claude sprang to action immediately.

“Hegemonic Style—Hard Strike!”

She rushed at me and slashed her sword down from above her head. *Just as I expected*. Considering her aggressive personality, I figured she would try to hit first.

“Hah!”

I whipped my blade out of its scabbard and met hers with a quick-draw strike. Sparks flew as our swords locked.

“Y-you maggot... How are you so powerful?!”

“Uh, thanks... Take this!”

“Huh?!”

I won our contest of strength, then took half a step forward in pursuit. But she was ready.

“Not so fast!” Claude performed a perfect pivot and swept her blade at me horizontally.

“Huh?!”

Though I was leaning forward, I quickly took a step back to narrowly avoid her attack. *...She’s skilled.* Claude had transitioned from her first move to her next splendidly. I would need to shake her balance a great deal more to disrupt her guard.

“Tch, well-played...,” Claude conceded begrudgingly.

“That was an incredible defensive move,” I praised.

“Can it!” she shouted.

We resumed clashing, our duel quickly intensifying. Her fighting style was true to the fundamentals. All her attacks, including the downward slash and the horizontal sweep she’d used at the beginning of the duel, were as polished and clean as could be.

“Hegemonic Style—Annihilation!”

“Huh?!”

She was meticulous and careful, but she also possessed real strength. This level of polish could only be achieved with harsh training.

However...

“Hrrraaaaagh!”

“What the?!”

...I had an enormous advantage in physical might.

I can do this. I have the power to overwhelm her! I thought.

Where is this strength coming from?! Is he really human?! wondered Claude.

Vigor was the foundation of all forms of swordcraft. With our respective skill levels about even, it would be the determining factor.

“Hrrraaaaagh!”

I performed a downward diagonal slash.

“H-huh?!” Claude yelled as my powerful blow knocked her backward into the air. “You perv worm...” She rolled as she hit the ground to erase the impact of falling, then sprang to her feet and readied her sword. But I was not going to let this opportunity go to waste.

“First Style—Flying Shadow!” I launched a projectile attack at her in pursuit.

“A ranged slash?! Hegemonic Style—Hard Strike!” Claude managed to stop the skill before it hit her, but I had only intended it as a diversion.

“Where’d he go?!”

“Right behind you.”

“What?!”

I’d hidden behind the Flying Shadow as it approached to easily get the jump on her.

“Cherry Blossom Blade Secret Technique—Mirror Sakura Slash!”

Four mirrored arcs descended on her from either side, making eight in total.

“Ngh... Huh?!”

She fended off five of the slices with astounding reflexes, but she was unable to handle every one of them since she’d been knocked off-balance. The remaining three slashes nailed her right shoulder, stomach, and thigh. However, the wounds they left were all shallow.

Claude is truly skilled. She’d studied the arcs until the last possible moment, then twisted her body to avoid any serious injuries.

“You bastard...” Claude leaped back to put a considerable distance between us. For a moment, it looked as though she was going to lose her temper, but then she took a deep breath and calmed herself. “...I hate to admit it, but you’re no ordinary con man,” she muttered with a repulsed expression.

“I wasn’t a swindler to begin with.” I tried to correct her, but I didn’t think it got through.

“As a person, you’re a despicable, perverted maggot, an enemy of all women. As a swordsman, however, you have my respect.”

“...Thanks.” I wasn’t sure if I should be flattered or insulted.

“That’s what makes this so regrettable... You are bereft of talent, Allen. To a shocking degree,” Claude declared.

“...You sure don’t mince words,” I responded. I knew better than anyone that I wasn’t a natural with the blade. It still didn’t feel good hearing her say that to my face, though.

“I’m sorry, but it’s the truth. I’ve led the Royal Guard since I was ten years old, and I’ve trained just over fifty thousand people to wield a sword. Believe me, I know how to spot talent. So I can say with confidence that you will never attain Soul Attire,” she asserted, driving the nail in the coffin. “I truly admire your effort. Despite your lack of aptitude, you’ve managed to fight with me on even ground thanks to your excellent swordcraft and well-honed body. I can sense you’ve committed yourself to hellish training for over a decade. Very few have that kind of mental fortitude.”

It was actually *over a billion years* of training, but I didn’t see the need to correct her.

“That being said, you don’t have what it takes to achieve greatness as a swordsman,” she continued dispassionately. “Much of a sword-wielder’s capabilities come down to their Soul Attire. Everyone knows that.”

“...Yeah, I’m well aware.”

“I bet you’ll keep grinding it out until the day you die. It’ll be a hard and painful road, but you have the mental fortitude to stick with it. Yet you’ll accomplish nothing in the end. All that will await you after a life of hard work is the stark reality that you could never acquire Soul Attire.”

“You might be right.” Only a handful of very talented swordsmen could realize that power, and I almost certainly wasn’t one of them.

“If you truly intend to tread that miserable path, I’ll do you a favor and sever you from the blade here and now,” she declared, holding out her right hand. “Draw Breath—Abio Troupe!”

A longsword materialized out of thin air.

“...You have Soul Attire,” I remarked.

“That’s correct. This is what talent looks like,” she responded. Claude struck the stone tiles of the stage with her sword three times in rapid succession. Light-blue crests appeared on the spots her blade had touched.

...What’s happening?

Suddenly, the sections of stone pavement began to crack and transform. Two fist-sized stones quickly morphed into a swallow and a crow respectively, and a barrel-sized stone turned into an owl.

“Tweet, tweet!”

“Cawww!”

“Hoo, hoo!”

Crying as if they drew breath, the stone birds flew freely around Claude.

“No way... Does your Soul Attire have remote-control capabilities?”

“Ha-ha, I’m not foolish enough to reveal my ability to you,” she answered, pointing her longsword at me. “Have at you, Allen Rodol!”

“Come at me!”

The true final battle was starting now!



The swallow and the crow circled around Claude to protect her, while the owl stared down at me from above.

It seems that this Soul Attire has a remote-control skill that allows it to manipulate inorganic materials like stone. This kind of ability was powerful in its simplicity—it increased the number of targets the opponent had to contend with. *I can’t be sure of anything yet, though.*



Claude was the captain of the Royal Guard. I had a hard time imagining that this was all her Soul Attire could do.

When faced with an unfamiliar ability, the best thing to do is strike! If I attacked relentlessly, I could prevent her from going on the offensive with her Soul Attire.

“Haaaah!” I screamed, rushing straight at Claude in order to make the first move.

“Good decision. It seems like you know how to duel someone with Soul Attire... But that won’t work against me,” she said with total ease, before swinging down her longsword.

“Hooooooooo!”

The owl above her head aimed for me with a sudden nosedive. *It’s so fast!* It wasn’t just in free fall—the bird was clearly boosting its speed through Claude’s Soul Attire. *I can handle this, though!*

“Hah!”

I cleaved the owl in two, and Claude laughed. “Detonate.”

“Huh?!”

Her stone familiar began to glow, then burst into a massive explosion.

“Wha—?!” Though I made the split-second decision to leap backward, the scattered shards of rock still pierced my skin. I couldn’t see anything through the smoke.

“Hegemonic Style—Hard Strike!” Claude yelled, following up without a moment’s delay.

“Grr...” Despite my broken stance, I managed to whip my sword into a horizontal position to block her downward strike.

“Nice recovery, but your stomach is wide-open!”

“Bwah!”

Claude delivered a fierce front kick to my stomach. Dull pain surged through my body. “Urgh...” I jumped back to regain my posture and put some distance

between us.

“Haaah...” After taking a deep breath, I did my best to analyze Abio Troupe’s ability. “...I get it. It doesn’t just control matter; it also turns whatever it touches into a bomb.”

“Well-spotted. It seems your head isn’t totally empty,” Claude said, before striking the stone floor again.

“Hooooooooooooooooo!”

She gave life to another stone owl, exactly the same as the last. As long as she had the material, she could craft an endless supply of bombs. *...This is gonna be rough.*

Biting my lip, I checked my condition. *My wounds aren’t too bad.* I’d avoided the heat wave and the explosion when I jumped backward, so I wasn’t seriously injured. The stone fragments only scratched me, and I had already recovered from the kick to my stomach.

All right, I’ll have no trouble keeping up the fight. I just needed to figure out her strategy with Abio Troupe. Holding my blade out before me, I assumed the middle stance.

“Let’s see how you handle this!” Claude shouted, waving her longsword as if it were a conductor’s baton.

“Tweet, tweet!”

“Cawwwwww!”

The fist-sized swallow and crow both dived at me with incredible speed. *Geez, they’re fast!* They were much quicker than the owl.

“Hah!”

I swiftly cut the two birds in two, and they instantly erupted into small explosions.

“Ngh...”

I took a small step backward to avoid all the stone shrapnel. *The smaller ones move with incredible speed, but their detonations pale in comparison to the*

owl's. It was close, but I'd managed to avoid the heat waves, explosions, and all the fragments.

Claude, who had been observing me from a distance, calmly began to speak. "It takes impressive sword speed to keep up with my summons. I guess I have no choice but to increase their numbers," she said, striking the ground with her longsword.

""""""Tweet, tweet, tweet, tweet, tweet!""""""

""""""Caw, caw, caw, caw, caw!""""""

She produced five swallows and five crows—ten new bombs in total.

"Y-you can't be serious...," I muttered. Cold sweat ran down my back. *Their blasts are small, sure, but I don't know if I can handle ten of them...*

"Now dance!"

""""""Tweet, tweet, tweeeeet!""""""

""""""Cawwwwww!""""""

On her orders, ten flying bombs raced toward me.

"How am I supposed to deal with this...?" I mumbled. I focused intently on the approaching birds, slicing through them all before they reached me. However, dodging both the eruptions and the subsequent stone fragments proved difficult, and my injuries piled up.

"Haah, haah..."

"No matter how much effort you put in, you will never achieve natural talent. Take this duel, for instance—it shifted entirely in my favor the moment I summoned my Soul Attire. I'm sorry, but this is your reality."

Claude gave me a look of pity as her birds circled around her. She was totally convinced of her victory.

Shoot. If I could just close in on her... I clenched my teeth and glared at the owl waiting above her head. But if I showed even the slightest sign of trying to approach her, she would go on the defensive and sic the owl on me.

This is a really tricky Soul Attire. If I got near her, she would attack me with

the owl's large explosion. If I kept my distance, she would use the quick swallows and crows to assault me with smaller blasts. And to make matters worse, her bombs seemed to be in near-infinite supply.

...I'm at a loss. I don't know how I can win. Her ability was too complex for someone without Soul Attire to deal with. I looked around to try to find some way out of this deadlock, but we were on an empty stage; there was nowhere to take shelter from the blasts, and no trees to hide behind.

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught sight of Lia.

"Come on, Allen...", I heard her say. She was holding her hands in front of her chest, praying for my victory. Despite how hopeless this match looked, she was still confident I could win.

I just need to believe.

The owl's explosion was significantly larger than that of the swallow and crow, but it was still nothing compared with the gargantuan blast I'd witnessed at the Unity Trade Center. *It's not strong enough to kill me.*

I need to find my resolve. Resolve to jump into the discharge, resolve to withstand the pain, and most of all, resolve to live!

"Arrrrrrgh!"

After firing myself up, I ran straight for Claude.

"Finally gotten desperate, huh?"

She swung her longsword down, and the owl dived at me to fulfill the purpose it was created for.

"Hooooooooo!"

"Hah!" I sliced the bomb open once it flew into range; it burst with dazzling light.

...Urgh. For a split second, my feet stiffened from my fear of the inevitable pain to come. *Don't choke now! Charge!* Rallying myself, I dashed into the glow. That's when the explosion occurred. The heat wave, detonation, and stone fragments struck my body like a hurricane. A giant cloud of smoke engulfed me, blocking my vision.

“Th-that was a direct hit!”

“Holy crap... Is he dead?”

“That blast was enormous... It’s certainly possible.”

Those voices were from the stands.

“A-Allen? Please be okay...”

That was Lia’s trembling voice.

“You fool... Like I said, you stand no chance.”

And that was Claude! Though I was blinded by the smoke, her voice gave away her location.

“This isn’t over yet,” I said.

“Huh?!” Claude exclaimed.

I dashed out of the cloud of smoke and started my counterattack.

“Eighth Style—Eight-Span Crow!”

“Whuh?!” Her face contorted in anguish as two of my slashes connected with her shoulder and leg. “A-are you invincible?!”

“Nope! It *did* sting a little. Hah!” I responded as I flourished my blade with determination.

“Shit!” She cursed as she took a defensive stance.

All right! I just needed to close in on her! I thought.

Damn it all. I can’t use my explosions when he’s this close to me... Claude hissed internally.

Abio Troupe had two abilities—matter manipulation and explosions. It excelled in intermediate and long-range combat. On top of that, it took the form of a longsword, a weapon effective at keeping opponents at bay. But longswords were difficult to wield in close quarters. *This is my chance! Time to hit her with everything I’ve got!*

“Fifth Style—World Render!”

Just as I pulled my blade back for a powerful swing, however, Claude suddenly

smirked. “Nice try, Allen. But I was prepared for this.” She opened her right hand.

“Squawk!”

A small stone parrot emerged. *She was hiding that in her palm?! An explosion that small should be no problem, though!*

“Aaarrgh!” I yelled, heaving my sword downward.

“Squaaaaawwwwwwk!” A dazzling light burst from the parrot’s body, painting the world white. This one wasn’t a conventional bomb, but a flash-bang.

“Whuh?!” The terrific glow blinded me, leaving me open to attack.

“Take this!” Claude slashed at my unguarded abdomen.

“Gyaaah!”

Sharp pain coursed through my body, and I leaped back in retreat. My flickering vision steadily came back into focus, and I checked my wound as soon as I could.

...Huh? The wounds I’d sustained were inexplicably shallow. *Did she miss? Or did she not hit me as hard as I thought?* Either way, her blunder had saved me. I took a moment to regain my composure.

“Wh-what the hell?! Do you eat iron for breakfast or something?!” Claude shouted, her face going pale. I didn’t know what she was talking about.

Can my sword not harm him?! His skin is impossibly hard... And how did he get through that blast uninjured?! Does he have self-strengthening Soul Attire? No, I would be able to sense that. Dammit... What kind of sorcery is this?! Claude thought.

“What are you talking about? I don’t think you can eat metal,” I answered. At least, I’d never heard of someone doing that. “Brace yourself, Claude,” I warned, taking a step forward.

“...” On the other hand, Claude took a step back. She looked pale, and all traces of her earlier confidence were gone.

I’m used to the explosions now. Either Abio Troupe’s power was growing

weaker, or my body had adapted to its abilities. Even the large blast from the owl hadn't hurt me as much as I thought it would. At this point, I doubted that the swallows and crows could even harm me at all.

There's nothing left to fear! The only thing I needed to do now was attack!



Having totally negated Claude's Abio Troupe, I charged at her in an attempt to bring the duel to a close.

"Arrrrgh!"

"S-stay back!" Claude shouted, scrambling to create a large number of bombs before sending them at me to impede my advance.

""""""Tweet, tweet, tweet!""""""

""""""Caw, caw, caw!""""""

It was a flock of over twenty swallows and crows.

"Hah!" I cut them down one by one. All the small explosions hit me, but I felt pain from neither the heat waves, nor the detonations, nor the stone shrapnel.

"Y-you're a monster...," Claude gasped. Now accepting that her bombs had no effect on me, she began to engage me with pure swordcraft. The heavy style of the Hegemonic School of Swordcraft harmonized spectacularly with the longsword, which was designed to deliver powerful blows with the user's full body weight behind them.

However, if our duel came down to simple swordcraft and physical strength, I had the upper hand!

"Take this!"

"Huh?!"

I swung my blade up and broke Claude's guard. Though she still had a hold on her sword, I'd pushed both of her hands above her head, leaving her torso wide-open.

"No!" she shouted, knowing she didn't have time to defend herself.

“You’re fini... Wait, what?!” Something felt off when I tried to deliver the finishing blow. I quickly jumped backward and looked down at my weapon. “Wh-what the heck?!”

The base of my blade was melting as if from some kind of acid; it looked like it could break at any moment. Straining my ears, I heard a strange bubbling sound. *Wh-what in the world is happening?!* As I watched on in bewilderment, the sword continued to dissolve until it finally plopped to the ground. It had been rendered completely useless.

Did Claude’s Soul Attire cause this?! ...No, this wasn’t her doing. Upon closer inspection, I saw that some kind of white powder had been planted inside it. *I can only think of one person who would have done this...* I looked up and saw King Gris sneering wickedly from his special seat.

Gah-ha-ha-ha! You finally noticed, idiot boy! I had a chemical planted into your sword that releases a powerful acid when exposed to heat! It responds wonderfully to Claude’s bombs! Do you see it now? This is why I said you don’t have a chance in hell of winning! the king thought.

Judging by his expression, I had no doubt the tampering was on his orders. *Dammit. He was willing to cheat in order to prevent me from coming out on top...* I looked back at Claude, who wore a troubled expression.

...So His Majesty is responsible for this. He probably sabotaged every single weapon in the waiting room, Claude thought.

Noticing my gaze, she began to speak in a meek tone. “I had no desire to win through such an underhanded trick,” she said, pausing for a moment. “However, I have given my life to serve Princess Lia. I will do anything to protect her, no matter how unsavory the means!” Her expression clearly communicated that she had made up her mind on the matter.

“I understand completely,” I responded. Just like I had my resolve, Claude had hers.

“You fought very well, Allen. You’re a much better swordsman than I could have imagined. But you have no chance of winning now that you’ve lost your weapon. Surrender now. This duel is already a blotch on my honor, but regardless, I do not want to sink so low as to attack an unarmed opponent,” she

declared, training her longsword at me with an uncomfortable expression.

She's right that I have no chance of winning without a sword. But she made one miscalculation.

"Claude, do you really think I would surrender after losing my blade?"

Why would I do that? Fighting at a disadvantage was nothing new for me. In my duel with Dodriel at Grand Swordcraft Academy, he'd been the academy's prodigy, while I'd been the Reject Swordsman; I shouldn't have had a chance. When I'd crossed swords with Shido in the Elite Five Holy Festival, the odds were stacked in his favor thanks to his physical prowess and Soul Attire. And in my bout with Shii in the Club-Budget War, it was clear she'd beaten me handily in terms of pure skill with the blade.

I'm always taking on hopeless battles... This fight right here was nothing more than another instance of that.

"Allen... You've done enough. Going up against Claude without a weapon is suicidal! I don't want to see you get seriously hurt!" Lia yelled from the mezzanine, where she was watching the duel. She had tears in her eyes.

"...Hey, Lia, can I ask one question?"

"Wh-what?"

"What is it that you want?"

"Huh?"

"I...I want to be with you. I want to work together with you on our swordcraft for as long as we can," I declared, voicing my desire clearly. I waited quietly for her response.

"I—I want to be with you, too... I want us to be together forever!" she proclaimed for all to hear.

"I see... Thank you." That was enough for me. That was the only reason I needed to keep fighting. "Are you ready, Claude?"

"Are you in your right mind?"

"Yes. I am going to defeat you and retain my life with Lia. Nothing is going to

stop me!” No matter how hopeless the situation, I wasn’t about to give in. As someone who had trained for over a billion years, I knew the value of perseverance better than anyone.

“I will not show mercy for any challenger, even if they are barehanded.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way.” I locked eyes with Claude, and she shook her head.

“I suppose my eye is not as discerning as I believed. I take back everything I have said about you. I respect you as a swordsman, and most of all, as a man!” she announced, giving me high praise. “As you wish, I will not hold back!”

She held her sword out horizontally, its tip trained on me. The tension in the Grand Coliseum was so thick, you could cut it with a knife. A moment later...

“Arrrrrrrrgh!”

“Haaaaaaaah!”

...Claude and I charged at each other.

“Hah!”

I threw a straight-right punch with all my strength behind it.

“Hegemonic Style Secret Technique—Supreme Dragon Strike!”

Claude loosed a downward diagonal slash that took full advantage of her longsword. Both of our blows carried our resolve.

However, my arm obviously had nowhere near the range of her longsword. *Dammit.* Her blade would almost certainly cut me down before my fist reached her.

“Come on, Allen...!” I heard Lia scream.

This isn’t over... I can still do this... Extending my arm, I kicked off the ground, squeezing out every last ounce of power I could muster. *Faster, quicker, stronger!* A split second was all I needed!

I...will...win!

“Haaarraaarrgh!”

“?!”

What the hell?! He just accelerated out of nowhere! I need to dodge— No, it's hopeless. Can I defend myself? No, that's impossible, too... Am I going to die? No, I can save myself! Claude thought.

“Detonate—Abio Troupe!”

The moment our blows were about to meet, Claude opted to blow up her own Soul Attire.

“Whuh?!”

“Gaaah!”

The sudden explosion sent both of us flying.

“...*Phew.*” I was used to her blasts by now, so I was able to roll as I hit the ground to regain my balance. Claude, on the other hand, didn't take the impact nearly as well; she bounced against the stone pavement like a ball.

“Haah... Haah...” Her shoulders were heaving, and her legs were shaking, but she managed to get to her feet.

Why did she detonate her own weapon...? Did she miscalculate? She should have known that the explosions were ineffective against me by now. And indeed, despite the size of the blast, it had barely even singed me. Meanwhile, Claude was gasping for breath after taking a direct blow from it. Countless lacerations lined her body, and she was clearly worse for wear.



Most importantly, her longsword had snapped in two. *This is my chance!*

“...I surrender.”

“...Huh?”

“You win, Allen Rodol.” Claude dropped her broken longsword onto the stage.

“Th-this match has reached its conclusion! Claude Stroganof has surrendered! That means the winner of today’s special event is—Allen Rodol!”

A smattering of applause began after the announcer declared the winner. It grew steadily louder until it reached a deafening roar that seemed to shake the coliseum.

“That fight was *insane!*”

“Right? That was the best duel I’ve ever seen!”

“Allen’s the real deal!”

The spectators clapped and whistled as they cheered passionately for my performance. With that, I had successfully defeated three of King Gris’s most talented young swordfighters.



I returned to Vesteria Castle with Lia after winning my gamble with King Gris. We were currently waiting to speak with the man himself.

The king was sitting on his throne with a funereal expression on his face. Claude, who was now caked in bandages after being treated in the palace infirmary, was stationed behind him. Lia and I were the only other people in the room.

“Allen, are you sure you’re okay?” Lia asked. She had been watching me with concern.

“Yeah. I don’t feel any pain, so I should be fine,” I answered.

Claude and I had been carried to the infirmary as soon as we reached the castle. Claude had received many bruises and lacerations from the final explosion, so she was ordered to rest for a week. The doctors didn’t find a

single scratch on me, however, and they dismissed me from the infirmary without any treatment.

I'm pretty sure I noticed a few wounds after the explosion... But if they had been there at one point, my body showed no trace of them now. *Hmm... That's strange...*

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

Not one word passed from the king's or Claude's lips as I stood there in thought. The throne room was quiet and oppressive. Feeling that this silence wasn't going to get us anywhere, I decided to speak up.

“Your Majesty, as I said yesterday, I think there's been a big misundersta—”

“Silence. I don't want to hear it,” the king interrupted. He *still* wasn't going to listen to me.

“Father! Listen to Allen! Actually, before that, what was with that messed-up sword? Explain yourself,” Lia pressed, letting out her pent-up frustration.

“That was, uh, well...”

“Go on.” Her glare could have frozen lava.

“...*Ahem*. Allen Rodol,” the king said, addressing me to avoid his daughter's inquiry.

“Y-yes, Your Majesty?” I responded. It wasn't like I could ignore a monarch.

“Oh, *now* you want to talk to him? Don't just use him to avoid my question,” Lia growled in an unnaturally cool voice. A vein bulged on her forehead.

“I-it's okay, Lia. I've already moved on, so you can drop it,” I said, trying to calm her down.

“If you say so... You're always too nice,” she grumbled unhappily, but that did get her to back off.

“You have overcome the trials before you and earned the title of Vesteria's Next Strongest. I acknowledge and respect this feat,” the king muttered quietly, his eyes closed. “And I also approve of your...r-romantic relationship with my

daughter.”

““Huh?”” Lia and I blurted out simultaneously, turning to each other. Unless my ears were mistaken, he’d just said “romantic relationship” instead of “master and slave.”

Does that mean what I think it does? Realizing a certain possibility, I immediately looked at Claude. She noticed me glance at her and spun away in a huff. *Claude...!* She must have left out the part about Lia being my slave during her initial report to the king and told him we were dating instead.

But if that’s true, that means the king got this worked up just because he believed I was Lia’s boyfriend. Talk about being a helicopter parent, I thought. Actually, that’s unfair of me. There’s no way a student like me can understand the feelings a father has for his daughter. I had no right to criticize his parenting.

The king drew me out of my thoughts.

“However, my approval only goes so far! You can have a pure, chaste relationship, but I do not grant you permission to start a physical one!” he yelled, standing up in fury.

“O-of course, Your Majesty!” I responded.

“F-Father, don’t say stuff like that so loudly!” Lia shouted.

We both flushed a deep shade of crimson.

“...Good. No boy can date my daughter without my approval. Don’t you forget that,” he declared, pausing momentarily. “You will both return to Thousand Blade Academy tomorrow! Claude!”

“The aircraft is ready for departure, Your Majesty!”

“Very good.” King Gris nodded, satisfied with Claude’s response. He was apparently sending us back to Thousand Blade the next morning.

...It’s still summer break, isn’t it? I felt like I had spent the last few days flying all around the world. *This might... No, I can already say this definitively. The last few days have been way harder than my average day at the academy. Haaah... I wish summer break would end already...*

While hoping for something no other student ever would, I left the throne

room with Lia.



After Allen and Lia had vacated the now-quiet throne room, Gris let out a loud sigh.

“Dammit! If only I had prepared something that would have sabotaged him more directly... This isn’t over, Allen Rodol! Next time, I’ll use an explosive instead of chemicals and blow your whole arm off!” he seethed, pounding his throne with a clenched fist.

