











# CHAPTER 1 A Political Marriage

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**Afterword** 

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SYUICHI TSUKISHIMA
Illustration by MOKYU



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# CHAPTER 1 A Political Marriage

I walked into the Aurest branch of the Holy Knights association with my four companions—Lia, Rose, Lilim, and Tirith—and headed straight for the branch manager's office. I knocked on the door and opened it to find Clown, wearing his usual harlequin outfit.

"Allen? What brings you here? You've brought quite the gang with you," Clown said, his demeanor as casual as always.

I quickly filled him in on the situation—that Shii Arkstoria, Thousand Blade Academy's Student Council president, had been sent to the Holy Ronelian Empire and forced into a political marriage; that we were looking for a shadow spot leading directly into Ronelia and information to help us find her; and that we thought Raine Grad, one of the Thirteen Oracle Knights, might be able to give us this information.

"In short, we're looking for Raine. Would you happen to know where he is, Mr. Clown?" I asked.

"Raine, huh? He's actually imprisoned in our underground dungeon right now," Clown said.

"Really?!" I asked.

"Yup," Clown responded.

"Can we please see him?!" I requested.

"Nope!" Clown refused with a cheerful smile.

"Wh-why?!" I asked.

"Think about it. You're gonna go to the Holy Ronelian Empire if I do, right?" Clown asked.

"...Yes," I admitted, deciding there was no use lying.

"That's why I can't let you speak to Raine... Let me make myself clear. You're not ready to go to the Holy Empire," Clown said, turning uncharacteristically serious. "You're preposterously gifted as a swordsman, Allen. There's no question you're going to distinguish yourself on a global scale. But you're still just fifteen. A kid. Your body, mind, and Soul Attire are all still immature." Clown sighed quietly. "Honestly, it would be a waste," he said.

"Huh? What do you mean?" I asked.

"You have unequaled potential, Allen. You could transform the world. It would be a tremendous loss for humanity if you threw that all away on a foolhardy mission," Clown said emphatically. He looked at me admonishingly. "Listen up. There are fearsomely strong swordfighters in this world who have reached the peak of human potential. That includes the Four Imperial Knights—who rank highest among the Thirteen Oracle Knights—and the Holy Knights Association's very own Seven Holy Blades, who are considered the most powerful swordfighters alive. They're all genuine monsters who have overcome countless fierce battles and achieved true mastery of their Soul Attires. You couldn't hope to defeat them in your current immature state."

...Everything Clown said was true. There was no way that I—a Reject Swordsman—could even challenge the greatest prodigies in the world.

"But...," I began, before trailing off.

What would happen to Shii if we gave up now? Liengard had married her off to a noble who treated women like tools... Her life would be a living hell.

That's just not right, I thought, clenching my fists.

"I really do pity Shii Arkstoria. If she wasn't blessed with the rare beauty of the renowned Arkstoria family, that despicable Numelo never would've fallen in love with her at first sight... She's an unlucky girl," Clown said sympathetically. "But you need to act like an adult, Allen. Think about all the people you won't be able to save in the future if you take this risk and pay the ultimate price. I know how you feel—really, I do—but you need to back down. It's for the best."

That was a roundabout way of telling me to grow up.

Clown's probably right. Realistically, we stood very little chance of saving Shii, even if we did make it to the Holy Ronelian Empire. Make that no chance, actually. We were going up against an evil superpower that had brokered a deal with demons, conquered the Principality of Theresia, and was threatening to wage war against the entire world.

No matter how much I didn't want to, it would be best to do as Clown said and back down. It would be wiser to focus on growing stronger in the hopes that we could save Shii someday in the future. That would surely be the "adult" thing to do. But...

I still want to save her.

...I wanted to act now. We might have better odds of succeeding if we waited, but I didn't care. I couldn't stand the idea of a future in which we didn't get to spend every day at the academy laughing with our Student Council president. We needed her back this instant.

"Please, Mr. Clown. Let us talk to Raine," I said, bowing deeply.

The office fell silent. The only sound was the ticking of a clock.

"Haah... This simple purity of yours must be what endeared you to Rize," Clown said. He shrugged in resignation and raised his index finger. "How about we play a game, Allen?"

"A game...?" I repeated.

"Yes. If you win, I'll lead you to Raine's cell in the dungeon. I won't stop you from going to Ronelia, either," he said.

"Really?!" I responded.

"Absolutely. A swordsman never goes back on his word. But if I win, you all will give up on trying to go to Ronelia. So what'll it be? Will you play?" he asked seriously.

He's not going to tell me anything about the game, is he? It's highly likely that the rules will put me at a massive disadvantage. But we're never going to get a better chance! I thought.

Talking to Raine was our only way into the Holy Empire. We would never make it there if we let this opportunity pass us by. And if I beat Clown, our path would be secured.

"Okay. I'll play your game," I said.

"Marvelous. Let us begin!" Clown said cheerfully. He raised his hand into the air. "Down with the Royal Canopy—Lonely Crown!"

He summoned his Soul Attire, and a strange force weighed heavily against my entire body.

"Mr. Clown... What are you...doing...?!" I struggled to ask.

"The rules are simple. If you move me so much as an inch, you win. If you can't, I win. You're forbidden from using your darkness. Now—let the game begin!" Clown declared, moving to the end of the room.

So I have to surpass Lonely Crown's power with my physical strength alone...

It sounded like an impossible challenge. I got off the couch and took a small step forward.

This is really hard...

My body felt like it had been turned to lead. Even lifting a foot was difficult.

"Are you okay, Allen?!" Lia asked, sounding concerned.

"Is this the ability you used against Don Golurg?!" Rose asked, staring intently at Clown.

"Ah-ha-ha, that's a name I haven't heard in a while. I wonder how old Don's doing nowadays... Well, that hardly matters right now. I'll explain my ability," Clown said. He held out his ominous green and black sword. "Lonely Crown is a Soul Attire that can summon a repulsive force. I'm currently using this power to push down on Allen, essentially increasing the gravity acting on him by dozens of times."

"Dozens of times...," Lilim repeated, shocked.

"Geez, he shouldn't even be able to stand...," Tirith said, looking just as

astonished.

That explains why my body feels so heavy. I jerked my head up, resisting the pressure, and Clown smiled boldly.

"Allen. I'm gonna take this opportunity to determine just how great your resolve and potential are," he said.

"That's fine by me...!" I responded.

I braced myself and took a big step forward. I can do this. It won't be easy, but I can move under this weight. However, as I slowly dragged my leaden body toward Clown, I realized something.

"Grk...?!" I gasped.

The weight pressing against me was growing stronger with each step.

"Whoops, I left out one detail. The repulsive force above you will grow stronger as you approach me. Just five meters to go, Allen!" Clown said.

"Haah, haah... You're something else...," I gasped.

How many more rules was he holding back? He clearly had no intention of letting me win.

Damn it... I can't lose... I gritted my teeth and struggled my way toward the branch manager. He addressed me when I had only one meter to go.

"I never thought you'd get this far with your natural strength alone... I'm stunned, really." He sighed heavily and thrust Lonely Crown into the floor. "Lonely Crest!"

A faint magic circle appeared beneath my feet, summoning extremely strong attraction.

It's so...heavy...!

It felt as if my feet had been bolted to the floor. I couldn't even breathe properly. It took all my effort just to stay upright.

He's really trying to crush me now, I thought, glaring at Clown.

"This is unfair! How come you can use your Soul Attire and Allen can't? He never stood a chance!" Lia protested.

"Lia's right. You put him at too much of a disadvantage!" Rose concurred.

Clown was unbothered.

"'Unfair?' Do you hear yourselves right now? You're trying to take on the Holy Ronelian Empire—the headquarters of the Black Organization. Do you expect them to give you an even playing field? 'Fair' isn't in their vocabulary. You won't last ten seconds with that mindset," he said dispassionately. His eyes were cold.

""…""

Lia and Rose didn't respond. His tone brooked no argument.

"I expect great things from you, Allen, and I'm not alone in feeling that way. You've already surpassed most people's expectations and have grown with unbelievable speed. But you're skipping steps and obtaining strength in the wrong order, throwing you off balance. Going to the Holy Empire without taking more time to mature would be suicide," Clown said unfeelingly. His voice reverberated in the office. "So yes. In the interest of clarity—I never had any intention of allowing you to go to Ronelia."

He smiled cruelly and leaned on his Soul Attire, which was still thrust into the floor.

*"*...?!"

The force pressing on my head suddenly intensified, pushing me down to one knee.

"Wow, you're still conscious... You should surrender before you get hurt. A regular person would've already been crushed to death by now. Even *you* will die soon without the help of your darkness."

The repulsive force was growing stronger by the moment. It felt like Clown was going to kill me. My bones creaked, and my muscles ruptured. The pain was positively hellish.

But what does that matter? Shii cried as she wrote that letter. She left for Ronelia without saying goodbye. Think about how painful that must have been. How much distress that must have caused her. How badly she must have wanted to cry for help. She must have been hurting terribly, yet she kept it all to

herself. She chose to sacrifice herself for her country, for her family—and for us. This physical pain is nothing compared to her suffering!

I braced myself, stood back up, and inched toward Clown.

"You can still move?!" he exclaimed, showing panic for the first time. He poured significantly more spirit power into Lonely Crown.

**"**?!"

A veritable waterfall of repulsive force pressed down upon me. It was overwhelming.

Damn it... I'm so close...

Clown was just fifty centimeters away. He was close enough to reach out and touch.

This is now a test of fortitude. My body is at its limit, but my mind is unbroken.

Remember that hell. Remember the billion-plus years you spent devotedly swinging your sword.

Think of Shii's pain. Think of the emotional distress she chose to bear all alone.

This weight is nothing. There's no way in hell I'm gonna let it beat me!

I clenched my fists tightly and mustered all the strength I could. "MOVE!" I yelled, desperately reaching out my hand.

"Wh-what is this power...?! GAH!" Clown screamed.

An invisible force threw Clown off his feet, sending him crashing into the wall behind him. Lonely Crown's repulsive force immediately dissipated.

"Haah, haah... I—I did it... I won!"

I fell to my knees and breathed a sigh of relief. Lia immediately ran to my side.

"Are you okay, Allen?!" she asked.

"Yeah, I think so," I responded.

The instant after breaking free of Lonely Crown, I'd used the healing power of my darkness to mend my ruptured muscles. Now that I was free of the pressure, I felt totally disencumbered, like I had grown wings.

"Hey, Allen... What was that last attack?" Rose asked seriously.

"I'd tell you if I could, but I'm not sure," I answered.

I was sure about one thing, though—the power that had knocked Clown off his feet wasn't mine. But Zeon hadn't done anything, either. It felt strange, like some foreign element had joined forces with mine.

What was that power? I wondered, staring at my right hand.

"Owww..." Clown slowly rose to his feet in front of the wall he'd crashed into.

"I should've known you'd find a way to surpass my expectations. You always do," Clown said, smiling happily with his usual casual demeanor.

"I won the game, Mr. Clown. Please take us to Raine," I requested.

"I honestly don't feel great about this, but...I guess I've gotta keep my promise," Clown said.

"Thank you," I responded.

Clown didn't make it easy, but we'd taken a real step toward saving Shii. *Now everything rides on Raine knowing where the shadow spot is.* I thought the odds of that were pretty high. He was a member of the Thirteen Oracle Knights, the top brass of the Black Organization. There was no way that someone with such high standing in the organization wouldn't know about the shadow spots they'd placed around the globe.

"Now then...I have a little desk work to take care of, so could you kids go wait in the reception area for me?" Clown requested, turning to his desk.

Lia and Rose gave him sharp looks.

"Do you really have to do that work right now?" Lia asked.

"You're not going to try to run, are you?" Rose accused.

Evidently, the unfairness of the game had caused them to lose all faith in Clown.

"Th-these documents are really urgent! They're not gonna fill themselves out, you know!" he explained, sounding flustered. A cold sweat formed on his forehead.

"Why don't you just knock them out right now, then?" Lilim suggested.

"I don't see any reason to make us leave the room...," Tirith said.

Those were both good points.

"W-well...I'm sorry. These are confidential documents! They're not meant for your eyes!" Clown claimed, earning suspicious stares from us as he made excuse after excuse.

There's definitely something off about this. He looked really flustered. He was behaving awkwardly, too—it was like he was desperately trying to hide something.

I don't know why, but our presence in the room is an inconvenience to him. I didn't like making other people uncomfortable.

"Will you keep your promise, Mr. Clown?" I asked, deciding to be frank with him.

"Of course! A swordsman keeps his word!" Clown responded.

"Okay. We'll go ahead to reception," I said.

"I—I knew you'd understand, Allen! Thanks a lot!" Clown said with a gratified smile.

"Allen?!" Lia exclaimed.

"That's a crazy idea!" Rose protested.

"It's okay. Mr. Clown said he would keep his promise," I said.

"...Oh, fine," Lia responded.

"You're always way too trusting," Rose said.

I led the exasperated girls out of the room and headed to reception.

Clown leaned against the wall as soon as Allen and the others had left the room.

"Haah, haah... That kid sure packs a punch...," he said to himself, panting

heavily. His anguished face was drenched with sweat. "But, man... Ha-ha-ha... To think *that* power would blossom first. You really are outrageous, Allen Rodol!"

He laughed with pure joy. What he had just observed was totally contrary to his expectations. As a researcher, he found that nothing excited him more than the unexpected.

"Hmm-hmm... Ha-ha-cough, cough!"

Clown coughed, spraying crimson blood across the floor.

"Urgh... I'm in bad shape..."

He took off his shirt, exposing an unsightly dark brown bruise on his abdomen. His skin was caved in, and a broken rib had pierced a vital organ. His injuries would kill him without immediate treatment.

"Anyone else would've died on impact," Clown said with a chuckle. He stumbled to his desk, reached into a hidden compartment under the drawer, and took out a light blue capsule. It was a soul-crystal pill. "I definitely can't let Allen and the others see this."

He downed the drug, and the wounds on his abdomen quickly faded. He was fully healed in seconds.

"Phew..."

Having recovered from the brink of death, he looked at his cherished sword, Lonely Crown, which was still thrust into the floor. The ominous green and black blade was stable.

"Sweet. Looks like taking a single pill no longer gives you any side effects."

Clown Jester was a mad scientist, and he'd developed the soul-crystal pills that the Black Organization valued so much. He had tirelessly continued to research, test, and improve them since the first generation of pills, and now he had finally gotten rid of one of its most problematic side effects—destabilizing the user's Soul Attire.

"I'll have to figure out how to mass-produce them next... I'll consult with Rod to figure out the budget."

Clown changed out of his ruined clothes and into new ones as he thought.

"Okay... Time to catch up with Allen and the girls."

We walked to reception after leaving the branch manager's office and waited quietly for Clown.

"Sorry for the wait," Clown said shortly afterward. He was wearing new clothes and looked refreshed; he must have been relieved to have gotten that work off his back.

"...Huh. I'm surprised you actually came," Lia said.

"Make that two of us," Rose said.

They stared at Clown in wide-eyed disbelief; they had both just claimed there was no way he was coming.

"You wound me, Lia and Rose. I told you I keep my promises," Clown responded, waving his hand casually. "Shall we head down to the Aurest Dungeon?"

"Yes, please," I responded.

We followed Clown as he led us to the dungeon. We walked down a long, narrow hallway and took a left when it split into two directions. That hallway branched in three directions, and we took the right path. We continued in this manner for some time.

"Sorry for all the long, winding hallways. There's a good reason for it—it's a measure to prevent escape," Clown said.

"Oh, that makes sense," I responded. This building had been purposely built to be confusing.

We continued walking until a large black door came into view. The two prison guards standing on either side bowed quietly.

"Wait a second," Clown said. He took a key ring from his pocket and got to work unlocking the many locks on the door, which included a padlock, a door

bolt, a cylinder lock, and a dial lock. "There we go. It's a little dark down there, so watch your step."

He pushed the door open and began to descend a spiral staircase. We followed along.

He wasn't kidding. It's really dark in here, I thought. The lighting embedded in the walls was so dim, I could barely see my feet.

Clown spoke up with a mischievous tone as we continued down the stairs. "You wanna know something, Allen? This place is actually haunted."

"Haunted?" I repeated.

"Yep... A great many criminals attempt suicide in this dungeon, despairing at the length of their sentence," Clown continued in a gloomy tone. "A renowned medium investigated the dungeon and said that it was thick with the vengeful spirits of those who had killed themselves. It's common for guards to hear voices saying, 'I'll kill you,' 'I hate you,' 'Follow me,' and other ominous things. So if you hear a strange voice, Allen, don't respond. You might end up getting whisked away to the afterlife..."

Clown turned around and smiled creepily.

"Huh. I guess that's a thing that can happen. I'll be careful," I responded.

There was a lot in this world that science couldn't explain. It wouldn't hurt to exercise some caution.

"...Eh? You don't seem bothered at all. Do ghost stories not scare you?" Clown asked.

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"Ah-ha-ha, I wouldn't say that. It's just..." I trailed off and glanced behind me.
""...""
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Lia and Rose were both trembling, clinging tightly to my arms. The darkness of the stairwell to the dungeon had been the perfect environment for Clown to scare them speechless with his ghost story.

"Lia, Rose...you can wait outside if you're scared," I offered.

"I-I-I'm not scared! I-it's just a little chilly in here!" Lia insisted.

"A-are you suggesting that I'm scared of some vengeful spirits?! Don't be ridiculous!" Rose responded.

Neither let go of my arms despite their insistence that they weren't afraid. It was clear they were lying.

"Okay, okay. My bad," I apologized with an awkward grin, briskly walking down the stairs.

"H-hey, don't go so fast," Lia said.

"D-don't we have anything lighter to talk about?" Rose asked.

We followed Clown for a while longer.

"And we're here. This is the Aurest Dungeon," he announced.

We stood at the end of a seemingly endless hallway with cramped cells built into the left and the right walls. Each one had a simple toilet, a metal frame bed, and a small wooden desk. The cells were partitioned with clear glass instead of iron bars. It was probably a type of tempered glass.

""Eek?!"" Lia and Rose screamed together. They were looking at the prisoners confined in the cells. There was an old man smiling kindly at us, a middle-aged man who was intently muttering while facing a wall, a woman who was wordlessly pounding the glass... All the prisoners seemed abnormal in some way.

"I recommend avoiding eye contact. They might pull you in," Clown warned.

He walked down the hallway while ignoring the prisoners. We followed along, trying to keep our eyes straight ahead. We continued until Clown stopped before a cell.

"Here we are," he announced.

Raine Grad—one of the Thirteen Oracle Knights—was imprisoned inside. He stood nearly two meters tall and was in his late thirties, and he wore his long, dark blue hair tied behind his back. His large eyes, defined nose, and short beard had given him a cold look before, but now his eyes had a warm and kind glint.

"Hm... Allen Rodol?! Oh, it's wonderful to see you again!" Raine exclaimed,

standing up from his bed and walking toward us. He was wearing a prison uniform with black and white stripes.

"Hey, Raine. It's been a while," I responded from the other side of the glass.

"Yes, it's been two months... I'm truly grateful for what you did. It's because you dispelled the Rain Curse that Serena is now able to live a normal life," Raine said.

Serena Grad was the sole survivor of the orphanage Raine had founded. A monster had attacked her many years ago and inflicted her with the terrible Rain Curse, which made it so that the victim could survive only in rainy weather. Raine had summoned a perpetual storm in Daglio, the Land of Sunshine, in order to protect her.

His actions weren't right, but he did what he thought was necessary to keep Serena alive. I could tell how much he was hurting during our fight.

"Oh yeah, is Serena doing well?" I asked.

"Yes, she is. Clown arranged for her to live at an orphanage in Aurest. She comes to see me multiple times a month. Look at all these letters she sent me!" Raine said, pulling a large stack of letters out of a desk drawer. He smiled joyfully; it looked like an enormous weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

"That's great," I responded.

"It's all thanks to you, Allen. I can't possibly convey the depth of my gratitude in words," he said.

"Don't worry about it," I responded. I decided to move on to the main topic. "We have some questions we need to ask you, Raine."