Watching him lose his temper, Claude forced herself to speak up. “My deepest apologies, Your Majesty. I have failed you as the captain of Princess Lia’s guard... Please punish me however you see fit,” she told him, bowing her head submissively. Gris decided to ask her about something that had been bugging him.

“Claude, what transpired at the end of your duel? To my eyes, it looked like you simply made a miscalculation and self-destructed.” He was asking why Claude had suddenly blown up her Abio Troupe despite clearly being in an advantageous position.

“This may sound like I’m making excuses for myself, but...,” Claude began. “That was exactly what I meant to do.”

“...Go on.”

“If I had made the error of following through with my attack, I probably— No, I *certainly* would have been killed.”

Gris’s eyes went wide at her response. “Excuse me? Tell me exactly what you mean!”

“Yes, Your Majesty! The moment my sword was about to make contact, his Spirit Core, which I hadn’t felt a trace of during the entire duel, momentarily emerged. He had long white hair and wore a menacing expression... Just thinking of him now makes my hair stand on end. Allen’s Spirit Core is bona fide monster,” she answered. The king could tell from her tone that she was being sincere.

“Hmm... For you to say that about a Spirit Core... Give me an estimate. How strong is it?”

Claude hesitated before replying gravely, “Equal in might to Princess Lia’s Fafnir, at the least.”

“D-do you mean Fafnir as it is currently sealed? Or an awakened Fafnir?!”

“...I mean an unfettered one.”

“Th-that’s impossible... How could a Spirit Core that powerful be residing in that little twerp?! Are you sure about this, Claude?!” Gris shouted, jumping to his feet.

“Your Majesty... I hate to admit this, but it is *at least* as strong as Fafnir. The possibility remains that his Spirit Core will surpass it.”

“You’re not messing with me, are you?!”

“I would do no such thing.”

Claude’s serious expression was all the proof he needed. “I don’t believe it...” Gris grumbled to himself as he sat back down upon his throne. “...That reminds me. You said it was Reia who revealed their romantic relationship to you, correct?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

Gris put his hand to his chin and thought. “I see now... That lass played me for a fool!”

“...?” Claude tilted her head in confusion.

“She lured me into a trap by telling you about their relationship, then used Allen Rodol to send me a warning! What a nasty trick. She’s much more cunning than she looks...,” he muttered, grinding his teeth hard.

Dammit, how much does she know? Can I still win Allen over to my side, or is he already Reia’s puppet? Regardless, I need to accelerate the plan.

“Anyway—if they have a card in their hand that can rival Fafnir, we need to fortify this country’s defense!” Gris declared.

“I agree, Your Majesty,” Claude said.

“Any news on the task I gave the Royal Knights?”

“I received a report stating they found and destroyed a soul crystal–pill production facility located in Vesteria.”

“What about the Black Organization? They had to have been in charge.”

“Unfortunately, the place was already deserted. There was neither a trace of the Black Organization nor the large number of soul-crystal pills that were manufactured there.”

“Damn. Those slippery bastards...” The king clicked his tongue in frustration, then made up his mind and gave Claude an order. “Oh well. Call two, no, three knights back to the castle and tell the rest to continue pursuing the Black Organization.”

“Understood, Your Majesty,” Claude responded, immediately making her exit to follow Gris’s order.

Alone in the throne room, Gris tugged on his magnificent beard and plunged himself in thought. “A Spirit Core as strong as Fafnir... Could Allen Rodol be the Child of Destru— No, I’m overthinking things...”



I let out a sigh of relief as soon as we left our audience with the king.

“Thank goodness... We really owe Claude one,” I said. I didn’t even want to think about how much worse the situation would have been had she told him about our relationship as master and slave.

“Hmm... She also filled his head with totally unnecessary lies, so I’m not sure I agree with you on that one,” Lia complained, crossing her arms.

“Ah-ha-ha, that’s harsh.”

“Like I said before, Allen, you’re too nice... Though, I suppose that can be a good thing sometimes.”

We left the castle as we talked, and then we ambled through the busy streets of Arlund for a while.

“H-hey... Father thinks that we’re boyfriend and girlfriend, doesn’t he?” Lia asked timidly, as if to double-check what we heard earlier.

“Sure seems that way.”

“Then, um...shouldn’t we start behaving as such? He might grow suspicious if we don’t.”

“...Oh yeah, I could see that.”

“R-right?!” she exclaimed overexcitedly.

“U-um, but how do we do that?” I wasn’t keen on admitting this, but I had never once dated a girl. Beyond that, I had never had a friend of any gender before entering Thousand Blade.

“I actually have an idea. Want to hear it?”

“Sure.”

For some reason, Lia needed to take a deep breath before continuing. “D-do you want to go on a date?” she asked timidly, her cheeks flushing red.



After I’d accepted Lia’s invitation, we decided to spend the day on a date exploring Vesteria. It was currently one in the afternoon; we hadn’t eaten lunch yet, so we decided to get something along the way.

“Look, Allen! They’re selling buttered potatoes! Let’s get some!” Lia remarked, pointing at one of the stalls excitedly.

“Sounds good to me,” I responded.

“Yay!” She ran to the stall with an enthusiastic smile. “Excuse me, can we have two buttered potatoes?”

“Coming right up! Whoa, are you Princess Lia?!”

The stall owner was a bearlike woman wearing a blue *happi* coat. She was a just a bit smaller than Ms. Paula—which was to say she was massive.

“Hmm? Who’s this handsome boy? Are you her boyfriend?” she asked with a wide grin.

“U-um...” I fumbled, unsure of how to respond. *How should I answer this...?* As King Gris misunderstood it, Lia and I were supposed to be dating. But that had been a private matter between us and him. *The princess having a boyfriend would be really big news... I wonder if we should keep it on the down low.*

“Ah-ha-ha... He is, actually...,” Lia said, blushing.

“Well, I’ll be. To think tiny little Princess Lia has already reached that age. How wonderful! Here, have a freebie!”

“Thank you very much!”

We took our buttered potatoes and left the stand.

“I—I can’t believe I actually said it...”

“Is it okay to tell people that?”

“Y-yeah, I’m sure it’ll be fine!”

After that, we went to many more stalls and sampled a great variety of foods.

“I can’t believe Father... *Munch*. Summoning us all the way here... *Mmm!* Then sending us back the moment he’s done with us... *Gulp*. What gives him the right?! Wow... This is delicious!” Lia said, her anger toward her father and her enjoyment of the strawberry ice cream mixing incongruously.

“Yeah, it’s really yummy. You know...if we stay any longer, King Gris could end up changing his mind about us. Leaving tomorrow may not be a bad idea,” I answered gently.

“Oh my god, he totally could... Yep, tomorrow it is!” Lia agreed with a satisfied nod.

Once we’d had our fill of eating and walking, we searched for the site of our next activity.

“Ah, there it is. That’s the Vesteria National Museum, one of our most famous tourist attractions,” Lia informed me, pointing at a large building in the distance.

“Wow, it’s huge!” I remarked. The gallery’s architectural stylings made it look like a temple. It was only three stories tall, but very wide. It probably surpassed

Vesteria Castle in terms of square meters.

“Let’s go in!”

“Sure.”

We strode through the front door. No entrance fee was necessary. There were plenty of tourists inside, but the museum was so large that it didn’t feel overwhelmingly crowded. We would be able to take our time savoring the exhibits.

“This is my first time in a museum,” I revealed.

“Wow, really? Then this looks like a job for Professor Lia! I’ll explain all the pieces to you!” Lia exclaimed.

“Ha-ha, that would be great.”

Lia and I began to walk around and browse the collection.

“See this weird painting? They say the artist, Henry, drew this while blindfolded. That’s why there’s paint on the frame.”

“Wow, I can see that.”

Lia had received a noble’s education from a young age, so her knowledge of the fine arts was extensive. She gave me just the right amount of information about each exhibit—never too much and never too little. It was engaging to listen to. On top of that, it seemed like she was adjusting the amount she told me about each piece based on how interested I was.

As we perused the museum, one item in particular caught my eye.

“...”

It was a strange and fascinating mural depicting a cherry blossom tree and seven different beasts, including a dragon and a wolf. Despite its position on a wall in the middle of a reception hall, nobody else was looking at it.

“Lia, what’s with that mural?” I asked.

“Ah, that piece. No one knows who painted it, or even when or where it was created. It’s a true mystery,” she answered.

“Really...”

“It’s been here for a very long time in spite of the fact that it doesn’t meet the criteria to be displayed in this museum. Once, I asked Father why a painting that didn’t really draw anyone in had been put in such a prominent position, but he wouldn’t give me a clear answer,” Lia added, shrugging.

“Is it just a favorite of his or something?”

“Hmm, I don’t think that’s it. We often come here for inspections and such, and I notice him glaring at it every single time. Almost like he’s angry about something.”

“H-huh... This really is a perplexing mural.”

We spent a little while longer looking around; by the time we left the gallery, it was already evening.

“Phew...”

“Mrgh...”

We both stretched, glad to be outside after such a long time indoors.

“Thanks for showing me around, Lia. That was really fun.”

“Ha-ha, glad to hear it.”

Her smile was truly beautiful against the glow of the evening sky.

“So do you want to head back? It’s getting late,” I suggested.

“Not yet, actually. There’s one more place I want to go. Is that okay?”

“Sure, what is it?”

“The Hill of Hope, of course!”



I followed Lia straight through the streets of Arlund. Not long after the flat roads began to slope gently upward, we arrived at our destination, the Hill of Hope.

“Phew, this must be it...,” I said. There was a large crowd of people here, even though the sun had already set.

“Allen, over here!” called Lia.

“Okay,” I responded, heading toward the steep edge of the hill.

“...”

I went speechless at the captivating sight stretching out before us.

“It’s gorgeous, isn’t it?” said Lia.

“Yeah, this is the best view I’ve ever seen,” I agreed.

Countless lights twinkled amid the darkness of the city, some of them from street stalls and the windows of buildings, and others from lanterns that people carried in the streets, which seemed to move around as though they were alive. *This is totally different from the beauty of nature, but just as stunning in its own way.*

We stood there and soaked in the scenery.

“Thank you,” Lia said suddenly.

“For what?” I asked.

“I was so happy to see you fight for me. It’s all thanks to you that we’ll be able to continue living together. So...thank you.”

“You’re welcome, Lia.”

Now that I had a moment to reflect, the last three days had been really hectic. Just when I thought I was going to get a break after summer training camp, Claude had assaulted me out of the blue, and I was summoned to Vesteria the next day. We ate as soon as we got off the aircraft, then went straight to our audience with King Gris. I’d accepted his challenge to fight at the Grand Coliseum, and later that night, I saw Claude naked... I was better off forgetting about that last part, though.

Finally, I’d bested the three swordfighters the king had selected to fight me today, ensuring that Lia could continue studying with me at Thousand Blade. *I’m long overdue for a break.* I felt fine physically, but mentally, I was exhausted.

“What do you think of my father?” Lia asked. Now *that* was a difficult question to answer.

“Hmm...” He was a complicated man, but if I had to boil him down to one sentence, it would be this: “It’s clear he loves his daughter very much.”

“Ah-ha-ha, you’re right about that. He can go way too far with it, though, which is his biggest flaw.”

“Yeah, I’ll decline to comment on that one.” I was hesitant to speak ill of him while so many of his subjects were around. We spent some time staring absentmindedly at the beautiful scenery, until Lia broke the silence in a small voice.

“You know... My mother died soon after giving birth to me.”

“...R-really?” The gravity of her topic caught me off guard, but I still managed a response.

“Yeah... She was frail, so she ended up succumbing to the burden of giving birth. I only know her face from pictures. Father says she was a resilient person who could light up the room.”

“I see.”

“A servant who’s tended to our family for a long time once told me that Father made a promise to my mother before she died: *‘I will protect our child, no matter what!’* I think that’s the reason he can be so overbearing.”

“...That makes sense.” He gave Lia extra affection to show her the love that the late queen—his wife—had felt for her as well. That explained the lengths he went to keep her safe.

“My father was totally in the wrong to sabotage your sword like that... But he only did it because he loves me. So I hope... I hope that you don’t hate him for it.”

“Okay. I won’t hold a grudge.” Lia clearly cared very much about her family.

“Thanks... Sorry for bringing down the mood like that!”

“It’s okay, I don’t mind,” I told her gently, to which she muttered her thanks again.

“...I don’t know why, but I wanted to tell you that. Sorry for burdening you.”

“No, it’s not a burden at all. I’m happy to learn more about you.” At that moment, I decided that I should share something about myself, too. *I’m not exactly doing this to pay her back, but...* I did want Lia to learn more about me. “That’s...actually something we have in common.”

“...Huh?”

“I’ve also lost a parent. My father passed away soon after I was born, apparently from an epidemic.”

“...Really,” Lia said, looking at me with surprise.

“Mom raised me all by herself. She worked herself to the bone to provide for me... I’m very grateful to her.”

“She must be a very strong person.”

“Yeah, I really admire her.”

Lia spoke softly after a short pause. “I’d like to meet your mom, Allen.”

“I appreciate the thought, but you’d be shocked by how rural my hometown is. To give you an idea, there are more cows than there are people.”

“Ha-ha, I don’t mind that. It’s where you grew up, so I’m sure it’s wonderful.”

“Really? It would mean a lot if you liked it.”

We stood in silence for some time.

“...”

“...”

Neither of us said a word, but there was nothing uncomfortable about it. It was a warm silence full of mutual understanding.

“...Hey, Allen. Since we’re here, do you want to make a wish?” Lia proposed after a few minutes passed.

“A wish? Oh yeah, don’t people say the Hill of Hope can grant any wish?” I remembered her telling me that on our flight here from Thousand Blade.

“Yeah. See that big tree over there?”

“Um... Oh yeah.”

Lia was pointing to a tree so tall that I couldn't see the top. "Supposedly, it's been here for hundreds of millions of years... I don't know if that's true, though."

Hundreds of millions of years, huh. *This tree has probably worked just as hard as I have.* Not once had it crossed my mind that I would feel a personal connection with a plant.

"Tradition also has it that if you stand under that tree, put your hands together, and make a wish from the bottom of your heart, it will be granted."

"Wow, that sounds awesome. Let's try it."

"Yeah!"

We walked to the base of the tree. After exchanging glances, we each put our hands together and made a wish.

I wish to be with Lia forever.

I wish to be with Allen forever.

After making our wishes, we opened our eyes and quietly moved back to our original spot.

"So..."

"Hmm?"

"What did you wish for, Allen?"

"Uh... That's a secret. Sharing it would be way too embarrassing," I said. There was no way I could bring myself to tell her I wished that we could be together forever.

"Oh, come on... Give me a hint, at least!"

"Well, if you insist... How about this—it would make me happy if you wished for the same thing."

Her face lit up in response. "Hmm-hmm, I wonder if we did?"

Lia and I spent a memorable final day in Vesteria.

CHAPTER 2

A New Semester & the First-Year Tourney

I returned from Vesteria Kingdom full of hope that I could spend the rest of summer break in relaxation... But that hope soon died in vain. Life wasn't so kind, and I got caught up in one thing after the other.

It all started when I went to see that hit movie with Lia and Rose. In a horrible episode of clumsiness, Lia let slip that we went to Vesteria together. Unsurprisingly, Rose ended up feeling offended over being excluded. Fortunately, I was able to smooth things out by promising her that the two of us would do something together sometime.

Besides that, I also subdued some thieves I ran into and had to deal with Cain from Ice King Academy, who'd turned into an ardent stalker of mine. I never got a chance to rest. *What an exhausting summer break...* Honestly, I was relieved it was finally over.

"Do you have everything, Lia?"

"Yep, I'm ready."

Lia and I left our apartment to head to class together. It was August 1, the beginning of the new semester. Summer was at its height, and the sun's harsh rays bore down upon us. Thankfully, it was a breezy, low-humidity day, so the weather actually felt pretty refreshing.

I glanced to my side and caught Lia humming cheerfully. *Going all the way to Vesteria was worth it.* We were going to Thousand Blade together. I should have been used to that by now, but I was especially grateful for it after what we'd just been through.

"What is it, Allen? Is there something on my face?" she asked, noticing my gaze. She began to pat her cheeks.

“Ha-ha, no. It’s nothing.”

Basking in the feeling of summer as the cicadas sang around us, we headed for our classroom.



We opened the door to Class 1-A to find the majority of our classmates already inside.

“Hey, Allen! How’s it going?” Tessa Balmond, the practitioner of the Slice Iron Style, called out to me.

“Good morning, Tessa,” I said, waving back at him. He studied my body intently from head to toe. “Wh-what is it?” I asked, bewildered.

“...You’ve gotten stronger, haven’t you, Allen?” he mumbled, looking none too pleased at the development.

“H-have I? I can’t really tell... Speaking of getting stronger, your arms have gotten huge, Tessa. I can see from your palms that you’ve really been getting some swings in,” I noted. His hands were covered with torn calluses.

“Heh, you noticed! Practice swings aren’t all I’ve been up to, though. I’ve been training hard to keep up with you. You’d better be ready for me next time we cross blades.”

“I’m looking forward to it.”

After I’d finished my conversation with Tessa, our other classmates greeted us as well.

“Mornin’, Allen!”

“Good morning, Allen and Lia!”

“Good morning, everyone,” I responded.

“Good morning! Let’s have a good second semester!” said Lia.

After greeting all our classmates, Lia and I walked to our desks and put our stuff down. Just then, the door opened weakly behind us.

“*Hraaah...*” Rose entered the room, yawning and looking even more tired

than she usually did in the early hours of the day. She tottered unsteadily toward us. “*Hraaah...* Mornin’, Allen and Lia,” she said with a yawn and a quick wave.

“Good morning, Rose. You look sleepy as ever,” I remarked.

“Morning, Rose. Your hair is all over the place...,” Lia commented.

Right after Rose had joined us, we heard the familiar *ding-dong, ding-dong* of the school bell, and everyone took their seats. It had been a month since I’d sat in my seat next to the window, so even the view outside felt nostalgic.

The entrance to the classroom crashed open noisily. “Good morning, boys and girls! It’s time to start homeroom!” Chairwoman Reia announced, entering with even more gusto than usual. “I have some matters to discuss, but...that can wait for afternoon homeroom. We’re just gonna get started on first period instead! Follow me to the Soul Attire Room, everyone!”

We relocated and picked up our Soul Attire class from where we’d left off last semester. Some of my peers had already realized their Soul Attire and were striving to control and strengthen it. I felt a little jealous of their talent as I watched them from the corner of my eye.

...No, I shouldn’t think that way. My natural abilities have never been on their level. They’re all elites who got into Thousand Blade on their own merits rather than through a scholarship. I don’t have time to be jealous of them. An average joe like me has no choice but to make up for the talent gap by working five times as hard as anyone else!

Clearing idle thoughts from my mind, I calmly readied my soul-crystal sword. I inhaled deeply, then exhaled slowly. Before long, I was sinking into my consciousness, plunging lower and lower until I reached the world of my soul. When I opened my eyes, I saw a sprawling wasteland.

Rotten trees. Fetid soil. Putrid air. I’d lost track of how many times I’d come to this desolate realm. There, *he* sat, laid out as usual on his giant boulder.

“Hey... It’s been a while,” I greeted him.

“Heh, the little wimp has come back for another ass-whupping,” he said with a wicked grin.

“I have a question... Will defeating you really grant me my Soul Attire?”

“Yep, that’s right. Ten billion years wouldn’t be enough time for a brat like you to beat me, though.”

“That’s a relief to hear.” That meant that I had a chance, no matter how infinitesimal. If I wanted my Soul Attire, all I had to do was beat him! “Let’s get started. First Style—Flying Shadow!”

“Ha, how boring.”

Our first duel in a month turned out to be a horribly one-sided affair.

“Eighth Style—Eight-Span Crow!”

“The hell? Is that really all you’ve got?!” Unaffected by a direct hit from Eight-Span Crow, he casually swung his fist down from above his head.

“Oof!” I defended against his attack perfectly but emerged with major wounds regardless. *He’s so powerful...* I thought that I had grown stronger from all I had overcome over the last month, but I still stood no chance against him. If anything, it felt like the gap between us had gotten wider.

No, that isn’t just my imagination. He had clearly grown mightier since the first time we fought. It was as though he regained more of his original power every time I progressed myself.

“D-dammit...” Unable to take any more, I fell flat on my face.

“Pathetic. You don’t even make for a good warm-up,” he spat, before jumping onto his boulder and sitting cross-legged.

“...A-are you not going to possess me?” I asked as my consciousness faded.

“Ha, I’m sure Black Fist is right there waiting for me... I can’t handle that shitty attack of hers in this fragile little vessel. I’d be able to deal with it if not for initial petrification, though...,” he answered, face twisted by rage.

So his strength is tied to mine somehow... After obtaining that vital piece of information, my consciousness faded from the realm of my soul.

“...Goddamn brat. I can’t believe he can cut my skin now. He’s actually improved a little...”

When I came to, I was back in the real world.

“Haah, haah... Dammit...” I was still so far away. The road to obtaining my Soul Attire was precipitous and never-ending. However...

“I can’t give in.” No matter how hopeless the odds, there was a chance as long as I kept trying. “Okay, one more time!” Just as I tightened my grip on my soul-crystal sword, the bell chimed to announce the end of the class. I looked at my watch and saw that it was already the end of second period.

“That’s all for now! We’re taking a one-hour break for lunch! Hmm, let’s see... Gather here after the break instead of the classroom! You’re dismissed!” the chairwoman announced.

Lia, Rose, and I grabbed a meal and headed for the Student Council room to attend our regular meeting (which was a meeting in name only, of course). We knew our way around Thousand Blade’s large campus by heart at this point, so we reached our destination in no time. I knocked on the door three times.

“...Enter,” came Shii’s voice a few seconds later. She sounded quiet, devoid of her usual energy.

“Coming in,” I called back. Feeling that something was off, I slowly opened the door—and found the place almost completely dark.

““““Huh?!”””” all three of us exclaimed. The lights were off, and the curtains were shut. The Student Council president was sitting alone in the middle of the darkened room, without hide nor hair of Lilim and Tirith.

“Wh-what’s going on, President? I’m gonna turn on the light, okay?” I said, before flipping on the light switch.

“Allen, please... I’m in big trouble...,” Shii begged. She got up from her chair and walked shakily toward me.

“Wh-what’s wrong?” She clearly didn’t seem like her normal self. *What happened to her...?* I gulped.

“I can’t do this alone... Please help me!” she cried, throwing herself against my chest.

“P-President?!” Her sweet scent tickled my nostrils as she pressed her soft body against mine. My pulse quickened; I had no idea what to do.

“H-hey, Shii! Get off him!”

“Don’t cling to him like that!”

Lia and Rose tore her from me with startling speed.

Wh-what is it this time? I thought that things were finally going to settle down now that summer break was over, but it took less than a day into the new semester for me to get dragged into yet more drama.



I got Shii to sit in a chair and decided to hear her out once she’d calmed down.

“Um... What happened, President?”

“Allen, will you help me?” She stared at me with puppy-dog eyes, but there was no way I could agree with so little to go on.

“That depends on what you’re asking.”

“...Jerk.”

“That’s not fair... Just tell me what happened. I can’t know what’s up until you tell me.”

She pointed at something.

“...That’s an enormous stack of papers,” I observed.

“It really is,” Shii said with a sigh.

An ungodly amount of documents had been piled up on the vice president’s desk. Lilim had apparently moved them to the corner of the room because she felt they were in the way.

“I was hoping the vice president would be back after summer break, but he still hasn’t returned...,” Shii explained.

“I can see that,” I said.

The vice president had run off to the Holy Ronelian Empire—a dangerous country that Liengard had placed a travel ban on—in order to mine a rare mineral known as a blood diamond. He'd taken care of all the Student Council's actual duties before he left, so now that he was gone, the work had simply piled up.



“Lilim and Tirith aren’t even coming to the meetings anymore. They got out while they could.”

“...I see.”

“I don’t know what to do... I can’t possibly handle this amount of paperwork on my own.” All the strength left my body once I realized what Shii had in mind. “Please, Allen... Will you help me get through these documents?” she pleaded, bowing with her hands in front of her head.

“...I’m sorry, President. Wasn’t one of the conditions for my joining the Student Council that I wouldn’t have to do any assignments?”

“That’s totally different! It’s inevitable that unexpected circumstances are going to arise! Lia and Rose, you two agree with me, right?!” she said, turning to the two girls for support.

“Hmmm...”

“This is a classic case of *you reap what you sow*...”

That was not the response Shii was looking for. The president had only her own negligence to thank for this, so it wasn’t surprising that they didn’t take her side.

“Oh, come on...,” Shii whined. No one was backing her up. “P-please, Allen! I’m in huge trouble here!”

She was outright begging.

“A promise is a promise, President...” I hedged, trying to gently refuse.

“How could you ignore a plea for help from your kind upperclassman...? You’re not human! You’re an ogre, a demon, a Rodol!” she yelled, throwing a childish temper tantrum.

“Please calm down. And why’d you use my last name as an insult?” I asked. I then tried to come up with a suggestion to help her regain her composure. “If you can’t do this alone... Oh yeah. Why not take these papers home and ask your servants for help?”

Shii’s family, House Arkstoria, was a distinguished clan that typically occupied

important positions in the government. I'd seen people who looked like butlers when we'd visited her estate on the way to summer training camp, so she should have been able to handle this without our assistance.

"That's not an option. Taking home documents submitted to the Student Council is strictly forbidden," Shii protested.

"Wouldn't have thought you would care about that...," I grumbled. Despite the fact that she didn't hesitate to cheat at cards, the president's conscience tended to arise at the most unexpected of moments.

"Please, Allen, it would mean so much to me... O-oh yeah, if you help me, I'll treat you to ice cream! Doesn't that sound nice?" she offered, shaking my shoulders.

"I'm not a little kid. You can't bribe me with ice cream."

"Grr..."

If any of us could be lured with a frozen treat, it would be Lia. *But if I refuse...* Shii might abuse the intercom and call me out for the whole academy to hear like she'd done after the Club-Budget War. *If I'm in for pain either way, I may as well help her clean up this mess.*

Regardless of how I'd joined the club, I was still a member of the Student Council. Plus, it was very hard to refuse in the face of her groveling.

"Haah... Fine. I'll do what I can."

"R-really?!"

"Yes. But there won't be a next time, okay?" I warned her.

"Th-thank you! I knew I could count on you, Allen! I'll bring some delicious ice cream for you next time!" Shii declared ecstatically, not seeming to hear me.

Haah... She's just gonna let this happen again, isn't she...? I thought, sighing internally.

"Good grief... If Allen's helping, then so will I."

"Fine, count me in, too..."

Though they looked reluctant, Lia and Rose offered to lend a hand as well.

“Yay! I’m sure we can handle this with four people!” Shii exclaimed. Having regained her pep, she cheerfully pulled her lunch out of her bag. “All right, everyone! Let’s eat and get to work!”

Once we’d finished our meal, we divided the documents between us and got started. I wrote responses to petitions from various clubs, demands from the staff room, a crackdown proposal from the academy’s prefects, and more. It definitely wasn’t realistic for one person to handle all this.

“I finished everything on my end, President,” I announced.

“Thanks. There’s still a mountain of papers over there, so go grab some more!” Shii told me, working through the forms faster than anyone else. She wasn’t the Student Council president for nothing—despite her usual behavior, she was very bright.

At this pace, we might finish by the end of school tomorrow, I thought, carrying a stack of documents from the vice president’s desk.

“Hmm?” An eye-catching poster attracted my attention. “...First-Year Tourney?”

August 8th in the underground practice facility! was written on it in bold lettering.

“Have you not heard of that tournament, Allen?” Shii asked, leaning toward me after noticing me staring at the poster.

“Y-yeah. What is the ‘First-Year Tourney’?” I asked.

“It’s a swordfighting tournament for first-year students. The winner is awarded the first-year slot in the Royal Sword Festival!”

“I like the sound of that.” I didn’t know what the Royal Sword Festival was, but a tournament sounded appealing.

“They should be looking for applicants right about now... I’m sure your homeroom teacher will fill you in about it at the end of the day.”

That reminded me, Chairwoman Reia did say she had matters to tell us about during afternoon homeroom.

I want to sign up. It would be fun to cross blades with Lia, Rose, and everyone

from Class 1-A. Just the thought was making me giddy.

The president clapped her hands to bring me back to earth. “Hey, forget the First-Year Tourney for now and focus on the task in front of you! Let’s get this done!”

“Yeah, you’re right.” I calmed myself down and refocused on my assignment.

We worked for another twenty minutes until we only had about five minutes left of our lunch break. “How about we stop there for today?” I proposed, putting my pen down and stretching.

“Yeah, Soul Attire class is about to start. Let’s call it here.”

“Hraaah... I’m so tired...”

Lia and Rose stretched as well.

“Make sure to come back after school, okay? That’s a promise!” Shii reminded us emphatically. The three of us departed and headed for our afternoon class.



Once our course was over, we left the Soul Attire Room and returned to Class 1-A. Lessons in Soul Attire were always mentally exhausting.

“Phew...” I exhaled loudly when I sat down in my chair.

“Are you okay, Allen? You look a little tired.”

“Are you sleeping okay? Rest is essential for recovering from fatigue.”

Lia and Rose both checked to see if I was all right.

“Thanks, you two. Yeah... I’ll try to go to bed earlier tonight.”

The door rattled open, and in walked Chairwoman Reia.

“Okay, time to start afternoon homeroom. I have an important matter to discuss with you today, so listen up!” She cleared her throat and clapped her hands. “I’m sure plenty of you have heard about this from upperclassmen or seen it on the schedule, but the First-Year Tourney is next week on August eighth!”

A wave of anticipation swept through the area.

“I’ll give you a rundown of the First-Year Tourney for those who aren’t in the know. Simply put, it’s a tournament for first-years with a slot in the Royal Sword Festival at stake!” she informed us. “All high school swordcraft academies participate in the Royal Sword Festival, so it draws a lot of eyeballs. Excelling in it may very well open a path to a wonderful career as a senior holy knight or a military officer. This tourney is your first step toward achieving that!”

I’d heard that senior holy knights received higher and more stable salaries than their lower-ranking counterparts. Rising through the ranks would allow me to give Mom an easy life. *I should take advantage of this opportunity.*

The chairwoman continued her spiel.

“Participation in the First-Year Tourney is voluntary, but I’d like to see all of you enter. To get a quick impression, please raise your hand if you’ve already decided to enter!” The whole class immediately raised their hands. “Wow, it’s rare for everyone to participate! I love the ambition of this year’s first-years—or Class 1-A in particular, I should say!” She gave a satisfied nod. “Make sure to practice hard over the week you have left! You’re dismissed!”



The following week, I spent each day training with maniacal intensity in the hopes of manifesting my Soul Attire. However, no matter how hard I worked, there was no way a normal, talentless individual like me could pull that off in only a week, so I failed to obtain it in time for the First-Year Tourney on August 8th.

The tournament took place in the underground practice facility, the same venue as the Club-Budget War. A square stage was set in the middle of the room with bleachers surrounding it. The participants listened from the wings of the stage as Chairwoman Reia gave the crowd a simple speech.

Ten, twenty, thirty, forty... There are almost fifty participants, I counted in my head. The chairwoman’s address came to an end as I glanced around.

“Okay, enough with the formalities. Many of this year’s first-years have

already acquired their Soul Attire! The intensity of the competition will be a step above the average year! To the participants—fight fair and use these duels to show off the results of your training and your skill with the blade! The First-Year Tourney starts now!”

As soon as she’d finished, the students in the crowd began to cheer.

“WHOOO! IT’S FINALLY HERE!”

“Tessa! Win it for the Judo Club!”

“Allen! You’re welcome to join the Swordcraft Club any time!”

A rugged group of students wearing judo uniforms cheered for Tessa with deep voices, while Sirtie Rosette, the vice president of the Swordcraft Club, waved at me.

Wow, the audience is really into it... I looked around and exhaled deeply. I felt a perfect mix of tension and excitement. Lia and Rose walked up to me.

“I’m going to pay you back for beating me on the first day of school, Allen!” Lia proclaimed.

“You embarrassed me at the Sword Fighting Festival, but I’m gonna win this time!” Rose declared.

The unconcealed passion in their eyes lifted my spirits.

“We’re opponents for today—let’s give it all we’ve got!” I said.

With a slot in the Royal Sword Festival at stake, the First-Year Tourney was set to begin.



After Chairwoman Reia opened the tournament, a female announcer started to explain the rules.

The First-Year Tourney was conducted in an elimination format, and the winner was awarded a place in the Royal Sword Festival. Only swords were allowed; shields, armor, and other tools were forbidden. In the interest of fairness, the matchups were drawn via a lottery immediately before each duel.

None of this was out of the ordinary.

“That’s it for the rules. Now it’s time for the moment you’ve all been waiting for—the first match!” she declared. From the announcer’s seat just before the front row of the audience, she reached into a clear box full of small balls. I noticed that each ball had a name written on it; this was evidently how they performed the lottery.

“We have our first participant!” she declared after pulling a ball out of the box excitedly. My name was on it. “What are the odds he’d be drawn first? It’s the infamous Allen Rodol from Class 1-A! He’s the leader of the mysterious Practice-Swing Club, and the secret leader of the Student Council! This scoundrel beat his opponent half to death in the Elite Five Holy Festival, used a dirty trick to defeat the vice president of the Swordcraft Club during the New Student–Recruiting Period, and toyed with the Student Council president during the Club-Budget War! Is there anyone who can stop his unhinged rampage through this academy?!”

Most of what she’d said was true, but she didn’t have to make it all sound so bad. A number of the upperclassmen began to cheer for me fiercely as soon as she’d finished.

“Hey, he’s that troublemaker everyone’s been talking about! This is the first time I’ve seen him!”

“Heh-heh, what mess is he gonna stir up this time?”

“I came to see you, Allen!”

Should I be flattered or insulted...? I was unsure how to feel about this.

“Allen’s opponent is Reyes Volgan of Class 1-B! Rumor has it that he once sent ten students from another school to the hospital as a middle schooler! I’m sure most of you have heard of Scimitar Reyes!”

He walked onto the stage when the announcer had finished.

“Hey, it’s the scimitar guy!”

“I’ve heard about him... They say he’s as crazy as a rabid dog...”

“Allen the Diabolical versus Scimitar Reyes. This is a really fun first match!”

My opponent and I locked eyes as the spectators talked excitedly among themselves.

Reyes Volgan had dark-red hair, which he kept slightly longer than most boys, and a silver earring in his left ear. He was about the same height as me at a hundred seventy centimeters tall.

This is the second time we've crossed blades. The first time was...right, the first day after my suspension, when he'd charged into the Soul Attire Room and challenged me to a duel.

"Heh-heh, long time no see, Allen Rodol," Reyes said with a smile, snapping me out of my thoughts.

"Hello, Reyes," I responded.

"Man, I can't believe I drew you in the first match... Ha-ha-ha, this is my lucky day!" he yelled, his eyes bloodshot.

It looks like he still resents me for our last bout... We continued to glare at each other until the announcer spoke up.

"Are you both ready? On your mark—begin!"

I quickly drew my sword and assumed the middle stance. Reyes summoned his Soul Attire immediately, just like the last time we fought.

"Surge Forth—Three Skeledragons!"

Three skeletal dragons materialized, each with red light glowing in their eye sockets. "*Hyuk-hyuk-hyuk,*" they laughed.

"Holy crap...," I said aloud. The dragons were huge—way bigger than last time.

"Ha-ha, wettin' your pants yet? Wait 'til you see this! Skeleton Dance!"

At his command, they aggressively trained themselves on me. ""*Hyuk-hyuk-hyuk!*"" Their fangs were large and pointed, and sharp bone protrusions jutted out across their bodies. Every part of them was a weapon.

I've never seen this move before. Any attack from them should be easy enough to handle, though. I just needed to pulverize them like last time.

“Eighth Style—Eight-Span—?!”

As soon as I had begun my eight-part slash attack to destroy the approaching skeletal dragons, Reyes rushed toward me. He had known exactly what I was going to do.

“That’s not gonna work!”

“Huh?!”

Reyes locked his sword with mine, preventing me from performing my move.

“““Hyuk-hyuk-hyuk!”””” The three skeletal dragons then rushed toward my limbs.

I twisted my body in an attempt to dodge them. “Gah!” However, a bone fragment protruding from one of them cut me lightly on the left shoulder.

“Ha-ha! Isn’t this fun, Allen?” Reyes said with a wicked smile as he pressed his sword against mine.

“...You’re using super-close combat to prevent me from performing my moves,” I remarked. I had no way of using any of my techniques—Flying Shadow, Hazy Moon, World Render, or Eight-Span Crow—when he was this close to me. *Reyes can’t perform any, either, but he has his Three Skeledragons.* The remote-control capabilities of his Soul Attire meant that he was now the only one of us capable of unleashing any powerful attacks.

“Ha-ha, very good! I’ve been training diligently at super-close combat ever since the day I lost to you. All so I could gut you the next time we fought!” Reyes claimed triumphantly.

Obstructing your opponent’s blade at such tight quarters... That’s easier said than done. In fact, it was close to impossible for an ordinary swordfighter. He could pull it off because of his quick reflexes and excellent swordcraft. *I can see how an elite duelist like him got into Thousand Blade.* His fundamentals with the blade far outstripped mine.

“You still can’t use Soul Attire. Isn’t that right, Reject Swordsman?” he said with a snicker.

“...Yeah.”

Unfortunately, he was correct.

“Pffft, ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! You really do have no talent! How do you think you’re gonna get out of this? You can’t use the swordcraft you’re so proud of, and you can’t produce your Soul Attire. Why not just give up now?” Reyes jeered provokingly.

“There’s still something I can do.”

“...Oh really? This’ll be good. Mind enlightening me on what that is?”

“If I can’t use any moves, I’ll just rely on brute force.”

“Huh? What do you...?”

I braced myself...

“Hah!”

...and used my full arm strength to push his sword away and break the deadlock.

“How...? Where the hell did you get so powerful?!” he shouted.

“Haaaaaaah!” I pressed him with downward diagonal, upward, and downward strikes, all at full force. Sparks flew every time our blades collided.

“C-crap... You’re not human!” Reyes yelled, fighting just as hard to not back up an inch as he defended himself from my onslaught. We continued like that for another couple of minutes.

“Hraaagh!”

“Gah!”

Before long, I wore him down with my incessant strikes, then sent him flying across the stage with a particularly powerful blow that he was unable to handle.

“Oof... Urgh...” He tumbled on the ground like a rag doll.

“This is over. Surrender now,” I asserted. I knew everything his Soul Attire was capable of, and I could overcome his super-close-combat strategy with my higher-level physical abilities. There was nothing he could do to win.

“Pffft. Ha-ha... Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!” Reyes chortled, sounding like a broken

madman. His body was battered and bruised. “Oh man, I’m so lucky... I’m so goddamn lucky...,” he mumbled incoherently, rising to his feet.

...*What’s that?* I noticed that Reyes was clutching some sort of black device in his right hand.

“And you, Allen Rodol, are the unluckiest man alive!”

He pushed a switch on the device.

“Huh?!”

A dazzling light glowed around my feet, followed by a huge explosion.

“...A bomb?!”

I quickly released a Flying Shadow with a one-armed swing to offset the blast, but unsurprisingly, the eruption proved more powerful and knocked me backward. As soon as I fell, I rolled on the ground to bring myself to a halt and regain my balance.

“Ha-ha! Impressive, Allen! Dodging that took extraordinary reflexes! But you’re finished now!” he exclaimed, staring exaggeratedly at my right hand. My weapon had been knocked away by the explosion—I was unarmed.

“Isn’t setting traps ahead of time illegal?” I asked. That explosion had nothing to do with his Soul Attire; it was just an ordinary bomb. He had to have planted it beforehand.

“Haah... I don’t give a crap about the First-Year Tourney or the Royal Sword Festival... I just want to kill the shit out of you for the way you embarrassed me!” he shouted before thrusting his hands forward. “Die—Skeleton Gluttony!”

The three skeletal dragons disassembled and reformed into one enormous creature. “*Roaaaaaaarrrr!*” It howled loudly enough to shake the stage, then charged to swallow me whole. Once it moved close enough, I grabbed its skull and slammed it to the ground with all my strength.

“*Hraaagh!*”

An earsplitting sound of bone smashing filled the room, and pieces of its cranium scattered throughout the stage.

“Hyuk-hyuk...hyuk...” Smashed to bits, the skeletal dragon stopped moving entirely as the red light in its eye sockets faded.

“...Huh?” Reyes froze in place, his jaw hanging open.

“Looks like my luck won out,” I said. If he’d used anything other than a bomb for this booby trap, I likely would have been injured. “You’ll never beat me with dirty tricks like that.”

I dashed toward him and delivered a fierce blow to his stomach.

“Gaaah!”

I knocked all the air out of his lungs; he fell to his knees and fainted.

“I—I don’t believe my eyes! He just took the match barehanded! Allen Rodol wins, proving he is the far superior troublemaker!” the announcer declared.

Thus, I won my first-round duel, securing a spot in the second bracket.



I rode my momentum from defeating Reyes in the first round and raked in the victories. Eventually, I took to the stage for the semifinals.

“We’re nearing the climax of the First-Year Tourney! Everyone, please give a large round of applause for the students who have overcome their intense bouts to make it this far!” the announcer proclaimed, to which we received deafening applause.

The four students to make the semifinals were Lia, Rose, Tessa, and me.

“We’re so close, Allen!” exclaimed Lia.

“This is where the real battle begins,” asserted Rose.

“Yeah, let’s all do our best!” I responded.

Tessa looked at the three of us and shrugged. “Hey, you’d better not forget about me.”

But with his polished Slice Iron School of Swordcraft and impressive physique, there was no way I could forget Tessa. He was one of the most skilled swordsmen in Class 1-A.

“I’m excited to square off against you, too, Tessa,” I told him.

“Heh-heh, right back at you.”

The announcer addressed the crowd just after we’d finished speaking. “It’s time to decide the semifinal matchups!” she announced, reaching her hand into the clear box to draw a ball. “The first contestant in the first match is...the nefarious trickster who has made it this far with barely a scratch—Allen Rodol!”

The spectators cheered excitedly.

...Nefarious trickster? I understood that the announcer needed to pump up the crowd, but...I would appreciate it if she came up with a less insulting nickname.

“He’s up against the practitioner of a legendary, secretive school of swordcraft with a peerless reputation! She’s the sole inheritor of the Cherry Blossom Blade Style—Rose Valencia!” the announcer declared, giving my friend a proper introduction.

“Aaaaahhh! I love you, Rose!”

“Look over here, Rose!”

“You can do it! I’m rooting for you!”

High-pitched cheers exploded from a section of the crowd. When I glanced toward the source of the noise, I saw many female students waving at Rose. She seemed popular with the same sex.

Not that I can blame them. She’s really cool. Her dignified features were enhanced by her distinctive red eyes. Pink-tinged silver hair extended all the way down her back. From a certain angle, even the fact that she struggled with mornings was appealing.

“I’ve been looking forward to crossing blades with you again ever since losing to you in the Sword Fighting Festival,” she remarked with a belligerent grin, reaching out her right hand.

“Me too, Rose. Let’s give this all we’ve got,” I said, exchanging a firm handshake with her.

“Are you both ready?! The first semifinal match starts—now!”

We both drew our blades the moment the announcer kicked off the duel. I took the middle stance, holding my sword in front of my navel, and she did the same. The tension was palpable when our eyes met.

It's been a long time since I've faced Rose like this... The Sword Fighting Festival was over half a year ago. Back then, I couldn't have dreamed that we would end up attending the same swordcraft academy.

"Ready, Allen?"

"You bet. Come at me!"

I nodded, and before I knew it, Rose was right in front of me. "Whuh?!" She was very skilled at reading her opponent, then slipping through gaps in their attention. *I knew she was coming, but my reaction was still delayed...* Her coordination was just as amazing as ever.

"Cherry Blossom Blade Style—Sakura Flash!" Not slowing in the slightest, she thrust her weapon at my abdomen with all her weight behind it.

"Hah!" I met her stab with a thrust at exactly the same angle. The tips of our blades collided, resulting in a momentary stalemate. This was exactly how our last duel had started.

I need to attack! I dropped my center of gravity and charged toward her.

"Pfft, that's not gonna work this time!" Having predicted my course of action, she quickly pulled her sword back for another swing. "Cherry Blossom Blade Style—Night Sakura!" She loosed a downward diagonal slash with astonishing speed.

She's so fast! That was a perfect counter to my charge. The old me probably wouldn't have been able to respond in time. Given all the tough battles I'd now overcome, though, it was nothing I couldn't dodge!

"You'll need to do better than that!" I shouted as I evaded her attack by a razor-thin margin.

"What?!" Rose gasped. I then kicked hard at her wide-open torso. "Oof!" The blow hurled her off the stone stage and sent her flying backward.

...She took that well. Rose had immediately dropped her left arm to protect

her solar plexus before I'd hit her, likely preventing any internal injuries. She would have no problem continuing to fight.

"You really are strong, Allen...," she said after spinning midair to stop herself and taking the middle stance.

"Same goes for you, Rose. That counter scared me for a second. Your coordination has improved significantly since the Sword Fighting Festival..."

"Ha, that means a lot coming from you. But we're just getting started!"

We reengaged, exchanging fierce blow after fierce blow.

"Haaaaaah!"

"Raaaaaah!"

Our blades rang, and sparks flew every time our weapons collided. Another couple of minutes of this, and the bout would gradually—no, absolutely—turn in my favor.

"Cherry Blossom Blade Style—Lightning Sakura!" Rose unleashed a lightning fast quick-draw strike, but I brought down my sword to deflect it.

"*Hiyah!*"

"Crap!"

My counter had pushed her sword down, leaving her defenseless.

"First Style—Flying Shadow!"

"...!"

She had no chance of dodging Flying Shadow from so close; the projectile slash attack hit her head-on.

"..." Still unharmed, I calmly maintained my middle stance.

"Haah, haah...," Rose panted, her shoulders heaving. She had suffered a few injuries.

I had gained the upper hand in our duel both because of my advantage in brawn, and because I had figured out a certain tendency of hers. *Whether it's intentional or not, Rose dislikes using the same move twice in a row.* She had

already used Sakura Flash, Night Sakura, and Lightning Sakura in this match. *I have a good idea of what her next technique will be.* She would probably resort to her most powerful move to try and turn things around.

“Cherry Blossom Blade Secret Technique—Mirror Sakura Slash!” Rose performed the secret technique of the Cherry Blossom Blade Style, just as I had expected. I had a response ready.

“Cherry Blossom Blade Secret Technique—Mirror Sakura Slash!” I used the exact same move. We both unleashed eight lightning-quick slashes, four from the left and four from the right. My eight slices collided with hers—leading to a one-sided result.

“Ngh... *Aaaah?!'*” Rose screamed. My Mirror Sakura Slash easily cut through hers and struck her hard. “H-how did that...?” she muttered in disbelief.

“Probably the strength and angle of my attack...,” I answered. Physical strength was the foundation of swordcraft, and mine was much greater than hers. Additionally, I’d predicted she would use her secret technique, so I intentionally angled my Mirror Sakura Slash to offset her momentum. Actually, it really wasn’t surprising that my strike proved superior.

The announcer took advantage of the brief lull in the action to speak up.

“Who could have imagined this would turn into such a one-sided match?! Unless my eyes deceived me, Allen just used a move from the Cherry Blossom Blade Style, which Rose is supposed to be the sole inheritor of! He would stoop so low as to steal an opponent’s moves?! Allen truly is the Emperor of Evil!”

Emperor of Evil? *Haah, whatever. There’s nothing I can do about that...*, I thought, sighing internally.

Rose began to speak quietly. “You’re very strong, Allen. I hate to admit it, but you would best me in a contest of pure swordcraft,” she conceded. She had a fire in her eyes that defied her admission of defeat.

It’s finally time, isn’t it...? I steeled myself, watching her carefully.

“But don’t think that means I’m gonna lose this duel!” she swore as an intense pressure seemed to pierce my skin.

I was afraid of this... Rose can already summon hers...

“Blossom—Winter Sakura!” she cried out.

A giant cherry blossom tree appeared behind her. Its thick trunk projected an aura of might, and its flowers were in full bloom, all a bewitching shade of scarlet... *It’s beautiful.* The tree was so splendid that I lost myself for a moment staring at it.

“Assemble,” Rose commanded. At that, cherry blossom petals from the tree gathered at her hands and formed a weapon. It was a beautiful scarlet sword with a brilliant pattern across its blade. The thing seemed to project an indescribable sense of pressure. It was clear at a glance that it was no ordinary blade.

“Let’s do this, Allen.”

“Bring it on!”

My duel with Rose in the semifinal of the First-Year Tourney moved into its final phase.



Rose lifted her beautiful scarlet sword high into the air. “Dance—Sakura Blizzard!” Upon her command, a great many petals from the cherry blossom tree behind her raced toward me with incredible speed.

“Huh?!” My vision went scarlet. There must have been over ten thousand petals surrounding me. *I don’t know what kind of Soul Attire this is yet, so I should avoid touching them.*

“First Style—Flying Shadow!” I fired a Flying Shadow to try to knock down the vast number of blossoms approaching me. Rose was ready for it.

“Nice try!” She waved her left hand, and the petals turned to evade my projectile slash.

Her Soul Attire has remote-control capabilities just like Reyes’s Three Skeletons... Still, I had to do something about the blizzard of cherry blossom petals homing in on me. “Eighth Style—Eight-Span Crow!” My eight slices

extended out in all directions, forming a protective barrier around me.

“Now!” Rose shouted. A handful of blooms slipped through the gaps in my barrier and grazed my side.

“Hng?!” I grimaced from a sharp pain. Looking down at my side, I saw an incision that looked like it had been inflicted by a dagger.

Sure enough, those aren't ordinary petals... They were frighteningly sharp; each one was like a miniature blade. Rose's Soul Attire was a remote-control type just like Three Skeledragons, but the sheer number of objects at her disposal made it way more difficult to deal with.

“So Winter Sakura's ability is controlling those bladelike petals,” I stated.

“That's half true. But there's more to it than that!” Rose declared, charging straight at me. “Cherry Blossom Blade Style—Night Sakura!” She performed a downward diagonal slash aimed at my chest at far greater speeds than earlier in our duel.

“What?!” I whipped my sword up horizontally and barely managed to block the attack. It was immediately apparent that it wasn't just her speed that had increased. *When did she get so powerful?!* An impact the likes of which I'd never felt previously raced up my arms, then hit the rest of my body.



“Haaaaah!”

“Whuh?!”

She bested my strength and sent me flying backward.

“Take this!” Without a moment’s hesitation, Rose rushed forward to overwhelm me before I could recover. “Cherry Blossom Blade Style—Sakura Flash Chain!” she shouted, loosing a series of lightning-fast thrusts.

That’s ridiculously swift! I dodged some of the thrusts, deflected others, and angled my body so the rest only grazed my skin. After managing to avoid any direct hits, I jumped back in retreat.

Unlike how things started out, Rose now holds the clear advantage in power. Her Soul Attire must have caused this development. That led me to one conclusion.

“You’re much more vigorous than before... Winter Sakura must be a self-strengthening Soul Attire,” I theorized.

“Ha, very good. This cherry blossom tree is a massive wellspring of power; Winter Sakura allows me to freely manipulate it,” Rose answered, grabbing one of the petals.

It all makes sense now. She’s able to absorb the abundant energy stored inside the tree to bolster her physical abilities. Manipulating the petals was just a by-product of that. *So she wields self-strengthening Soul Attire with remote-control capabilities. I don’t know if I can imagine a more annoying combination...* But that didn’t mean I couldn’t still eke out a victory.