"You do?" he responded.

"Yeah. It's about the Black Organization."

"I see... I don't mind, of course. I'll answer any question you have to the best of my knowledge."

"Thank you. That's a huge help."

I gave him a detailed rundown of our situation. I told him about how a dear

friend of ours was being forced into a political marriage just to buy Liengard a little time by postponing a war with Ronelia; that she was being married to Numelo Dohran, a major noble from the Holy Ronelian Empire; and that we were looking for a shadow spot Dodriel had made to invade the Holy Empire and crash the wedding.

Raine nodded in understanding when I'd finished. "You truly will stop at nothing to save someone... Okay, I think I have a handle on your situation. But I have to apologize—I may have been an Oracle Knight, but I don't know where exactly all the shadow spots have been placed."

He shook his head apologetically.

"N-no...," I despaired. I felt as if my feet were sinking into the ground.

"Don't lose heart yet, Allen. I may not know the precise locations of every shadow spot, but I know of one place that is guaranteed to have one," Raine said, raising a finger.

"Really?! Where is it?!" I asked excitedly. There was hope after all.

"The Eidolon Research Laboratory Liengard Branch," he answered.

"Huh? What's that?" I asked.

"The Black Organization is scouring the world for eidolons and their hosts. They secretly built hidden facilities in the world's leading nations so they can begin research immediately when they find one. Those hidden facilities are referred to as Eidolon Research Laboratory branches. Emperor Barel Ronelia is quite passionate about this research, and he had Dodriel Barton set shadow spots connecting the Holy Empire to each facility as soon as the boy learned his Shadow Traversal ability," Raine explained.

"Where is the facility?!" I asked.

"That, I am not aware of, unfortunately. But I believe you all should know of its location," Raine said, looking at Lia. "I received a report from a subordinate in August last year that Zach Bombard and Tor Sammons successfully captured Lia Vesteria, the host of the eidolon Fafnir. They also told me that they took her directly to the Liengard branch of the Eidolon Research Laboratory."

Lia, Rose, and I glanced at each other.

"So the place they took Lia was the Eidolon Research Laboratory?!" I said.

"Yeah, it has to be! There were a lot of weird machines in the room I was confined in. I saw a bunch of people who looked like researchers, too!" Lia responded.

"It was in the forest outside of Drestia!" Rose said.

Raine shared a wealth of information with us after telling us about the shadow spot. He told us about Numelo Dohran and the location of his estate, gave us a broad overview of the landscape of Ronelia and buildings we could use as landmarks, and described to us the basic structure of Berios Castle, the headquarters of the Black Organization. He knew as much as I would have expected of an Oracle Knight.

"Do you have any more questions for me?" Raine asked.

"No, that's more than enough information. Thank you so much!" I responded. I hadn't dared to dream that the meeting with Raine would go this well.

"Ha, there is no need to thank me. I hope my answers prove even a little helpful. Nothing would bring me greater joy," Raine said, smiling happily.

"I'm curious about why one of the Thirteen Oracle Knights is being so helpful, but whatever. We know how to reach Ronelia now!" Lilim exclaimed, speaking up for the first time. She clenched her fists in excitement.

"We still don't know the time and location of the wedding, though...," Tirith muttered.

Raine shook his head. "Sorry, but I'm in the dark about that. I've been in this dungeon for the last two months."

Though it was essential that we learned the time and place of the wedding, we would have no choice but to find that information in Ronelia.

"The wedding is at Numelo's estate, and the ceremony is at noon Ronelian standard time. That's about ten hours from now," Clown said.

I couldn't believe my ears. "M-Mr. Clown...?"

"Don't be too surprised. I have my own information network. It doesn't come close to matching Rize's, though," Clown said.

"No, that's not what I'm surprised about... I didn't think you would help us," I responded. I thought he was strongly opposed to us infiltrating the Holy Empire.

"Hmm... Consider this a special bonus for beating me in a totally unexpected way," Clown said. His words were joking, but his eyes were serious. "You're much more important than you realize, Allen. You can't die on this mission. Make sure you come back safe and sound, okay?"

"Okay. Thank you very much," I responded.

Raine groaned. "I would love to accompany him, if possible..."

"Absolutely not! I don't have the authority to release one of the Thirteen Oracle Knights and send him to the Holy Empire... Once headquarters found out, they'd fire me on the spot. I'd be arrested as a Black Organization conspirator, too," Clown said, emphatically shaking his head.

It sounded like even a temporary release would be unrealistic for Raine.

"Sorry, Allen. It sounds like I can do no more for you," Raine apologized.

"You've helped enough already. Thanks," I said.

Thanks to his overview, we were prepared as could be. The rest is up to us.

We left Raine and walked back toward the exit of the dungeon. According to Clown, the wedding ceremony starts ten hours from now. We could get to Drestia in three hours if we hurried. After that, we would have to go to the Eidolon Research Facility and find the hidden shadow spot. We don't have much leeway. We'll have to hurry...

"H-hold on!" Lilim yelled, stopping in front of a cell.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Look over here!" she said, pointing at it.

Inside was a man wearing a prison uniform. He was sitting as still as a statue on his metal frame bed. I couldn't see his face because he was looking down, but he seemed familiar.

"Hey! Is that you, Sebas?!" Lilim asked.

The prisoner slowly raised his face. "Oh... It's been a minute, Lilim. What brings you here?" he asked.

It all came back to me when I saw his face. That's Sebas Chandler, the vice president of Thousand Blade's Student Council! He's the eccentric swordsman who infiltrated the Holy Ronelian Empire and brought back a blood diamond just because Shii asked him to.

His personality could be a bit overwhelming, but his strength was the genuine article. During the Sword Master Festival, he'd defeated Lily Gonzales—White Lily Girls Academy's captain—with just one swing. He was arrested by the holy knights afterward, and I had forgotten he existed until now.

"We have an emergency, Sebas! We need your help!" Lilim begged.

"I'm not leaving. I can't move from this spot," Sebas responded, rejecting her without a second thought.

"Wh-why? Is your crime that serious?!" Lilim asked.

Sebas had infiltrated the Holy Ronelian Empire despite Liengard's travel ban on the country and stolen a blood diamond, which was a rare and valuable mineral. I assumed that was the crime he was being confined for.

"You'd actually be doing us a huge favor by taking him off our hands. He's been a real nuisance since he decided to lock himself in here," Clown said, scratching his cheek awkwardly.

He's staying here of his own accord? It didn't sound like he'd been sentenced to stay here like Raine.

"Shii told me to wait here until she sent someone to get me, so I'm not budging from this spot until she does," Sebas said quietly, closing his eyes. He really was here by choice.

Oh yeah, I vaguely remember Shii telling him that when the holy knights took him away at the Sword Master Festival. Considering Shii's current situation, however, she had most likely forgotten about him. I felt a little bad for Sebas.

"Forget about that! She said that ages ago! Your beloved Shii is being forced

into a political marriage!" Lilim shouted.

"She'll be wed to a major Ronelian noble in less than ten hours!" Tirith yelled.

"...Huh?" Sebas said, looking flabbergasted. "Lilim, Tirith. You know I don't like jokes. I'm gonna be pissed if you're making this up."

He stood up slowly like a ghost, projecting a foreboding sense of malice. Lilim and Tirith braved his overwhelming presence as they continued to face him.

"We're not joking! Shii's in the Holy Empire right now!" Lilim insisted.

"There's no way I would joke about that! That would be in really poor taste...," Tirith said.

"So you're not lying?" Sebas asked. They both nodded. "I see... Hah!"

He threw an astonishingly fast punch and effortlessly broke the tempered glass, as though it were a sheet of paper.

"""Huh?!""" we all gasped.

The boy cracked his neck and walked calmly out of the cell after performing his unbelievable stunt.

Sebas Chandler is ridiculously strong... I heard that Eighteen escaped prison by using chopsticks to cut through the bars of his cell, but Sebas just broke tempered glass with his bare hands.

"D-do you have any idea how strong this glass is?!" Clown despaired, leaning over to scoop up the glass fragments on the floor.

Sebas looked at me. "It's been a few months since I've seen you, Allen... But I can tell you've become even more inhuman. I don't know how you carry that kind of strength without losing your mind," he said in disbelief.

I feel like he told me something similar last time I saw him. Does he know about Zeon, maybe? I wondered.

"Well, I guess that's none of my business. Tell me what we need to do to save my one true love," Sebas requested, still looking at me.

"First, we need to go to the Eidolon Research Facility on the outskirts of Drestia to find the shadow spot that Dodriel made. You can think of a shadow spot as a means of transportation between Liengard and Ronelia. We're going to use it to infiltrate the Holy Empire and crash the ceremony at Numelo Dohran's estate. Once we save Shii, we'll return using the same shadow spot," I said.

"Got it," Sebas replied.

"According to Clown, the ceremony will start ten hours from now. We don't have much time left. I want to leave right away. Are you ready?" I asked.

"Of course. Shii must be suffering right now... Let's save her as quickly as possible!" Sebas urged.

"You bet!" I responded.

We left the dungeon and departed for the Liengard branch of the Eidolon Research Laboratory.

We dashed out of the Aurest branch of the Holy Knights Association and headed for the Eidolon Research Laboratory located outside of Drestia. We decided to forego riding horses in the interest of saving time—it was faster to run.

We arrived in Drestia after a few hours of running, then dashed down Holy Street—which ran through the center of Drestia—and into the forest outside the city. After forcing our way along a rugged forest trail, we found the beatendown laboratory.

"Phew... We're finally here," I said.

We stood before the Liengard branch of the Eidolon Research Laboratory, the Black Organization facility where Lia had once been imprisoned.

"I forgot how big this place is," Lia said.

"It's gonna be hard to find one spot in this giant building," Rose commented.

"What does a shadow spot look like anyway?" Lilim asked.

"I can't even imagine...," Tirith said.

This might take longer than expected, I thought.

The laboratory was as large and complicated as a labyrinth, and we didn't even know what a shadow spot looked like.

What's this unpleasant feeling in the air? I wondered just before Sebas clapped his hands.

"We're short on time. Let's get searching. Allen, you take the lead. You already know the layout of the facility," he said.

"Huh? Oh, uh...okay," I responded.

Something about what he said felt off to me, but I obeyed and entered the Eidolon Research Laboratory.

"Huh?" I gasped, freezing as soon as I set foot inside the building. An uncomfortable sensation seemed to be emanating from the place, seeping into my very soul. *It's making me feel both nostalgic and angry...* This was undoubtedly Dodriel's spirit power.

"What's wrong, Allen?" Lia asked, cocking her head. She didn't seem to sense the unpleasantness in the air.

"I think I found the shadow spot," I said.

"R-really?!" Lia responded.

"Yeah. I can't really explain it, but...I feel a detestable presence. We'll probably find the shadow spot if I follow it," I said.

"A detestable presence?" Lia repeated.

"It's probably Dodriel's spirit power," I said.

"We can't sense whatever it is you're feeling... But I trust your inhuman instincts. I'm sure you're right," Sebas said. I wasn't exactly happy with his explanation for why he trusted me.

I followed the trail of Dodriel's spirit power through the laboratory until we eventually arrived in the small dungeon where Lia had been confined.

"Is it here...? No, it's past this room," I said.

"There's nothing beyond here, Allen. It's a dead end," Lia responded.

She was right—the cell didn't lead anywhere else—it was a dead end. But Dodriel's spirit power was definitely emanating from just beyond this chamber.

"Stand back," I said. I drew the sword at my hip and slashed at the dirt wall before me. "Hah!"

My blade tore through the wall, rending it with ease to reveal a space behind it.

""A hidden room?!"" Lia and Rose shouted, surprised.

"Hey, look! There's a weird black fog in the middle of the room!" Lilim shouted.

"That could be the shadow spot...!" Tirith speculated.

"Bull's-eye, Allen. Having an inhuman sword sure comes in handy," Sebas said.

The three upperclassmen looked excitedly at the swirling black shadow in the middle of the hidden room.

"Dodriel's spirit power is coming from this black shadow. This has to be the shadow spot," I said.

I was the only one who could sense Dodriel's spirit power. The thought that I was connected to him somehow creeped me out, but it was coming in handy, so I decided not to dwell on it.

"This shadow spot is going to take us to the infamous Holy Ronelian Empire. There is no guarantee we'll make it home safe. Are you all prepared?" I asked everyone.

"I still think this is too dangerous, but...I'll follow you anywhere, Allen!" Lia responded.

"The Holy Ronelian Empire... I can think of no better enemy against which to sharpen my Cherry Blossom Blade School of Swordcraft!" Rose declared.

"What was Shii thinking, running off on her own like that...? We're gonna drag that dummy back!" Lilim exclaimed.

"I won't let her get away with leaving without saying goodbye...!" Tirith said.

"I'm Shii's knight in shining armor. I would follow her to the depths of hell," Sebas said.

They were all clearly ready.

"Okay, let's go!" I said.

We all jumped into the shadow spot Dodriel had created.

Numelo Dohran's estate was so large, it could easily be mistaken for a castle. Just by looking at it, you could tell that he was the wealthiest man in the Holy Empire. The walls were painted an elegant white, the roof tiles were a calm shade of blue, and a round tower rose from the center of the structure. In front of the estate was a colorful garden, which surrounded a world-famous statue.

Shii Arkstoria wore a somber expression in one of the rooms of the magnificent mansion.

"Haah..." She sighed for the umpteenth time, lying on her back in bed. "I can't believe I have to marry him."

She'd heard plenty about Numelo's unsavory characteristics. He was a lecherous man who was always married to ten women at a time, and referred to them by the numbers "One" through "Ten." He would spend one night with Five, the next with Seven, then Eight, and so on, using them each like toys until they broke. He had gone through over one hundred wives and had traumatized over one thousand women—he was the most despicable man in Ronelian history.

He planned for Shii to fill the spot of Number Ten, which had become vacant a month prior.

"How did I wind up here...? I always thought a prince on a white stallion would come whisk me away one day."

Shii was a purehearted romantic who'd fantasized about love since she was little. Her dream was to one day marry a man—a prince on a white stallion—who would give her a new life, freeing her from the great responsibility that came with being an Arkstoria. She would be able to forget her social standing,

her duties, and her lineage to live as a simple wife. A part of her had always hoped this ideal man would appear before her.

She'd once shared this dream with Lilim and Tirith, and they'd both burst out laughing.

"Pfft, ha-ha-ha! A-a prince on a white stallion... I have tears in my eyes!" Lilim had responded.

"Sh-Shii...that sounds way too much like a fairy tale...," Tirith had said.

"Oh, come on! It's not that funny!" Shii had shouted, embarrassed.

That was the last time she shared her fantasy with anyone. Even so, she had refused to give up on it. She was convinced her soul mate would one day appear on his white stallion.

But reality was cruel. Her country had sold her to Numelo; he would do with her what he pleased, and she would eventually be discarded. There would be no more dreaming, no hope, no salvation—all that awaited her was a ghastly end.

"Haah..." Shii sighed again. In an attempt to take her mind off her harsh reality, she turned her thoughts to the friends she'd left behind in Liengard. "I wonder what they're all doing right now... Did they find my letter?"

The letter Shii had left in a desk drawer in the Student Council room was the only farewell that she could manage. Writing it had been the hardest thing she had ever done. As she put her thoughts to paper, all her delightful memories with her friends had burst into her mind like water from a dam, and her tears had refused to stop flowing.

"Should I have said goodbye in person? I'm never going to see them again..."

She had asked herself that question many times.

"...No. I couldn't have done it."

Shii wasn't confident that she could have told Allen and the others goodbye with a smile. Instead, she would have wept hideously, which was hardly the last memory she wanted them to have of her before she left the country. There was no reason to hurt them like that. That was why she'd chosen to leave a letter.

"How did they feel after reading my farewell message?"

Had they cried for her? Were they sad for her? Were they mad at her?

And the scariest question of all... Would they remember her?

Warm tears formed in her eyes as she considered that.

"Lilim, Tirith, Lia, Rose...and Allen... I miss them all so much..."

No one was there to hear her cry.

The wedding was just a few hours away.

We all dashed into the black fog we found in the Eidolon Research Laboratory's hidden room.

This must be Dodriel's Shadow World, I thought. We emerged into a space that was entirely black. It was cold, suffocating, and gloomy.

This place gives me the creeps. My sense of direction was in total disarray, but I felt the odd sensation that I was drifting toward somewhere. I barely had time to assess our situation before a light shone up ahead.

Have we reached the exit already?

We charged through the light and emerged in what appeared to be someone's room.

"Now that doesn't happen every day. Are you guys invaders?!" a large man asked, swinging down a greatsword at us.

Talk about a violent welcome...

I wrapped myself in my cloak of darkness and caught his blade in my bare hands, crushing it.

"Wow, color me impressed! You can summon a helluva lot more of that darkness than last time!" the man bellowed, sounding strangely pleased. It was Zach Bombard, a fierce opponent whom I had battled twice before.

"Z-Zach Bombard?!" I exclaimed.

"Wa-ha-ha! It's been a while, Allen Rodol! You still sparkle like no one I've seen before!" he said in his deep voice.

Zach Bombard was a member of the Black Organization. He had short crimson hair and a tough chiseled face. He stood two meters tall and was very muscular. I guessed he was in his mid-thirties. His skill with the blade was deadly, as he had demonstrated when he kidnapped Lia many months ago.

Of all the people to run into... This was awful luck.

The five of us assumed combat stances just as someone banged on the door.

"Hey, you big oaf! What're you yelling about so early in the morning?! Do you realize what time it is?!" a familiar voice yelled from outside the room. It sounded like Tor Sammons, the woman who worked alongside Zach.

This is going from bad to worse... Tor actually managed to fend off Chairwoman Reia for a bit. Fighting both her and Zach would cause a big scene.

I assumed we were already in the Holy Ronelian Empire. If we fought Zach and Tor now, we would undoubtedly attract the attention of other Black Organization members or Oracle Knights, drastically reducing our chances of saving Shii.

Damn it! What should we do?! We could retreat... No, that's not an option. We wouldn't be able to return here and use the shadow spot again. Should I knock Zach and Tor unconscious in one blow, then? No, they won't go down that easily.

I bit my lip in frustration as I racked my brains for a way out of this horribly unlucky situation.

"Wa-ha-ha, sorry! I just had a really refreshin' bowel movement! I didn't mean to yell!" Zach lied, laughing heartily.

"Tch. Do you have to be so goddamn disgusting all the time? I'm gonna kill you next time you make that kinda noise!" Tor yelled, kicking the door.

"Sweet, sounds like she left," Zach said, sighing with relief after he heard her walk away.

"... Why did you do that?" I asked.

"Wa-ha-ha, I couldn't let her ruin our long-awaited reunion!" Zach responded, giving me a nonanswer. He opened his refrigerator and took out a bottle of alcohol. "Let's knock back a cold one to celebrate our reunion! Feel free to grab a drink!"

"I'm still underage," I said.

"Man, you're just as stiff as you look. What a bummer!" Zach said. He took a jovial swig of his bottle. I didn't know what he was so happy about. "Man... Nothin' better than a drink in the presence of a sparkling gem like you!"

Zach's breath reeked of alcohol. He was still going on about that "sparkling" nonsense.

"Where are we, Zach?" I asked, looking around the small room. There was a bed, a dresser, a refrigerator, and a fan. Pairs of pants and empty alcohol bottles were strewn across the dirty floor.

"My humble abode," Zach answered.

"This is your place? Does Tor live nearby?" I asked.

"We live together, more like. This is the tenth floor of Berios Castle, the headquarters of the Black Organization. We regular members live in the residential section!"

"I see..."

The shadow spot led directly into the enemy's base. That sure was convenient. According to Raine, Numelo's estate was near Berios Castle. That meant we had to figure out how to escape. Zach had said we were on the tenth floor, so this castle had to be crawling with Black Organization members—getting out of here would be difficult.

We're so close and yet so far from Shii. What should we do? I thought.

"Wa-ha-ha, why're you scrunchin' your face like that? Tell me what's goin' on. I might be able to help," Zach said, already sounding drunk.

"Do you expect us to trust you? You kidnapped Lia," I responded.

Zach had abducted Lia last August. He was covering for us right now for some reason, but we couldn't let our guards down.

"Oh, man... I see murder in your eyes. I can tell you've been through a lotta hard battles since I last saw you," Zach remarked, glaring back at me with a smile. It felt like we were on the verge of coming to blows.

"...I think we can trust him," Lia interjected.

"Lia?!" I responded. She was the last person I'd expected to defend Zach.

"I'm serious, Allen. When I was confined in the Eidolon Research Laboratory, one of the researchers tried to...do something unspeakable to me," Lia revealed hesitantly.

"...What?" I responded.

This was the first I'd heard of that. Someone tried to do something... "unspeakable" to her?! The way she hesitated could only mean one thing—the researcher had tried to violate her. He had some nerve trying to assault Lia while she was confined, I thought, growing angry. Thick, murky darkness began to burble all over my body.

"H-hey, Allen! You're releasing a type of darkness I haven't seen before! I appreciate the sentiment, but please calm down! He didn't actually get to do anything!" Lia shouted.

"Really? That's a relief...," I said.

"A-anyway, my point was...Zach saved me when the researcher was about to assault me," Lia said.

"Wa-ha-ha, I forgot about that. Talk about nostalgic," Zach said, gulping down the last of his bottle and exhaling with satisfaction. He quickly opened a second drink and immediately downed the bubbling, foamy beverage.

"I'm not saying he's a good guy, but I don't think he's rotten to the core. He protected us just now, too... I think we can try counting on him," Lia said.

"Yeah... Maybe," I responded.

If what Lia said was true, then Zach seemed like an upright person for a Black Organization member. Oh yeah, I remember he said he used to be a holy knight. He refused to say why he left the holy knights for the Black Organization, but he might have once had a strong sense of justice. Lia could be right about asking

him for help.

We were on the tenth floor of Berios Castle, which was the residential area for regular Black Organization members. Escaping would be difficult without inside help.

"...You'll hear us out, Zach?" I asked.

"Wa-ha-ha, of course. I'm very interested to know why a sparkling gem like you decided to infiltrate the Holy Empire... Lay it on me!" Zach responded.

I gave him a simple overview of our situation. "And that's why we used the shadow spot in the Eidolon Research Facility to sneak into the Holy Ronelian Empire," I finished.

Zach hummed in thought. "Hmm... I don't know that there's a worse man in the world to catch the eye of than Numelo Dohran... This Shii Arkstoria is an unlucky girl."

His tone was heavy. It was clear how he felt about Numelo.

"You kids are obviously in the right. I'll do what I can to help!" Zach said.

"Really? I appreciate it," I responded.

"Wa-ha-ha, don't worry about it. I'm doin' this for myself, too!" he claimed.

"Huh? How so?" I asked.

"I'd be beside myself with regret if a rare gem like you died on a trivial mission like this... I prolly wouldn't get outta bed for weeks!" he said ominously. He rummaged through a desk drawer and pulled out an old piece of parchment.

"What's that?" I asked.

"As I said, this is Berios Castle. It's located smack dab in the middle of the Holy Empire, and this residential area is one of the middle floors. To be frank, gettin' outta here is gonna be next to impossible."

"I figured...," I responded.

"Wa-ha-ha, no need for you to pull a long face. I'm gonna give you these to help!" Zach said, taking some black overcoats out of his wardrobe.

"Are those ...?"

"Yeah, they're the standard Black Organization garb. You didn't hear this from me, but Black Organization members don't exactly have a lotta camaraderie. Barely anyone here in the residential area knows the names and faces of their coworkers. Most people aren't even aware of who lives right next to them, unless the person's a total weirdo."

"Really?"

"Yep. Part of the reason for that is the high mortality rate on our missions—whoops, I'm gettin' off track. What I'm tryin' to say is, no one will question a group they haven't seen before if they're all wearin' these black overcoats."

"That makes sense... These are way too big for us, though."

Zach was two meters tall—his overcoats were obviously too large for us. No matter how little Black Organization members cared to know their neighbors, a group walking around with overcoats that dragged on the floor would definitely arouse suspicion.

"Trust me, that won't be a problem. Try them on," Zach said.

"...? Like this?" I asked, putting on the way-too-large overcoat as he instructed. Something mysterious happened when I did—the overcoat shrank to fit me perfectly.

"Wa-ha-ha, are you surprised? These are special overcoats made by the magic artisan Rod Garf!" Zach said.

"Rod Garf? Magic artisan? Who's that?" I asked. This person sounded shady.

"Huh? Have you not heard of him? Rod Garf is a guy who makes all kinds of crazy things, like magic items that produce sophisticated barriers, or tools that prevent opponents from using their Soul Attire. I thought he was pretty famous... Eh, whatever. Let's talk about your escape route," Zach said, pointing to the map.

He drew a circle on an outer section of the castle with a quill pen.

"This castle is kinda unique—it was built without any windows as a measure to prevent invasion. That means there are only three ways to escape: by using a

shadow spot, by leaving through the front entrance, or by jumping off the roof."

Zach raised three rough fingers and began to detail the escape plan.

"Using a shadow spot isn't realistic. There are large and small shadow spots all through Berios Castle, but only Emperor Barel Ronelia and the caster—Dodriel Barton—know where they lead. Finding the right shadow spot in this huge building in just a few hours would be impossible," he said.

"Okay...," I responded.

"Leaving through the front entrance would be a bad idea, too. There's a security station down there that manages all entries and departures from the castle. They won't let you through."

"...Damn," I said.

It sounded like escaping from Berios Castle was going to be extremely difficult.

"That leaves jumping off the roof—this is the most realistic and safest option," Zach said, tapping the roof on the map. "The higher up you go in this castle, the lighter the security. There's no guard station on the roof, and few people ever go up there. You all were strong enough to make it to the Holy Empire, so jumping from twenty stories up should be a walk in the park, right?"

"Yeah, of course," I responded.

I could strengthen myself with my darkness, and Lia and Rose could do the same with their flames and cherry blossom petals, respectively. Lilim's exploding clay wouldn't do her any good, but Tirith could help her with her telekinetic powers. Sebas could probably survive the fall with his raw strength alone.

"I don't know... This seems pretty risky," Lia said.

"Lia's right. We'll have to pass through here to get to the roof, right?" Rose agreed.

Lia and Rose were both staring with concern at the throne room toward the top of the map.

"Don't worry. The throne room's been empty ever since the emperor shut

himself away deep underneath the castle. It's totally unguarded," Zach responded.

""Underneath the castle?"" Lia and Rose repeated together.

"Yep. Rumor has it he's performing a grand ritual using a captured eidolon or host. 'Let sleeping dogs lie,' as they say. I advise you don't go anywhere near him," Zach said.

I was a little worried about that ritual... But saving Shii took top priority right now.

"You could actually consider yourselves lucky that the wedding is today," Zach said now that we had a plan of action.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Over half of the Thirteen Oracle Knights are out of the country looking for eidolons. That includes all of the Four Imperial Knights, which you should be especially happy about," Zach explained.

"Yeah, that is lucky," I responded. If that was true, this was the best chance we could've asked for.

"Anyway, you don't have much time. Go save your friend from that idiot noble!" Zach urged. He gave us a thumbs-up. "I'll pray for your success!"

"...I'm not going to thank you," I said.

"Wa-ha-ha! Nor would I expect it! We're enemies, after all! But I sometimes wonder if a day will come when we'll fight together, Allen," Zach responded.

"Sorry, but I don't ever see that happening," I said. Hell would freeze over before I fought alongside the Black Organization.

"You never know what life has in store. I, for one, never thought I would leave the holy knights to join the Black Organization," Zach said, staring off into the distance. His smile seemed conflicted.

"Well, bye. I appreciate the help," I said.

"May we meet again, sparkling gemstone!" Zach responded.

We put on our black overcoats, pulled up our hoods, and began our trek up Berios Castle. We were currently on the tenth floor, where the general members lived. Our first goal was to reach the eleventh floor.

"I feel so on edge," I muttered.

"Yeah, I'm nervous, too," Lia responded. She was walking next to me.

We passed people in black overcoats everywhere we went. It filled me with an unpleasant feeling, like we'd actually joined the Black Organization.

Thank goodness we were able to borrow these overcoats, though. I don't know what we would've done without them. Zach's claim that everyone would think we were members of the Black Organization appeared to be true. No one seemed suspicious of us.

It's times like this when the personalities of my friends really show through.

The levelheaded Lia was marching ahead carefully, without losing focus. The bold and experienced Rose and the ever-positive Lilim were walking briskly and fearlessly. Tirith, who was always unflappable, was strolling along at her own pace.

Sebas is the surprising one. He was following quietly behind us and looking down with his hood pulled up to keep his face hidden. I hadn't expected him to be so careful.

A short while later, we arrived at the twentieth floor without incident. This was one level below the roof.

Is this story a library? I wondered as I looked around. The floor was a sea of books. The volumes were neatly organized on many bookshelves; whoever managed them was clearly meticulous.

"Wow, there are so many books. They're all old ones that I've never seen before, too," Lia said.

"I wonder if there are archaeologists in the Black Organization," Rose said.

"Quiet. Someone's coming," Sebas whispered.

I strained my ears and heard a pair of footsteps coming toward us from deeper in the library.

We're in trouble... This person is really strong. The footsteps were so quiet, I couldn't have heard them without focusing. The person they belonged to was obviously no ordinary swordsman.

Should we retreat to the nineteenth floor? No, that would be a bad idea.

The footsteps were clearly heading our way. In all likelihood, the person knew we were here, so doing an about-face and going down a floor would come across as unnatural. That would put unnecessary suspicion on us.

...We have to keep going.

We all locked eyes and nodded—it seemed like we were all thinking the same thing. I let out a small breath, readied myself, and approached the footsteps.

Please let us pass. Please..., I prayed as we approached the owner of the footsteps.

"Stop right there," said a familiar male voice. "What is your affiliation? What business would a group of six people have in my library? I rarely receive any visitors."

uuu nnn

The six of us had no answer.

"It's proper etiquette to lower your hood when speaking to someone."

A strong blast of wind blew down our hoods.

"Would you look at that... I certainly did not expect a visit from you all today," the man said, sounding intrigued.

I looked up in response. "Fuu Ludoras..."

Fuu Ludoras was one of the Thirteen Oracle Knights, and a fearsomely strong swordsman who'd recently attacked Thousand Blade and easily defeated a force of students led by Shii. He was over 190 centimeters tall and relatively slim for someone who wielded a blade. His black hair reached his back, and he looked to be in his early thirties. His chiseled features gave him an air of intelligence; without the rapier at his hip, he could have been mistaken for a scholar. He wore a white noble's shirt under a black overcoat that was emblazoned with a green pattern I felt like I had seen somewhere before.

Why did this have to happen...? Fuu Ludoras was one of the worst people we could have possibly run into.

"Long time no see, Allen Rodol. I admit I am a tad surprised that this would be the site of our reunion," Fuu said.

"I could say the same thing to you. I never thought we'd see an Oracle Knight in a library," I responded.

"Hah, is that so? You've come to Berios Castle with a group of six people... I presume you're here to save Shii Arkstoria?" Fuu said.

**"**?!"

We were all shocked that he'd figured out our goal so quickly.

"How do you know that?" I asked.

"Come now, a child could have figured that out. Shii Arkstoria was the Student Council president at Thousand Blade Academy. Given how much you care for your friends, there's no way you would have abandoned her to that vulgar noble," Fuu responded.

He studied me keenly.

"I noticed you climbed up from the nineteenth floor... Which means you must have used the shadow spot at the Eidolon Research Laboratory to get here. And judging from those overcoats and the fact that you got up here without causing a scene, you must have had help from the inside. Hmm... Was it Zach Bombard who lent his assistance? He has taken quite a shine to you, Allen. I deem him the likeliest candidate," Fuu surmised.

He'd figured out our entire path here in mere seconds. His deductive reasoning was truly astounding.

This is really bad... Fuu wasn't just strong; he was intelligent, too.

"I think I already know what your answer will be, but would you be willing to let us go?" I asked.

"Of course not. I'm not foolish enough to pass up an opportunity like this," Fuu responded.

"...I figured as much," I said. It didn't seem like we'd be able to avoid fighting with him. Then I'll need to give him my best! I quickly drew my sword and took a step forward. "Go ahead, everyone! I'll take care of him!"

""Allen?!"" Lia and Rose shouted.

""Are you sure?!"" Lilim and Tirith responded.

"Fuu stopping all of us here would be the worst-case scenario! Hurry to the roof while I keep him occupied!" I yelled.

"You'd better catch up, Allen. I'm gonna consider that a promise, okay?" Lia said.

"I haven't beaten you in a duel yet, Allen. You'd better not die here," Rose warned.

Those responses were both very like them. They took off running.

"I feel guilty for always giving an underclassman the hardest jobs... But we'll leave Fuu to you," Lilim responded.

"I'm really sorry about this...," Tirith said.

"This fight should be no sweat for an inhuman like you. We'll be waiting at Numelo's mansion," Sebas said.

Fuu made no move to attack my friends as they ran for the roof. Instead, he turned around and walked up to a nearby cupboard.

"...?"

I maintained the middle stance, watching him with confusion as he set down two elegant white cup-and-saucer sets on a desk covered by a white tablecloth.

"Hmm, that smells nice. The color is satisfactory as well," Fuu said, sounding content. He placed tea leaves into each cup and poured in some hot water.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"I'd think that would be obvious. I'm making tea," Fuu responded.

"I can see that, but...why?"

"Because I acquired some good tea leaves."

"...Huh."

It didn't seem like we were on the same page.

After preparing the tea with a refined technique, Fuu sat in a lovely wooden chair. "Well, don't just stand there. Have a seat. This is a perfect opportunity to answer those questions you had for me," he said before taking a sip of the tea he'd just poured.

I don't know what his game is... But this works for me. The longer I kept Fuu occupied, the more time Lia and the others would have to escape. If he wanted to talk, I would oblige him for as long as he wanted. I sat down in the chair across from him.

"Okay... What questions are you talking about?" I asked.

"Hmph, do you not remember? Very well." Fuu cleared his throat. "It was last September when I attacked Thousand Blade Academy with Dodriel. You asked me about eidolons and the being inside Lia Vesteria. Unfortunately, I was on duty, and I didn't have time to talk. I said I'd like to sit down for some tea and chat in the future. Does that jog your memory?"

"Oh..."

I actually did feel like we'd had that exchange. I can't believe he remembers a short conversation we had in the middle of a fight... He sure was meticulous.

"I am an archaeologist, and I always try to answer the questions of curious young individuals such as yourself. Personally, I think a scholar's work calls for more than just research. We must do our best to disseminate accurate information throughout the world and pass the baton of knowledge to the next generation. I believe that is our most important duty... What do you think?" Fuu asked.

"Huh? O-oh, yeah... I don't think you're wrong," I responded.

"Hah, I knew you would understand," Fuu said, smiling with satisfaction. He took a sip of his tea.

Fuu normally came across as aloof, but he evidently became quite talkative while discussing his area of expertise.

"Now—I will speak on eidolons and what is inside Lia Vesteria. First, 'eidolon' is a general term for monsters that once inspired deep terror throughout the world. The Black Organization is scrambling to collect them. A few countries, including the Holy Ronelian Empire, have secretly captured eidolons for use in battle. Most are still lurking out in the world, however," Fuu continued.

I had never heard any of that before. The Thirteen Oracle Knights possessed knowledge that few were privy to.

"Next, I will talk about what is inside Lia Vesteria. The Primal Dragon King, also known as Fafnir, is sealed within her body. I assume it has become her Soul Attire," Fuu said.

That would explain the name of Lia's Soul Attire.

"I'll expound a little on Fafnir. Around seven hundred years ago, the Primal Dragon King descended from the sky and used its all-consuming black flames and all-healing white flames to raze Vesteria Kingdom," Fuu continued.

"I didn't know that!" I exclaimed.

"Of course you didn't. International law strictly forbids historical research. If not for archaeologists like me, events that occurred centuries in the past would be forgotten forever," Fuu said. "As I was saying, a member of the Seven Holy Blades who safeguarded Vesteria at the time set out to defeat Fafnir, but he was ruthlessly devoured. The Vesterian citizens despaired at the man's defeat, having considered him their only hope, but then a woman who had been born in a distant land rose in defiance. She used a special ability in her blood to seal Fafnir within her womb."

Fuu's calm tone did nothing to make his words any less shocking.

"That woman became Fafnir's host. She was hailed as Vesteria's savior, and she married the king. Fafnir has been passed down through the royal line ever since. Lia Vesteria is its current host. The name of the previous host was... Oh, yes. It was Liz Vesteria. She was Lia's mother."

Fuu took a moment to catch his breath and sip his tea.

"That is the extent of my knowledge about eidolons and the monster sealed within Lia Vesteria. Do you have any questions?" he asked.

"No, I'm okay," I responded.

I took a moment to process the deluge of information he had just given me. "Eidolon" is a term for monsters that possess tremendous strength. Fafnir, which Lia inherited, is an eidolon that attacked Vesteria in the past. The Black Organization is scrambling to collect eidolons. I couldn't accept everything he'd told me without question, of course, but I didn't think he had any reason to lie. I was pretty confident I could trust this information.

"Would you mind if I ask you a question, Allen Rodol?" Fuu asked.

"No, not at all," I responded.

"Have you ever thought about the edge of the world?" he asked with a serious expression.

"Uh... No, not really. It's called the World's End Waterfall, right?" I responded.

"Yes, very good. That is what we have always been taught... But I can't accept it as the truth."

"What do you mean?"

According to the Holy Knights Association, the world was composed of one enormous land mass. Thirty percent of the land protruded above water, and the other seventy percent lay beneath the ocean. They also taught that the world was flat and that it ended with a colossal waterfall called the World's End Waterfall. The seawater that flowed down the waterfall eventually returned to the world as rain, completing the water cycle.

Research to learn any more about the composition of the world was strictly forbidden by international law.

"I have scoured every resource I can find—including historical documents, memoirs, classic works of literature, and murals—for details on the World's End Waterfall, but none of them mention it. It seems the only source for this information is the Holy Knights Association itself. That doesn't make sense! I can't help but feel that this is artificial!"

Fuu clenched his fists, speaking with rare passion.

"The Holy Knights Association may possess an important secret about the

world. Their headquarters, which is defended by the Seven Holy Blades, must conceal monumental historical information!"

His burning desire for knowledge showed on his face.

"The edge of the world is far away. Modern airplanes can't yet hold enough fuel to make it there. Even so, I wish to go beyond the World's End Waterfall! I desperately want to know what's out there! I joined the Black Organization in pursuit of this knowledge!"

"Did you join for protection?" I asked.

"Precisely. International law strictly forbids researching history and the edge of the world. The wicked 'history hunters' have made sure there is no place for archaeologists like me to work. The reality is that joining the powerful Black Organization is the only way to safely devote oneself to research," Fuu explained.

"...I see."

Zach Bombard had joined to accomplish something he couldn't as a holy knight. Raine Grad had joined so he could save Serena from the Rain Curse. Fuu Ludoras had joined to learn about the edge of the world. They had all entered the Black Organization to achieve a goal.

Fuu sighed. "Haah... My apologies. I let myself get carried away," he said with a self-deprecating smile. He looked at me seriously. "You have good eyes, Allen Rodol."

"...Huh?" I responded.

"Your pupils are clear and untainted... Why is it that they seem to draw me in? They give me a sudden urge to help you," Fuu said. He drained his teacup and stood. "That is all I have to say. You may do as you wish."

"What... Are you not going to stop me?" I asked.

"Unfortunately, I made plans to spend the entire day deciphering historical texts. I have also received no orders to stop Allen Rodol. Besides, you've grown too strong for the likes of me to defeat," Fuu said humbly. He closed his eyes. "Let's see... Your companions are struggling to get through some tight security.

They are hiding in a storage shed in Numelo's grand garden located five kilometers north of here."

"How do you know that?!" I asked.

"I have the ability to hear voices on the wind and pick up any conversation within ten kilometers of me. There aren't many groups of five people in the Holy Empire who would say your name. I am certain they are your— Hmm..."