“If that’s the case...then what if I do this?” I shifted my attention from Rose to focus on the tree itself. “Haaaaah!” I slashed my sword at it as powerfully as I could. “What?!” As soon as I did, however, my arms reeled as if I had struck steel.

It’s so hard! I already knew it wasn’t an ordinary plant, but I was floored that I couldn’t even dent it. As I stood, eyes wide with astonishment, I heard Rose speak from behind me.

“That’s only being fastened to this world with the appearance of a tree. You

won't cut it down so easily," she said. I turned to see her already poised to attack. "Cherry Blossom Blade Style—Lightning Sakura!"

She unleashed an incredibly swift quick-draw strike. "Ack!" In response, I immediately held my sword horizontally to block her attack. However, thanks to my poor stance and disadvantage in strength, I was unable to quell her momentum, which left my gut wide-open.

"This is payback!" she yelled, giving me a fierce kick to the stomach.

"Gaaah!" Her superhuman leg strength sent me rolling on the ground like a ball. Blood rushed into my head, and my breath shot out of my lungs. I lost all sense of direction as a dull pain coursed through me.

"This isn't...over...!" I gasped, leaping up and assuming the middle stance to prevent any further attacks.

"You're already up and ready to counter after that technique... Your endurance is unbelievable," Rose marveled, staring at me as if I were a monster.

"Haah, haah... Let's see if you can handle this!" I shouted.

"Bring it on!" she responded.

I relentlessly assaulted Rose with all the moves in my arsenal. In response, however, she used her precise swordcraft to ward off my every blow, delivering accurate counterattacks whenever she found an opportunity. As a result, I came away with even more injuries.

I know I still have a chance! The tide of the battle even seemed to be gradually shifting in my favor.

"Eighth-Style—Eight-Span Crow!"

"Ch-Cherry Blossom Blade Secret Technique—Mirror Sakura Slash!"

Our eight slashes collided and vanished. It seemed our physical strength was now even. *No, I'm a little more powerful!* Deciding that this was my opportunity to get the upper hand, I pressed forward aggressively.

"Aaaaaaaahh!"

"Haaaaaaaah!"

We locked swords, each of us vying for supremacy.

Rose's fighting style got much more aggressive once she summoned Winter Sakura. Initially, I'd thought she just wanted to end the bout before I figured out its abilities... But it seemed there was more to it than that. There's a reason she needs to bring me down quickly.

The giant tree that served as the source of her energy was gradually wilting. Previously, its flowers had been in full bloom, but now it had lost about half of its petals. Whenever the tree lost petals, Rose's vigor seemed to decline. *That means she can only maintain Winter Sakura for a limited time!* My victory in our last contest of might have proved that.

"Hraaaagh!"

"Ahh!"

I got the better of her this time as well. I sent her flying backward, but she fell gracefully and assumed the middle stance.

"Winter Sakura has a time limit, doesn't it? ...Either that, or you simply can't control it yet," I ventured. Rose stayed silent, frustration etched on her face. I must have hit the bull's-eye.

Chairwoman Reia told us it takes a very long time to manifest your Soul Attire, and just as long to gain control over it. On top of that, she'd also insisted that the more powerful the Soul Attire, the more difficult it was to handle.

"Man, you don't miss a thing... You're right. I don't have complete control over Winter Sakura yet. We've already far surpassed the three minutes I can manage," she admitted, shrugging. "That's why I'm going to end this with my next move!"

The rest of the tree's petals gathered around Rose. Infused with the vast power of the cherry blossom tree, her sword glowed a bright, bewitching crimson.

"..." The overwhelming pressure caused me to gulp.

"Let's do this, Allen!"

"Time to finish this!"

We charged at each other at the same time.

“Haaaaaaaah!”

“Aaaaaaaahh!”

We both reached striking distance...

“Cherry Blossom Blade Secret Technique—Scarlet Sakura Slash!”

“Fifth Style—World Render!”

...and our all-out attacks met. A short moment of silence passed.

“Even that wasn’t good enough, huh...,” Rose mumbled. Her blade fell to pieces, and the giant cherry blossom tree dissolved into nothingness.

“I’ve won,” I declared, pointing my sword at her.

“...Yeah, I admit defeat,” Rose responded with a tender smile. She’d given her all.

“Catch your breath, everyone! That’s the end of this intense duel! The winner is—Allen Rodol!” the announcer declared.

I’d managed to defeat Rose and her powerful Soul Attire and advance to the championship match.



Rose and I were heading to the infirmary to get our injuries from our semifinal match treated. She was limping unsteadily, so I slowed my pace to match hers.

“...Nrgh,” Rose moaned, staggering out of the blue. She leaned against me to catch herself.

“A-are you okay?” I asked.

“...Sorry, I’m fine. Using Winter Sakura for longer than I can command it took more out of me than I expected,” she said before she slowly began walking again. She must have pushed herself to her limits in that duel.

“Really... Let’s take it easy, then.”

“Thanks...”

Rose and I shuffled down the halls in momentary silence.

“...I’m so disappointed that I lost to you again,” she admitted.

“It was a close match. If we fought again, I don’t know which of us would win,” I responded encouragingly. I happened to come out on top this time, but I wouldn’t be surprised if she beat me the next time we clashed.

“Ha, you’re a nice guy. But the difference in our strength is clear as day. I’m probably incapable of defeating you.”

“I don’t know about that...” I had no idea what to say at times like this. When I turned to her hesitantly, she stopped in place.

“...Don’t get the wrong idea. That only applies to the here and now. I’m going to continue training; I *will* beat you one day. So...will you fight me again when the time comes?”

“Yeah, of course. It’s a promise.”

“Thank you, Allen,” she replied with a kind smile.

“...” That was the warmest and softest grin I had ever seen from her. She was usually so cool and dignified; the unexpected sight took me aback.



When we reached the infirmary, I knocked three times on the entrance.

“Come in,” called out a young female voice. I opened the door, and we entered the room.

“Welcome. Were you kids hurt during the First-Year Tourney as well?” the nurse said, sweeping her eyes over us.

“Yes, ma’am,” I answered.

“Haah, what a busy day...,” she muttered, shrugging and standing up from her desk work.

“My wounds can wait, so please treat Rose first,” I requested.

“Got it. Okay then, Rose. Would you please follow me?” she asked.

“Yes, ma’am... Thanks, Allen,” Rose said.

“Don’t worry about it.”

Rose followed the nurse to a bed farther into the infirmary.

“Allen, was it? Don’t come back here until we’re done,” the nurse warned, pulling a white curtain around the bed to create a partition. “Okay... I’m going to use a disinfectant, so please take off your clothes.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I heard Rose respond.

“Ngh?!” Thanks to the unfortunate angle of the lighting, I could clearly make out Rose’s silhouette through the curtain. Reflexively, I turned around and put a hand to my pounding chest. *I-it’s okay... She hadn’t taken everything off yet, so there’s nothing to feel guilty about...*

The sound of clothes rustling stressed me out as I waited. “...” Then I heard a short sigh.

“This is going to sting a little, so brace yourself. If we don’t disinfect your injuries, they’ll take longer to heal.”

A little while later, the curtain opened, and the nurse walked back toward me. Rose was sitting up in bed, bandages wrapped around her arms and legs. She seemed fine at a glance.

“Will Rose be all right, ma’am?” I asked.

“She has many lacerations, but none of them are deep; she’ll heal up just fine. Based on her fatigue, I’m guessing she pushed herself too hard with her Soul Attire. Thankfully, she’ll be right as rain with some rest,” the nurse answered.

“Thank goodness...,” I said, relieved. The nurse clapped her hands.

“All right, you’re next. I need to apply disinfectant first, so lose the clothes,” she insisted, producing a bottle labeled DISINFECTANT and some cotton.

“Yes, ma’am.”

I did as I was told and started to strip. “...Huh?” When I took off my shirt, I noticed something strange. Not a single one of the wounds I’d suffered was there. *Now that I think about it, the soreness I felt after the duel is totally gone,*

too...

The nurse felt around my body and cocked her head in confusion. "Hmm? Are you sure you were injured?"

"Y-yes, ma'am. I'm pretty sure anyway..." I'd sustained more than a few blows during my duel with Rose. At least, I was pretty sure of that. In defiance of my memory, however, it turned out there wasn't a single scratch on me.

"That is strange... The blood on your clothes is still damp. Are you sure it's yours?" the nurse asked quizzically, feeling my soiled uniform.

"Yes, ma'am, I'm sure of it."

"Hmm... Do you have some kind of self-healing Soul Attire?"

"No. I, uh...haven't realized my Soul Attire yet."

"Oh, sorry about that. Well, I suppose there's still plenty we don't know about the human body," the nurse muttered, putting the disinfectant and cotton back in her medicine box.

Hold on... I had an idea for what might have been causing this strange phenomenon. *Did he heal me?* The same thing had happened after the Elite Five Holy Festival. I suffered heavy injuries during my duel with Shido, but when I woke up afterward, they'd disappeared without a trace.

I'm not going to get any answers thinking about this right now. Fortunately, he usually proved talkative. I decided that I would ask him about it during the next Soul Attire class.

I'm curious about how the duel between Lia and Tessa is going... I should return. I approached Rose first. "I'm heading back."

"Okay. Sorry for the trouble," she responded.

"Don't worry about it. See you later." I turned around to leave the infirmary.

"Wait, Allen." Rose reached out and gently took my hand.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Don't you lose. I can't stand the thought of someone else beating you."

I suppose this is Rose's way of cheering me on. That's so her, I thought. "Sure

thing. I'll definitely win."

"Good luck out there."

I gently returned Rose's grip, then exited the infirmary.



"...Hmm-hmm. What an adorable boy. So polite, too. Allen, huh... I think he's my type," the nurse said to herself.

"S-students are off-limits, ma'am!" exclaimed Rose.



When I returned to the underground practice facility, the duel between Lia and Tessa was approaching its end.

"Slice Iron Secret Technique—Slice Iron!"

"Hegemonic Style—Hard Strike!"

Their swords collided ferociously.

"Grrrrngh!"

"Haaaaaaah!"

Lia overwhelmed Tessa with her tremendous might, sending him flying off the stage.

"Gah..." He soared through the air until he crashed into the outer wall of the underground practice facility, then slid down the wall and collapsed facedown. His blade slipped out of his rugged hand, and he went still. It was obvious he couldn't continue.

"Lia Vesteria is the victor! What an incredible display of strength that was!" the announcer declared loudly. The crowd erupted with cheers for Lia. A certain group didn't join in, however.

"BWUH?! TESSA!!!"

"Dammit! That match was intense..."

“He fought well... Way to make us proud, man!”

I heard some boys with deep voices calling out to Tessa. His fellow judo-club members really seemed to love him.

“Ready or not, the end of the First-Year Tourney has arrived! The final match between Allen Rodol and Lia Vesteria is about to begin!”

Applause erupted from the audience as Lia and I faced each other calmly.

“This really takes me back,” she said.

“Yeah, I can’t believe it’s been four months since then. It feels like yesterday,” I responded.

We’d fought here in the underground practice facility on our first day at Thousand Blade. *So much has happened since then...*

My life-or-death battle at the Elite Five Holy Festival. Our time working as witchblade apprentices. The terrorist attack at the Unity Festival. The summer training camp held by the Student Council. Forming the Practice-Swing Club and representing it in the Club-Budget War. My three duels in Vesteria Kingdom. Ever since I’d started living with Lia, it had been one thing after another.

“You got the best of me when we last faced off, Allen, but this time, victory will be mine!” Lia declared.

“Sorry, Lia, but I’ve got no intentions of losing, either!” I responded.

Once she and I had fallen silent, the announcer spoke up. “Are you both ready? The championship match starts—now!” she yelled, opening the match.

Calmly, I drew my blade and assumed the middle stance. Opposite me, Lia stuck out her right hand.

“Conquer—Dragon King Fafnir!” she called out. A gorgeous sword surrounded by black and white flames emerged, tearing a rift through the empty air.

“Brace yourself, Allen!”

“Bring it on, Lia!”

So began the final match of the First-Year Tourney.

Lia grabbed Fafnir and readied herself for battle.

“Raaaaaahhh!” I screamed as I charged toward her to close the gap between us. *Her black and white flames give her a lot of options in ranged combat. Engaging her from a distance would be ill-advised.* She had to have anticipated I was going to do that, though.

“Nice try! Draconic Rage!” Lia shouted, quickly swinging her sword and scattering black and white fire. The unpredictable ranged technique blanketed the stage.

“Huh?!” Unable to withstand the blaze, I jumped back and did my best to sweep away the falling sparks.

“Black Dragon Breath!” Without a moment’s hesitation, Lia attacked me with a torrent of jet-black flame.

“First Style—Flying Shadow!” I fired my special projectile slash attack at the approaching inferno. “What?!” However, the ebon fire ate my Flying Shadow instantly. *Crap, they’re way more powerful than before...*

I leaped to the left to dodge her technique. *If I try to get close, she uses a ranged attack to scatter flames in all directions. If I keep my distance, she attacks me with black fire. Man, talk about a punishing Soul Attire...* Her fighting style reminded me of Claude’s. *They might have trained together in Vesteria Kingdom.*

Lia watched my every move closely as I ruminated, giving me not even the smallest window of opportunity to attack. The negligence and overconfidence she’d displayed during our last duel was completely gone.

“I didn’t expect your blaze to block my Flying Shadow. You’ve grown very powerful, Lia,” I said.

“Hmm-hmm, did that catch you off guard? You haven’t seen the least of my capabilities yet! Haaah!” she responded, quickly swinging her blade and sending a scorching ebon conflagration my way yet again. This forced me to go entirely on the defensive for some time.

“Take this—Black Dragon Blast!” Lia heaved her sword down from above with

all her might, launching a ball of black fire at me that was significantly larger than Black Dragon Breath.

“Nrgh...” I quickly jumped to the right in an attempt to dodge.

“Burst!” she commanded. The orb exploded, sending fist-sized flames in all directions.

“Hng?! Eight-Style—Eight-Span Crow!” I instantly spread a barrier of slash attacks around myself for defense, but there was no way only eight slashes could block over a hundred balls of flame. One of the orbs slipped through and landed on my right leg, giving me a terrible burning sensation.

“Damn... First Style—Flying Shadow!” I sent a flying slice attack in an attempt to counter.

“White Dragon Scales!” Lia, however, formed a large shield of white fire to easily stop it.

This is bad... I’m clearly getting worn down. My movement gradually becoming more sluggish was evidence of that. The longer this match drags on, the more my disadvantage will grow... It was in my best interest to end the duel quickly.

The odds were stacked against me. Recognizing that, I sighed loudly. *Not being able to use Soul Attire really is a disastrous impairment for a swordsman.* Since I’d fought many Soul Attire users recently, that truth had become painfully apparent.

Save the pity party for after the match. I cleared my mind and renewed my resolve. *I’m going to be fine.* I’d been able to endure the explosions from Claude’s Abio Troupe, so I would likely get used to Lia’s powerful flames as well.

Haah, I guess I have to do this... I was going to feel a few seconds of harsh pain. After steeling myself for that, I charged. “Aaaaaaahhh!”

“I was waiting for this! Draconic Rage!” Lia yelled, and black and white flames settled on the stage to separate us.

Don’t chicken out! The pain will only last a moment. If I can just break through this wall of fire, I’ll be able to win! I thought, egging myself on. I charged straight

into the bright, scorching blaze. “Nrgh...” The violent inferno licked my entire body, causing searing pain. It was hot—so hot—and agonizing. But it was nothing I couldn’t handle!

“Haaaaaaaah!” Pushing myself to overcome the burning sensation, I broke through the wall of flame.

“I knew you would be brave enough to do that, Allen.” Unfortunately, Lia had been waiting for me on the other side with her sword held high. “Hegemonic Style—Hard Strike!”

“Whuh?!” I whipped my blade into a horizontal position and blocked her fierce downward strike. A massive shock ran through my entire body upon impact. But that wasn’t the end of it.

“Haaaaaaaah!” Lia screamed. Tremendously powerful flames shot out from the back of her weapon, explosively propelling her downward strike.

T-too strong! Unable to contend with her overwhelming might, I was sent flying backward across the stage.

Dammit... I had trained so hard over the last four months. I’d overcome numerous hard-fought bouts and prided myself on my work ethic. However, it seemed Fafnir’s growth far surpassed my own.

Lia charged forward to take advantage of my loss of balance and attack. “Haaaaaaaah! Hegemonic Style—Multithrust!” Black fire surrounded the sword, and she performed a series of meteoric thrusts.

“Nrgh...” I focused on dodging, parrying, and knocking her blows aside, somehow managing to withstand the barrage.

As I did my best to fend off her tempest-like assault, I found myself genuinely impressed. *Lia is truly amazing...* Her natural talent with the blade manifested as the overwhelmingly powerful Dragon King Fafnir, yet she still devoted herself to practice each and every day. As someone who attended the Practice-Swing Club with her on a daily basis, I knew that better than anyone.

“Hegemonic Style—Hard Strike!” She loosed another powerful downward slice.

“Hah!” I met her attack with a downward diagonal slash that had all my weight behind it. Our blades collided violently, resulting in my second sword-lock of the day.

She’s a hardworking prodigy. Since I was a normal person who struggled to make up for lack of talent with elbow grease, her kind was my greatest enemy.

“Sorry, Allen, but this match belongs to me!” Blistering flames shot out of the back of Lia’s sword with astounding force.

Crap, I want to win... I knew better than anyone that I lacked talent. And yet I still wished to defeat Lia. I yearned to defeat a genius with the sword like her, who trained hard every day despite her natural talent. *I want to overcome the barrier of talent that has always gotten in my way!*

At that moment, a power greater than I had ever felt before welled up inside me.

“Haaaaarrraaaaaarrrrrgh!”

“What...? Ahh!”

Despite the propulsion from Fafnir’s flames, I knocked her sword aside with simple arm strength. That was the first time I’d overpowered her in this duel.

This feeling... It was as if strength sealed deep within me was rising to the surface; there was something strangely nostalgic about it. Though I had sensed this power inside me on numerous occasions already, this time it was at another level.

...I can do this! I thought as I stared at my palms.

“I-is that you, Allen...?” Lia asked hesitantly, holding Fafnir in front of her chest. I saw my reflection in her blade—my hair had become streaked with white, and there was a black crest under my left eye.

“I look kind of strange, but I swear it’s me,” I answered. *He* hadn’t taken over my body; I was still in full control.

“Have you conquered your Spirit Core, then?”

“No, I don’t think so.” There was a terrific power coursing through my veins, but a chasm still separated his might from mine. The strength I’d just gained

made me understand that clearer than ever. I had a long way to go yet on the path to obtaining my Soul Attire.

He probably just did this on a whim. I would have to thank him the next time we met. *Regardless, this closes the strength gap!* Lia wouldn't be able to overpower me again. *This is now a duel to see which is superior—my swordcraft or Lia's Fafnir!*

I dropped my center of gravity and assumed the middle stance.

"Let's do this, Lia!"

"You bet, Allen!"

The championship match had reached its final act.



With my newfound power, I raised my sword high and swung it down forcefully. "First Style—Flying Shadow!"

Lia swept her blade wide at the same time. "Black Dragon Breath!"

Our moves collided, and Flying Shadow easily cut through her black flame. "That's impossible!" Lia exclaimed, eyes wide in shock. She quickly dived to the side to dodge my approaching slash.

Awesome! I can do this! Just as I'd expected, she wasn't going to overpower me again! Seeing a chance to end this now, I rushed forward to engage her in close combat.

"Haaaaaaaaaah!"

"D-Draconic Rage!"

A whirlwind of black and white fire blocked my path. *I had a feeling she would do that...* But I now had the strength to push through this! "*Hrrraagh!*" I swept my blade horizontally to extinguish the brilliant inferno.

"You put out my flames just by swinging your sword?!" exclaimed Lia, freezing temporarily out of shock. I seized this opportunity and unleashed a full-strength downward diagonal slash.

“Hiyah!”

“Wha—?!” She defended herself with her blade right away, but my vastly superior arm strength sent her rocketing away.

“How did you get this strong?!” She regained her balance and backed up to put distance between us. “To manage this kind of strength without Soul Attire... You’re really special, Allen.”

“You are, too, Lia. You have such total control over your Soul Attire now... You’re something else.”

“Hmm-hmm, thanks. But you’ve seen nothing yet!” She thrust the tip of her sword into the stage and calmly closed her eyes. “Fafnir Soul!”

Ivory flames as bright as the sun and ebon flames as dark as night wrapped around her body. The conflagration released an incredible pressure that seemed to prick my entire body. Her overwhelming presence made the very air feel heavier.

That’s Lia for you... I couldn’t help but be impressed that she still had a trick up her sleeve this late in the game.

“Hmm-hmm, I’m much stronger than before,” she asserted.

“Yeah, I can tell. Huh?!” In the blink of an eye, she was right in front of me with her sword held high. “You’re so fast!”

Unlike Rose, Lia moved in a way that was purely an extension of her athletic ability. It was simple without any trickery, which actually made it very difficult to contend with.

“Take this!” she yelled, bringing down her blade.

“Ngh...” I instinctively rolled to the right to dodge successfully.

“You won’t get away! Hegemonic Style—Multi-Thrust!”

“Ch-Cherry Blossom Blade Secret Technique—Mirror Sakura Slash!” Our swords clashed, sending sparks flying. The duel was a seesaw affair from there—we were totally even offensively and defensively.

“Hegemonic Style—Hard Strike!”

“Hrrragh!”

Our blades collided into another lock, neither moving an inch. It was as if time had stopped.

You’re kidding... I can’t even overpower him while enhanced by Fafnir Soul?! Lia thought.

The white flames surrounding her are probably stimulating every cell in her body. What a useful skill...

Our eyes met, and we both leaped back. *We’re evenly matched in close combat, but I’m at a bit of a disadvantage at range.* Lia’s versatile flame projectiles were her greatest boon in battle.

As soon as I landed, I rushed straight at her. “Haaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

“Wh-White Dragon Scales!” She responded quickly by creating a large shield of white fire, forming an impregnable barrier around her.

“Eighth Style—Eight-Span Crow!” I shouted, unleashing an eight-slash attack that easily cut through her shield.

“Wh-what?!” Lia went pale and retreated backward. Anguish etched her face. “Haah, haah...” She was clearly out of breath.

...It looks like she can’t maintain Fafnir Soul for very long. Like Rose with Winter Sakura, Lia could probably control it for only a limited amount of time.

“H-hey, Allen... Can you handle wielding such inhuman strength for so long?” Lia asked.

“I—I don’t think there’s anything inhuman about it... I feel totally fine,” I answered. Unlike the power Rose and Lia gained from their Soul Attire, the vigor coursing through me now placed no burden on my body. If anything, I felt better than before. The burns I’d suffered earlier in the duel had been completely healed as well.

“Really... Then the longer this bout drags on, the less chance I’ll have...”

“Yeah, that’s right.” Judging by her exhausted state, that result was inevitable. However, that didn’t mean Lia was going to lie down and accept defeat.

“Okay then, Allen. I’m going to end this now, before I run out of gas!” All the flames surrounding Lia’s body collected around Fafnir, black and white combining to create a pillar of beautiful, vicious fire. “The fate of our duel is riding on this attack.”

“Come at me!”

She raised her blade above her head slowly, then swung it down instantly. “Take this—Supreme Dragon Breath!”

The sable and ivory inferno transformed into a wicked dragon made of flame. It rushed toward me, tearing up the stage as it did. “*Rooooooooaaaaarrrr!*”

I gathered all my might to meet it with an incredibly powerful maneuver. “Sixth Style—Dark Boom!” I launched a slash that dwarfed Flying Shadow toward the flame dragon.

“Haaaaaaaaah!”

“Raaaaaaaaah!”

Our attacks collided in the middle of the stage...

“*R-roooooooooaaaaarrrr...*”

...and my Dark Boom erased the dragon.

“Yes!” I pumped my fist, sure of my victory.

“...Ngh.” Meanwhile, my opponent swayed and fell facedown onto the stage.

“L-Lia?!” I shouted. Her Soul Attire slipped from her hand, then turned to particles and vanished. *Dammit. Did she have to faint now?!* She must really have put everything she had left into that last technique. As a result, she was now defenseless as the devastatingly powerful Dark Boom sped toward her. If that attack hit her while she was unconscious, there was no guarantee she would survive.

“Aaahhhhh!” Tossing aside my sword, I sprinted toward her. *Crap... I have to catch up!* I mobilized the strange power filling my body and ran with such force that I crushed the stage underneath me with each step.

“Hah!”

Once I'd managed to catch up to it, I punched Dark Boom in the side as hard as I could. A hard *crack* reverberated through the facility, and my right hand stung like I'd struck a brick wall. However, that wasn't enough to stop the projectile. It continued its life-threatening march toward Lia, its incredible might unaltered.

Wh-what can I do?! I darted my eyes around the room for help, but unfortunately, Chairwoman Reia was nowhere to be found. That meant I had to stop it by myself.

I need to squeeze out every last bit of my strength... This is to save Lia! I gritted my teeth and clenched my fists. At that moment, colossal power like I'd never felt before coursed through my body.

"Just...go away... *Grrraaaaaaaaaaagh!*" Focusing all my strength into my right hand, I unleashed an all-out attack—and then some kind of black *substance* formed in my palm. A deafening *smash* echoed throughout the whole academy, and I successfully dispersed Dark Boom only millimeters in front of Lia.

"Haah, haah... I did it..." The strange vigor that had filled my body was gone. *What in the world was that?* I thought as I sighed with relief.

"Ow!" I felt a searing pain in my right hand and looked down to see a deep stab wound. *I'm not gonna be able to train for a while...* I had punched a no-holds-barred Dark Boom with my bare hand; it wasn't surprising that this happened. Honestly, I was just grateful my hand wasn't even more messed up.

"Thank goodness I stopped it, though..." I said, watching Lia with relief. She was breathing normally.