Fuu suddenly fell silent and furrowed his brow.

"Did something happen?" I asked.

"I recommend you make haste... It sounds like the wedding ceremony is beginning," Fuu said.

"What?! It's supposed to start hours from now!" I exclaimed.

Clown had told us before we left the branch that the wedding ceremony was in ten hours. We had since gone to the Eidolon Research Laboratory, used the shadow spot to reach the Holy Empire, and ascended Berios Castle with the help of the black overcoats Zach had lent us, but that all couldn't have taken longer than four or five hours.

"Schedules mean nothing to Numelo Dohran. That waste of oxygen truly believes himself to be the center of the world," Fuu responded.

"Damn it," I cursed, immediately jumping out of my chair and dashing for the roof.

"I'll pray for your success in this mission, Allen Rodol," Fuu said.

"Please do!" I yelled back as I began to race toward Numelo's mansion.

In the cathedral on Numelo Dohran's estate, the wedding ceremony between him and Shii Arkstoria was about to commence.

"Please come this way if you have an invitation!"

"The wedding's about to begin! Please make haste!"

The ceremonial hall was in a state of panic after Numelo accelerated the

schedule without warning. Shii sighed loudly as she listened to the tumult around her.

He's such a selfish man. I can't believe he moved the ceremony forward by five hours on a whim, Shii thought. She was waiting for Numelo in the bride's dressing room. I never thought I'd be so miserable looking at myself in a wedding dress. Shii felt like she was watching a different person as she studied herself in the mirror. Where did I go wrong...?

She stared into space and thought about the dream she'd had since she was a child—that a prince would arrive on a white stallion to whisk her away. That he would free her from thinking about her position, lineage, and duty, allowing her to live as a simple housewife. But the cruelty of reality had crushed her fleeting dream like a grape.

I suppose this is a fate all Arkstorias share... The duty of an Arkstoria was to live and die for Liengard. That was what Shii had been taught as a little girl. She had always known she would lack the freedom to do whatever she wanted in life. She had also long accepted that she would eventually be used for a political marriage.

But somewhere in her heart, she had still dreamed. She had still believed her gallant prince would arrive to break her bonds and take her away on his white stallion.

It turns out that you can't change fate. I'm an Arkstoria, and nothing will change that. My duty is to live and die for Liengard...

Just as Shii sighed loudly, someone knocked on the dressing room door and opened it. An elderly gentleman in a black suit walked inside.

"Lord Numelo has summoned you, Lady Shii Arkstoria," he announced.

"...Understood," Shii said. She steeled herself and left for the cathedral.

Meanwhile, a man smiled with satisfaction as he peered through the doors of the cathedral. His name was Numelo Dohran.

Numelo had used gel to slick back his hair. He was around 150 centimeters

tall and was in his late thirties. He was so fat that his belly threatened to burst through his fancy frock coat. His face was ugly and puffy, and his lustful eyes were sure to inspire a visceral hatred in any who saw him.

"Bweh-heh, only I could fill a cathedral after pushing up the ceremony by five hours! I truly am the greatest!" he said.

Numelo's personal attendant nodded in response. "Indeed, my lord. I believe this is entirely due to your outstanding virtue."

"Bweh-heh. You think so, too?" Numelo asked.

"I am hardly the only one. I would posit that everyone in this cathedral feels the same," the attendant said.

"Bweh-heh, wonderful! My virtue is truly something to behold!" Numelo said, laughing joyfully in response to the obvious flattery.

The attendees were all famous Ronelian nobles. They'd hastened to get here in time after Numelo accelerated the schedule in hopes they could please him, avoid incurring his displeasure, and build a relationship with him in the future.

"Where's my new wife?" Numelo demanded.

"She should be here any moment," the attendant answered.

Shii Arkstoria arrived in her wedding dress shortly afterward.



"I apologize for the wait, my lord," she said.

"Bweh-hoo...! You make a stunning bride! You are more than worthy to be my new Number Ten!" Numelo exclaimed.

"Your praise overjoys me. It is more than I deserve as your simple tool," Shii lied, bowing her head gracefully. Pleased by her docile attitude, Numelo ran his eyes up and down her body, not bothering to hide his lust.

"Bweh-heh-leh! I'm gonna give you some sweet loving tonight. I hope you're excited!" Numelo said.

"...Nothing would make me happier," Shii said.

"My lord, it is almost time," his attendant said humbly when they were done speaking.

"Bweh? Already? Well then, let's go!" Numelo commanded.

The bride and groom walked through the large cathedral doors. Numelo took the lead, with Shii following three steps behind as if she were a servant. The attendees gasped in admiration as she passed.

"Wow, she's the new Number Ten!"

"She's stunning! A paragon of beauty, I tell you!"

"My goodness, she is truly breathtaking... I'm so jealous!"

They all praised Shii's beauty when they saw her. There were plenty of vulgar comments as well.

"Heh-heh... Numelo has special taste in women. I'd do anything to see her face twisted with anguish!"

"The sight of a noble girl degrading herself for pleasure never gets old!"

Numelo and Shii reached the altar, and a gentle-faced young priest addressed the audience.

"The wedding ceremony between Numelo Dohran and Shii Arkstoria will now begin. I will first share some words as God's apo—" he said, before getting interrupted.

"Cut the tedious preamble and get on with it," Numelo ordered irritably.

"...Very well. Allow me to say just one thing—God says this will be a holy day," the priest said, greatly shortening his address. "Numelo Dohran. Do you take Shii Arkstoria to be your wife, to treat her with compassion, and to love her?"

"Bweh-heh! I do, I do!" Numelo vowed.

"Shii Arkstoria. Do you take Numelo Dohran to be your husband, to have and to hold in sickness and in health, and to serve him with your mind and body as his possession and slave for as long as you live?" the priest asked.

"...Yes, I do," Shii pledged.

The priest smiled after they'd completed their terribly one-sided vows.

"O, Holy Father! These lost lambs have come together and given their vows to you! Please grant them your blessing so that they may find eternal happiness! Numelo Dohran and Shii Arkstoria—you may now share a kiss to seal your vows!" the priest proclaimed.

Shii and Numelo locked eyes and took a step toward each other. Numelo closed his eyes and puckered up, waiting for his Number Ten to kiss him.

His guards are at the end of the cathedral... Now's my chance! Shii thought.

She drew the dagger she had hidden in her dress and thrust it at Numelo's heart.

"Rot in hell, Numelo Dohran!" Shii yelled.

Numelo's eyes widened in shock, and the wedding hall plunged into disorder. The guards stationed at the entrance went pale and rushed toward the altar... but they were too late.

"Grk...?!" Numelo grunted.

Shii had plunged her dagger deep into Numelo's chest. He fell to his knees.

*I*—*I* did it...

Shii had succeeded in assassinating Numelo Dohran, one of the most powerful nobles of the Holy Ronelian Empire.

"...Huh?"

Or so she'd thought. What she saw next shocked her speechless; the blade of the dagger vanished from where it had been plunged in Numelo's chest. Actually, it melted, as if by scorching flames. Coward that he was, Numelo had fainted from shock, but he was uninjured.

Did a Soul Attire do that?! Shii thought, her sharp intellect guiding her to the right answer.

"Heh-heh-heh."

Scornful laughter echoed throughout the cathedral.

"How pitiful... One should never break a vow made to God."

The priest's gentle expression had been replaced by a menacing smile. He tossed off his vestments to reveal black ceremonial clothes emblazoned with a crest that was granted only to the top brass of the Black Organization.

"...I guess that explains why Numelo's guards were so far away," Shii said, deducing the priest's identity from his clothes and wicked expression. "You're Grega Ash. I can't believe one of the Thirteen Oracle Knights would pose as a priest..."

Shii's face went pale. She had failed to assassinate Numelo and was now faced with one of the strongest swordsmen in the land.

Grega Ash had neat gray hair and stood at 170 centimeters tall. He was a prodigy with the blade who had climbed to the rank of Oracle Knight at the young age of twenty. The sharp look in his dark, stagnant eyes and his menacing smile were his most distinctive traits. His black clergyman's robes were accented by gray and red. A gray crest signifying his status as an Oracle Knight was emblazoned on the left side of his chest.

"I suppose you should never underestimate an Arkstoria. You pretended to be docile while vigilantly watching for an opportunity to assassinate Numelo. I truly admire your willingness to do anything to achieve your objective," Grega said, clapping slowly. His expression then turned hostile. "But there's one thing I can't accept. Why did you break your vow to God?!"

Grega seethed malice, and the attendees began to shout in protest.

"Yeah! How dare you turn a dagger on Lord Numelo, Number Ten! What were you thinking?!"

"A tool should never turn against its master!"

"A Liengardian tried to assassinate Lord Numelo... This will be an international crisis! Do you realize what you've done?!

Shii faced the audience calmly. "I have discarded my Liengardian nationality. I'm just Shii Arkstoria now; I belong to no country. Do any of you have a problem with that?"

Normally, an international crisis would have developed if an Arkstoria had struck down a major Ronelian noble. But if Shii lacked a nationality, all responsibility for the incident would fall on her alone. Admittedly, that technicality might not hold up to scrutiny, but nobles valued logic and formality above all else. The attendees could only grit their teeth in frustration.

"Grk... You insolent little brat!" one of them shouted.

"Haah, you are all such fools... I couldn't care less about honor, logic, or formality. This woman broke a vow to God. That is the problem here!" Grega shouted. He drew the sword at his hip and pointed it at Shii.

"...You're just as zealous as the rumors say," Shii responded.

Grega's presence reminded Shii of the Rosas Tragedy that had occurred ten years earlier. The incident was a massacre that occurred on the small Rosas Island, located near the Commonwealth of Polyesta.

Grega Ash had been born on Rosas Island. He was a pure and simple child who grew up in the company of loving parents and kind neighbors against the backdrop of the island's lush flora and fauna. However, his personality began to twist in his tenth year when he suddenly announced that he could hear the voice of God. One day, the voice of God told him to kill everyone on the island. He awoke to his Soul Attire at the same time and obeyed the voice, slaughtering every last one of his fellow islanders. He had since become a serial killer who took lives in the name of God.

The Black Organization sent an agent to find him when it caught wind of his brutal, powerful Soul Attire. Grega's interests aligned with the organization's,

and negotiations went smoothly. He flexed his natural talent with the sword and his Soul Attire's immense strength to quickly climb to the rank of Oracle Knight.

I may have failed to assassinate Numelo, but I can still kill Grega Ash to rob the Holy Empire of his talents! Shii reached out her right hand to fulfill her duty as an Arkstoria.

"Trace—Aqua Queen!" she shouted, pulling a sword out of a rift in the air. It was as blue as the sky and clear as the ocean, and it had the ability to manipulate water freely. Thanks to its wealth of possible attacks, it was highly adaptable in any situation.

"I see the Arkstorias didn't gain their status in Liengard for nothing. That's some fine power!" Grega cooed, impressed. He readied his blade.

"...Are you not going to summon yours? I know you've manifested your Soul Attire," Shii said.

"And end this duel in seconds? No, that won't do. I can't summon my Soul Attire until I've offered enough of your blood and screams to God!" Grega shouted.

"You'd better hope that carelessness doesn't get you killed," Shii responded. She focused, calmly lowering her center of gravity.

Grega produced heat strong enough to melt my dagger without even summoning his Soul Attire. Leave it to an Oracle Knight to tame his Spirit Core so completely, Shii thought.

Swordfighters who were proficient at handling their Spirit Core could use a piece of its power without summoning their Soul Attire.

I'm guessing his Soul Attire has the power to manipulate fire and heat. I can handle that with my water!

Rolling with the punches, Shii formed a combat plan in her mind.

"Let's not waste any more time. Using my status as an apostle of God, I hereby bestow you with divine punishment!" Grega roared, running straight at her. "Let God hear your beautiful screams!"

"Hah!" Shii shouted, swinging her sword to meet his. But when their blades should have collided, Grega's passed through hers.

What?!

She jumped back, wide-eyed.

"Grk..." Shii gasped in pain. Forcing herself to dodge midswing had proved difficult, and Grega's blade grazed her shoulder.

"Huh. I thought I would cut deeper, but you have impressive reflexes," Grega said.

"...It looked like your blade just disappeared. What kind of ability do you have?" Shii asked.

"Heh. I'd normally feel no obligation to answer that, but God is overjoyed by the taste of your blood! I'll tell you a little about my ability as a reward for offering Him your body! Be grateful for His compassion!" Grega laughed, holding his ashen blade in front of his chest. "My sword lacks substance. No one can stop its blows."

"...So it's impossible for anyone to block your blade. Doesn't that mean it won't be able to block my attacks, either?" Shii asked.

"Naturally. But don't get the wrong idea—that does not put us on equal footing. The moment you assume that, you'll die!"

Grega grinned menacingly and dashed at Shii with tremendous speed. The ensuing duel was terribly one-sided.

"Hya!" Grega shouted.

"Ngh...," Shii grunted.

The Oracle Knight inflicted a new wound with each flourish of his blade.

"Take that...!" Shii shouted, swinging her sword.

"Whoa there," Grega said, dodging. He avoided each of Shii's slashes by a razor-thin margin.

He has so much more experience with this style of combat... Fighting with or against a sword with no substance completely eliminated the ability to defend.

Being unable to block an opponent's attacks meant that you had no choice but to dodge them, which required precise management of the space between you and your foe. Shii was fighting at a normal distance from Grega, while he was going up against her from a more unique position. Their difference in experience—specifically in their abilities to gauge distance—gave Grega an overwhelming advantage.

I'm in trouble...

Shii tried to counter by pressing Grega with Aqua Queen's abilities, but he dispelled all her attacks. The effort left her exhausted.

"Haah, haah..." Shii panted, her dress bloodied, and her body covered in wounds. It took all her energy just to use her Soul Attire like a cane and stay on her feet.

"What's wrong? Is that really all you've got? Hah!" Grega yelled, kicking her fiercely in the side.

"Ahhh!" Shii screamed, tumbling to the center of the hall.

Now that he had clearly won the fight, the nobles begged him to stop.

"Stop, Grega! Number Ten belongs to Lord Numelo!"

"Even you could end up being punished if you kill her without his permission!"

The power dynamic between Oracle Knights and major Ronelian nobles could be difficult to figure out. Grega Ash obviously had the advantage in strength, but Numelo had a massive financial advantage. If Grega killed Shii, Numelo would undoubtedly erupt with anger and cause chaos in the Holy Empire. The nobles were trying to prevent that scenario, but Grega's furious response made their hair stand on end.

"SHUT UP! SHUTUPSHUTUP! Can't any of you hear God's voice?! He is demanding this girl's blood and screams. Who is more important—Numelo or God? That I should even need to ask that question offends me to my core!"

The gentle-natured boy who Grega used to be had died when "God" entered his life, replaced by an individual who didn't hesitate to commit shocking acts of violence. Well aware of his reputation, the nobles all fell silent.

"Haah... It's good to see you understand. No one comes before God." After silencing the nobles with a glare, Grega walked toward Shii—who was still on the floor—and lifted her chin. "Can you hear Him now? Strain your ears and you should hear God's grateful words."

"Sorry, but I've never once believed in God," Shii responded. She bit his thumb.

"...?! Oww! How dare you, scum!" Grega shouted, kicking Shii in the stomach.

"Ahhh...?!" Shii screamed as she flew backward through the cathedral.

"You're clearly a strong-willed girl... Unfortunately for you, that's my least favorite kind," Grega said, angrily marching toward Shii as she struggled to her feet. "If you still can't hear God's voice, I'll relay His words to you myself. He is telling me that your fate is to die here!"

Grega lifted his ashen sword overhead and swung it down with terrific force. Shii was too badly injured to do anything but watch.

...Fate, huh?

Her life began to flash before her eyes. She saw her ordinary days living with her mother and father. Meeting Lilim and Tirith. Finding Sebas when he was on the verge of death. Getting accepted into Thousand Blade Academy. The fun times she'd had in the Student Council.

Her last memory was of Christmas Day and her fight against her rude underclassman, who she had never once defeated.

"Can you please never pull a stunt like that again?" Allen had said with a sigh after she had endangered herself to trick and attack him.

"Are you saying you won't save my life next time? I'm hurt," Shii had responded.

"No, I'll be there to save you any time you ask for my help," Allen had said.

That casual remark could hardly be called a promise. But to Shii, who had endured harsh training since she was a little girl and had never been helped by a swordsman her own age, those words were very meaningful.

"Give God one last beautiful wail as the life seeps out of your body!"

Grega's blade was almost upon her. She couldn't move an inch; her fate was sealed. All she could do in this hopeless situation was faintly whisper his name.

"Help me...Allen..."

It was then...

"First Style—Flying Shadow!"

...that a pitch-black slash attack flew through the cathedral. An eerie black blade that gushed wicked darkness blocked the substanceless ashen sword.

"No way...," Shii gasped.

Princes riding on white stallions existed only in fairy tales. The boy before her...

"You were never one for restraint, were you, President?"

...was a prince of darkness.

I rushed to the wedding venue as fast as I could after parting from Fuu Ludoras and was able to save Shii in the nick of time.

Man, that was close...

If I had gotten there even a second later, she would have been lost forever.

"Allen?! How did you get here?!" Shii cried.

"That's a long story. I'll tell you later. Hold still," I said.

"All ri— Ahhh?!" Shii screamed.

I took her into my free arm and jumped backward. Once we were far enough away from the menacing swordsman, I used my darkness to instantly heal Shii's numerous wounds.

"Th-thanks...," she said.

"You're welcome," I responded.

"Anyway, what the heck are you doing here in the middle of the Holy Empire?!" Shii asked.

"I'm here to save you, obviously. Do you remember what I said? 'I'll come to your aid any time you ask for my help,'" I told her, repeating the promise I'd made to her on Christmas.

"..." Shii blushed, her words catching in her throat.

She never actually asked for my help, but she may as well have. The tearstained letter she'd left in the Student Council room was an obvious plea for us to save her.

"You remembered that trivial exchange...?" Shii asked.

"Of course. And I'm not the only one who came for you—Lia, Rose, Lilim, Tirith, and Sebas are here, too. The entire Student Council joined forces to save you," I said.

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

"They're currently fighting Numelo's guards outside," I said, straining my ears to hear our friends' voices and the sounds of their battle. Lilim's excited cries suggested that things were going well.

"But why...?" Shii muttered, looking guilty that she had roped us all into this.

"Ahhh. You must be Allen Rodol, the S-class threat. There are many tales about you. I heard you defeated Fuu and Raine—that's no small feat... Oh, this is wonderful! There would be no better offering to God than you!" the swordsman said, smiling wickedly. He pointed his ashen blade at me.

"Be careful, Allen. That's Grega Ash, one of the Thirteen Oracle Knights. He's a truly elite swordsman whose ashen blade has no substance," Shii warned.

"An Oracle Knight...," I repeated. I supposed I should have expected a Ronelian noble to have first-class security.

"...Do you have an escape route?" Shii asked.

"Ha-ha, sorry. I was too focused on getting here to think that far ahead," I admitted.

We could use the same shadow spot to return to Liengard, but we had to figure out how to fight our way out of this predicament first.

"Oh... No, that's okay. Thank you very much for saving me. I'm truly grateful," Shii said, thanking me despite her despondent expression.

"Defeating one of the Thirteen Oracle Knights won't be easy... But don't worry," I said.

"What do you mean?" Shii asked.

"I'm feeling kinda strong today," I responded, smiling kindly to put her at ease. "Grega Ash. I'm sorry, but I don't have much time to waste. Can we go ahead and get this started?"

"Hah, I'm ready any time!" Grega said with a sneer, holding his ashen sword at his navel. I dashed forward as soon as our eyes met. "What?! Where'd he go?!"

"I'm right behind you," I said after easily circling around behind him. "First Style—Flying Shadow!"

I'd held back on the last Flying Shadow because Shii had been right next to Grega, but I performed this one at my full strength.

"What?! How are you so strong?! Kindle—Ember Cross!" Grega shouted, summoning his Soul Attire and assuming a defensive stance. My black slash still proved too much for him, however, and it sent him flying backward through the air.