"L-Lia Vesteria has been knocked out! That means the winner of this year's First-Year Tourney is—Allen Rodol! I can't believe what I just saw! Allen put his body on the line to protect Lia, receiving a wound of honor! Does the Emperor of Evil have a soft side?!" the announcer said, loudly declaring my victory.

"Good job, Allen!"

"That was an amazing duel!"

"Incredible... You're incredible!"

The long First-Year Tourney had finally come to an end.



Reia was watching Allen with a grim expression on her face from the topmost section of the spectator seating, where she had observed the match at a distance.

“That appearance, that power... Has he gained control over his Spirit Core? ... No, there’s no way. He would have been even stronger. Is *he* just having some fun, then? Or—”

“Hyo-hoh-hoh-hoh! Oh, this is splendid! This makes up for my mistake!”

Suddenly, an old man appeared out of thin air, interrupting Reia’s chain of thought. He was short with a crooked back, and he had a long, white beard. The man started clapping his hands with a wide grin.

“Huh?!” Reia exclaimed, hurriedly turning around. She was astonished by how easily he’d snuck up on her.

“Hoh-hoh. I was concerned when he emerged partway through... But I am delighted to see that the path is opening smoothly!”

“You’re the Time Hermit...,” Reia remarked, balling her fists and staring at the old man.

“Hyo-hoh! Long time no see, Black Fist. I am overjoyed to see you’re well.”

“I’ve already been informed of what you’ve done. You used the cursed 100-Million-Year Button on Allen, didn’t you?!”

“‘Cursed,’ you say? What a cruel thing to call it...,” he grumbled, staring at Allen as he accepted the championship trophy on the stage. The boy’s white-streaked hair had already returned to black.

“Hmm, it’s already pure black again... This may take a while yet...” The Time Hermit tugged at his magnificent beard and worked out his plans. Reia then swung her fist at his face. “Bweh?!”

“I have a long list of questions for you. Time for a nap, old man... Huh?!” The Time Hermit passed through Reia’s fist, then her entire body.

“You sure live up to your reputation, Black Fist. What fearsome agility... I can’t let my guard down around you for a moment.”

“That’s your transparency ability I’ve heard about...”

The Time Hermit saw the frustration on her face and laughed. “Hyo-hoh-hoh! Anyhoo, I still have many things I need to do. May we meet again, Black Fist.”

“W-wait!” Reia called out. The Time Hermit ignored her plea and faded from the underground practice facility like fog. “Dammit...” She ground her teeth, knowing she had let this unexpected opportunity go to waste.

“...Daria. Something far greater than you imagined is going on here.”



Around the time Allen won the First-Year Tourney, a boy cried out in triumph deep underground in the Holy Ronelian Empire.

“Y-yes! I finally found it!”

It was the vice president of Thousand Blade Academy’s Student Council, Sebas Chandler. He’d slipped through the Holy Ronelian Empire’s tight defenses and had been living the last few months as a miner while evading pursuers from the empire and the Black Organization.

“Blood diamonds! Oh, how I’ve dreamed of this moment!” Sebas held a fist-sized gemstone in each hand. These crimson crystals had a reputation for their devilish beauty, and even in this rough, unpolished state, they were bewitching to behold.

“Mm-hmm-hmm... The president is going to be overjoyed!” he laughed, a mix of elation and relief on his face. Just that moment, a number of flashlights shone on him.

“Th-there he is!”

“Contact the imperial soldiers immediately!”

“Hurry and notify the Black Organization, too! We can’t hold him for long!”

The witchblades hired by the empire barked commands with bloodshot eyes.

Every one of them was holding Soul Attire, a testament to their skill.

“Tch, again? You guys don’t know when to give up.” Sebas began to cut down the skilled witchblades as easily as if they’d never held a sword. There were over one hundred of them, though, so he soon grew annoyed of fighting them.

“Haah, I guess I’ll just make a break for it.” He sighed, scratching his head. He turned his back on the witchblades and dashed off.

“Huh?! Hey, stop!” A dozen or so witchblades gave chase, but he had a clear athletic advantage, so his lead quickly grew.

“Wait for me, President! I declare on all my honor that these blood diamonds shall be yours!” Sebas held the blood-colored gemstones tight as he sprinted underground through the Holy Ronelian Empire.



After receiving the championship trophy from the executive committee of the First-Year Tourney, I hurried to join Lia and Rose in the infirmary. The nurse informed me that Lia was extremely fatigued from excessive use of her power, but she’d sustained no serious injuries and would wake up after some rest. I was relieved to hear she was okay.

“How are you feeling?” I asked Rose, who was sitting up in the adjacent bed.

“Much better already. I should be up and about by tomorrow,” she answered. She looked me in the eyes with a slightly troubled expression and gave me a fleeting smile. “I’m guessing you won.”

“Yeah, somehow.”

“I see... Congrats.” The swordsman who’d defeated her had won the tourney. She probably wasn’t entirely sure how to feel about that. Despite that, she was still a good friend and congratulated me.

“Thanks,” I replied. We then talked to pass the time until Lia woke up. Her Spirit Core had apparently shown some agitation after our match ended, and her sleep was a little restless.

“Ngh...” Around ten minutes later, Lia opened her eyes.

“Ah, Lia! You’re awake?!” I exclaimed.

“...A-Allen?” She sat up slowly and looked around the room. “Where am I...?”

“The infirmary. Do you feel okay?” I asked.

“Y-yeah... I’m strong, so I’ll be fine with a little sleep,” she answered.

“That’s good to hear.” Now that I thought about it, Chairwoman Reia had once told me that Lia was unusually tough. As I was reminiscing on the past, the princess spoke up again.

“Huh... So this means I lost...,” she muttered, clenching her fists in frustration. She creased her blanket, and we fell silent for around half a minute.

“Allen, how could you knock up two girls like this? You’re horrible,” Rose joked, breaking the silence with a shocking comment.

“I—I, uh, well... I was only trying to win the tournament...” I *did* technically send them both to the infirmary, but... *Does she have to say ‘knocked up’? Is she trying to invite some terrible misunderstandings?!* I racked my brain for a way to defend myself.

“...Rose is right. How are you going to take responsibility for this?” Lia asked.

“Y-you too, Lia?!” She had teamed up with Rose.

“What are you going to do?”

“You *are* going to account for this, right?”

Their tag-team attack left me at a clear numerical disadvantage, and I had no idea what to do. “I—I, uh... Responsibility? I don’t know how...,” I babbled.

“...Ha-ha, it was a joke,” Rose said.

“Hmm-hmm, we’ll let you off the hook this time,” Lia chimed.

They both smiled cheerfully.

“Don’t do that to me, you two...” I already didn’t have the best reputation in the academy, what with people calling me things like Reject Swordsman, troublemaker, and the Emperor of Evil. *I honestly don’t care what people think of me anymore...* But I’d rather nip a bad rumor in the bud if I could.

I breathed a sigh of relief.

“The Royal Sword Festival is up next. I’m gonna be there to cheer you on, so you’d better win the whole thing,” Lia said.

“Do your best for us,” Rose added.

They both gave me some nice encouragement.

“Yeah, you bet. I’ll work as hard as I can,” I assured them. The Royal Sword Festival was a celebration of sword fighting that all high school swordcraft academies participated in. *Shido will likely be there as Ice King Academy’s first-year...* There would be incredibly talented sword-wielders from the other Elite Five Academies as well.

Ha-ha, I can’t wait! I felt excitement well up in my chest at the thought of the duels I would experience there.

“Huh...? Allen, what happened here?” Lia asked, noticing the bandage wrapped around my right arm. Nothing got by her.

“Uh, well... You know... I just pulled a muscle. I did have three tough fights in a row, so... Yeah, it’s no big deal!” I answered, making something up so she wouldn’t feel any unnecessary guilt.

“...You’re lying, aren’t you?” she said, staring me right in the eyes. She’d seen through my words immediately.

“N-no, of course not...”

“Are you *sure* about that?”

“Nrgh... A-anyway, I got this injury from overexerting myself! Let’s leave it at that!” I declared, assertively ending that conversation. “O-oh yeah! You two need to get well soon so we can get back to our practice swings!”

“Grr... Got it,” Lia said.

“Roger that,” Rose responded.

The turbulence of the First-Year Tourney now behind us, we were all excited to return to our everyday lives.

CHAPTER 3

The Wanted Man & an Awakening

It was the morning after the First-Year Tourney. We had the day off, so I was hoping to give myself a much-needed break. Unfortunately, however, I got roped into some plans, so I was now heading for an ice cream shop located in the middle of Aures.

“Hmm, it should be around here somewhere...,” I said aloud as I searched for the shop, pamphlet in hand.

“Allen! Over here!”

The Student Council president’s clear voice called out behind me. I turned around to see her jumping and waving her arms. She was wearing a nice casual outfit.

“Sorry, were you waiting for me?” I asked.

“No, I just got here,” Shii answered. She smiled kindly and looked me over. “It’s nice seeing you out of your uniform, Allen. You look good.”

Per her request, I’d put on personal clothes for the first time in a while. My outfit was simple—I was wearing a black jacket over a white shirt and navy-blue pants below. Ms. Paula had given me these for my birthday.

“Thank you. You look great, too, President.” She was wearing a slightly loose white blouse and a long skirt with a high slit. A necklace with a red pendant was hanging at her chest. The cool elegance of her clothes suited her well.

“Hmm-hmm, thanks.”

Once we’d got our greetings out of the way, I decided to inquire about what was on my mind. “Why did you ask me here so suddenly?”

Right after I’d accepted the trophy for the First-Year Tourney and visited Lia

and Rose in the infirmary, I received a letter from the president. The message had been short and sweet.

I'm inviting you to ice cream as thanks for helping me with the Student Council work. It'll be my treat. Let's meet up at noon tomorrow by the clock tower on Oriana Street.

Shii Arkstoria

Written below were three conditions: Keep it a secret from Lia and Rose and come alone, wear casual clothes, and don't take your sword since it attracts attention. The fancy envelope also contained a pamphlet for the ice cream shop.

"Hmm-hmm, you know what they say. 'Women are fickle creatures'..."

"...Huh." That didn't even come close to answering my question. Well, this kind of abruptness was the norm for her. I couldn't let something like this surprise me.

"So, Allen. Lia and Rose haven't caught wind of this, right?" the president whispered, darting her eyes around the street.

"Yeah, there's no need to worry." I'd told Lia I was "going on a little errand" and informed Rose that I had no plans to train together today. "Why do we need to keep this a secret, though? I don't see any reason to hide it from them," I asked, expressing my doubt.

"I swear, you can be denser than a boulder sometimes...", she said, shaking her head and sighing loudly. "But whatever. We're off today! Let's spend the whole day having fun!"

"A-all day? I thought we were just getting ice cre—"

"Let's go! Chop-chop!" Shii interrupted, walking off in high spirits.

"Hey, wait for me!" I called after her.

I followed behind her until we arrived at the ice cream parlor. The building had been made to resemble a small castle, and a long line of women stretched outdoors.

"Th-there are so many people here...", I observed.

“Hee-hee, this place is brand-new, so it’s very popular right now,” Shii explained. We joined the end of the line; as we waited, we browsed a menu an employee handed us. “Let’s see... The mandarin-orange ice cream is calling to me. It’s a summer special. Have you made up your mind, Allen?”

“Hmm... I think I’ll go with vanilla.”

We passed the time with small talk after deciding on our orders. The president was a great conversationalist. Our wait flew by as a result, and before I knew it, we were at the front of the line.

“Excuse me. Can we please have one mandarin orange and one vanilla?” Shii asked.

“Thank you for your order! Coming right up!” a cheerful employee responded, promptly filling two cute cups with balled scoops of ice cream and handing them to us. We then sat down at a two-person table inside the shop.

“Hey, Allen, aren’t you going to have a hard time eating with that hand? Do you want Big Sister Shii to feed you?” she asked, glancing at my heavily bandaged right hand and smiling alluringly.

“No, I’m fine. I can eat with my left hand,” I answered. I picked up a small spoon with it and ate a bite of ice cream to show I could do it without issue.

“Hmph, you’re no fun...”

“Ah-ha-ha... You should start eating before your ice cream melts, President.”

After we’d finished our delicious treats, we left the restaurant and entered a chic clothing store.

“Welcome!” A young, trendily dressed employee greeted us with a wide grin.

“Th-thanks...,” I responded, bowing slightly.

“Allen, follow me!” Shii insisted, humming happily as she walked farther into the establishment. “Hmm, these are all so cute...,” she muttered, studying the clothes on display closely. She picked out an item she liked and held it against herself in front of a mirror set up for customers. “Allen, did you know that green is in fashion this year?”

“Huh, I didn’t,” I said. Shii occasionally shared small quips like that with me as

I chased her around the store, feeling fidgety and stressed out all the while. *I just can't seem to calm down...* Everyone I looked at seemed to be practically glowing. Their hair and clothes were all so nice that it was making me feel out of place.

It's gonna take me a while longer to get used to cities... Goza Village had more livestock than people; urban areas weren't the easiest of places for country bumpkins like me.

I followed Shii around for another fifteen minutes or so until she turned to face me. "Hey, Allen. Which dress do you like better—this polka-dot one, or this green one?" she asked, holding up two pretty garments.

"..." Her question hit me like a bag of bricks. *I thought this was just an urban legend, but I guess it really happens...* This was the dreaded "either-or choice" guys often had to face when going shopping with a girl. If I answered incorrectly, it would ruin her mood, along with the rest of our day... Or so I'd heard anyway.

I can get through this! I have the surefire method that Ms. Paula taught me! A conversation I had with her a few years back resurfaced in my mind.

"Listen up, Allen. Girls always crave agreement."

"Agreement?"

"That's right. For example... Let's imagine a girl asks you to choose between two items of clothing. Nine times out of ten, she'll already have given you the answer when she asks the question."

"Huh..."

"In other words—what they're looking for is your agreement, not your opinion."

"...This sounds complicated. How do you figure out the answer they want?"

"That's simple, my boy. All you need to do is look at her eyes!"

"Her eyes?"

"Girls are pure and honest with their emotions. They can't help but glance at the one that they like best."

"I—I see..."

"Well, I suppose there's no real point to trying to get a blockheaded man to understand the delicate heart of a woman... But it's important...that you try your...BEST!"

I remembered Ms. Paula cutting off the head of a pig with a giant butcher's knife as she told me that last part. ...*That's so nostalgic.* The pork stew we ate that day had been amazing.

Hey, don't get lost in thought, Allen. I need to focus on the problem at hand. Getting my slightly derailed monologue back on track, I pretended to compare the two dresses while actually observing the president's gaze. I then noticed that her eyes were drifting toward the green dress. *Oh yeah, she told me earlier that green is in fashion this year.* Putting two and two together, the answer was clear!

"I like the green one the best," I declared. There was no going back now. My palms started to sweat, and my heart began to race from nervousness. *Was that the right choice?!*

I gulped.

"Great, I was thinking the same thing! I'll get this one, then," Shii responded with a wide grin. She took the green dress to the cashier.

Thank goodness... That was the most difficult challenge I've faced today, but I got through it somehow... Thanking Ms. Paula internally, I breathed a sigh of relief.



After that, Shii took me to many more shops. *We went to a grocery store, a general store, a jewelry store, an arts and crafts store... Oh yeah, and a secondhand store, too.* I never would have entered any of these places myself, so I saw a lot of items I hadn't encountered before. It turned out to be a fun day of broadening my horizons.

"Aww, it's getting dark," the president said.

"Yeah, the day is almost over," I responded. It was already seven at night. We

were walking down Oriana Street side by side.

“...”

“...”

We fell silent momentarily as we walked... *Is she tired? It has been a long day.* Would it be better for me to say something or continue walking in silence? I debated internally over what to do until Shii finally spoke up.

“...Hey, Allen,” she said, a serious expression on her face.

“What is it?”

“Would you consider working for the government?”

“...Huh?”

Her proposal caught me totally off guard.



It was the morning after the First-Year Tourney.

“Lia, I’m going on a little errand,” Allen said. He was wearing casual clothes and ready to go out.

“...Huh? O-okay... See you later,” Lia answered, taken aback. She gave him a wave and an awkward smile.

“Yeah, see you,” he said back, closing the door behind him. Left alone in the apartment, Lia was overtaken by a strong sense of unease.

“...That’s weird.” She noticed that he’d left his sword standing against his desk. “That’s *definitely* weird.” Allen took his blade wherever he went, but today, he’d left it behind. “He always tells me where he’s going, too...” Her unease approached anxiety with each little abnormality she noticed.

“...Is it a girl?” she said, arriving at a conclusion. “N-no, don’t be silly! He’s never shown any interest in them! There’s no way!” she proclaimed, waving her hands back and forth in denial.

Lia knew better than anyone how much of a late bloomer Allen was when it came to romance. After all, they had been living in the same apartment for four

months now, and he had never shown any signs of making a move on her. Although...

“There’s no way he would be meeting a girl... Right?” But try as she might, she couldn’t deny it definitively. “No matter how innocent he is, if another woman approached him aggressively enough...”

Lia played out a number of scenarios in her head. “...This could be bad,” she realized aloud, her face going pale. She already knew from the regular information exchanges she held with Rose in secret that Allen was very popular with the ladies. “Allen is a nice guy...but way too trusting of other people.” There was at least a small chance that someone was taking advantage of his kindness and naïveté.

...He could be in trouble, she thought, making up her mind. “I have to do something!” She changed into plain personal clothes so she wouldn’t stand out, then dashed out of the dorm.

“Sorry, Allen. It’s not that I don’t trust you... I’m just doing this to protect you from bad girls,” Lia muttered to herself as if trying to justify her actions. She tailed Allen stealthily for about fifteen minutes until someone approached him.

“N-no way...” What she saw made her feel as if she had been plunged into an ice-cold pool of despair.

“Allen! Over here!”

“Sorry, were you waiting for me?”

“No, I just got here.”

Allen was meeting up with Shii Arkstoria. Lia had trusted him so much. To make matters worse, she saw no sign of the other Student Council members, Lilim and Tirith. It was just the two of them. This looked entirely like a date.

“Why...?” she said, starting to walk toward Allen in dumbstruck stupor.

“...What are you doing, Lia?” said Rose, tapping her on the shoulder. She had happened to be passing by.

“Eek!” Lia shrieked, jumping in shock. She quickly turned around and saw Rose in casual clothes. “D-don’t scare me like that!”

“I was calling your name...,” Rose responded. She looked bewildered by Lia’s reaction.

“F-forget about that! Care to tell me what *you’re* doing here?!” Lia fumed, mistakenly believing that Rose was there to go on a secret date with Allen as well.

“What’s with the accusatory tone? I just came here to get some of that ice cream everyone is talking about,” she answered, pointing toward an ice cream parlor that looked like a small castle.

“O-oh... That’s good.” Relief washed over Lia as she accepted Rose wasn’t also her enemy in this situation.

“What are you doing sneaking around like this?” Rose asked.

“...Look over there.”

Rose followed Lia’s finger. “That’s Allen and...Shii?!” She saw the two of them chatting, looking frighteningly like a couple. “I-is that a date?!”

“I-I’m not sure of that yet! I’m watching them to find out!”

“Okay... I’ll join you!”

And so Lia and Rose decided to work together and spy on Allen and Shii.



Lia and Rose watched as Allen and Shii entered the ice cream shop. The two girls joined the long line, taking care not to be discovered.

“Excuse me. Can I please have strawberry, vanilla, chocolate banana, *ramune*, matcha, milk coffee, caramel, cream nuts...oh, and the summer-special mandarin orange? I would like all of them large,” Lia requested, giving an employee her order.

“...Your stomach is as bottomless as ever. I’ll have a regular mandarin orange, please,” Rose added.

“Understood!” The employee set to work and promptly brought them a collection of cute cups full of ice cream. Once they’d got their food, Lia and

Rose hastily moved to a two-person table and resumed their observation.

“Urgh, why does he look like he’s having so much fun...? Wow, this is delicious!” said Lia.

“Grr, I have a bad feeling about this... Hmm, this ice cream is just as good as advertised,” Rose commented.



After finishing their frozen treats, Lia and Rose trudged along behind Allen and Shii as the two explored a variety of different shops. Before they knew it, the sun was going down, and Allen and Shii were walking quietly down the evening-lit Oriana Street.

“Ugh, look at how comfortable they are together...”

“What a disaster...”

Lia and Rose were hiding behind a trash can and doing their absolute best to maintain their composure. Shortly afterward, Allen and Shii stopped in front of a beautiful fountain. The president’s expression turned serious, and she told him something that seemed to catch him off guard.

““...Did she just confess to him?!”” Lia and Rose both exclaimed, going pale.

“Yo, you’re Princess Lia of Vesteria, aren’t ya?” said a black-garbed man who suddenly dropped out of the sky.

““Huh?!”” The girls jumped back from him in surprise.

“...Isn’t it polite to introduce yourself before asking for someone else’s name?” Lia asked pointedly. She observed the man carefully, preparing herself to summon Fafnir at any moment.

He was a giant, muscular man who stood at about two meters tall. His crimson hair was cropped short, and his face was rough and chiseled. He was likely in his midthirties. His low, baritone voice projected great confidence.

This guy seems really tough! Lia’s instincts told her he was a formidable man, so she watched him attentively.

“Wah-ha-ha-ha! I like your grit, girl! I’m Zach Bombard! There, now it’s your tur—”

“Summon your Soul Attire, Lia!” Rose shouted urgently, interrupting him.

“C-Conquer—Dragon King Fafnir!” Lia did as Rose said immediately. Rose already had Winter Sakura in hand and was facing Zach with intense animosity.

“This is Zach Bombard, otherwise known as Immolation Zach! He’s a dangerous man with a reputation for traveling around and burning down holy-

knight branches for fun. There's also a huge bounty on his head since he's on the international wanted list," Rose explained.

"Wah-ha-ha, you know who I am, huh? Looks like I've become a celebrity!" Zach responded with a bombastic laugh.

"I haven't heard anything about you in years... I never would have thought you'd join the Black Organization," Rose asserted, immediately picking up on his jet-black clothes.

"Ah... That's kinda just the way things worked out. It's a bit of a long story..." he started, scratching his head. "Eh, that's not important. Don't worry, I'll stop short of killin' ya."

"Huh?!"

"He's gonna attack, Lia! Don't let your guard down!"

Zach reached out his hand. "Howl—Blazing Cross!"

"Huh?!"

"This power...!"

The moment he summoned his Soul Attire, a giant inferno engulfed Lia and Rose.



The president's question threw me for a loop. "Wh-what do you mean, 'work for the government'?" I asked.

"I'm headhunting you, to put it bluntly. If it's okay with you, I can set up a meeting with my father right awa—" Shii's proposal was interrupted by the sudden appearance of an enormous pillar of fire.

""Huh?!"" we both shouted. The people around us began to panic.

"F-fire! There's a fire!"

"It's some thug! Call the holy knights now!"

"Good grief, did this have to happen on my day off...?"

The flaming pillar had appeared close by—only about ten meters from where we were now.

“Allen!”

“Let’s go!”

We rushed to the scene to find a man resting a giant, scorched blade on his shoulder. “Wah-ha-ha, *that’s* the Fafnir I’ve heard so much about? Letdown of the century!” Lia and Rose were sprawled out at his feet.

“L-Lia?! Rose?!” exclaimed Shii.

“You bastard... What did you do to them?!” I shouted, gripping my terribly injured right arm and glaring at the man in front of me.



I stepped forward to help Lia and Rose, who had fainted.

“Allen, no!” The president quickly grabbed my hand. “You can’t fight with that arm. I know how you feel, but we need to stay composed!”

That brought me back to earth. She was right—my right arm was so banged up, I couldn’t even hold a spoon. I couldn’t fight properly in this state. “Haah...” I exhaled deeply to cool my head. “Thanks, President.”

“Don’t worry about it,” she responded kindly before directing a sharp glare at the large man before us. “You’re Zach Bombard, correct? I’ve heard that you’d been MIA for the last few years. To think you joined the Black Organization...”

“Wow, you’ve heard of me, too?”

“Naturally. I’m an Arkstoria. How in the world did the Border Patrol let someone as infamous as you slip into our country...?” she said with a look of great displeasure. Then the president changed the subject. “Anyway, what is your purpose here? Are you planning to stay on brand and burn down another holy-knight branch?”

“Wah-ha-ha! That’s not a bad guess, but I’m here on business. I came to abduct a girl named Lia Vesteria,” Zach answered, glancing at the unconscious princess.

“Why her? Does this ‘business’ relate to the Black Organization?” Shii inquired.

“Right on the money! The more jobs I complete, the more I’ll sparkle! My light may be dull now, but one day, I’ll shine as bright as a star!”

“...‘Sparkle’?” I repeated. Shii continued to speak with the man until I heard some people approach.

“Nobody move! You’re the thug who’s been starting fires, right?!”

“You’re coming with us to the holy-knight branch!”

“Stay back, citizens! This man is dangerous!”

Over thirty holy knights rushed toward us and surrounded Zach.

“Hee-hee, you all got here quick,” Shii said with a satisfied grin. She must have been keeping Zach talking to buy time for backup to arrive. Her ability to stay cool in a crisis impressed me. “I’ve been waiting for you, holy knights. I’ll take the lead. I trust you all will back me up?” the president added, never once taking her eyes off Zach.

“Wh-what are you...? Ms. Arkstoria?!” one of the holy knights cried out, realizing she was the daughter of House Arkstoria, a family who held significant sway in the government. “U-understood! Everyone, support Ms. Arkstoria!”

““““Yes, sir!”””” His fellows saluted, following Shii’s orders.

“Thank you very much. Can someone please lend me a blade?”

“Here, use mine, my lady!” A holy knight drew his sword and handed it to her respectfully. Now ready for battle, the president pointed the tip of her steel at Zach.

“Surrender now, Zach Bombard. The senior holy knights and the chairwoman of the nearby Elite Five Academy will arrive before long. You have no hope of escape.”

“The chairwoman is the Black Fist, right? Wah-ha-ha, I wonder how brightly she glitters... My heart’s racin’ just thinkin’ about it!” Zach twisted his mouth into a grin as though he were fantasizing.

“Good grief... I see conversation is a waste of breath,” Shii muttered.

“...You guys ready to show me how much you sparkle?” Zach asked. In a flash, he was behind the president, his massive sword raised high.

“...Huh?!”

“Look out, President!” I warned her as quickly as I could, but I was a little late.

“Blazing Circle!” Zach yelled as explosive flames erupted around him. The terrific shock waves crumbled the surrounding buildings, and the intense heat set the street alight.

“*Aaahhh!*” The explosion sent the president flying backward, until she banged the back of her head and fell unconscious.

“Gaaahhh...”

“Owww.It burns...”

“H-he’s a monster...”

Zach had taken out all the holy knights in a single devastating attack.

“That’s impossible...” I said to myself. His strength was overwhelming—it was abundantly clear that no one here stood a chance.

“Wah-ha-ha-ha! Where’s your sparkle, guys?” His deep, shameless laughter reverberated throughout Oriana Street, which had been reduced to ashes. He walked up to Lia as he mocked the president and the holy knights. “You’re comin’ with me,” he said, picking up the princess and carrying her under his armpit as he started to walk off.

I watched him in a daze—as if everything I saw were taking place in a faraway world. *Why did this happen?* I’d been having a fun, if hectic, day with the free-spirited president. The sun was going down, so pretty soon, I would have escorted her back to her estate. Afterward, I would have returned to the dorm to eat dinner with Lia, and after an enjoyable night, we would have gone to sleep in the same bed.

This should have been an entertaining, ordinary day... Why did it have to turn out this way?

“...Stop right there,” I demanded quietly.

“Eh...?” Zach turned around to face me. Blood dripped from Lia’s shoulder as he held her under his arm.

“...” The anger I had been suppressing started to well to the surface. “...Give her back.”

“What was that?”

“Give...Lia back!” I borrowed a sword from an unconscious holy knight and gripped it tight with my bandaged right hand. “...Nrgh.” A harsh pain raced up my arm, but then it quickly disappeared.

“AAAAARRRRRRRGH!” I charged straight for Zach, mustering every bit of my strength into an all-out attack. “Eighth Style—Eight-Span Crow!” Eight slashes rushed toward his arms, legs, head, neck, chest, and stomach.

“Man, who dimmed the lights...? Blazing Shield!” With a casual swing of his giant blade, he produced a thick shield of flame. Its brightness stung my eyes, and the fire instantly consumed all my slashes.

“Huh?!” The power of this man’s Soul Attire slightly surpassed that of Lia’s Fafnir.

“Take this!” Zach took advantage of my astonishment and delivered a powerful kick to my abdomen.

“Gaaah?!” Something inside me made an unpleasant *snap* as I was hurled backward. “Dammit...” A metallic taste filled my mouth; a broken bone might have punctured an organ. My vision flickered, but I pushed myself to stand up. “S-stop...”

“Wow, how’d a weakling like you get a body that tough? Wah-ha-ha-ha!”

I ignored his ridicule. “Give...Lia...back!” Bloodied and battered, I charged at him again. “Fifth Style—World Render!” I clenched my teeth to bear the pain and flourished my blade for all I was worth.

“So slow... I’m gonna conk out before your sword reaches me... Blazing Death Lance!”

Flame blanketed my vision. “Wh-what the?!” His attack snapped the sword I’d

borrowed from the holy knight in two, and a red-hot inferno enveloped my body. *“Aaaaargh!”*

Pain. Hot, searing, burning pain. Words could not properly describe the agony I felt throughout my entire body. But I wasn't going to give in. *“This...isn't...over...”* Nothing would make me withdraw. I took one step forward into the never-ending stream of flame.

I will...get Lia back... I won't let...this freak have her! Though the blade I'd been using was broken, I nevertheless persevered. I clenched my fists—and took another step forward.

“Goddamn, kid... Most people would have dropped dead by now...”

I caught a glimpse of Zach's face through the torrent of flame. *This is my last chance!* I concentrated all my might into my fist and aimed a punch for his face. *“Aaaaahhhhhh!”*

“Wah-ha-ha! I like your guts, but you don't have the strength! Blazing Shield!” A large barrier of flame appeared in front of him.

“Gaaaaah!” Intense fire seared my right arm. *This isn't over... I can't give up!*

Lifting my right hand again, I aimed a punch for the flame shield. *“Graaargh!”* As soon as I did, an incredibly dense black substance formed around my hand. The outpouring of darkness easily consumed his flame shield.

“The hell?!” Zach shouted. The blackness raced toward him without slowing a bit. *“B-Blazing Death Lance!”* Instantly, he dropped Lia to produce a roaring inferno. The black substance wriggled as if it were alive on its collision course with the red flames, which were hot enough to reduce anything to ashes.

“Haaaaaaaarrrrrrrgh!”

“Impossible... Where'd this crazy power come from?!”

The two materials met.

“Ngh, GAAAAH!” The darkness devoured Zach's fire and sent him rocketing backward.



After managing to drive the man away, I dropped to my knees and looked at my right hand.

“Haah, haah... What happened?” When I’d concentrated all my willpower into swinging my fist, some sort of incredibly dense black substance was birthed in my right hand. *Oh yeah, I felt a similar sensation when I punched my Dark Boom during the First-Year Tourney...*

The difference this time around was the level of strength—it had been significantly more destructive here than when it had appeared during the tourney. That outpouring of pitch-black darkness hadn’t occurred last time, either. *What in the world is this power?*

A large pillar of flame in the distance snapped me out of my thoughts. “Huh?!”

“Wah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! I can see it now! Your brilliant, sparkling light!” Now clad in armor made of flame, Zach returned to me with deep, roaring laughter.

“No way!” I said aloud. There wasn’t a scratch on him. “That didn’t even injure him?!” I gasped, standing there stupefied.

“Yo, gimme your name... Oh wait, my bad. *Isn’t it polite to introduce yourself before asking for someone’s name?!’* Wah-ha-ha!” He guffawed as if something was amusing. “My name is Zach Bombard! Fate dictated that I serve the Black Organization! Okay, now it’s your turn!”

After introducing himself for unclear reasons, he crossed his arms and waited for my response. I didn’t understand what was going on, but it would have been bad manners to not give him my name. “...I’m Allen Rodol,” I told him quietly, and he gave a satisfied nod.

“Allen Rodol, huh...? Wah-ha-ha, that has a nice ring to it! I won’t forget it!” he proclaimed. “Now gimme that darkness again!”

“...Huh?” I had no clue why he would ask for that.

“Don’t ‘huh’ me! That attack was from your Soul Attire, right? Come on, the suspense is killing me! I wanna see your sparkle! Hurry up!” He stuck out his right hand and urged me to do as he wished.

“...Sorry to disappoint you, but I haven’t realized my Soul Attire yet.”

“You serious?! You mean you produced that level of force without it?! Wah-ha-ha! That’s some incredible talent! ...You know what, I’ll teach you a few pointers! You deserve it.”

He began to lecture with great enthusiasm. I had no idea what he found so amusing.

“There are three ways to extract power from your Soul Attire! The first is to speak to your Spirit Core and borrow its power. The second is to negotiate with your Spirit Core so it will conditionally lend you its power. The last is to beat your Spirit Core into submission and take its power by force!” Zach explained, ticking off three fingers as he did. “This is a hunch from your last attack, but your Spirit Core has a particularly violent nature, doesn’t it?”

“...You’re right.”

“Wah-ha-ha, got it in one! Talking or negotiating with such a ferocious Spirit Core is impossible! By process of elimination, that means you hafta beat it senseless!”

“If I could do that, I would have my Soul Attire by now.” Defeating *him* and wrestling his power away by force was easier said than done. I calmly shook my head, to which Zach made a confused expression.

“Eh? With grit like yours, it shouldn’t be impossible. You just showed willpower monstrous enough to plunge into Blazing Cross’s flames without fear of injury, after all!” Zach argued.

“Let’s say you’re right, and my mental fortitude is a little higher than the average person’s. Even then, if I lack the might to defeat him—my Spirit Core—I’ll never manifest my Soul Attire.”

“Hmm... I think you’ve got the wrong idea, Allen. Like you said, you do need to defeat your Soul Attire physically to obtain *all* its power. But to gain a *piece* of it, you just gotta make it submit with your heart!”

“...My heart?”

“That’s right. You need a strong heart—you gotta find your resolve and keep

your belief in it steadfast! Then use that willpower to force your Spirit Core under your thumb! Once you do, show the world just how brightly you sparkle!” Zach preached passionately.

“Can it, you half-wit!” A strange girl suddenly appeared and kicked him in the back of the head.

“Owww... What the hell are you doing, Tor? I was just getting to the good part!” Zach exclaimed.

“That’s what *I* should be asking *you*, moron! I was looking for you because you didn’t show up at the rendezvous, and here I find you loafing around!” the girl answered.

“Oh yeah, get a load of this, then! I found the most dazzling gemstone! I think he sparkles brighter than any I’ve ever seen!”

“Tch, what are you babbling about...? We’re on the clock here! You’ve always given me the creeps...”

Tor was short, thin, and wore a black cloak. She looked like a moody girl in her early teens. Rose-pink hair emerged slightly from her hood, and she was wearing simple pins to keep her bangs out of her forehead.

Those clothes... She must be in the Black Organization, too. As if dealing with Zach alone wasn’t exhausting enough—now she was here to back him up... This was the worst thing that could have happened.

“What are you waiting for, you big oaf?! Grab the princess and run!” Tor commanded. She was focused on their job and seemed uninterested in fighting.

“H-hold on! You don’t find a gem like this every day... Can’t I play with him a little longer?!” he protested.

“Put your duty first, idiot! I got word that the Black Fist is fast approaching. So once again, we need to grab the princess and split!”

It sounded like Chairwoman Reia had caught wind of the disturbance and was heading here.

“Wow, Black Fist is coming?! C’mon, the two of us could totally kill her,” Zach said, frothing.

“You’re sure full of yourself, peabrain! There’s no way you could beat a Transcendent! If you *have* to fight her, do it alone! I won’t mourn your unsightly death,” Tor responded.

“Wah-ha-ha, our years of working together have done nothing to warm that cold attitude of yours!” Zach dismissed Blazing Cross and then picked up the unconscious Lia. “Let’s go.”

“On it.” They ran off with incredible speed.

“Hey, stop!” I yelled after them.

“We don’t have time to waste on a punk like you.” Tor, who I had just seen run ahead of me, was suddenly standing behind me.

“Huh?!”

“Die.” She pulled a knife out of her pocket and stabbed at my neck. I heard a loud *thud*. “What the hell...?!”

Tor’s blade had failed to penetrate my skin. Maybe it was rusty.

“Tch...” She threw down her dagger and moved nimbly away from me. “What the heck is that *creature*? No human could possibly have skin strong enough to block a dagger!”

“Wah-ha-ha, I told you, he sparkles like you wouldn’t believe! He’s still unpolished, but one day, he’ll truly shine!”

I used Zach and Tor’s conversation as a chance to rush at them. “Put Lia... down!”



“Tch. We have no business with undiscovered species!” she yelled, opening her black coat.

“““Screech, screech!”””

A large number of bats flew out from within. “Wh-what the?!” The animals flapped around my head and obstructed my vision.

“Now’s our chance. We’re withdrawing, half-wit.”

“Wah-ha-ha! Let’s meet again sometime, Allen! I love the way you sparkle!”

Their voices grew distant as I worked to fend off the bats.

“Grr... Stop!” I took a step, and my vision swayed. “Huh...?” I lost all sense of equilibrium; it felt as if my entire body was floating. I could barely move my feet forward, as if I had been dropped into a dense swamp.

What’s happening? Curious, I looked down—and saw a giant red puddle. “Is that all...my blood?” Pain racked my body as I suddenly became aware of every injury I had endured. “Dammit...”

I collapsed into the pool of my fluids and lost consciousness.

“Hey, Allen, hang in there! Crap... Eighteen!”

“At your service!”

“Keep an eye on Allen! He’s already regenerating, so he doesn’t need treatment. On the small chance that *he* emerges, hit him with intent to kill! Don’t miss the initial petrification!”

“Understood.”

“I’m gonna chase after them! I leave the rest to you!”



Through the mist of my consciousness, I heard an authoritative female voice.

“Yes, it was the Black Organization! A tall, large man and a slim woman, both wearing the usual black garb! Contact me as soon as you have any info!”

It belonged to Chairwoman Reia.

Uh... What was I doing again? My senses gradually came back to me as my brain kicked into gear. *Do I know this place...?* I was lying on my back. Putting aside the thin, brown blanket draped over me, I slowly sat up.

“...Where am I?” I asked.

“You’re up, Allen! Relax, you’re in the chair’s office. Those two are gone.”

“Those two? ...?!” My heart leaped out of my chest the moment I heard that. I felt as if I had been doused with ice-cold water.

My shopping spree with Shii. The Black Organization assaulting Lia and Rose. My battle with Zach and Tor. I remembered it all clearly now. “Oh yeah, where’s Lia?! Is she safe?!” I asked, springing to my feet.

The chairwoman calmly shook her head. “...Sorry. They had already taken her by the time I began my pursuit.”

“No...” Blood drained from my face and my vision flickered.

“H-hey, are you okay?!” The chairwoman rushed to catch me as I swayed from a strong wave of dizziness.

I couldn’t stop unpleasant thoughts from whipping around in my head. What if something terrible happened to Lia? What if she was humiliated in some way? What if... What if she had already been killed? Those kinds of scenarios flooded my mind.

No, stop that... I need to hang in there! Moping won’t accomplish anything. I clenched my fists, gritted my teeth, and tried to lift my spirits.

“Sorry, I’m okay. More importantly, where did they take off to?” I asked.

“...Hmm. Before we get to that, there’s some things you should know,” the chairwoman answered. She placed a couple of wanted posters, each with a portrait, on the desk. “These are wanted posters for Zach Bombard, also known as Immolation Zach, and Tor Sammons, aka Tor the Conjuror. As you can see, they both have top-rate international bounties on their heads. You did well to survive, Allen.”

Memories flooded back to me after hearing her explanation. *Oh yeah... Wasn’t I on the brink of death? I suffered some horrible wounds...* Zach had

stabbed me with Blazing Death Lance, and scorching flames had burned my entire body, until I'd finally passed out from an acute loss of blood. Next thing I knew, I was here.

Nervously, I glanced down at my stomach. *Huh?* There was nothing there—no burns, not even a scratch. *Medicine is very advanced in this country, but how could I have healed this quickly?* Maybe the chairwoman had used her societal standing to summon an elite doctor?

“Next, take a look at this,” Reia said, pulling me out of my thoughts. She pointed to a map of the country she had spread out on the desk. “House Arkstoria is currently taking advantage of its influence to tighten our border security like never before. It will be next to impossible for those two to slip through. That means they’re hiding somewhere within our country!”

It sounded like Shii had been making use of her family’s power while I was unconscious.

“Also, given the Black Organization’s goals, there is no way they’ll kill Lia right away,” she continued.

“What are they after?” I asked.

“...Sorry, Allen. That’s a highly classified state secret. For your own safety, I can’t reveal it to you yet,” she said, shaking her head with a slightly sour expression.

“Really...?” I was dying to know the details, but since they were confidential, I had no choice but to drop it.

“I can’t tell you any more about what they’re doing, but they’ve almost certainly taken Lia to a research lab located somewhere in Liengard. They will have to refrain from harming her for the twenty-four hours it takes to complete their analysis.”

“W-we only have a day?!” That was a really short amount of time.

“Yeah, and given the approximate location of the research lab...it’s safe to assume the twenty-four hours will be up tonight at midnight.”

My eyes snapped to the clock hanging on the wall. It was noon, which meant

we had only half that time left.

“All right! We can’t even begin our fight until we discover where the lab is. You’re gonna help me search for it, Allen!”

“Yes, ma’am!” I responded before I sprinted off campus to begin searching for the lab. “Wait for me, Lia...” *I swear I’ll find you before midnight!*



I worked like a madman talking to people to try to gather information. I started by asking my old dorm matron, Ms. Paula, then Mr. Bonz from the Witchblade Guild. After that, I tried Lilim and Tirith from the Student Council. When that didn’t pan out, I began approaching people indiscriminately on the streets of Aurst. I used all my personal connections and searched as many places as I could... But in the end, I didn’t turn up anything.

“Dammit, what can I do...?” The sun had set, and darkness had fallen. It was nine at night, which meant we had only three hours until the deadline.

Lia must be suffering right now... Frustration and impatience were working my mind into a tizzy, but I couldn’t do anything until I learned the enemy’s whereabouts. This experience was making me painfully aware of the importance of information.

...Maybe Chairwoman Reia has already found it. Clinging to that final hope, I plodded back to her. I passed through Thousand Blade’s front gate and went to her office. The chairwoman responded with a short “...Enter” when I knocked on her imposing black door; she sounded fatigued.

“I’m coming in,” I announced. I opened the door and saw her poring over a thick pile of documents.

“...Oh, Allen. Any progress?”

“Sorry, ma’am. I spent all day searching, but I have nothing to show for it.”

“That’s too bad... I reached out to everyone I could think of but didn’t find anything useful, either...,” she admitted, letting out a large sigh.

A thick silence fell between us. Chairwoman Reia opened her mouth to speak

a few minutes later. “...I do know of one person who might know where the research lab is, though,” she said. Now *that* I wasn’t expecting.

“R-really?!”

“Yeah. They’re shrouded in an endless amount of unscrupulous rumors, but their information network is unparalleled. I’m positive they’ll know where it is,” she explained with a conflicted expression. “But they’re rotten to the core. I don’t think they’ll just tell us. I’m almost certain it would be a fool’s errand.”

“If there’s any chance at all, it’s worth trying! We’re running out of time! Please tell me who this person is!” I begged.

“...” After a slight hesitation, the chairwoman calmly answered me. “One of the Five Business Oligarchs and the owner of Fox Financing—Rize Dorhein. She’s also the eldest daughter of the famed House Dorhein. By all accounts, Rize is a wicked woman whose connections to the shady underbelly of society run deep. People call her the Blood Fox for a reason.”

“Rize Dorhein... Do you mean Ferris’s older sister?!”

“What, are you acquainted with her?”

“Y-yes, sort of... Are you sure she knows where the research lab is?!”

“Yeah, it’s almost a guarantee. But she’s the wealthiest person in Liengard, and more importantly, she’s infamously treacherous. We’d have an easier time flying to the moon than wringing anything out of her. She already has anything she could ever want, after all... We’ll just be turned away at the gate without her ever knowing we were there.”

I didn’t know much about Rize Dorhein. If what the chairwoman said was true, she wasn’t the easiest person to ask for a favor. But I knew I could get through to her at least once.

“This might work!” I exclaimed.

“What do you mean?” the chairwoman asked inquisitively.

I had totally forgotten about this until now. *I have something very valuable...* As one of the Five Business Oligarchs, Rize Dorhein possessed unimaginable wealth. And I had a once-in-a-lifetime privilege—for a single time, she would

grant me her aid for anything I needed.

“Allen, what do you mean by that?! Tell me!”

“Yes, ma’am! The truth is...” I told her about what had transpired at the Unity Festival three months ago. About how Lia, Rose, and I received a job to escort an old lady from Aurst to Drestia while working as witchblades. And how the Five Business Oligarchs were holding a conference in the Unity Trade Center while the annual Unity Festival was underway. The Black Organization had used this as an opportunity to attack the oligarchs and set off explosions in the building. After we happened to run into that band of criminals, however, we drove them off. As thanks, Rize gave me the opportunity to ask a single favor of her.

“So that’s how you met...,” the chairwoman said.

“Yes, ma’am. I am sure Ms. Rize will be willing to help!”

Reia scowled and fell silent for a moment. “I don’t know what kind of impression she left on you, but she’s an unfeeling sleazebag who’s rotten to the core.”

“A-are you sure?” She didn’t seem that bad when I met her in Drestia...”

“She’s a shrewd businesswoman who brought Fox Financing to its current standing in just one generation. Though her charm and amicable demeanor may make her *seem* like a good person at first glance.”

I could still see Rize’s gentle smile in my mind.

“But don’t let her fool you—there’s no one as crooked and cunning as her. While growing Fox Financing, she bankrupted one rival firm or opposing force after the other through means that were just barely legal; occasionally, she would resort to something downright criminal. After monopolizing half of the market that way, she forged countless unsavory connections with the criminal underworld, probably in hopes of protecting herself from revenge-seekers and government regulations. I don’t know what ties Fox Financing has now. It’s warped into a sinister organization that you’re better off staying away from. Rize Dorhein cannot be trusted whatsoever,” the chairwoman explained, pausing for a moment. “...That being said, I haven’t ever heard of her breaking a

promise.”

“Th-that means...!”

“We’re out of time and ideas... Allen, are you willing to use this valuable privilege of yours now?”

“Of course, ma’am!” I responded immediately, seeing a ray of hope.

“Wait for me!” Rose barged into the chairwoman’s office. There were bandages wrapped around her forehead.

“R-Rose?! I’m so glad you’re okay!” I expressed.

“Hey, you’re awake!” added the chairwoman.

I rushed to her side.

“Thank you. I feel fine now. So please let me tag along,” Rose said, determined.

“Rose...I appreciate the sentiment, but your injuries...,” I started. The dressings on her arms and legs were stained with blood. She was clearly not in fighting shape.

“Don’t worry about that. When it comes time to battle, I can get as much strength as I need from Winter Sakura!” Rose insisted.

“Even so...” That power lasted for only a limited amount of time, and Rose had said herself she didn’t have full control over it yet. For the sake of her health, it would be best for her to stay behind and rest. However, the chairwoman had other ideas.

“That’s good enough for me,” she remarked, casually giving Rose consent to come.

“Ch-Chairwoman?! ”

“Eighteen is busy working with the Border Patrol, so every extra hand will help. Plus, Rose has a self-strengthening Soul Attire, so a few injuries shouldn’t be a problem.”

She knew much more about Soul Attire than me, so there was nothing for it but to agree. “Just promise me you won’t push yourself too hard, Rose,” I told

her.

“Okay. Thanks, Allen,” she responded.

“All right, let’s depart for Drestia! I’ll get my horse ready, so you two wait in the courtyard!” Chairwoman Reia commanded, flying out of her office.



We got in a carriage pulled by Chairwoman Reia’s horse and took off. The Merchant’s Town of Drestia wasn’t far from the capital. We got there in no time after a bumpy ride.

“It’s been three months since I’ve been here,” I remarked. We stepped out of the carriage onto Holy Street, which passed through the center of the city, and we began to look around. The road was packed with stalls on both sides, and there were still many people out despite it being past ten at night.

“Rize’s mansion is this way,” the chairwoman told us. Rose and I followed her on quick feet as she turned through the streets of Drestia until a large mansion came into view. “This place always sickens me... Rize flaunts her wealth like no one else.”

The estate was beautiful, and jaw-droppingly huge; it almost looked like a palace made of white stone. It was six, no, seven stories high. It had a wide courtyard containing a huge pool and a graceful fountain, and I could even make out a rock garden in the distance. Her home was a splendid mix of many different cultures, and it was surrounded by an exquisitely designed iron fence.

Wow... While I stared in awe at Rize’s residence, a number of flashlights trained on us out of the blue.

“Who goes there? Why are you peeping at Lady Rize’s mansion at this hour?! We’ll call the... Huh?!”

As men who must have been Rize’s private soldiers rushed to surround us, they went pale in the face.

“Y-you’re Black Fist, right?!”

“What?! She didn’t learn her lesson last time?!”

“...What do you want?”

The men all watched the chairwoman fiercely. They must have had a history with her.

“H-hold on, you guys! I didn’t come for anything like that this time. I only want to talk!” she explained quickly with an awkward smile.

“Is that so? Well, that’s too bad. Lady Rize has already gone to bed!”

“If you have business with her, I recommend you come back tomorrow!”

We were being sent away at the gate without a chance to plead our case.

“...Hmph, looks like we’ll have to muscle our way in after all.” Chairwoman Reia sighed, balling her fists.

“...Wait. Are you Allen Rodol, young man?” one of the private guards asked me.

“Y-yes, I am...,” I answered hesitantly.

“Hmm, I thought so... We’ve been instructed to let you pass whenever you decided to visit. You may enter. Lady Rize is relaxing in the reception room on the second floor,” he relented, opening the front gate a smidge.

“H-hey, what the hell?! Didn’t you just say she was sleeping?!”

“Come on, Black Fist. Do you truly have muscles for brains? I was obviously lying!”

“Yeah, we can’t let a dangerous individual like you through!”

“Our orders only extend to Allen Rodol. Behave yourself and wait right there.”

The soldiers clearly didn’t trust Reia one bit.

“...Chairwoman, Rose. I’ll be right back,” I said.

“Be careful, Allen,” Rose urged.

“Take care... You’re dealing with the Blood Fox. Shout for us if anything goes wrong, okay?” the chairwoman instructed.

“Ah-ha-ha... I really don’t think Ms. Rize is going to hurt me,” I responded before leaving them behind and entering through the luxurious gate. I then

passed through the expansive courtyard and opened the door to the mansion.

Wow... I knew what to expect, but this is really amazing... A crimson carpet spread out over a marble floor, and a meticulous glass chandelier hung from the ceiling. The walls were decorated with paintings that all looked like masterpieces you'd find in a museum.

She lived in a world a commoner like me could never be a part of.

"Let's see... He said she's in the reception room on the second floor..." I said to myself, remembering what the soldier had told me. I ascended a staircase to find Rize drinking black tea from a silver cup.

Rize Dorhein was a woman of unrivaled beauty, and today, she was dressed in a red-and-white kimono that blazed like fire. Her hair was long and red, done up in an elegant side bun that was held down by an ornate hairpin shaped like a flame. She had smooth and supple skin, and her slanted eyes were like those of a fox. There was an air of elegance and relaxation about her that few women could match.