"Gaaaaaah?!" he screamed before crashing into the wall of the cathedral, kicking up a large cloud of dust.

"Amazing...," Shii muttered.

Grega cleared away the dust a moment later, scattering rubble in all directions. There was blood streaming down his forehead.

"Haah, haah... Damn you... I'm going to give you the most painful death imaginable!" he yelled, glaring at me with hatred.

And so my battle with Grega Ash, one of the Thirteen Oracle Knights, began.

Shining gray specks gathered around Grega as he held his Soul Attire, Ember Cross.

"Is that ash?" I wondered aloud. It was probably a Soul Attire with a burning or drying ability. I've never fought this kind of Soul Attire before. I'll have to be careful. I had at least gotten him to reveal his ability with my first move—that would be very helpful. And more importantly...

I knew it. My darkness has gotten even stronger! This was apparent to me as soon as I gripped my mock ebon sword. The darkness swirling within me was stronger, thicker, darker—I was drawing closer to Zeon.

My game with Clown was probably the trigger. I had sensed a foreign power mix with mine when I defeated him. Touching that power might have opened a path that had been closed to me before. In fact, Clown might have let us go to Ronelia precisely because he knew that my darkness had gotten stronger.

"Allen... You just raised your hand against an apostle of God. That is tantamount to betraying God Himself! You must know the consequences of such an act. I'm going to put you through hellish torture until you experience every kind of pain known to man!" Grega bellowed with such malice that everyone in the cathedral cowered.

"""Eeek...?!""" the nobles squealed.

"..." Even Shii shrank back.

But Grega's blustering didn't faze me. I didn't feel even a hint of the despair I'd experienced when I first fought Fuu, or the oppression I'd felt I first fought Raine. I was totally calm, as if standing alone in a desolate world.

"It is time to start the sacrificial ritual! Allen Rodol and Shii Arkstoria! I'm going to offer your youthful blood to the Heavenly Father! Let us begin with a hymn," Grega cried. He swung his sword and buried the attending nobles in ash.

"Wh-what's happening?!"

"Huh... Graaaaagghh!"

"It burns! It buuuuurns!"

The nobles' horrible screams echoed in the cathedral as they writhed in pain

and burned to death.

"Yes, yes! Sing, you ugly, corpulent pigs! Your voices are music to God's ears!" Grega yelled in admiration as he made the nobles sing his twisted idea of a hymn.

"What are you doing?! Aren't they your fellow countrymen?!" I shouted.

"Whoa, what are you so mad about? I gave their worthless lives meaning by letting them be the foundation of a holy song. They should be nothing but grateful," Grega responded. He was much more despicable than I'd taken him for. "What do you care for the lives of foreign nobles anyway? You're softer than I expected."

He dashed toward me with shocking speed. "Take that!" he shouted, swinging down his ashen blade.

"Ngh!" I grunted, lifting my mock black sword to block his blow. Our blades clanged and sent sparks flying as we each tried to overpower the other.

Grega furrowed his brow. "Why can you block my substanceless blade, heathen? What exactly can that darkness do?!"

"It's just a normal self-strengthening Soul Attire," I responded.

"Do you really expect me to believe that?! A normal self-strengthening Soul Attire wouldn't be able to stop my ashen sword!"

He screamed wildly and unleashed a flurry of swings and thrusts. I easily defended myself by dodging some, parrying others, and sweeping aside the rest.

"Hya-ha-ha, what's the matter?! What happened to that assertiveness from before?!" Grega shouted. He had been trying to provoke me in this manner since we started fighting.

"...Can I ask something?" I inquired.

"What is it? It's too late to beg for your life!" Grega shouted, misunderstanding me greatly.

"Why aren't you taking this seriously? I'm going to end this if you don't," I asserted, making myself clear.

"Huh... Wha?!"

I stepped into range for a deadly strike and swung my mock black sword. "Eighth Style—Eight-Span Crow!"

"Gwah?!"

Eight pitch-black slashes flew through the air, gouging Grega in the chest.

"Haah, haah... Damn it, that hurts...," he said. He retreated and reached into his pocket to pull out a light blue tablet.

That's a soul-crystal pill, I realized. Grega bit it, and the slash wounds on his chest disappeared immediately.

"Whew... The power of science is truly astounding!" he shouted. Now fully recovered, he studied my mock black sword. "A Soul Attire that commands darkness... I've never heard of such an ability."

He had calmed down a little; he must have awoken from his blind rage after laying eyes on the blood seeping from his wounds.

"I don't know how that thing can block my ashen sword, but...given your absurd strength, it must truly be a self-strengthening Soul Attire. You may be a dirty heathen, but I can't deny your might. I can see how you defeated Fuu and Raine and earned your status as an S-class threat," Grega said calmly.

"Thanks," I responded. I hadn't actually summoned my Soul Attire yet, but I saw no reason to reveal that.

"Heh-heh. But I have bad news for you. I eat self-strengthening Soul Attire users for breakfast," he said.

"Really?" I responded.

"You bet. Ember Cross's greatest asset is its ability to endlessly change form as I attack! A one-note self-strengthening Soul Attire like yours can't hope to match its unpredictable assault!" Grega shouted. He thrust his Soul Attire into the floor, and it birthed four ashen spears, which flew at me.

"Hah!" I yelled, quickly spinning and cutting down the polearms.

"Ha, got you!" Grega said.

"What...?!" I gasped. The ashen spears had latched on to my mock black sword like sticky candy. *Is this the shape-shifting ability that Zeon used against me last time we fought?!* I stared at my blade in shock.

"Now, burst! Exploding Embers!" Grega shouted.

The ash glowed, then erupted in an enormous blast.

"Grk?!"

The point-blank explosion threw me off my feet and through the air. When I landed, a giant cloud of dust kicked up around me, obscuring my vision.

"A-Allen...?!" Shii shouted, worried.

"Bwa-ha-ha! That was perfect! I wonder how much of his body is left...," Grega said, laughing joyously I couldn't see a thing, but I could hear their voices.

"Hey, don't bury me yet," I said, swinging my sword to clear the dust.

"Allen! Thank goodness...," Shii said, relieved.

"What... How did you survive a point-blank explosion uninjured?!" Grega yelled, veins bulging in his forehead.

"I've suffered more explosions than I care to admit... My body has gotten used to it," I responded.

I had fought plenty of explosion-type Soul Attires, including Claude's Abio Troupe and Lilim's Bursting Clay. My body had adapted to explosions after being subjected to the explosive wind and fire enough times. I would still be injured by one of Claude's owls or Lilim's Bursting Sword, though. Explosions were only a side ability of Ember Cross, so my cloak of darkness was able to block it completely.

"...I see now that you're a true monster. But let's see how you handle this!" Grega shouted. He raised his left hand and produced a large number of floating ashen blades. He had transitioned sweeping attacks like the explosion to more lethal thrust attacks.

He wasn't kidding about his ever-changing strikes. My cloak of darkness wouldn't be enough to protect me from this.

"Ha-ha, get skewered! Ember Sword!"

Over one hundred swords made of ash shot toward me simultaneously. I could handle that amount easily.

"Hah!" I shouted, using perfect fundamentals to perform upward slashes, downward slashes, and horizontal sweeps to cut down all the approaching swords.

"Tch. It's like your swordcraft jumped right out of a textbook. Are you the type who likes to drill the basics for hours on end?" Grega asked.

"Yeah. That's all I had," I responded. I was never allowed into any schools of swordcraft, so I'd had to make do with the training regimens detailed in textbooks.

"Don't respond to my taunts seriously, scum! Stop this pointless resistance and just die!" Grega yelled, packing the cathedral with over one thousand ashen blades. "You're finished! Ember Siege!"

Ashen swords blanketed my vision. Blocking all of those with my false sword would be difficult.

...It's time.

I thrust my right hand into the air and called *his* name. "Destroy—Rapacious Demon Zeon!" I yelled, manifesting the true ebon blade. Wicked darkness swept violently throughout the cathedral as if it had a mind of its own, devouring the ashen swords.

"You've got to be kidding...? Since when could you do that...?" Grega muttered, shaking his head and retreating a few steps.

"Sorry, but it's time I end this duel!" I declared. I grabbed the black sword and ran at him.

"No, stay back! Ember Forest!" Grega yelled, stamping his feet and summoning a dense forest of ashen trees to block my path. He used the cover to jump backward in retreat.

"You're not getting away!" I shouted. I cut down the trees, not letting them slow me at all as I rushed toward him.

"You monster... You made my ash look as soft as cheese," Grega remarked in disbelief.

I swung my sword as hard as I could once I'd entered the range for a finishing strike.

"Hraggh!"

"Grk, Ember Shield!" Grega flourished his blade to form a giant ashen shield.

"Not good enough!" I shouted, easily cleaving it in two.

"No one should be that strong... Ember Maiden!"

Grega clapped his hands together, manipulating the two halves of the severed shield to assault me from either side. The pieces of the shield had sprouted sharp thorns; getting sandwiched between them would fill me with holes.

"Here's one more for you! Ember Sword!" Grega yelled, sending over a hundred ashen blades at me just to be safe.

The thorned shields came at me from the left and the right while the ashen swords charged at me from ahead—I was facing attacks from three sides. I used to struggle with attacks like this more than any other... But that was a thing of the past.

"Dark Shadow," I said, summoning an abyss that easily consumed all the ash.

"Once again... What in God's name is that ridiculous darkness?!" Grega cried, pulling his hair in frustration. Not one to overlook an opportunity, I stepped forward to erase the distance between us.

"Seventh Style—Draw Flash!" I yelled, performing a draw slash that was faster than the speed of sound.

"So quick!" Grega gasped in shock just before my blow severed Ember Cross.

Then I spun and kicked him using my centrifugal force. "Hah!"

"Gah..."

My blow sent Grega bouncing across the cathedral floor like a ball.

"How could someone possibly be that strong...?" Shii muttered, stunned.

Grega stood slowly, wheezing and clutching his side.

"Haah, haah... Fine. You clearly have the strength of a demon... Fuu and Zach were right. You're nearly as strong as the Four Imperial Knights and the Seven Holy Blades," he said, walking toward me in a daze. "I hate to admit it, but you've beaten me. I have no words. I could challenge you to one hundred million more one-on-one duels and get pummeled every time... But on this occasion, I still have a chance to win. Ember Powder!"

Grega screamed with bloodshot eyes and scattered a tremendous amount of ash. It filled the cathedral completely, blinding me. *Is he trying to run?* I wondered before I swept my sword to clear my field of vision.

"Ahhh!" I heard Shii scream.

"President?!" I shouted, whipping around.

"Heh-heh. What are you going to do now, Allen Rodol? You're out of options!" Grega shouted.

"...I'm sorry, Allen," Shii apologized.

Grega had taken Shii hostage, smiling triumphantly as he pressed his ashen sword to her throat.

"How dare you, Grega!" I yelled.

"Oh, I'm so scared! Stop glaring at me, I'm gonna wet myself," Grega taunted.

I glared at him with hatred for performing the most dishonorable act a swordsman could, but he just laughed.

Crap! What should I do?! Grega was about seven meters away. I'd only need a second to cut him down, but he has the same advantage. One second would be enough time for him to slit Shii's throat.

"Let her go! This is our duel!" I shouted.

"Hmm, it sounds like there's been a misunderstanding. I said I was going to offer you 'both' to God, remember?" Grega said, smiling repulsively. He was trying to claim that he was fighting us both and that Shii technically wasn't a hostage.

"...I see. So God told you to take her hostage," I said.

"Sh-shut up! Shut up shut up! You are not worthy to speak of God! This was *my* decision! The inviolable Holy Father would *never* command someone to perform such a cowardly act!" Grega screamed, tearing at his hair. No matter what twisted logic he used, he knew deep down that he had stooped to abducting Shii. "Haah, haah... Don't get the wrong idea, Allen! I am in charge here! ME!"

Grega lightly cut Shii's neck with his broken ashen sword.

"Ow...," she whimpered.

"S-stop!" I shouted.

"Hey, don't move! Don't you fear for Shii Arkstoria's life?!" Grega yelled, threatening to kill her. He backed up, terror clear on his face.

"..."

"Yes... Yes, that's more like it. Stay right there. If you take one step without my permission, this girl dies," Grega said, slowly regaining his composure while using Shii as a shield. "Start by dropping that black sword. And dispel your darkness while you're at it... What are you waiting for?! Do it now!"

I started to put down my black sword.

"Wait!" Shii yelled.

"President?" I responded.

"...Allen. Don't worry about me. Just do what you need to do to defeat Grega," she said.

""HUH?!"" he and I both shouted. I couldn't believe my ears.

"What are you saying, President?!" I asked.

"Just think about it. If I broke Numelo's spirit and helped to kill one of the Thirteen Oracle Knights, that would be more than enough accomplishment for one life. I'd have performed a great service for my country. And most importantly...I don't want you to die, Allen," Shii said, smiling faintly.

"Shut your mouth, girl! Do you want me to take your life right now?!" Grega

raged, swinging his broken sword at her throat and making another shallow cut. Blood trickled from her neck.

"...What's the matter? Aren't you going to kill me? I'll bet you can't. You know that the moment you do so, Allen will end you," Shii said.

"Damn you...," Grega seethed. It seemed like Shii's assessment was correct; though Grega's eyes were bloodshot, he wasn't moving.

"Allen, I'd like to make one last selfish request: Defeat Grega and get everyone safely back to Liengard. Can you promise me you'll do that?" Shii asked with her usual gentle smile. Upon closer inspection, however, her hands were shaking. She was using her iron will to repress her fear and put on a tough front, all to avoid worrying me.

She really was strong and endlessly kind.

"...Okay. I promise," I said.

I had no choice but to match her mighty resolve. I sighed loudly...and dropped my black sword. It clattered to the floor.

"Allen?! Why?!" Shii cried.

"Bwa-hah! Yes, Allen! You made the right choice!" Grega hollered, his joy greatly contrasting Shii's despair.

"It's okay, President. I'm going to keep my promise," I said, giving her a gentle smile to ease her fear.

I was going to defeat Grega and bring everyone home safely. And that "everyone" included Shii. Her final request... I'm gonna have to put my life on the line to grant it. I steadied my breathing, steeling myself for the possibility of death.

"Heh-heh-heh... Gya-ha-ha! I'm gonna imbue this next slash with all my spirit power! Not even ashes will remain of your body if you let this hit you without anything to defend yourself! Are you ready, Allen Rodol?!" Grega shouted. Assured of his victory, Grega poured tremendous spirit power into his broken ashen blade.

That's so much spirit power... I was going to be in for a world of hurt if I didn't

use my darkness to defend myself. But...

...Remember.

Who did I fight day in and day out? Only the strongest man I'd ever seen—Zeon. I had suffered more of his slashes than I cared to remember. My billion-plus years of tireless training had toughened my body as well.

I needed to find my resolve. I needed to grit my teeth and bear the pain. And I needed to live every moment like it could be my last.

"This is the end for you! Ember Annihilation!" Grega yelled.

A giant cross made of ash descended upon me with incredible speed.

"Allen, run!" Shii screamed just before I experienced the most painful blow of my life.

"Gah-hah...," I groaned.

A scorching shockwave burned my flesh, the cross's massive weight broke my bones, and an explosion hit my entire body for good measure. Grega's attack wreaked havoc on a cellular level, easily inflicting enough damage to kill a person.

"Heh-heh... Gya-ha-ha! You absolute fool! You're the biggest idiot in the world, Allen Rodol! You could've easily won this fight if you hadn't held back!" Grega laughed.

"No... Allen...," Shii cried in disbelief.

Hellish pain seared my body, and ash and blood blinded my vision, yet I still charged forward.

"Haah, haah... I've got you...," I said, grabbing Grega's right arm.

"What in the...? That's impossible! You've breached a line no human should be able to cross!" Grega yelled.

"I win, Grega Ash!" I shouted. I summoned the black sword again and mustered all my spirit power. "Sixth Style—Dark Boom!"



"Y-you're a mon—AAARRRGGGHHH!" Grega screamed when my ebon slash tore through him. His voice echoed in the cathedral.

I had defeated Grega Ash.

After dealing with Grega, I fell to my knees and gasped for air.

"Haah, haah..."

My darkness began to heal me as I somehow held on to consciousness. *Phew... I actually thought I was gonna die this time...* The Thirteen Oracle Knights were each said to have the strength of a national army. I totally could have met my end after taking his attack head-on without my shroud of darkness.

"Allen, are you okay?!" Shii asked, now free of Grega's evil clutches.

"Yeah, I'm fine," I answered, smiling so she wouldn't worry.

"Thank goodness," she said, relieved. She sat down next to me. "Wait, we're not glossing over this! Do you realize how insane it was to not defend yourself against that attack! You could've easily died!"

Shii leaned her face close to mine, looking like she could cry. The sweet fragrance of her perfume slightly quickened my heart rate.

"Ah-ha-ha, sorry... I had to do it to fulfill my promise," I responded.

"You mean your promise to defeat Grega and get everyone home? You could've done that without putting your life at risk."

"No, I couldn't have."

"Why?"

"Because my 'everyone' included you."

"..." Shii blushed deeply and looked down. "Oh..."

"I had no way to fulfill your request without getting a little reckless," I said. I mustered what little darkness I had left to heal Shii's wounds.

"Ah... Thanks."

"You're welcome."

I took off my jacket and inspected it. *Good, it's still wearable*. The Thousand Blade uniform was sewn with strengthened fiber to survive the toughest of battles. Even after I'd taken Grega's attack, it was still whole.

"Take this, President," I said, offering her my jacket.

She cocked her head in confusion. "Why?"

"Um, well... I feel a little guilty looking at you right now, so I would appreciate it if you put that on," I said. Her wedding dress had been torn all over, revealing a lot of skin. She must have had a fierce battle with Grega before I arrived at the cathedral.

"Guilty? What...? Oh! A-Allen, you pervert!" Shii shrieked, blushing to her ears. She quickly put the jacket on.

"Ah-ha-ha... Surely I don't deserve that...," I responded, laughing. I cleared my throat and looked directly into her eyes. "Can I ask you a question?"

"S-sure. What is it?" Shii responded falteringly.

"If you ever get roped into a situation like this again, will you talk to me instead of keeping it all to yourself? I don't know if I'd be much help, but I'd like to try. Can you promise me that?" I asked, holding out my pinky.

"...Okay. I'll definitely speak with you next time," Shii said, sounding happy. She wrapped her soft pinky around my callused one, completing our pinky promise.

"...Ha-ha," I began to laugh despite myself.

"Wh-why are you laughing?" Shii puffed out her cheeks, looking offended.

"It's nothing. I just thought you feel more like a little sister than an older one right now."

"Geez, you can be such a brat, Allen!"

"Ah-ha-ha, sorry."

We'd shared many such exchanges since meeting each other. It felt nice to

have her back. We weren't out of the woods yet, though—we needed one more push to take back our carefree student life.

"Let's get going. We shouldn't make our fellow Student Council members wait any longer," I said.

"Yeah, you're right," Shii agreed.

Having successfully rescued Shii, I led her toward our friends.



We left the cathedral to find an intense battle taking place. The expansive garden was blanketed with Black Organization members; there were easily over three hundred of them. Our five reliable companions—Lia, Rose, Lilim, Tirith, and Sebas—were facing off against them. They were too focused on the enemies before them to notice us.

I need to let them know I saved Shii, I thought. I yelled to inform my friends of that, and to demoralize the enemy. "Shii is safe! All we have to do now is make it back home!"

The Black Organization members were stunned.

"You're kidding... Did that kid defeat the Oracle Knight who Numelo hired?!"

"It's him again... The S-class threat, Allen Rodol!"

"Crap! He's too much for us to handle... We need to contact Berios Castle right away to request reinforcements!"

Lia and the others ran toward us as the Black Organization stood there ineffectually, too shocked to move.

"Allen, Shii! I'm so glad you're both okay!" Lia cheered.

"Thank goodness you're unharmed!" Rose said, sounding as pleased as could be.

"Shii, you big dummy! I thought I would never see you again...," Lilim said.

"You'd better not ever do something like this again...," Tirith said.

The two upperclassmen hugged her, tears forming in their eyes.

"Shii...! You have no idea how happy I am to see you safe! I'm yours forever!" Sebas sobbed, falling to his knees.

"I'm sorry for putting you all through this. And thank you for coming to save me," Shii said. She sounded guilty, but I saw a hint of joy on her face as she bowed.

Rose looked at us seriously. "You two look exhausted. Did the swordfighter in the cathedral put you through the ringer?"

"Yeah. Numelo had hired one of the Thirteen Oracle Knights as a guard.

Defeating him took a bit of work," I responded.

"Only you could describe taking down a swordsman with the strength of a national army as 'a bit of work'...," Lia said, exasperated.

"You make the impossible seem easy...," Rose said.

They both gulped.

"That's a third Oracle Knight for your record books along with Fuu Ludoras and Raine Grad... You have to be on the Holy Empire's most wanted list by now," Lilim said.

"I'd recommend keeping one eye open for assassins...," Tirith warned.

Those comments were foreboding.

"I can't believe you defeated the infamous Grega by yourself... There really is no other word to describe you than 'inhuman.' I knew I was right about you," Sebas said.

"Huh? Oh, thanks...," I responded. I wasn't sure how to feel about his comment, but I nodded regardless.

Lia and the others stepped forward once we were done updating them.

"Okay, now that Allen and Shii are safe and sound, let's do this!" Lia said.

"It's time to show these scoundrels just how formidable the Cherry Blossom Blade School of Swordcraft is!" Rose declared.

"I can't let you outshine me too much, Allen. I'm still your upperclassman!" Lilim said.

"It's time to go all out...!" Tirith added.

The girls then simultaneously summoned their Soul Attires.

"Conquer—Dragon King Fafnir!"

"Blossom—Winter Sakura!"

"Pummel—Bursting Clay!"

"Bind—Psychic Shackle!"

It was a breathtaking sight.

*uuu ...* 

They were saving their Soul Attires... They must have been fighting with pure swordcraft to save energy for the return trip.

"We're gonna carve a path forward!" Lia said.

"Leave this part to us, Allen and Shii!" Rose requested.

They both ran ahead, eagerly taking the lead.

"We can't let them upstage us, Tirith!" Lilim said.

"There's no way we're not getting back home after making it this far...!" Tirith declared.

They both charged after Lia and Rose.

We sprinted through the extravagant capital city, setting our sights on the shadow spot on the tenth floor of Berios Castle.

"Out of the way! Black Dragon Breath!" Lia shouted.

"Dance—Sakura Blizzard!" Rose yelled.

Black flames and brightly colored cherry blossom petals swept violently through the Black Organization members, greatly reducing their numbers.

"Crap, is that Fafnir's host, and the sole inheritor of the Cherry Blossom Blade School of Swordcraft?!" a Black Organization member shouted.

"Their long-range attacks are a pain in the ass... Let's take them out first!" another yelled.

They quickly reorganized their ranks and aimed for Lia and Rose.

"Like we'd let you do that...!" Tirith yelled.

"Brace yourselves!" Lilim shouted.

Tirith held down our enemies with psychic thread, and Lilim attacked them with a technique called Burst Sword.

"""Gaaaah!"""

Lilim's massive explosion blasted over one hundred Black Organization members into the air. We continued to push our way forward, cutting down our opponents with relentless intensity until Numelo's estate suddenly burst into flames behind us.

"Wh-what the...?!" I gasped, quickly turning around.

"ALLEN RODOL!" Grega yelled, sprinting toward us with an unstable Soul Attire in hand.

"He's still conscious?!" I exclaimed.

"God is commanding me to cut you limb from limb, you...fool...," Grega began before breaking down into a coughing fit. "I see why they warn you against taking three pills at once..."

His body had merged with his Soul Attire, causing it to float through the air like ash. He must have taken an ill-advised number of soul-crystal pills to recover from his deadly wounds.

This is really bad... A never-ending stream of Black Organization members was charging at us from ahead, and one of the Thirteen Oracle Knights was threatening us from behind. Lia, Rose, Lilim, and Tirith have their hands full trying to cut us a path to the castle, and Shii is in no condition to fight... I have no choice but to battle Grega.

I mustered what little spirit power I had left in preparation to summon my mock black sword.

"...I think this calls for my services. I'll take Grega," Sebas volunteered.

"I'm pretty sure you'll be fine, Sebas, but be careful. Grega wields a strange ashen Soul Attire without substance," Shii warned.

"Sh-Shii...I'm honored beyond words that you would express concern over me! Thank you for the warning!" Sebas bowed, overcome with emotion.

"Take this! Ember Sword!" Grega shouted, firing over one hundred ashen swords toward us.

"...Is that really the best you can do?" Sebas said coldly. He sliced the swords into tiny pieces.

He's so fast! I thought. Sebas unleashed a storm of slashes in less than a second. He barely even had to move to do so. He was clearly no ordinary guy.

"Wha... You can block my ashen sword, too?! How?!" Grega shouted.

The rest of us pressed onward as Sebas held off Grega, but we failed to maintain our initial momentum and fell to a snail's pace. The Black Organization's forces only swelled as we approached Berios Castle.

"Haah, haah... These guys don't give up...!" Lia shouted.

"There's no end to them...," Rose complained.

The two girls were both already out of breath from the effort of using their Soul Attires to push ahead.

"We knew the risk of going to the Black Organization's base... They're not gonna let us get away without a fight," Lilim said.

"I don't know how much longer we can last...," Tirith mumbled.

Fatigue showed on Lilim and Tirith's faces. They were running out of stamina.

This is gonna heavily tax my body, but I don't think I have a choice. I could use the rest of my spirit power to perform a full-strength Dark Boom and break the enemy's formation. That would open a path to Berios Castle. It might give me a spirit power deficiency, but that would be preferable to us all getting wiped out here.

I braced myself and summoned my mock black sword.

"Wa-ha-ha, I rushed here as soon as I heard the fighting!"

Zach Bombard swung his Soul Attire, Blazing Cross, down from overhead.

"Wha...?!" I gasped.

"Wa-ha-ha, *long time no see*, Allen Rodol! I've been dyin' for a rematch with the S-class threat!" he yelled with tremendous hostility, and enveloped himself in scorching hot flames. He pointed his sword at me.

"Zach?! What are you—"

"Wa-ha-ha, your little rescue mission ends here!" He lifted his enormous greatsword overhead and thrust it into the ground. "Take this! Blazing Circle!"

An explosive blaze erupted around Zach in a circle.

"Wha?! Gaaaaah!"

Screams sounded from all directions as his indiscriminate attack enveloped Black Organization members.

"Crap...," I cursed, trying to squeeze out enough spirit power to summon some defensive darkness. The effort turned out to be unnecessary. "Huh...?"

The flames Zach had sent in our direction lacked heat. It was fake fire.

"Wa-ha-ha! Sorry, guys! I have a hard time holdin' back!" Zach shouted to his burned Black Organization comrades, smiling boorishly. Their ranks had been thrown into chaos.

"Why did you do that?" I asked.

"I thought it'd be a waste to lose a sparkling gem like you here. Go ahead and cut me down. Just don't kill me, okay?" Zach responded. It seemed like he had come here to put on a performance and save us.

"...Thanks," I said.

"Wa-ha-ha, didn't you say you wouldn't thank me?" Zach teased.

"Ha-ha. Bye," I said.

"Let's meet again sometime, you wonderful sparkling gem!"

I drew the sword at my hip and lightly slashed his chest.

"Gah..."

Zach exaggerated the blow, collapsing face-first on the ground.

"H-he defeated Zach with one swing?!"

"Good lord... I thought Allen Rodol was supposed to be at the end of his rope!"

The sight of me defeating Zach shocked the Black Organization members, who were watching from a distance.

"This is our chance! Let's go!" I shouted.

Taking advantage of the opportunity Zach had given us, we ran forward.

When Berios Castle's front entrance came into view, a piercing siren began to blare.

Then an emergency broadcast played: "This is an emergency. An enemy force led by the S-class threat Allen Rodol has shown up at Berios Castle gate. All swordfighters living in the capital city are to rush here and intercept him at once."

Throughout the city, swordfighters bolted out of houses.

"What?!" I gasped.

The reinforcements easily surpassed ten thousand in number. We were quickly surrounded on all sides.

"Allen...what should we do?!" Lia asked.

"There's no way we can handle this many people!" Rose shouted.

They both blanched in the face of the enemy's overwhelming numerical advantage.

"I-is there anything we can do?!" Lilim yelled, panicking.

"This sure seems like the end...," Tirith said gloomily, looking like she had half given up.

"A-Allen...," Shii said, gripping my sleeve with hope and anxiety on her face.

"..." I racked my brain harder than I ever had before to try to come up with a way out of this predicament. Grega Ash is behind us. We're surrounded by over ten thousand swordsmen. And to make matters worse, we're all wounded and exhausted...

It was no good. I couldn't think of a single way out. Even a child would have been able to tell this was checkmate. *Crap. Is this where it ends?* 

The others drooped their shoulders in despair as I continued to think, refusing to give up.

"Allen. I can't let your potential get snuffed out here. Down with the Royal Canopy—Lonely Crown."

An invisible force pressed down on everything in a massive range in the

capital, causing a wave of destruction that the swordsmen were helpless to resist. The force had the strength of a natural disaster.

Is this Clown's repulsive force...?! I couldn't see him, but it seemed like he was lending us his aid from somewhere.

"Th-this is an insane amount of power... It has to be on the level of the Seven Holy Blades," Lia said.

"I can't believe that shady jester has been hiding this amount of power!" Rose exclaimed.

They were both astonished by Lonely Crown's tremendous power.

Thank you, Clown...!

We took advantage of the opportunity and sprinted ahead.

"Allen, look!" Lia shouted, pointing at Berios Castle's front entrance. There were three swordsmen waiting for us.

You've got to be kidding me! Their black overcoats were emblazoned with the crest of the Thirteen Oracle Knights. That meant that each of them was a member of the Black Organization's top brass. After everything we've gone through, we have to fight three Oracle Knights... We were so close and yet so far.

"We've come all this way. We have no choice but to force open a path!" I declared. I summoned my mock black sword and leaped forward to engage the Oracle Knights. I stood little chance of winning, but trying was my only option.

"Haaaaaaah!" I shouted, preparing to swing my sword with all my might.

"Supreme Wind Blade."

My assault was interrupted when a powerful gale lifted me and my friends high into the air. *Hey, I know this move!* We landed on the roof of Berios Castle, where Fuu Ludoras was standing.

"Hmm... The breeze feels nice today," he muttered to himself without a care in the world, looking down at the thick book he was holding.

"I don't know why you helped us, but...thank you!" I told him.

We rushed down the stairs from the roof of Berios Castle. *This worked out perfectly!* The Black Organization members within the castle were probably racing down to the entrance because of the emergency announcement, which would let us reach the tenth floor without any resistance. Eventually, Zach's room came into view, but...

"There they are! It's Allen Rodol's group!"

...a group of Black Organization members had run up from the first floor, completely blocking our path through the narrow hallway.

"That's a lot of people...," I remarked. Fighting our way through that crowd would be a challenge, wounded as we were. But luckily, they've lined themselves up perfectly! There was nowhere to hide in the hallway. One attack would clear them all out.

"Sixth Style—Dark Boom!" I yelled, mustering the rest of my spirit power to unleash a slash of darkness.

"What the hell?! That thing's massive!" one of the swordsmen shouted.

"""Gaaaaaah?!""" they all screamed.

My pitch-black Dark Boom swept away all the Black Organization members, unclogging the hallway.

"Y-you never cease to amaze, Allen. I can't believe you still have the energy to perform a powerful technique like that after the beating you've taken... As your upperclassman, I couldn't ask for a worthier rival!" Lilim said.

"You're not in the same league as him, Lilim. No human should be capable of what he just did...," Tirith said.

They both stared at me, stunned.

"Haah, haah... Zach's room is just over there... Let's hurry!" I yelled, out of breath. The others nodded, and we sprinted toward the entrance.

I'm at my limit... My fatigue was so great that my vision wavered. I just need one final push... Just a little more effort, and we'll all make it home! I gritted my teeth and dragged my heavy feet along. Then we finally reached Zach's room and threw open the door.

"ALLEN! RODOL!" Grega Ash screamed after crashing through the wall from outside.

"G-Grega...?!" I shouted in disbelief.

"Can you *please* stop running from me, Allen? I want to finish this glorious battle we've started," he said, giggling. He lovingly stroked his unstable Soul Attire.

"You're making good use of that body," I observed.

"Hah, I have you to thank for that," he said.

Grega's body had merged with his Soul Attire and turned to ash, which allowed him to float in the air. He must have flown up to the tenth floor.

"How did you find us?" I asked. Berios Castle was massive; it was difficult to imagine he had chosen this room by coincidence.

"Through a miracle of God, of course! Well, I'd like to say that, but finding you wasn't so hard. The ash attached to your clothes called out to me, informing me of the precise location of you Godless heathens!" Grega proclaimed.

""...?!""

Shii and I looked at our sleeves. Upon closer inspection, there was a bit of ash between the fibers. Grega had apparently used it to find us.

"Hmm, it all makes sense now. I was wondering why you were fighting so hard to get inside the castle... It turns out you're trying to use one of Dodriel's shadow spots to escape," Grega observed. He looked at the black fog behind him and raised his ashen blade.

Is he gonna try to destroy it?! The ecstasy on Grega's face left little doubt that his weapon was capable of doing so.

"No so fast!" I shouted, drawing my sword.

Just then, Sebas, who had been silent for some time, threw off his black overcoat and calmly approached Grega.

"...Huh? Were you undercover? Well, whatever. Help me out he—"

Sebas's sword was through Grega's chest before the Oracle Knight could even

finish speaking. I never even saw him unsheathe it.

"Sebas...?! Why are you...betraying me...?!" Grega wheezed.

"I'm not betraying anyone. I'm one of the Four Imperial Knights—purging subordinates who have lost their way is part of my job," Sebas said casually. I was shocked by what I was hearing. "Also—a man who would harm Shii is no comrade of mine."

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"Gah...," Grega moaned.
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Sebas performed a flurry of slashes and knocked Grega off the tenth floor.

"Undercover." "Why are you betraying me?" "Four Imperial Knights." "Purging subordinates who have lost their way." We were all left speechless by the exchange we'd just witnessed.

"So you really are one of them, Sebas...," Shii said, drawing her blade. She was the only person in our group who didn't look surprised.

"...I'm sorry, Shii. It looks like this is goodbye," he said with a shrug, flashing her a pained grin. "You all need to get going. It'll be a little problematic for me if you stick around too long."

He stepped back from the shadow spot to show he meant us no harm.

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I met Sebas's eyes. The gloom in the room was palpable.

Sebas is one of the Thirteen Oracle Knights... And not only that—he's one of the Four Imperial Knights. When had he joined the Black Organization? Why did he attack Grega? Why was he letting us go? I had so many questions, but before I could ask any of them, I heard three sets of footsteps running up the stairs. Given their light, efficient quality, I figured they belonged to the Oracle Knights who had been waiting for us at the entrance of the castle.

"Getting out of here is our top priority. Sebas is our enemy—let's get back to Liengard before he changes his mind!" Rose said decisively. She was always calm in the face of adversity. That being said, hearing her call Sebas an enemy was like a stake through my heart.

"I don't really know what's going on, but we need to go, Shii!" Lilim shouted.

"We can figure this out later...!" Tirith added.

"What? Hey!" Shii yelled as her classmates grabbed her by the hands and dragged her into the shadow spot. The three Student Council members disappeared into the black fog.

Sebas watched them depart with sadness. "Farewell, Shii, Lilim, and Tirith... It's been a blast," he muttered, sounding as if he thought he would never see them again.

Lia and Rose jumped into the shadow spot next.

Okay, everyone's through! I started to run after them, but Sebas told me to stop.

"Hey, Allen. Do you have a moment?" he asked.

"...What is it?" I responded, making sure I would be able to jump into the shadow spot at any moment.

"You can relax. I'm not going to attack you this time," he said.

"'This time,' huh...," I repeated. That meant he wouldn't hesitate to strike next time we met.

"Don't give me that look. We both have our positions, right?" Sebas said, smiling bitterly and scratching his cheek.



"So what do you want?" I asked.

"Oh, right... We couldn't have saved Shii without you. Thank you very much," he said, bowing deeply. His sincere attitude and heartfelt words made it clear that he was being genuine. "I owe you a great debt. I don't know if this is enough to repay you, but...allow me to make a promise."

"A promise...?"

"I swear that no matter my position or the situation in the future, I will act as your friend and help you."

"...I appreciate the offer, but I'm gonna take that with a grain of salt." It would be unwise not to be skeptical of someone who belonged to an enemy organization, obviously.

"I understand. Actions speak louder than words, after all." Then, looking as though his sober expression was going to break, Sebas gave me a request. "Please take care of that foolish, scatterbrained, yet hopelessly kind Student Council president for me, Allen."

"Don't worry. I will."

"We may be enemies now, but your words are very reassuring." Sebas continued after a short pause. "Right. I might as well take this opportunity to give you a warning." It seemed he'd remembered something. "Keep an eye on your dear friend Lia Vesteria's condition."

"Her condition...?"

"Yeah. It won't be long before... Shoot, we're out of time." Sebas cut himself off and left Zach's room. I heard three surprised voices as soon as he did.

"L-Lord Sebas?! When did you get back?!"

"Be careful! The S-class threat Allen Rodol is hiding somewhere in this castle!"

"He's already defeated Grega Ash, Numelo Dohran, and hundreds of swordsmen! This is the first time in history Ronelia has sustained losses like these!"

The Oracle Knights who we'd seen at the entrance had caught up.

"Yeah, I know. I regret to inform you that I failed to stop him just now," Sebas said.

"What?!"

"He got away from you, Lord Sebas?!"

"Just who is Allen Rodol...?"

Sebas calmly lied to his subordinates and glanced meaningfully at the shadow spot. He was clearly telling me to escape while I could.

...Goodbye, Sebas.

I bade him farewell in my mind and jumped into the shadow spot, completing my escape through the Shadow World from the Holy Ronelian Empire.

I emerged in the Liengard branch of the Eidolon Research Laboratory and was relieved to see that my friends were safe.

Thank goodness. We all made it back...

All except for Sebas, that was. He was a Black Organization member from the start, which just meant he was back where he belonged. At the end of the day, he achieved his goal of saving Shii just the same as we did. The mission was a total success.

"Thank goodness you're okay, Allen! I was worried something had happened to you when you didn't come through right away," Lia said, rushing toward me. She looked exhausted.

"Sorry. Sebas stopped me when I was about to jump through," I responded.

"Sebas? Did something happen?" Lia asked.

"He, uh...he just had some parting words," I said.

I decided I would ask her about Sebas's warning in private later. One's health was a sensitive topic. It wasn't something I should bring up in front of other people.

Rose, who was leaning against a wall, let out a long breath. "Phew... I can't

believe we pulled that off. We just infiltrated the Holy Ronelian Empire, attacked the estate of a major noble, defeated one of the Thirteen Oracle Knights, successfully rescued Shii, and escaped from the center of enemy territory without leaving anyone behind. This will be major news all around the world..."

"Of course we pulled it off! I was on the team, after all! I always keep my promises!" Lilim cheered.

"All you did was buy time, Lilim. That goes for everyone here except Allen...," Tirith quipped.

It felt great seeing those two back to their usual rapport. We had seen many such exchanges between them in the Student Council room, but this one felt more special than ever.

Shii spoke up grimly. "We've just besmirched both the Holy Ronelian Empire and the Black Organization. They could send assassins after any of us... I'm sorry for putting you all in danger."

Shii bowed deeply, and Lilim sighed.

"You're such a worrywart, Shii... You can relax. There'll be nothing to fear on that front!" she declared.

"How can you be so sure?" Shii asked.

"Ha, it's simple. The broadcast from Berios Castle called us an 'enemy force led by the S-class threat Allen Rodol.' And think about it... Who crashed the wedding? Allen. Who did the Ronelian nobles see? Allen. And who defeated an Oracle Knight? You guessed it—that was Allen, too! They're not gonna go after small fries like us. If they try to kill anyone, it'll be him!" Lilim explained.