"Hello, Ms. Rize. Apologies for stopping by so late," I announced.

"Oh my, it's Allen. What are ye doing here at this hour?" Rize asked with a kind smile.

"Sorry, I'm short on time so I'm going to get to the point. My close friend Lia Vesteria has been abducted by the Black Organization. Apparently, they're hiding in a laboratory somewhere in Liengard. Would you have any idea where their hideout is, Ms. Rize?"

"Why, of course," she answered readily, not concealing the fact that she knew for a moment.

"R-really?!"

"I wouldnae lie, Allen," she said, taking a sip of her tea.

"Then, um...can I use the privilege you gave me? When you said you would lend me your aid for anything I might need?!"

"Of course," Rize answered, immediately giving her consent. "But are ye sure this is how ye want to use it?" She tilted her head quizzically. "I dinnae mean to

brag, but I am one of the richest people in the land. Ye can ask me for anythin'. Do ye not want to use this for your own benefit?"

She stood up gracefully and began to circle around me slowly.

"I really will do *anythin'* for ye. Wealth, influence, famous blades—any of it could be yers. Do ye really want to use such a privilege to learn the location of some filthy research facility?"

Rize was every bit as kind as I remembered. She was thinking of me, making sure I was aware of how much I stood to gain from this privilege. I was grateful for that, but I'd made up my mind long before I approached her.

"Thank you, Ms. Rize. Despite that, I still want to find Lia," I replied. It wasn't that I didn't want money. I would eventually need funds to give Mom an easy life. *But I know she wouldn't want money I got by casting my friend aside!*

"I see... Hee-hee, I knew I liked ye better than Shido..." Rize muttered something to herself and produced a rolled-up map from one of her kimono sleeves. "Here, take this. I actually figured ye would come soon, so I had this ready."

"Th-thank you very much!" I told her, to which she smiled pleasantly.

"Ye see this red X on the map? That's their research lab." I spread out the chart and saw the marker. "Now then, I still have work to do tonight. I will take my leave of ye here."

"Thank you... Thank you so much!"

"Hee-hee, think nothin' of it. I was only returnin' a favor. I hope to see ye at Fox Financing again!" she said, before walking up the stairs to the third floor.

"Thank you, Ms. Rize..." I expressed my gratitude to her one more time, then dashed out of the mansion.

"I really do like that boy. He's so sweet and innocent... What kind of man is he going to grow into? Hee-hee, I can't wait to find out."



Having successfully obtained the information we were after, I returned to the

front gate, where Rose and Chairwoman Reia were waiting.

“Ah, Allen! How’d it go?!” Rose inquired.

“Did that Blood Fox try anything?!” the chairwoman asked.

“Ms. Rize was really nice! Here, look at this map! She told me the red X is the location of the facility!” I opened the map she gave me and grinned.

“That means we can save Lia!” said Rose.

“You actually managed to get information out of Rize... Well done, Allen! That’s truly impressive!” Reia studied the area around the marker. “Okay, that’s about fifteen minutes from here. I can’t believe it was in these woods all along...” she said with a scowl.

“We should get moving. This is our only lead right now!” I reminded them.

“You’re right, Allen... Let’s move out!” the chairwoman declared.

““Yes, ma’am!”” Rose and I responded.

We passed through Holy Street and raced to the west. Our path grew steadily more precipitous, eventually leading us into a thick forest. After about ten minutes of running, the chairwoman stopped and studied the map in her hand.

“Hmm, this is the place,” she said.

“Uh... Are you sure?”

“I don’t see...a building anywhere...”

Rose and I glanced around but didn’t see hide or hair of a laboratory. Tall, green trees blocked the sky, and I heard a large waterfall close by. There was no sign that people had ever been here, let alone constructed something. Nature extended as far as the eye could see.

Was Ms. Rize wrong? Cold sweat ran down my back as that unpleasant thought crossed my mind.

“...Nothing gets by Rize’s information network. She was right on the mark,” the chairwoman muttered, looking both pleased and upset. Then she headed toward the large waterfall in front of us.

“Ch-Chairwoman...?”

“Where are you going?”

Rose and I had no idea what she was doing.

“Swordless Style—Sever!” That instant, she threw a powerful punch in the direction of the waterfall, which *smashed to pieces*, revealing a run-down building behind it.

““Huh?!”” Rose and I both gasped in shock at the sudden appearance of the research facility.

“That was a powerful barrier placed to inhibit our awareness of what it was hiding. I bet it was the work of Tor Sammons. Her conjuring skills are no joke if it took getting this close for me to notice...,” the chairwoman informed us, praising Tor’s barrier. She cracked her knuckles and smiled aggressively. “If there was any doubt left that they’re in there, the barrier removes it! Let’s go!”

““Yes, ma’am!”” We charged into the research lab with Chairwoman Reia in the lead.



After being knocked out by Zach Bombard, a member of the Black Organization, Lia came to on the bottom floor of the laboratory.

“Wh-where am I...?” Her mind still hazy, she tried to move and felt a dull pain in her wrists. “Nrgh...”

Lia looked up to find that her wrists were bound by chains connected to the ceiling. Weighted chains also held her ankles to the floor, rendering her completely immobile.

“Wah-ha-ha, you’re already awake? You’re strong, Lia Vesteria!”

“...Listen up, girl. I’ve been nice enough to let you live so far, so don’t get any ideas, okay?”

Zach and Tor, who were both in the room, noticed that Lia had woken up.

“...Zach Bombard?!” Lia shouted. The details of her miserable defeat returned to her, and her face twisted with anger and regret. She knew she couldn’t fight back physically with her limbs bound, however, so she tried another tactic. “...

Does putting teenage girls in chains get you off? Are you some kind of creep?"

"Wah-ha-ha. You're a tough lass, being able to mouth off like that in a situation like this!" Zach responded with a delighted grin.

"Ha! That big bod of yours really does make you look like a perv, Zach!" Tor said, joining Lia in her barb.

Deducing from the exchange that she wasn't going to be killed right away, Lia spoke up again. "What do you guys want? Why did you abduct me?" That was something she had been wondering about ever since the Black Organization had attacked her during summer training camp.

"Hmm? Well, duh, for your—," Zach began, but Tor interrupted him.

"Shut up, moron! Don't just give away secrets of the organization like that! Do you even *have* a brain?!" She kicked his shin, veins bulging in her forehead.

"Wah-ha-ha, my bad! That is a secret, isn't it?!"

"Geez, you're hopeless..."

Lia then heard another voice.

"Heh-heh-heh... Apologies for the intrusion. I will need a sample shortly..." a researcher holding a giant syringe said timidly.

The man wore thick, round glasses over his pale, bloodless face. He was about a hundred fifty centimeters tall and looked to be in his midforties. His white-streaked black hair was long and wild, and it seemed like he hadn't bathed in weeks.

"Then hurry up and do it."

"Heh-heh... Understood..." After receiving permission from Tor, the man bowed deeply and walked toward Lia.

"H-hey... What are you doing?!" she shouted, twisting her body in an attempt to resist.

"Tch... We're only taking a blood sample, you ugly bitch. Hold still," Tor spat in irritation.

"U-ugly?!" Lia had always been fairly confident in her looks; the other

woman's insult left her fuming. However, being the highly educated princess that she was, she knew the importance of keeping her cool.

Hee-hee-hoo, hee-hee-hoo... Calm down, Lia..., she thought, employing a breathing technique meant for an entirely different purpose. *Trying to resist will only waste energy. I hate it, but the wisest course of action right now is to do as they say... It really pisses me off, though!*

Lia obediently held her tongue and quit resisting.

"Heh-heh-heh... This will only take a moment," the researcher said. She felt a pricking pain as he stuck a needle in her upper arm. He extracted enough blood to fill three entire cylinders.

"Heh-heh... This is sufficient." His face twisting with joy, the man inserted the cylinders into a giant machine.

"Hey, how long will the analysis take?" Tor asked.

"Heh-heh-heh... Even with the utmost haste, it will take a full day...", the man responded.

"Got it. Finish this as fast as you can. I hate waiting," she said impatiently, before the two of them disappeared up the stairs together.

Left alone and unsure of what to do, Zach stretched. "Guess I should eat... Oh, that's right. Are you hungry, Lia? I'll find you somethin'."

"Hmph, I will *not* eat a meal from my enemy. You might poison it," Lia fired back.

"Wah-ha-ha, your resilience continues to impress me! Well...let me know if you change your mind. I'll bring you grub anytime." He walked up the stairs with a hearty chuckle, saying, "Don't get your hopes up for the quality, though!"

After he'd left, Lia waited alertly for an opportunity. She didn't scream or try to force her way out of the chains—she simply stayed put, knowing it was best to preserve energy. Lia knew that Allen would find her. That he would save her. Believing that with all her heart, she waited.

Ten hours passed from her capture.

"Heh-heh... Are you awake, Lia Vesteria?"

It was the researcher from before.

“...What do *you* want? You already have enough blood, don’t you?” the princess asked.

“Heh-heh... Listen up, girl... Once this is over, you’re going to be sent to the homeland and killed without fanfare,” the man said.

“...I figured,” Lia responded calmly. She had already guessed that was what they were planning, so hearing it didn’t faze her too much.

“B-before that...I thought I’d have...just a little fun with you...” His vulgar gaze crawled all over her body.

“You’re disgusting ...”

“Kek-kek... Say what you will...!”

The man sidled toward her step-by-step.

“N-no... Stay back...”

He reached for Lia’s body, and then a flash of red light raced through the room. “Ah... A-aaah! Hot, hot, HOT!” Scorching hot flames engulfed him as he fell screaming to the floor. “AHHH, GAAAAAAAARRRRRRRGH!” One final, agonizing scream echoed through the facility, and his body turned to ash.



“Wh-what just happened?” Lia exclaimed, eyes wide after witnessing a man burn to death before her very eyes.

“Wah-ha-ha! That was a close one, Lia!” Zach walked into the room holding a glass of alcohol and laughing gleefully.

“Wha... What are you doing? Are you not one of them?!” Lia asked.

“Hmm... I could never work with a man disgusting enough to touch a young girl under restraint,” Zach said, before taking a sip from his goblet.

“H-hey! What the hell was that, you big oaf?!” Tor shouted, rushing into the room after hearing the researcher’s scream.

“Calm down, it was just a small fire. One of our researchers mighta turned to ash, no big deal.”

“What?! You... you goddamn moron! You’re aware of how important he was, right?!”

“Wah-ha-ha! Forgive me, will ya? My hand just slipped—I couldn’t stand lookin’ at the guy!” Zach apologized, scratching his head.

Tor sighed loudly. “Christ, idiocy is an incurable disease... I’ll have to report this to our superiors.”

“Go ahead.”

A dangerous mood seemed to form between them.

“...I won’t thank you for that,” Lia muttered quietly.

“Wah-ha-ha, why would you? Who the hell would want to thank their captor?!” Zach laughed, clutching his stomach. He took another tipsy swig from his glass. “Ngng... Pfftah! Hmm... Lia. When’s that Allen kid gonna get here? I can’t wait to see that spark of his again.”

Tor looked like she was at her wit’s end. “Hey, half-wit. This lab is hidden by my barrier, remember? How in the world do you expect them to find us?” she asked, taking offense to how he disregarded her magic. It was Lia who answered.

“I don’t care how impressive that barrier is, I know Allen is going to find me.”

“Wanna repeat that, ugly bitch?!”

“Oh, now you’ve said it... I’m not ugly, you pip-squeak!”

“How dare you...! Didn’t your parents teach you that you shouldn’t ridicule other people about their complexes?!”

“You’re the one who insulted me!”

Lia and Tor’s conversation devolved into a pointless shouting match.

“By the way, Lia. What kinda relationship do you and Allen have? He seemed very attached to you,” Zach asked out of the blue, looking properly hammered.

“U-um, we haven’t... What does that matter?!” a flustered Lia shouted, blushing at the unexpected question.

“Wah-ha-ha! Oh, to be young again! I’m gonna give you some advice as your elder in life—that boy shines! Blindingly so! Make sure to tie him down before he gets away!”

“Sh-shut up! That’s none of your business!” Lia pouted in response to his sudden forwardness.

“...Hey, half-wit. Don’t give her hope like that. She’s about to be shipped back to the homeland. She’ll never see that undiscovered species again,” Tor said, staring at Lia with pity.

“Wah-ha-ha! Now that I think about it, you’re right! But we’re up against the sparkle of hope! It’s only human nature to be enchanted by its warm and dazzling light! The odds of her rescue might be next to nothin’...but you can’t rule it out completely, can you?”

“Hmph, what are you going on about...? Whuh?!” An ear-piercing noise like stained glass shattering echoed through the research facility and interrupted Tor’s sneer. “Th-that’s impossible! My barrier was broken?!”

“Wah-ha-ha, Allen Rodol! I knew that glittering gemstone would make it!” shouted Zach.

“Allen!” Lia exclaimed.

The three of them reacted in very different ways. For her part, Tor sprang into

action.

“Shit... What are you grinning about, half-wit?! Get in position!”

“Wah-ha-ha, I can’t wait!”

Tor and Zach raced up the stairs to meet their uninvited guests, the former looking irritated and the latter barely able to contain his excitement.



We ran through the zigzagging hallways of the laboratory. *This layout is probably a security measure against intruders.* The hallways were lit by only a dim light, which severely impeded our vision. On top of that, we had to pace ourselves so we could look out for traps and ambushes.

After a while, we emerged into a cramped room.

“Oooh... I-intruders...”

“L-let’s do this... If we kill ’em... W-we’ll be free!”

“S-sorry, but... You d-d-die here!”

Seven swordsmen as pale as ghosts glared at us with bloodshot eyes. They were all holding strange Soul Attire that couldn’t quite maintain their shapes. Though we hadn’t even begun to fight, they were already panting heavily. I’d fought people who looked like this during summer training camp. *This case is really serious, isn’t it...?*

I quickly drew my sword and assumed the middle stance—and then something caught my attention. *Aren’t these Soul Attire more stable than they were at the beach?* I was under the impression that Soul Attire forcibly realized with soul-crystal pills should have been in even worse shape than this.

“Hmm, soldiers enhanced by the effects of that drug. I had no idea they could produce such stable Soul Attire this way... There’s been no word of this in my reports,” Chairwoman Reia muttered, looking annoyed.

“Oooh... Graaaah!” One of the swordsmen moaned and punched the wall, ripping a hole in it with an enormous *boom*.

““““Huh?!”””” all three of us exclaimed. The assailants at summer training camp had been tremendously brawny as well, but these guys were at another level entirely.

“Let’s...do this...”

“Haaaaaaaaah!”

“Graaaaaaaa!”

They all raised pitiful battle cries and charged at us simultaneously.

“Crap... Get back, you two! I’ll deal with—”

“Get out...of my *goddamn* way!” I shouted, interrupting the chairwoman. I unleashed a sideways swipe with all my strength behind it, which surpassed the speed of sound.

“Gah!”

“Impossible...”

With just one swing of my blade, I easily cut down all seven swordsmen and destroyed their Soul Attire.

How did I...do that...? Currently, I wasn’t filled with that strange power I’d felt in my last few fights. And yet my body felt light, as if I had just been reborn.

When the heck did Allen get this strong?! thought Rose.

That overwhelming power... Allen must have grown more accustomed to his power with his previous regeneration. This is happening much faster than I expected..., thought Reia.

Having successfully repelled the first enemy wave, I turned to Lia and the chairwoman. “Let’s hurry. Lia is waiting for us.”

We rushed deeper into the research lab.



After defeating the swordsmen enhanced by soul-crystal pills, we kept making our way through the lab. The dark and narrow hallways continued until we finally emerged into a wide, dimly lit chamber.

...*There's someone here.* I could sense a figure breathing in the darkness.

"Is that you, Tor Sammons?" Reia called out. A short woman wearing a black cloak appeared from the depths of the room.

She had pink hair that protruded slightly from her hood, and a permanent look of annoyance was plastered on her face. It was Tor Sammons, one of the Black Organization members who'd kidnapped Lia.

"That's right. And you're Black Fist... Blagh!"

One moment, Chairwoman Reia was standing beside me, and the next, she was driving her fist into Tor's stomach. *She's so fast!* It was as if she had teleported.

"We're short on time. You're gonna tell me *all* about this later... What?!" For reasons I didn't understand, the chairwoman jumped back in retreat. "...Tch, that's how it is," she grouched. Fresh blood was running down her right fist.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha! Your head's every bit as clogged with muscle as our intel says!"

A *second* Tor appeared from behind the first one.

""There's two of her?!"" Rose and I shouted at the same time as the *thing* that used to be Tor transformed into a dagger pierced into the floor.

"Mimic—Shapeshifter!" Tor shouted. Some kind of white clay flowed out of the dagger and coalesced into the form of Chairwoman Reia.

"I knew it... That was your Soul Attire I punched; it was mimicking you. And based on what just happened, your weapon needs to cut someone before it can copy them, right?" the chairwoman said, calmly analyzing Tor's Soul Attire.

"Hmm-hmm, I had heard you were a dumb jock, but it appears you're capable of intelligent thought after all!" Tor said, pulling two daggers from her pockets and readying one in each hand. It looked like she could fight in tandem with the copy.

"...Allen, Rose. You two go ahead," the chairwoman whispered for Rose and me to hear. "I don't know how much of my strength this duplicate possesses... but if it goes after you two, we'll be in trouble."

If that copy matched Reia in might...Rose and I would be out of commission

before we could lift a finger.

“We’re also running out of time. Depending on the results of the analysis, Lia could be ‘disposed of’ on the spot. Get her out of here as fast as possible. I’ll catch up as soon as I deal with Tor.”

““Yes, ma’am,”” Rose and I both responded.

No one had a better idea of the copy’s abilities than the chairwoman herself. She was best suited to handle this.

“Let’s go, Rose!”

“Okay!”

Both of us on the same page, Rose and I took off deeper into the research lab. Tor watched us pass silently; her duties must have only extended to stopping the chairwoman.

We passed through more corridors, eventually reaching a chamber significantly bigger than the last one. There, a harrowing sight awaited us.

“Th-they’re here...!”

“Mussst eliminate...intruders!”

A massive crowd of swordsmen stood in the room—way too many to count.

“W-welp...”

“This is going to be a long battle...”

There must have been a hundred of them. Actually, make that two hundred. Their eyes were bloodshot, they heaved their shoulders as they breathed, and each was grasping a warped Soul Attire in their right hand. All of them had enhanced their strength with soul-crystal pills.

Rose and I drew our swords and took our respective stances.

“AAAAHHH!”

“GRAAAHHH!”

They charged toward us with astounding speed.

“...”

“...”

For a brief moment, we were overwhelmed at the sight of two hundred swordsmen howling with rage and rushing toward us.

“Diiiiieeee!” one of them shouted, assaulting me with a powerful downward strike. I just barely managed to block it with my blade.

“Ngh...!” Powerful aftershocks traveled up my arms. *Crap, how are they so strong?!* Was this vigor coming from the soul-crystal pills, or from the self-strengthening Soul Attire? I didn’t know the answer to that, but the swordsman in front of me possessed superhuman might.

What I did know was that there was no way I was going to lose to a fake who relied on drugs to keep up!

“Haaaaaaa— *Raaargh!*” I bested the assailant’s strength, carrying my momentum into a downward diagonal slash.

“Wha—?! Gaaah!” the swordsman cried. He surely didn’t expect my power to surpass his. Unrest seemed to spread among his fellows.

“Let’s do this, Rose!”

“You bet!”

We cut down one enhanced henchman after another as they charged, eventually taking out around fifty of them. The tides of combat were shifting greatly in our favor; there was no doubt about it. But that didn’t mean there wasn’t reason for concern.

This is bad... We would have to go through Zach Bombard after this; we couldn’t afford to waste excess stamina with such a formidable foe lying in wait. Time was also running out. I had to think of something to get us past them.

Crap, what can I do...? I thought, impatience gnawing at me.

“Blossom—Winter Sakura!”

A beautiful, towering cherry blossom tree suddenly sprang up behind us. Rose immediately gained incredible speed.

“Cherry Blossom Blade Secret Technique—Mirror Sakura Slash!” she shouted.

She released four slashes from the left and the right in mirrored pairs. They cut down four swordsmen instantaneously.

“Wh-what are you doing, Rose?!”

“The one thing we can’t afford is both of us getting worn out. You go ahead, Allen!”

“B-but...” Her Soul Attire had limited durability, and performing a war of attrition against a large group of enemies was not her specialty. *What should I do?! I’ve got greater stamina than her, so maybe I should be the one to stay behind...*

Should I do as she says and go, or tell her to go instead? I racked my brain to try to arrive at a decision.

“I’ll be okay. Their artificial strength doesn’t stand a chance against the Cherry Blossom Blade Style!” Rose told me with a firm glance. She was set in her resolve. As if responding to her spirit, the giant tree crackled and grew.

“Got it. Thank you,” I told her, relenting. I started to dash through the room but immediately met with resistance.

“Yer not gettin’ through!”

“We’ll ssstop you here!”

The enhanced swordsmen all charged at me.

“Huh?!” I took a defensive stance to meet their attacks.

“Dance—Sakura Blizzard!” At Rose’s command, a deluge of cherry blossom petals rained down upon them.

“G-GAAAAAAAAHHH!”

Each of the petals was sharp as a blade, and they took out more than ten of the soldiers.

“Go now!”

“Okay, thank you so much!” With Rose’s assistance, I escaped the chamber and began to race farther into the research lab. After sprinting through the labyrinthine hallways, I eventually arrived in a room as large as a gymnasium. It

was well lit, so I instantly recognized the man who was waiting for me.

“Wah-ha-ha-ha! I knew you’d come, you wonderful, sparkling gemstone!”

“Zach Bombard!” He was resting his greatsword, which looked like a burned cross, against his neck and smiling eagerly. “...Where’s Lia?” I didn’t see her anywhere in here.

“Right below us,” Zach answered, before thrusting his weapon into the floor.

“...Is she okay?” I asked.

“Relax, she’s healthy as can be... She insisted on going hungry, though.”

I felt a wave of relief at hearing that. *I’ve finally made it...* Rize, Chairwoman Reia, Rose—with all their help, I’ve finally found my chance to get Lia back. *All I have to do now is defeat the foe in front of me!*

Calmly, I drew my sword and assumed the middle stance. “Let’s do this.”

“Wah-ha-ha! That’s the spirit! Bring it on!” Zach shouted. I set upon him the moment he finished speaking. “How’d you get so fast?! Blazing Shield!”

On a split-second impulse, he produced a large shield of fire before him. The scorching hot flames danced, and their brightness stung my eyes. However, I didn’t feel the pressure I’d felt last time.

“Eighth Style—Eight-Span Crow!” Though I had been helpless against his barrier before, this time, I sliced through it effortlessly.

“What the?!” Surprised, Zach leaped backward to separate himself from me. “Wah-ha-ha, impressive! I love this newfound strength, Allen Rodol!”

“We’re just getting started! Prepare yourself, Zach Bombard!”

My fierce battle with Zach had begun.



My eyes met his...

“Haaaaaah!”

“Raaaaah!”

...and we charged simultaneously, as if we had agreed on that cue beforehand.

“Hah!”

“Rah!”

Our blades collided with a tremendous *boom*.

“You’re just as...strong as you look...!” I said.

“Wah, wah-ha-ha! You’re one to talk... Where does that power come from...in that puny frame of yours?!”

Our respective strengths were perfectly matched, which meant our skills with the blade would decide the engagement. *I’m wasting time trying to best his strength... I need to back up and reset.*

“Blazing Shield!”

Just as I was reevaluating, he crafted a shield of flame while I was still at point-blank range. “Wha—? This close?!” Scarlet filled my vision, and intense heat bathed my skin.

“Ngh... Eight-Style—Eight-Span Crow!” I used eight slices to tear apart the blazing shield—and saw Zach positioned far behind where he had been. He must have used his barrier to conceal himself and enable a retreat.

My opponent stooped and thrust his weapon from a distance. “Blazing Death Lance!” A scorching hot spear of fire shot out of the tip of his greatsword.

“First Style—Flying Shadow!” I released a projectile slash to meet it.

“Lame!” Zach yelled. The violently burning lance easily penetrated Flying Shadow and continued toward me without slowing at all.

“What?!” I dived to the right and dodged his projectile. *Dammit, Flying Shadow isn’t good enough...* It looked like I needed power on the level of Dark Boom to deal with Blazing Death Lance. As I considered my options, Zach interrupted me.

“You need to pay a little more attention after dodging, kid,” he called out. Before I knew it, he was right in front of me, his greatsword held high.

“No!”

“Foehn Wind Style—Burning Tempest!” Four burning arcs raced toward me with astounding speed.

“C-Cloudy Sky Style—Cirrocumulus Cloud!” I countered, using the fastest move in my arsenal to send four slashes of my own at him. I was still off-balance from dodging his previous attack, however, so my slashes didn’t stand a chance of staving off his.

How is he so strong?! His violent flames consumed my four slashes and continued to hurtle toward me. I twisted my body in a desperate attempt to dodge, but two of his blasts hit me, one on my right shoulder, and one on my left leg, resulting in searing pain.

“Nrgh...” Feeling overwhelmed, I leaped back to recover. *Haah, haah... Fortunately, the wounds aren’t deep.* They weren’t going to impact my ability to fight.

Zach was maintaining the middle stance, the same one I always used. His blade was totally motionless in front of his navel, and he was displaying a healthy mix of tension and exhaustion. The way he stood looked incredibly natural.

...Posture like that isn’t gained overnight. I had never clashed against someone with such sound fundamentals. As far as I could tell, he both had innate talent and had devoted a massive amount of time to training. *Something’s off, though.* One thing stood out to me about Zach’s polished swordcraft.

“Did you learn your style from a holy knight?” I asked. His default stance, his defensive techniques, and even his way of walking in battle all screamed holy knight.

“...I kinda used to be one,” he mumbled with a pained expression.