"That's exactly what I'm worried about!" Shii scolded, sounding like herself again.

"Ah-ha-ha... I'll do my best not to get killed," I said.

An evil empire and a major criminal organization were going to be after my head. That sounded too absurd to be real. It makes me feel better that they're probably only going to target me, though. I was the one who had suggested we

infiltrate the Holy Ronelian Empire. It was only right that I take responsibility. I'd known from the beginning that I would be making an enemy of the Holy Empire and the Black Organization by rescuing Shii. I would rather that they focus entirely on me if it meant the others wouldn't be in danger.

"I can't believe Sebas Chandler is a member of the Black Organization," Rose said, bringing up the elephant in the room.

*uuu ...* 

No one knew what to say. Looking back, the signs were there. The first moment I'd felt like something was suspicious was when we went to the Eidolon Research Laboratory to find the shadow spot. Sebas somehow knew that I was familiar with the layout of the facility, even though that should have been impossible. He had been in the Holy Ronelian Empire trying to find a blood diamond when Lia was kidnapped, and he had been biding his time in the Holy Knight prison ever since he returned.

He never would have had a chance to learn that Lia was abducted. He shouldn't have known about my exploits at the Eidolon Research Laboratory.

My suspicions were strengthened shortly after I defeated Grega. *I only told Sebas that I defeated one of the Thirteen Oracle Knights, but he mentioned Grega by name.* On two different occasions, he had let slip information he shouldn't have known. In the moment, I hadn't noticed the signs because of the urgency of the situation, but they were definitely there.

"Oh yeah, it sounded like you knew something about that, President," I said.

Everyone had been shocked speechless when Sebas revealed his true identity —except Shii, who quickly drew her sword. She wouldn't have reacted that way unless she was aware of something.

"The truth is...I looked into Sebas at the beginning of this year," Shii revealed.

"You did?" I asked.

"Yeah. You know that the Black Organization has been causing incidents throughout Liengard for the last few years, right?" Shii asked.

We all nodded in response. Those incidents were constantly covered in the

newspaper and on the radio. You'd have to live under a rock not to hear about them.

"The Arkstoria family is in charge of Liengard's national security, so we endeavored to resolve the incidents and take preventive measures. And in the process of investigating many of the events alongside my father and our employees, I realized something: Whenever the Black Organization stirred something up, there was always a Thousand Blade student on the scene."

Shii paused for a moment and continued.

"I immediately asked for the attendance records for every Thousand Blade student and compared them to the days of the incidents. Only one student could have attended each one. Sebas Chandler was late or absent every single time the Black Organization caused trouble."

"Ah... So you then looked into him and found his ties to the Black Organization," Lia assumed, but Shii shook her head.

"No, actually. I performed an exhaustive investigation and turned up nothing. I couldn't find any connection between Sebas and the Black Organization. I did realize something strange, though. All his personal information in the Liengardian records—including his address, family, and birthplace—are fake. The Chandlers never existed."

Shii continued speaking.

"I found that suspicious, so I decided to send Sebas to get a blood diamond under the pretext of a penalty game. The incidents had been occurring weekly until that point, but as soon as he left the country, they dramatically decreased in frequency. That gave me an indirect connection between him and the Black Organization."

It turned out there was a purpose to that ridiculous penalty game I had heard about.

"You all know the rest. The holy knights arrested Sebas when he showed up at the Sword Master Festival, and I intentionally left him in the prison," Shii finished.

Lia gasped in admiration. "Wow, you really thought that through... That

means you didn't forget about him after all," she said.

"Lilim, Tirith, Sebas, and I have been friends for over ten years. I would never forget about him," Shii responded.

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Lilim and Tirith quickly lowered their gazes—they had *really* forgotten about him.

"Anyway, that's why I wasn't too surprised when Sebas revealed his identity. But I had no idea he's one of the Four Imperial Knights...," Shii said.

Everyone fell silent. That was a lot to process.

"We're all pretty beat. Should we head home?" I suggested.

"Are you actually tired, Allen?!" Lilim exclaimed, shocked.

"Th-that's rare... You almost sounded human there...," Tirith said, equally surprised.

"What exactly do you two think I am?" I asked.

"A monster," Lilim said.

"An inhuman creature," Tirith said.

"...I see," I responded. I was too exhausted to correct them, and I doubted they would listen anyway. Instead, I just smiled awkwardly and let it pass.

We started to make our way out of the dark laboratory...

"Ah."

"Wha?!"

...only to bump into Rodis, who was dressed in white. He must have been planning to use this shadow spot, too.

"What are you all doing here?!" Rodis shouted. He looked at us sharply and then froze. "Sh-Shii...?" he croaked as tears began to fall from his stern eyes.

"Huh? Father?" Shii responded.

"Shii...!" Rodis rushed toward his daughter and pulled her into a tight embrace. "Oh, it's really you! I'm so happy you're safe..."

"H-hey, stop it, Father! You're embarrassing me in front of my friends! And why is your chest so lumpy? You're hurting me!" Shii complained, pushing Rodis aside in embarrassment. It was clear how close the two of them were.

"Oh, sorry. I forgot about the bombs strapped to my waist," Rodis said, wiping tears from his eyes. He removed the explosives that he'd attached to himself.

"What were you planning on using those for?!" Shii shouted, her face going pale as she pointed at the bombs. She was obviously ignorant of his plan.

"I should think that to be apparent. I was going to blow myself up if the mission went sideways," Rodis answered.

"Y-you were going to what now?!" Shii asked, stepping back in confusion.

Rodis looked at me seriously. "Allen Rodol... Can you give me a detailed account of what happened?"

"Yes sir," I responded. I gave him a lengthy summary of everything that had transpired in Ronelia.

"Huh... You went through quite a lot...," Rodis said gravely. He then bowed deeply. "You have my sincerest gratitude for saving my daughter. I promise to eventually repay this great debt."

"Don't worry about it. We just wanted to save our good friend," I responded. The others nodded in agreement.

"...I see that Shii has truly wonderful companions," Rodis said with a joyful smile. His expression then hardened.

"...? Is something wro—," I began, before he cut me off.

"Allen Rodol. No, I suppose I should just call you Allen," he said, giving my name extra weight. He spoke with a strange intensity that lacked any animosity. "You protected Liengard from the demon Seele Grazalio and saved Shii from the Holy Ronelian Empire. You look no different from the timid young men that are all too common in your generation, but you clearly possess an impressive spirit."

"Th-thanks...," I responded. I decided to bow in gratitude, unsure of why he was praising me so much.

"..."

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An awkward silence hung between us. Rodis eventually gave me a determined look.

"I see no more reason to stand in your way. I'll allow you to start a relationship with my daughter," he said.

"Huh...?" I responded, my mind going blank. I had no idea what he meant.

"F-Father! What the heck are you talking about?!" Shii interrupted, blushing furiously.

"What? Are you opposed?" Rodis asked.

"N-no, I'm not, but... Argh, this isn't the time or place!" Shii shouted after glancing toward me.

"Sure, but...there aren't many men of Allen's caliber. Wait too long, and someone else will take him first," Rodis warned.

"I know that already...," Shii mumbled. She was in fine form, quickly swinging between embarrassment and anger and back again.

"Hmm... We can discuss this again when you're both ready," Rodis said. He looked down at his wristwatch. "And with that, I must take my leave. I have many urgent messages to send."

Rodis turned around and headed for the laboratory's exit. As the head of the Arkstoria family, he would probably have a lot to deal with in the aftermath of this incident. Despite that, he looked like he could start dancing with joy at any moment.

I'm sure he's overcome with happiness now that Shii is back and safe, I thought.

"A-Allen...," Shii said, tugging my sleeve. She was blushing and behaving rather suspiciously.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Pay no attention to what my father said. I don't want to give you the wrong

idea... I-I'm not against what he proposed... It's just that, I, uh...," Shii stammered.

"Yeah...?" I pressed, having no idea what she was trying to say.

"Well, you know, I...I'll see you tomorrow at school!" she said rapidly before running off after Rodis.

"Y-yeah... See you tomorrow...," I responded, waving weakly as she took off like the wind.

"Oof, she totally just struck out...," Lilim said.

"Yeah, definitely. I've never seen Shii make that face before...," Tirith agreed.

"Hmm-hmm, this will make for great teasing material!" Lilim exclaimed.

"This may come as a surprise, but Shii's completely inexperienced and innocent when it comes to boys... And as her besties, I know exactly what we need to do in this situation: give her fake dating advice...!" Tirith proposed.

They both grinned wickedly at each other.

"Tirith and I are gonna hold a top-secret strategy meeting! See you all tomorrow at school!" Lilim said.

"Hmm-hmm, this is going to be fun...!" Tirith said.

They jogged out of the laboratory. *Never a dull moment with those two,* I thought.

Rose stretched and spoke. "You and Lia can go on ahead. I expended a ton of spirit power, so I'm gonna see a doctor in Drestia."

"Are you going to be okay by yourself? We can go with you," I offered.

"Thanks, but I'll be fine. I'm just gonna get a little treatment so I won't feel so tired tomorrow," Rose said, shaking her head. "Are you feeling okay, Allen? You clearly pushed yourself harder than any of us."

"Hmm... Let's see where I'm at," I responded.

I focused my spirit power and summoned the cloak of darkness and my mock black sword. *That was easier than expected.* If I could produce this much darkness, I'd be able to handle myself in a fight. "H-how have you already recovered that much spirit power...? I don't even know what to say anymore," Rose complained with an exasperated shrug. She left to find a Drestian clinic, leaving me alone with Lia.

"Okay... Should we get going, too?" I asked.

"Grr...," Lia growled, glaring at me.

"Umm... Is there something on my face?"

"No... I'm just feeling a little jealous." She puffed out her cheeks slightly and looked away in a huff.

"Jealous? Why?"

"...It's not your fault. Don't worry about it."

We started the journey back to our dorm, Lia's mysterious bad mood persisting for the entire trip.

We reached the dorm at eleven at night after being away for nearly the entire day.

I'd like to go to bed right away, but...

I glanced at Lia and saw her sigh, a troubled look on her face. She had been acting depressed ever since we parted from the others, occasionally muttering things like "What if someone gets the jump on me?"; "No, I still have the best position!"; and "Is it time to get aggressive?" It sounded like she was fighting an invisible opponent.

Sebas was right. Lia does seem unwell... You clearly didn't become one of the Four Imperial Knights by accident. He had an amazing eye.

I should start by cheering her up. Mom always used to say that health starts with the mind. I'm really tired, but I just need to hang on for a little longer! I thought, firing myself up.

I cleared my throat. "Hey Lia, do you want to eat something?"

"Where's this coming from?" Lia asked.

"I just feel like cooking. I thought I might as well make something you like. What do you want?" I asked.

"...Curry rice," she said after some thought.

"Ha-ha, curry rice it is," I said.

"Hey... Why are you laughing?" Lia asked, glaring at me.

"I just thought that was a boyish food to ask for," I responded.

"Wh-why should that matter?! I've been craving curry!" Lia said, blushing and looking away. Her reaction was so cute, it warmed my heart.

"Sorry, sorry. I'll make you some delicious curry as an apology. It'll be ready in a bit," I said.

I started cooking right away. I first cut up carrots, onions, and beef, then tossed them into a thick pot heated over a low flame. Once they were sufficiently cooked, I added water and heated it for fifteen minutes while skimming the scum. Finally, I put in curry powder and let it simmer. A spicy aroma filled the apartment.

Okay, it'll be ready in about ten minutes. I turned around to find Lia staring hungrily at the pot, her stray hairs standing up on her head. Ha-ha, she wasn't kidding when she said she was craving curry.

Ten minutes later, I slowly opened the pot lid and peeked at the curry, which was appropriately thick. Let's give it a little taste, I thought, filling a small dish and trying it. Tastes good. This would be sure to cheer Lia up.

I placed some white rice onto a normal round plate for me and a special jumbo plate for Lia, then poured the curry on top.

"All done. Ready to eat?" I asked.

"Yeah!" Lia said.

I gave my thanks for the food and dug in.

"This is really good," I said after my first bite.

"Mmm, delicious! You're a really good cook, Allen!" Lia said, putting her hands to her cheeks and tapping her feet with excitement.

"Ah-ha-ha, I'm glad you like it."

There was no trace of her earlier despondent expression. She smiled radiantly as she stuffed her cheeks with bite after bite. *Thank goodness... Seems like she's back to normal.* 

Once we'd finished our late dinner, I decided to bring up what I was worried about.

"Hey, Lia. Can I ask you a question?" I asked.

"Whoa, what's got you so serious?" she said, cocking her head.

"Umm... Are you feeling okay?"

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Before I left, Sebas warned me to keep an eye on your condition."

"..."

Lia's face stiffened for a moment. "I-I'm fine! Today was obviously a little exhausting, but I'm the picture of health!" she said, smiling awkwardly.

"...That's good to hear," I responded.

It was clear from her reaction that she was hiding something. But...I shouldn't press her on this. I don't know why, but she clearly doesn't want to talk about it right now. I resolved to wait until she was ready to bring it up herself, occasionally starting casual conversations in which it would be easier to talk about what was weighing on her.

Having come to that decision, I took my plate to the sink.

"I'll do the dishes, so you go ahead and get in the bath," I said.

"Oh, hold on. I'll do the dishes this time," Lia responded. She jumped out of her seat and followed me to the sink. "You always do the dishes when I cook, so it's only fair that I return the favor."

"Aren't you tired?" I asked.

"I should be asking you that. Now, off with you!" Lia urged, tugging on my sleeve.

"Okay. I'll take you up on that... I guess I'll get in the bath first."

"Yeah, go ahead. And thanks for the curry. It was delicious."

"You're welcome."

We both took a bath, brushed our teeth, put on our pajamas, and climbed into the same bed. We'd slept on the edges of the mattress when we started living together, but now we settled in about ten centimeters closer to each other, a sign of how close we had grown.

"Good night, Lia."

"Good night, Allen."

We drifted off together.

Shii returned to her dorm for the first time in a few days after parting ways with Allen and the others.

"I never thought I'd see this place again...," she said to herself. Heaving a sigh of relief, she inspected her room. Her normal life was back.

I left a bigger mess than I thought...

Cast-off clothes, half-read shoujo manga, empty candy bags, and more were strewn about her dorm. There were some empty spots on the floor to step on, but not even the nicest person in the world could call it clean. Shii had always been hopeless at tidying up.

"Let's see... Do I have any drinks?" she asked aloud. She opened the fridge in the corner of the room and quenched her thirst with some cold water.

"Phew... Time to take a bath." Shii entered her changing room, closed the curtain, and took off the jacket that Allen had given her. "I hadn't really thought about it, but...Allen was wearing this, wasn't he?"

She looked around to see if anyone was watching even though she was in her own dorm room. Once she was sure no one could see her, she slowly brought the jacket to her face.

"...Hee-hee, this is Allen's scent."

She spent some time relishing the jacket's aroma.

"All right, I'll buy him a new uniform. I'm sure that'll make him happier than getting this ragged old thing back!"

Shii neatly folded his jacket and put it on top of her washing machine rather than inside it. Then she took off her torn wedding dress and black underwear, grabbed a towel to hold her hair, and entered the bathroom.

Allen's darkness sure comes in handy, Shii thought, studying her naked body in the mirror on the bathroom wall. She was completely uninjured. I took a lot of slash wounds during my fight with Grega, but that strange darkness of Allen's healed them all in an instant. I think even a healing Soul Attire would have trouble patching up someone this perfectly...

She wiped her head and body clean, wrapped her long black hair in her towel, and got in the bathtub.

"Ahhh, that feels good..."

Her muscles relaxed instantly as she enjoyed the warm water. She stretched as widely as she could and sighed softly.

"I'm gonna be really busy starting tomorrow... The noble faction is sure to act up again after this..."

Shii spent some time thinking about the trouble ahead and eventually sighed with wonder.

"He was so cool..."

The image of the gallant swordsman of darkness, rushing forward to save her from the brink of death at the hands of an Oracle Knight, had been seared into her mind for the entire day. He'd defeated the tremendously powerful Grega in the middle of enemy territory to stop her from having to give her life for her country. He was like a prince out of a fairy tale.

Father is right, though. Allen is really popular...

Shii fell into thought, and a troubled expression came over her face.

Lia definitely likes him, and I'll bet Rose does, too... And I've heard rumors that Idora Luksmaria from White Lily Girls Academy might have her eye on him...

She began to analyze the threat level of each of her opponents.

Lia is drop-dead gorgeous and has a great figure to boot. Rose is more "beautiful" than "cute" and has an enviably slender body. Idora has doll-like features but a smaller chest. She could be my biggest rival if Allen's into that, though...

Each and every one of her foes was formidable, and they all had a huge advantage over her—they were in the same year as Allen.

Wait... Am I in the worst position?

That conclusion triggered a stinging pain in her chest.

"N-no, it's okay... I'm no slouch myself! I think I'm relatively pretty, and I have the kind of body that guys like! I hope so anyway! My older age also gives me a mature appeal!"

She was only a year older, and Allen had said that she was more like a little sister... But she had already completely forgotten that he said that.

One thing's for sure—I'll be in big trouble if I don't make a move soon... Maybe I should invite him to get some tea?

Shii continued to think as she got out of the bath and walked to the changing room. She dried herself off, put on her pajamas, and got ready for bed.

Fwah... It's later than I thought. I should call it a night.

It was midnight, which meant most Thousand Blade students were fast asleep after another harsh day of sword training. Shii sat at her desk while rubbing her eyes and took a thick diary out of a drawer. She always wrote about her day in this notebook before she went to sleep.

"Hmm..."

She grabbed a pen and wrote as she reflected on the day.

"Phew, I'm done...," she said ten minutes later, her reflection finished. She collapsed onto her large bed and was softly snoring in less than a minute.

Written in lovely round handwriting, Shii's journal entry on her chaotic day began with the following sentence: For the first time ever, I have a crush on someone.

## CHAPTER 2 Valentine's Day

It was January eighth, the day after our turbulent trip to the Holy Ronelian Empire. Lia and I were walking to Thousand Blade's campus in the cool morning air.

"Man, it's chilly... I think I saw that the low is below freezing today," I said.

"Yeah, that's what the weather forecast said. You're a light eater, Allen, so make sure you get enough food to avoid getting a cold," Lia said, raising an index finger and leaning toward me.

"Ah-ha-ha... I'll do my best," I responded.

In Lia's mind, I barely ate a thing. The truth was that Lia was a glutton, but you could hardly say that to a teenage girl. I liked to think that I had at least some tact.

Anyway, I'll try to eat enough to set her at ease. It was common courtesy to be mindful of your roommate and avoid worrying them. I would gradually increase the amount I ate to expand my stomach.

We entered the main school building, walked down a long, straight hallway, and opened the door to Class 1-A.

"Hey, it's Allen and Lia! Are you two feeling better?"

"You both scared me when you left early yesterday."

"Don't push yourselves too hard, okay?"

Our peers seemed to think we hadn't been feeling well.

Oh, I see what happened... Chairwoman Reia must have explained our

absence in afternoon classes yesterday by saying we weren't feeling well and left early. Lia and I quickly picked up on that and nodded to each other.

"I feel fine after taking a day to rest," I responded.

"Thanks for worrying about us," Lia said.

We went along with the lie to set our classmates at ease. Lia and I then set down our bags in our seats and our textbooks on our desks.

From the way they're acting, I don't think our classmates know about what happened yesterday yet. I would have thought that such a major event would be talked about in the newspaper and on the radio, but either the empress or Rodis must have suppressed all reporting on it.

Rose arrived afterward—her bedhead a piece of art as usual—and the three of us chatted until the classroom door slammed open.

"Good morning, boys and girls! It's time for homeroom!" Chairwoman Reia said enthusiastically. She quickly rolled through the announcements and took us right to the schoolyard for our morning classes. We spent the time on intense strength and endurance training, stopping only when the bell rang for lunch.