“Huh?! Why would one of them join the Black Organization?!” I exclaimed in surprise. The Holy Knights Association was an international organization that upheld peace across the globe; the Black Organization was a large criminal syndicate that threatened societal stability. The two groups were directly at

odds.

“...There are certain things you can’t accomplish as a holy knight,” Zach answered grimly. “But that boring crap doesn’t matter right now! Back to it, Allen! Show me how you shine—show me how you sparkle!” he yelled suddenly, shaking off the gloomy atmosphere that had overcome him.

“Sing—Fox-Fire!” he shouted, swinging his greatsword. Blistering flames rose from his blade and gradually formed into the shape of living creatures.

““““Roooooowwwl!”””” Around a dozen crimson foxes composed of searing fire raised their first cries of life. They all turned to me and bared their fangs threateningly.

“Wah-ha-ha-ha-ha! How’s this for a climax?!”

“...Bring it on!”

Our fight reached a new, raging intensity.

“Raaaaawwwr!”

“Ngh... Hah!” I did my best to slay the infinitely spawning foxes...

“Take this!”

“Whuh?!”

...and before I knew it, Zach assaulted me with his greatsword from behind my back. Faced with relentless blows on from all sides from him and the foxes, I had no choice but to go on the defensive. *Crap, I can’t keep up...* I was all by myself against Zach and his fiery minions; the numbers weren’t on my side.

Every time I tried to switch into offense, the foxes got in my way and countered. But at the same time, focusing on defending did nothing to stem the barrage of attacks. *What the heck can I do...?* I searched desperately for a way out of this situation.

“Fox-Fire—Crimson Flame!”

““““Rowl!”””” Eight foxes split off into different directions, then assaulted me simultaneously.

“Ch-Cherry Blossom Blade Secret Technique—Mirror Sakura Slash!”

I used eight slashes to repel them all.

“Foehn Wind Style—Burning Blow!” As soon as I did, however, Zach came at me with a powerful downward slice from behind.

“Ngh?!” Despite my disadvantageous position, I barely managed to block it before intentionally jumping backward to lessen the impact of the blow.

“Wah-ha-ha, those reflexes are somethin’ else! I like your defensive technique, too! I thought I had broken you there... Never dreamed you would block that move!” Zach said with a leisurely laugh, before summoning four more fire foxes.

My disadvantage is only going to grow at this rate... I have no choice but to use those! I was satisfied with the positioning. All I had to do was wait for him to attack.

Maintaining the middle stance, I awaited my opportunity.

“What’s wrong, Allen? You’re gonna have to go on the offensive at some point, ya know? Fox-Fire—Conflagration!”

“““Roooooowl!”””

He created more blazing foxes; they charged at me. *Now!*

“Second Style—Hazy Moon!”

The twenty slash-attack traps I had set throughout the room during our fight activated and tore apart all his minions.

“Wow, that was an interestin’ move!”

With zero fire foxes in the room, now was the time to strike. “First Style—Flying Shadow!” I mustered all my strength to release a projectile that was much bigger than usual.

“Wah-ha-ha, that ain’t gonna work! Blazing Shield!” Intense flames consumed my Flying Shadow.

“That was just a diversion.” I approached Zach by hiding behind the Flying Shadow, then circled around behind him. At last, I’d created the perfect opportunity. “Fifth Style—World Render!” I aimed my most powerful technique

at his wide-open back.

“Not a bad idea, but I can handle strikes from behind in my sleep. Blazing Circle!” he yelled, and explosive flames erupted in every direction around him. A tremendous shock wave hit me, followed by intense heat that seared my skin.

“Ngh?!” The impact sent me flying, but I managed to land softly. I gritted my teeth in frustration. “Crap, I forgot about that one...”

It caught me off guard, but that was the incredibly powerful skill that had taken out Shii and the rest of the holy knights all at once. *I didn't think he would use it for defense...* I ground my teeth even harder.

“What's with that body of his...? That move usually chars people,” Zach muttered to himself, looking at me quizzically.

I took a moment to analyze our respective conditions. My injuries were increasing little by little. I had slash wounds on my right shoulder and left leg and scattered burns from when I'd tried to fend off the fire foxes.

On the other hand, Zach was nearly untouched. I had given him some light lacerations throughout the duel, but he was practically as good as new.

...Crap. Unless something changes, I don't see how I can win. There was one simple reason I was having a hard time in this duel—my lack of Soul Attire. I had run smack into the barrier of talent yet again.

I have no choice... I was loath to admit it, but Zach was the superior swordsman. I couldn't hope to win unless I drew from *his* power.

Wait. *Zach told me something earlier.* I didn't need to defeat my Spirit Core physically. If I wanted a piece of his power, all I needed to do was take it with my heart. *In the past, he had told me something similar.* My Spirit Core had once remarked that my “strength of my heart” and “resolve” were lacking. That the strength of my heart suffered because I lacked “resolve.”

I sank deeper and deeper into my consciousness—to the bottom of my soul.

I *had* to win. I *had* to defeat the foe in front of me. I *had* to save Lia and restore our everyday lives at the academy.

So just this instance, I would rely on *him*. I would do whatever it took.

Give...me...power! I pleaded for it with all my heart, so intensely that I felt like I was carving the words into my very soul and stabbing a sharp blade into my chest.

Then his voice emerged from deep within my mind. *You brat... Didn't think you had this in you.* That instance, something happened.

"I-is this...?!"

A blade darker than black—as if composed of condensed darkness—tore through the space in front of me.



Timidly, I grabbed the ebon sword with my right hand. "Hng?!" I knew it instinctually—this weapon held power that far surpassed what I was currently capable of.

It's so heavy... It wasn't its physical weight that made it difficult to hold; it was more like the incredible density of its might was overwhelming my senses. This black blade contained violent, tremendous strength.

"Wah-ha-ha-ha! Now we're talkin'! What dazzlin' light! I knew my eyes weren't playing tricks on me! I've never seen such sparkling in my entire life!" Zach's eyes lit up at the black sword, and he burst out laughing. "Show me the extent of that power! Blazing Death Lance!"



He shot a spear of fire at me, as if trying to test my strength. In response, I lightly swung my sword, and it birthed an enormous shock wave that easily extinguished the projectile.

“Huh?!” Zach shouted. The slash rushed toward him without slowing at all. “B-Blazing Shield!” Eyes wide with surprise, he scrambled to concoct a large shield of flame. It lasted less than a second before the shock wave cut through it like paper.

“Gaaaah!” The shock wave stabbed Zach, leaving a slash wound. It alone was that strong.

Wh-what is this power?! I was stunned by the overwhelming might. Urgh... What’s happening...? Suddenly, I felt a great wave of fatigue. Just holding the blade was draining my energy.

I see, I can only use this for a certain amount of time... In a drawn-out engagement, I would stand no chance at the rate this thing sucked up energy. *I need to end this as soon as I can...*

“Wah-ha-ha... I knew you were strong, but not like *this...*,” Zach remarked. He was heavily injured and unsteady on his feet, but he wore a vicious grin. “But there’s still more... Your power must go beyond even that! Show me your brightest light—show me how you sparkle!”

He stabbed his greatsword into the floor and summoned over a hundred crimson familiars. “Fox-Fire—Blaze!”

“““Roooooowl!””” Upon his command, the beasts gathered above his head and formed a giant mass of fire resembling a miniature sun.

“Wah-ha-ha-ha! It’s time to settle this, Allen Rodol, you wonderful, glittering gemstone!”

“Yeah, let’s do this,” I answered. We had been dueling for quite some time now, and I was worried Lia wouldn’t be safe if I didn’t end this quickly. I also didn’t think my body would hold out much longer against the energy drain of the ebon blade.

“I’m ending this right now!” Zach proclaimed. He heaved his greatsword

above his head, then swung it down with all his strength. “Blazing Flare!” he yelled, shooting the sunlike conflagration toward me with incredible speed.

I turned toward the scorching flames—which were hot enough to burn the whole room to ashes—and brandished my sword with all my might. “Sixth Style—Dark Boom!” Darkness flowed from my sword and enveloped my technique, sending an ebon arc racing through the air.

“HAAAAAAAAAH!”

“RAAAAAAAAAH!”

Our attacks collided—and my pitch-black darkness consumed his sun.

“Whuh?!” Zach cried as Dark Boom raced toward him, still boasting tremendous power. “Wah-ha-ha-ha! Very impressive, sparkling gemstone!” It consumed him, then crashed into the wall and wreaked massive damage to the entire research lab.

“Haah, haah... It’s over...,” I panted. Its role now finished, the black sword disappeared noiselessly. I let out a big sigh. I had given everything I had.

“...Ow!” Both my palms throbbed. I looked down to find torn skin and light bleeding. The impact from unleashing Dark Boom must have been too much on my hands. Sure enough, the power of the black sword had been too great for my current self.

Regardless, I had defeated Zach. “Hold on, Lia... I’m coming to get you!” I began to drag my heavy body toward the stairs leading to the basement of the research lab.



“You...monster...”

Despite succeeding in her plan to create a copy of Reia, Tor collapsed to the floor like a ragged doll. The chairwoman’s unmoving copy was sprawled out beside her.

“Hmm, you were stronger than I expected,” Reia said with a sigh, clapping her hands. She was totally uninjured. “Shapeshifter is an extremely versatile Soul

Attire, but the copy is a little lacking... I'd say it's only about sixty to seventy percent as capable as the original."

Having gotten through the battle without incident, Reia wasted no time. "I need to hurry." She took off running to catch up to Allen and Rose.

The hallway eventually opened into a large chamber. She saw a colossal number of collapsed swordsmen, and a nearly barren cherry blossom tree. Rose was in the room, facing off against her final three enhanced foes.

"Gwaaaaaaah!"

"Cherry Blossom Blade Secret Technique—Mirror Sakura Slash!"

Rose passed through them all, and the final petals fell from the tree.

"Gahhh!"

"Dammiit... The pills weren't enough..."

"We couldn't...beat her?!"

The three soldiers crumpled, and Rose held firm on two legs.

"Haah, haah... I did it!" The cherry blossom tree dissolved into particles and disappeared before the crimson blade in her hands followed suit. Rose had finished off the last of the swordsmen just before Winter Sakura's limited duration ran out.

An intense bout of dizziness and fatigue overcame her. "Ngh..." Her vision wavered, and she completely lost her sense of balance. When she began to collapse, Reia rushed forward to catch her gently.

"Whoa there, are you okay?" Reia asked.

"Ch-Chairwoman... Yes, I'm fine," Rose responded.

"That's good to hear. I can't believe you handled this many opponents by yourself... You've become truly strong," Reia said in earnest praise.

"Forget about that, we need to hurry after Allen! Zach is a monster! Allen is going to need our help to beat him!" Rose urged, recalling how easily Zach had defeated her and Lia.

"Yeah, let's go." The chairwoman gave Rose her shoulder, and they took off.

They sprinted through the winding corridors until they emerged into an enormous, well-lit room. Neither of them could believe what they saw next.

““Huh?!”” they both exclaimed as they watched pitch-black darkness engulf a giant orb of fire resembling the sun. Allen’s attack was off-the-charts powerful. The technique didn’t stop there; it continued on until it crashed into the wall with a resounding *boom*, seriously damaging the research facility.

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

No human was capable of that level of destructive force. Reia and Rose could do nothing but gulp.

Half a second was all the chairwoman needed to regain her composure. Quickly getting a grasp on the situation, she snapped her eyes to the black blade Allen was holding. *Th-there’s no doubt about it... That ebon sword is his weapon... A cold sweat ran down her back. If he’s gotten control of Allen’s body, there’ll be no getting him back...*

The period of initial petrification, a great weakness of all Spirit Cores, had surely already passed. *Allen’s strength has grown tremendously in a very short amount of time... Do I stand a chance at stopping him alone if his Spirit Core has taken over?!*

She flashed back to two friends who’d helped her carry Thousand Blade’s Golden Age during her academy days. *Crap, if only they were here now...* she thought in a rare moment of timidity. That was how greatly she feared the Spirit Core who resided within Allen.

“Is that you...Allen?” Reia asked after building up the courage.

“Ch-Chairwoman, Rose! I’m so glad you’re safe!” he responded, turning around with a joyful smile.

“*Phew...* Yeah, we’re fine. Looks like you are, too,” she said, relieved. She rushed toward him. “What was that black blade? Was that your Soul Attire?”

“No. I think it was only a fragment of my Soul Attire. It appears I still have a ways to go before I fully realize it,” he admitted, scratching his cheek

awkwardly.

“...Really. Well, you have my support,” Reia told him with an uneasy smile.

...Allen's talent is truly frightening. I can't believe he's grown strong enough to wrest power away from him in such a short amount of time... His mental fortitude is astounding. It's no wonder he overcame the 100-Million-Year Button.

Meanwhile, Allen was considering the small grain of power he had just used. *I'm going to need to train much, much more to obtain my Soul Attire... But I just got a taste of what it feels like!* Obtaining his Soul Attire was not going to be an impossibility. He was happy just to learn that.

“Anyway, that's not important right now. We need to hurry. According to Zach, Lia is being held directly below us,” Allen said.

“You're right. Let's go,” Reia agreed.

After single-handedly defeating the fearsomely strong Zach Bombard, Allen headed to the lowest floor of the research lab with Reia and Rose at his side.



We continued through the laboratory my Dark Boom had ravaged and found a spiral staircase leading to the basement. We descended slowly while looking out for possible assailants and entered a room packed with unsettling machines.

“Wh-what is this place?” I said aloud, gazing at a giant beaker full of clear orange liquid. There was a bluish-white stone floating within.

“It's giving me the creeps,” Rose responded. She was studying a strange instrument that looked like a water-storage tank. Its regular beeping sounded like an electrocardiograph.

“Hmm... It looks like they're researching soul-crystal pills here,” Chairwoman Reia muttered, holding a pale-blue crystal.

We advanced through the gloomy and dimly lit research room and encountered five researchers.

“A-are you Black Fist?!”

“Ms. Sammons and Mr. Bombard were defeated?!”

“Oh my god... This is the end...”

They all cowered in fear after seeing the chairwoman.

“Guess I can skip the pleasantries. I’ll get right to the point. Where are you holding Lia Vesteria? Resist if you want, but I promise you’ll regret it,” she warned, cracking her knuckles.

“““Aaaaiiiieeee...!””” the researchers all screamed together.

“Th-th-this way, please...,” one of them said, stepping up to guide us farther into the room. He led us to a cell partitioned by iron bars. Lia was within, her arms and legs bound by chains.

“Lia!” I shouted.

“A-Allen! And Rose and Reia!” she responded. I was relieved to see she looked relatively uninjured.

“Where’s the key?” the chairwoman demanded.

“R-right here, ma’am...!”

She grabbed it from the researcher and unlocked the cell, then released Lia’s bonds.

“Allen!”

“Whuh?!”

She flung herself into my chest the moment she was free. “I was scared... I was so, so scared...,” she cried, trembling slightly. I hugged her close.

“Sorry I took so long... This place was really hard to find.”

“No, don’t apologize... Thank you, Allen. I never lost faith that you would find me!” Tears welled in her eyes, and she smiled radiantly.

“...” Feeling self-conscious with her lovely smile right in my face, I averted my eyes and asked a question. “D-do you feel okay?”

“Yeah. All they did was take a little blood.”

“That’s a relief...”

We remained that way until Rose spoke up. “...Lia. I get how you feel, but you’re being a little clingy,” she growled in a deep voice, tapping a foot impatiently. A vein was bulging on her forehead.

“...Ah. Sorry, Allen... I was just so happy to see you...”

“Ah-ha-ha... Don’t worry about it...”

Lia and I slowly parted.

“Ooh, this is a big get, you guys,” the chairwoman said with a grin, holding one of the pale-blue objects that appeared to be a soul-crystal pill.



“What do you mean?” I asked.

“As far as I know, this is the first Black Organization research facility that has ever been captured. Very nicely done, Allen!” she praised, before clapping me on the back.

“I couldn’t have done it without you, Rose, and Ms. Rize,” I protested.

“...You’re always so humble. We couldn’t be more unlike in that regard.” Reia chuckled to herself and clapped her hands. “Anyway, it’s the middle of the night. You all should return to the academy.”

“What about you, Chairwoman?”

“I’m gonna book these guys, toss them into a holy-knight station, and then assist with the on-site investigation... It’s gonna be a long night,” she said, shrugging. “Honestly, I’m tempted to ask for your help...but this is a job for an Elite Five Academy chair. I can’t force my duties onto my students.”

It sounded like there was nothing else for us to do here. “Thank you, Chairwoman. We’ll head back, then,” I responded.

“Thank you so much!” added Lia.

“Excuse us,” Rose said.

Right when we were about to leave, I heard someone fly down the spiral staircase and rush toward us with astounding speed.

“Wh-who’s that?!” I stepped in front of Lie and Rose, who were exhausted, and quickly drew my sword.

“*Huff...huff...* E-Eighteen...at your service...!” He was drenched in sweat and totally out of breath.

“E-Eighteen?!” I exclaimed. I thought Chairwoman Reia had sent him to help guard the border...

“You sure took your time! What the hell have you been doing?!” the chairwoman shouted.

“M-my deepest apologies...Mistress Reia... I sprinted here...as soon as I got your message... But it was a really, *really* long way...,” he explained in between

gasps.

“Good lord, you’re hopeless... All right, here’s your next task. Just to be safe, I want you to escort Allen, Lia, and Rose back to the academy. Rose is especially tired, so keep an eye on her.”

“Y-yes, ma’am...Understood...” From my perspective, Eighteen looked *way* more exhausted than Rose did. “A-all right, kids...! I’m here, so... Y-you can rest easy! *Huff, hack...* L-let’s go!”

We followed him up the spiral staircase.

“Oh, right! Class resumes tomorrow, so make sure not to oversleep!” Chairwoman Reia shouted with a grin, sending us off with some teacherly advice.



Far to the north of the research lab, two figures moved through the forest.

“...Hey, half-wit. You still alive back there?” an uninjured Tor asked a heavily wounded Zach.

“Somehow... But, man, he got me good... I can barely move a muscle...,” he responded, weakly shaking his head.

“God, you’re pathetic... What about that Shiranui Armor you’re always bragging about?”

“Wah-ha-ha... There wouldn’t be a trace of me left if I hadn’t used it.” Just when the Dark Boom was about to make contact, he’d produced his nearly invincible Shiranui Armor, which allowed him to just barely escape with his life. “Allen really did sparkle like you wouldn’t believe back there... I’m still gettin’ chills just thinkin’ about it. He’s not finished growin’, either, so there’s no tellin’ how strong he’ll get...,” he gushed, reflecting on the utter blackness that had been seared into his mind.

“Hmm, Allen Rodol... If he’s that strong, maybe I should find a way into his good graces...” Tor had decent faith in Zach’s eye for talent, so she immediately started considering how she could curry favor with Allen.

“Wah-ha-ha, that’s not a bad idea... How’d your fight go, by the way? Did you defeat Black Fist?”

“Ha, hell no. Beating a Transcendent like her is impossible. I turned tail and skedaddled as fast as I could,” she declared shamelessly. In her mind, just surviving a duel against Reia Lasnote was victory enough. She’d never stood a chance of winning in the first place, so she did the only rational thing.

“Hmm, escaping from Black Fist can’t be easy... Did you use that secret of yours?” Zach asked.

“Yep. I set her against a copy of her *and* a copy of me. It’s dangerous to assume that a person’s Soul Attire manifests as only a single weapon,” she answered, producing two daggers.

Shapeshifter was a rare Soul Attire that materialized as twin knives. The only person who knew of her secret was Zach, her longtime partner.

“Geez... You really are craven...”

“Say what you will. My creed has always been *surviving is winning*.”

That concluded their exchange of information.

“Okay... Let’s return to the homeland.”

“Yeah, let’s split.”

With Tor carrying Zach on her back despite her tiny frame, the two of them disappeared into the night.

“Goddamn, you’re heavy! Drop and give me twenty, now!”

“Wah-ha-ha... Give me a break...”



After returning to the dorm, Lia and I had a late dinner. She must have been famished, because she truly indulged herself. I was worried she was going to get fat wolfing everything down like that, but asking a girl about her weight would have been tactless, so I held my tongue. Regardless, completely emptying our jam-packed fridge in just one meal was a stunning accomplishment.

Later, Lia was humming cheerfully while brushing her hair. She had taken her bath before mine. *"Hmm-hmm-hmm..."* Her hair was down, which made her look...very attractive. I should have been used to the sight by now, but she looked so different without her pigtails that seeing her like this still set my heart racing.

"I-I'm gonna take my bath now," I announced.

"Okay. Take your time and relax," she responded.

"Thanks, I will."

By the time I got out of the bath and readied myself for bed, it was already past two in the morning.

"Can I turn off the lights?" I asked.

"Yeah," she answered.

I shut them off and climbed into bed with her. The warm blanket enveloped me as I sank into the soft mattress. I relaxed my muscles, and all the day's exhaustion seemed to slip out of me at once.

"Good night, Lia."

"Good night, Allen."

We both went quiet to drift off to sleep.

About ten minutes passed.

"...Hey, Allen. Are you still awake?" I heard Lia whisper.

"Yeah, I'm up," I answered.

"Okay..."

"Is something wrong?"

"Yeah...I feel kind of restless," she said anxiously, her voice still weak. She'd been abducted by the Black Organization and imprisoned in an unsettling research lab for the entire day. That was more than understandable.

"Hmm, wanna talk about something fun? Or would you like some warm tea?" I said, suggesting ideas that would help her calm down.

"I was wondering if you would, um..." Lia trailed off in a rare moment of hesitation.

"...? You can ask me for anything," I urged as gently as I could. She opened her mouth as if she had found her resolve.

"U-um... Can I hold your hand?"

"O-oh, sure. I don't mind."

That request took me a little off guard, but if this was what she wanted, I had no reason to refuse. Feeling unspeakably nervous, I slowly reached out my right hand.

"Th-thanks...", she said, before placing her small, soft hand on top of mine.

There was nothing romantic about the way our hands were joined. Our fingers weren't entwined; instead, her palm simply rested on top of mine, both hands as flat as could be. Even still...my heart was pounding as hard as if I were in the middle of a duel.

"..."

"..."

Silence fell between us.

One minute, two minutes, three minutes... Had it been five already? My every swallow was deafening, and my hands were getting sweaty.

"S-so... Is this helping?" I asked the ceiling, trying to hide my nervousness. She didn't respond. "L-Lia?"

Concerned, I glanced to my side—and saw her sleeping peacefully. The blanket rose and fell rhythmically, and when I strained my ears, I could hear her soft breathing. She looked like a slumbering angel.

"*Phew...*" My anxiety dissipated, and I sighed loudly. "This was a rough day, wasn't it...?" I whispered to her sleeping face, then turned toward her and closed my eyes. "Good night, Lia."

Butterflies in my stomach about the ever-shrinking distance in our relationship, I joined her in deep sleep.

Afterword

Thank you very much for purchasing the third volume of *100-Million-Year Button*. I'm the author, Syuichi Tsukishima.

I have a couple of very big announcements to share.

Thanks to continued printing and strong sales for this series...Volume 4, releasing in June, will have a special edition that includes a drama CD! Allen, Lia, and Rose are all receiving voices! The star-studded cast features Natsuki Hanae, Ayana Taketatsu, and Sora Amamiya, all of whom will breathe new life into these characters! The script will be entirely new, of course! I am currently hard at work on it, so I ask for your patience!

Next—the manga version of *100-Million-Year Button* will begin publication in Young Ace UP at the end of February! Yutaro Shido is drawing this adaptation. It has stirring battle scenes, very expressive designs, and most of all, it's a thrill seeing the characters in action!

The manga really could not have turned out any better, so please check it out! You can read each chapter for free after publication on Young Ace UP's website using your computer or smartphone!

I now want to touch lightly on the content of Volume 3. This will contain spoilers, so those who read the afterword first should be careful.

Allen fought a great many battles in Volume 3. He crossed swords with Claude in Vesteria Kingdom, Lia and Rose in the First-Year Tourney, and finally, Zach Bombard in the Black Organization's research lab. I love intense duels, so I had a lot of fun writing them. I hope you all enjoyed them as well.

The fourth volume will contain the "Darkness & the Royal Sword Festival" chapter and more. It's shaping up to be even denser than Volume 3!

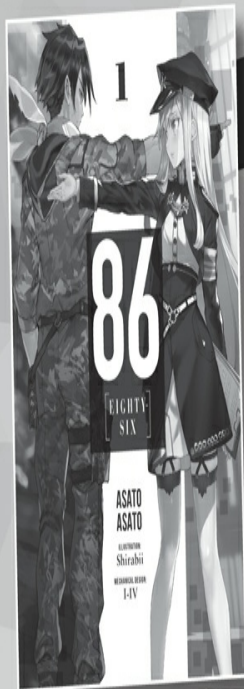
I would now like to give some thanks.

To the illustrator, Mokyu; the lead editor, the proofreader, and everyone else involved with the production of this book—thank you very much. And most important, a huge thanks to all the readers who picked up Volume 3 of *100-Million-Year Button*.

May we meet again when Volume 4 launches.

Syuichi Tsukishima

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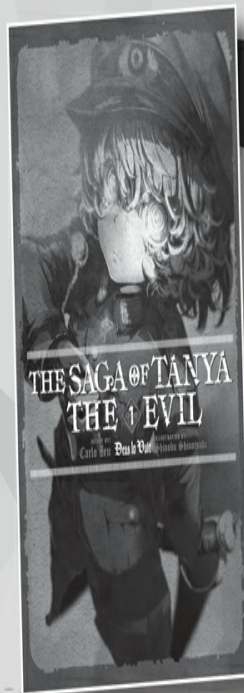
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E-rank hunter Jinwoo Sung has no money, no talent, and no prospects to speak of—and apparently, no luck, either! When he enters a hidden double dungeon one fateful day, he's abandoned by his party and left to die at the hands of some of the most horrific monsters he's ever encountered.

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MANGA

LIGHT NOVEL



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