Lia, Rose, and I were about to leave for the regular Student Council meeting (which was a meeting in name only) when an announcement sounded over the intercom.

"Allen Rodol, Lia Vesteria, and Rose Valencia of Class 1-A, please report to the chair's office immediately. Allen Rodol..."

We had been summoned to Chairwoman Reia's office.

"That must be Reia. I wonder what she wants," Lia said.

"Is this about yesterday? No, she would've called Shii, Lilim, and Tirith there, too," Rose said.

They both looked confused.

"Well, let's go find out," I suggested.

"Yeah," Lia agreed.

"There's no point in standing around thinking about it. C'mon," Rose said.

We walked through the long hallways of the main school building and arrived at the chair's office. I knocked on the black door.

"Come in," a beautiful, ringing voice called out.

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"""...?"""
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The three of us glanced at one another. That wasn't Chairwoman Reia's voice. There was someone else in the room.

"Excuse us," I said as I pushed open the door. "You?!"

"Hello, Mr. Rodol. I hope you are well."

It was Wendy Liengard, the empress of Liengard. She was fifteen years old like the rest of us. She had bright pink hair that reached her back and was about 165 centimeters tall, the same height as Lia. Her figure was flawless, and she had the face of an angel. She was dressed in the same outfit that she'd worn at the New Year's Jubilee, a white dress that exposed her collarbone.

What is the empress doing in the office of Thousand Blade Academy's chair? Rodis and Chairwoman Reia were standing behind her.

"...Greetings, Your Majesty," I said formally, acting warily. Lia and Rose followed my example, and the atmosphere in the room grew tense. The empress is the person who sold Shii to the Holy Ronelian Empire. I can't let my quard down around her.

The three of us were all on edge.

"...I was definitely right to come here," the empress muttered sadly.

"It would seem so, Your Majesty," Rodis agreed.

"Could you please mediate for us, Chairwoman Reia?" the empress asked.

"Yes, of course," the chairwoman responded. She cleared her throat. "I'm not exactly sure where to start, but... Well, first of all, you all truly distinguished yourselves yesterday. You both delayed Liengard's collapse and saved Shii Arkstoria. Thank you very much."

She continued.

"Anyway, for various reasons, I ended up getting chosen to mediate between

you and the empress... And as you all know, I'm not exactly the best orator. I'll do my best, but don't expect this to be easy to follow."

"That's okay," I responded.

"We all know how bad you are at speaking," Lia said.

"Don't worry about it. Everyone has their strengths and weaknesses," Rose reassured her.

Our thoughts all turned to the emergency chair meeting that had been held after the Elite Five Holy Festival last April to determine my and Shido's punishments. Chairwoman Reia allowed herself to get riled up by the obvious threats of the other chairs, letting them take control of the debate. The result was a month-long suspension not just for me, but for Lia and Rose as well.

She's a great teacher, but she can't orate her way out of a paper bag. Lia, Rose, and I were all well aware of that.

"We don't have much time, so I'll get started," the chairwoman said, looking visibly discouraged. She cleared her throat. "Shii Arkstoria's political marriage that you all just stopped was a top-secret plan that Her Majesty opposed up until the last moment."

"""...Huh?"""

The three of us stiffened, surprised.

"I would like you to keep this to yourselves, but...Liengard is in an extremely unstable state right now. The imperial faction—which is led by Her Majesty and Rodis Arkstoria—and the noble faction are currently waging a fierce political battle," Chairwoman Reia revealed. "To give a simple explanation of their differences... The imperial faction desires what is best for the country and wishes for sustainable development between it and the world. The noble faction, on the other hand, wants to hand Liengard to the Holy Ronelian Empire to help Barel Ronelia complete his world conquest."

"""What?!"""

We all gasped at the shocking revelation.

"Why does the noble faction like the Holy Empire so much?" I asked. If the

evil empire that housed the Black Organization came to rule the world, the result would be a literal hell.

"The leaders of the noble faction have underground connections to Ronelian nobles. The rich flock to the rich, as they say. It seems like they've been promised that they will be welcomed into the Ronelian nobility as a reward for selling Liengard." The chairwoman sighed loudly with an expression of disgust on her face. "That was a bit of a digression, but...what I want to say is this: There's no denying that Her Majesty made the call to marry off Shii in the end. But she was pressed into it by the noble faction after resisting for as long as she could."

I looked nonchalantly at Rodis and saw that he was nodding gravely. It was hard to imagine he would lie about his beloved daughter. This was the truth.

The empress spoke up after the office fell silent. "I have been powerless to help Liengard in the face of this unprecedented crisis... But I do have one ploy that could turn the tables completely."

She looked directly at me, a spark of hope in her eyes.

"You do?" I asked. What could she possibly do that would turn around the situation that easily?

"Yes... Do you not realize where I'm going with this?" she asked.

"Umm, no, I don't...," I responded.

"The ploy is you, Mr. Rodol. You're the one around whom everything revolves."

"...Huh?"

That was all I could manage in response to the empress's nonsensical statement. Her ploy to turn the tables is...me? I had no idea how to react.

"I'm sorry, but I don't really get what you're saying," I responded.

"You truly do have no self-awareness, huh? I didn't think that to be possible...," the empress said, her eyes wide. "You have a tendency to attract people, Mr. Rodol. Lia Vesteria, the Black and White Princess and the next ruler of Vesteria. Rose Valencia, the sole inheritor of the Cherry Blossom Blade Style,

which was once considered to be the strongest school of swordcraft in the world. Rize Dorhein, known as the Blood Fox and the manager of Fox Financing. Crazy Clown Jester, who rejected a spot on the Seven Holy Blades. Raine Grad, one of the Thirteen Oracle Knights. Your personality, potential, and strange appeal have inspired one famous swordsman after another to join the Allen faction."

"The 'Allen faction'? Really?" I smiled awkwardly in response to her hyperbolic statement. The empress looked completely serious, however.

"There aren't many people of your caliber in this world. You've defeated three of the Thirteen Oracle Knights at merely fifteen years old. People can't help but be pulled in by your incredible strength. The position of the Allen faction will have a dramatic impact on the balance of power in Liengard. That is how important you are."

"Oh, come on..." She was clearly exaggerating. Just a year ago, people called me a Reject Swordsman—there was no way I could influence Liengard's balance of power.

"What I just said isn't a joke or an exaggeration. Rodis and I came here today to show you our good faith."

"Huh? Good faith?"

"Put simply, we're conveying that we don't want to make an enemy of you," the empress claimed, speaking with full sincerity. "I'm sure yesterday's incident caused you to lose some faith in me and in Liengard."

"...I won't deny it," I said. I saw a flash of fear in her eyes.

"The noble faction will absolutely approach you and try to take advantage of that. If you join them...the imperial faction will be finished." The empress stepped forward, a dark expression on her face, and grasped my right hand with her soft palms. "I won't ask you to join the imperial faction. But I must ask this —can you please at least maintain a neutral position and not allow the noble faction to cajole you?"

The empress stared at me soberly. The clear look in her eyes made me think it was very likely she was telling the truth. However...

"I'm sorry. I can't give you an answer right now," I responded.

...I had never even heard of the imperial faction, the noble faction, or the Allen faction before stepping into this room. I couldn't make a proper decision until I had time to process all the information I'd just learned. Most importantly, I had no proof that everything the empress had told me was true.

She tried to stab me at the New Year's Jubilee. I can't bring myself to trust her completely.

"I see...," the empress muttered weakly, seeming to interpret my response as a rejection. Her hands trembled.

"I may not be able to give you an answer yet, but...I can make one thing clear," I said.

"What is that?"

"There are many people that I care about in this country. I'm going to use my blade to protect them to the best of my abilities, regardless of political faction."

My mom and Ol' Bamboo—who'd spent a lot of time playing with me when I was little—back in Goza Village. Ms. Paula, who'd supported me when I was the target of horrible bullying at Grand Swordcraft Academy. Lia, Rose, Shii, Lilim, Tirith, and everyone else in my class. Shido, who I had gotten a little closer to recently, and Cain, who was fanatically devoted to me for reasons I didn't understand. Idora, Rize, and Clown. There were many people in Liengard who were important to me.

I don't know much about complicated things like politics and factions, but I'm going to do everything I can to protect those I care about. That was why I trained for a billion-plus years.

"...That is a relief to hear," the empress said with a smile. "Chairwoman Reia, thank you for accommodating us despite the sudden visit. It is thanks to you that I was able to have a meaningful conversation with Allen and clear up our misunderstanding. I have political matters to attend to, so I will take my leave here."

She bowed gracefully and headed out of the office. Just as she grabbed the doorknob, however, she stopped.

"Hey, Mr. Rodol," she began.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Would you like to meet again for tea? Just the two of us this time?"

"...Yeah, I'd be glad to. But I have to ask that you refrain from assaulting me like last time."

"Hee-hee, of course." The empress giggled mischievously and left the chair's office, followed by Rodis.

Chairwoman Reia cleared her throat after the empress and Rodis had left the room.

"Sorry for summoning you out of nowhere like that. Did I startle you?" she asked.

"That's putting it lightly," I responded.

We'd gone to the office thinking we were about to meet with our homeroom teacher and instead found the ruler of our country. That would startle anyone.

"Sorry, sorry. This visit came as a surprise to me, too. I had to scramble to clean the room before they got here," the chairwoman said, sitting down at her desk. "Anyway, to get serious for a moment... Please be careful of the noble faction. They'll see winning you over as the key to making Liengard theirs."

"...I understand the imperial faction's predicament. Is the noble faction really that strong, though?" I asked.

"Well... Eh, I guess there's no problem with telling you," the chairwoman said, glancing at Lia. "The empress's family has operated the country on a principle of frugality. They always put the people first, which is why the tax rate is the lowest among the Five Powers. The government's annual revenue is little more than a drop in the bucket, but the people are well off as a result."

She paused before continuing her explanation.

"This policy had the unfortunate side effect of giving the nobles too much

power. They've misused laws and facilities meant for the common folk to line their own pockets with unbelievable riches. Some have even made illegal donations and vastly increased their political power. Incessant corruption over generations has resulted in an overwhelming advantage for the nobility," she said.

"That makes sense...," I responded. It sounded like the imperial faction's predicament had been brewing for decades.

"Rodis Arkstoria, the leader of the imperial faction, was the one who decided that something needed to be done. He convinced the previous emperor to abdicate the throne for Wendy Liengard, who was just ten years old at the time. The noble faction welcomed the transition because they believed it was the birth of a puppet administration, but they didn't anticipate the empress's rare intellect. She made a shocking move the day she took the throne," the chairwoman said.

"What was that?" I asked.

"She announced an agreement with the infamous Rize Dorhein," she said, shocking all of us. "It's common knowledge that the Blood Fox has connections in the underworld. It was unprecedented for the leader of a country to make a pact with such a shady figure. The noble faction was staunchly opposed, of course. They censured the empress and did their best to put pressure on Fox Financing. According to what I've heard, they wrecked Rize's store and set her mansion in Drestia aflame," the chairwoman continued.

"Th-that's awful," I responded.

"Geez, talk about a death wish," Lia said.

"What idiots...," Rose added.

Lia and Rose's reactions couldn't have been more different than mine.

"The very next day, the noble faction members who attacked Fox Financing vanished," Chairwoman Reia said.

"...Vanished?" I repeated.

"Yep. I don't know how, but they all disappeared without a trace. The holy

knights performed a strenuous investigation, but not only did they not find their bodies, they found zero evidence to indicate what happened to them. Rize uses a strange Soul Attire that no one fully understands. It was almost certainly her doing."

The chairwoman continued seriously.

"The noble faction fell into chaos after this inexplicable incident. Meanwhile, Rize used Liengard's backing to dramatically grow Fox Financing, while the empress silently put clamps on the nobility. Wendy Liengard has been working fervently for the last five years to rout out the corruption of the nobility... But now that her agreement with Rize has ended and she's made an enemy of one of the Seven Holy Blades, the imperial faction is facing an unprecedented dilemma. Sorry that took so long, but that's the history of the imperial and noble factions," the chairwoman finished.

"It's a bit late to ask this, but...was it okay for me to hear all that?" Lia asked, scratching her cheek. A foreign princess learning of Liengard's internal corruption could be bad for its reputation.

"It doesn't really matter. The world's leaders are well aware of Liengard's corruption... I'm sure Gris—Lia's father—already knows about it," the chairwoman said, wearing a troubled expression. "That's enough of that tedious stuff... Let's get to the real matter I wanted to talk about!" She clapped her hands to banish the somber atmosphere. "I have a request for you three. I particularly want your help with this, Allen."

"What's that?" I asked.

"I want you to act as the proctor for this year's entrance examination," Chairwoman Reia said.

"...Huh?" I responded, confused.

The chairwoman produced a handbook titled *Admission Application Guidelines*.

"The entrance examination is in about three weeks on February first. I'm thinking of making you the chief proctor, Allen, and making Lia and Rose your assistants. What do you think? Are you up for it?" she asked.

"Why do you want me to be the chief proctor?" I asked.

"Because of tradition. At the Elite Five Academies, the student with the highest grades in the previous year is made the chief proctor for the entrance examination. Shido will probably perform the role at Ice King Academy, and Idora at White Lily Girls Academy," the chairwoman said.

"Huh," I responded. It was hard to argue with tradition. I'm sure Idora will be fair, but I can't imagine Shido as a proctor... I felt bad for the students applying to Ice King this year.

"Shii was the chief examiner last year, by the way, and Lilim and Tirith were her assistants. What do you say, Allen? Do you accept this position?" the chairwoman asked, leaning toward me and pressing me to answer on the spot.

She's always been pushy, but she's especially bad today. I felt like something was off here.

"Hey, Reia... What's this?" Lia asked, pointing at a page in the handbook.

"Grk..." Chairwoman Reia flinched.

"Wh-what the?!" I exclaimed. It was a picture of me clad in my cloak of darkness and wielding my sword. When was this picture taken? And... Oh no...

There was text next to the picture saying, All students who manage to land a hit against the wicked swordsman Allen Rodol will be admitted on the spot!

"The 'wicked swordsman,' huh...? I get that you're trying to attract applicants, but isn't that a little extreme?" Lia said.

"Ha-ha-ha... Well, you know... I'm just trying to fire people up! The phrasing might be a little provocative, but...that's advertising, am I right?" Chairwoman Reia said awkwardly, avoiding her eyes.

"Wow, this page is even worse. 'Save Thousand Blade Academy from Allen Rodol's evil clutches!' That's going too far," Rose said.

"That's, uh... Well...," the chairwoman stumbled, clearly uncomfortable.

"Wicked swordsman" and "evil clutches"... She was making me sound terrible.

"Something's fishy about this," Lia said.

"Yeah, there's definitely something you're not telling us," Rose agreed.

They both glared at Reia.

"Oh, fine... I'll tell you the whole story." The chairwoman slumped in resignation. "I'm not proud of this, but our financial situation is extremely precarious right now... The main reason for that was the cost of reconstructing the main school building, which you all know was destroyed last September. We are getting subsidies from the government, but they're minuscule. Not even our reserves are enough to save us from losing a massive amount of money this year."

Last year, Fuu Ludoras and Dodriel Barton had attacked Thousand Blade. The academy had been on the brink of total destruction in the face of Fuu's overwhelming strength until Zeon took control of my body and went on a rampage, fending off the Oracle Knight. Unfortunately, Zeon ended up destroying the main school building in the process.

"The international landscape has never been this unstable, so Thousand Blade could be targeted again at any time... That's why I want to attract as many excellent students as I can to help defend it. I also want as many applicants as possible, so we can use their application fees to restore our finances. The entire Thousand Blade staff met for several days and nights to come up with a plan to accomplish those two goals. We decided that you, Allen, are the solution to everything," Chairwoman Reia continued.

"What do you mean?" I asked. I had no idea why they would have brought me up.

"It would be no exaggeration to say you're becoming a household name throughout Liengard. We're using your fame to attract the very best applicants and collect a wealth of application fees!" Chairwoman Reia said proudly, detailing her absurd plan.

I'm not nearly as famous as she says. My name will hardly have any advertising power, I thought, smiling uncomfortably.

"We got right to work once we'd solidified our basic strategy. We started by going to Drestia to learn about your reputation and collect impressive tales of your valor, hoping to use that to create an appealing tagline, but we soon ran

into a major problem...," Chairwoman Reia continued.

"What was that?" I asked.

"I don't know why, but your reputation is shockingly bad. You've fought off the Black Organization multiple times, saved the empress from a demon, and even developed the first cure for curses in the history of mankind. You've been a hero to Liengard, but...you wouldn't believe the things we heard about you. People think you're working with Rize to overthrow the government, or that you're in cahoots with the demons, or even that you could be one of the Thirteen Oracle Knights," the chairwoman said.

"Wow, my standing's gotten worse than I thought..." I had known that my reputation was really bad, but I had no idea it had worsened to that extent.

"Because of that, we were forced to change course, and we came up with an idea to save our plan. I feel bad about it, but we decided to have you lean into your villainous reputation. I swear we only did this as a last resort... None of the instructors at Thousand Blade believe you're evil!" Chairwoman Reia insisted.

"O-okay...," I responded.

I understood where she was coming from, but this was going to mean a lot of trouble for me. An advertising campaign like this would only worsen my already bad standing. I sighed, unsure of what to do.

"You're giving us a lot of excuses, but you really just wanted to take advantage of Allen and profit off his fame, didn't you?" Lia accused.

"Grk... I won't deny it," the chairwoman responded, biting her lip. "But the Allen effect was just as immense as we expected! Look at this!"

She took a piece of paper out of a drawer.

"What's that?" I asked.

"This is the number of applicants Thousand Blade has received in each of the last ten years. Look at the figures for this year!" the chairwoman urged.

"W-wow, that's so many people," I said. The number was an astounding three times higher than last year. "What would happen if I rejected the role of chief proctor?"

"Thousand Blade would get accused of fraud and be placed into an unprecedented crisis. It could even mean the end for this academy," Chairwoman Reia responded.

"I see." She had acted without thinking, as usual. "Haah... Fine. I'll do it."

I owed Chairwoman Reia a lot. She'd taught me how to perform Soul Attire training and had helped to save Lia when she was abducted. I also bore some responsibility for Thousand Blade's financial situation; it was my fault that Zeon destroyed the main school building.

"R-really?! You'll actually do it?!" the chairwoman exclaimed.

"Yes. But please never do anything like this again. If you just consult with me before—," I began, before getting interrupted.

"Sweet! Hell yeah!" the chairwoman yelled, balling her fists with excitement.

She's not listening to me..., I thought, sighing mentally. I would put money on her doing something like this again in the future.

"Hey, Allen. I think I've said this before, but you need to be harder on people... Not that I think you'll ever take that advice," Lia said.

"Your kindness is a strength, but it's also a weakness... Though I doubt you'll ever change," Rose said.

Both girls sighed in resignation.

Over the following days, we finally regained some calm in our lives. We spent our school hours attending our usual strict Soul Attire classes and our afternoons meeting with the Practice-Swing Club. Afterward, Lia and I would return to our dorm, eat dinner, and silently perform more practice swings until late into the night.

I've been able to devote all my time to my swordcraft like I've always wanted, but...one thing's been bothering me. And it's making me feel really awkward...

Shii had been acting strangely lately. She would avert her eyes whenever I looked at her and back up whenever I approached her. But if I ignored her for

too long, she would stare at me like she was lonely. Lilim and Tirith giggled and told me not to worry when I asked them about it, but...

Shii's been acting weird for about three weeks now. How can I not worry? She might have been acting strangely because there was something she wanted to tell me alone... Okay. I'll ask about it the next time we're by ourselves.

I continued to think about that as I read the handbook Chairwoman Reia had given me—the *Entrance Examination Implementation Guidelines*—and got ready for the big day.

February 1, the day of the Thousand Blade entrance examination, arrived. It was currently half past eight in the morning, thirty minutes before start time. I went to campus early with Lia and Rose to fulfill our roles as chief proctor and assistants, respectively, and we busied ourselves with preparations.

Man, I'm getting pretty nervous, I thought with a sigh in the Class 1-A classroom, which we had chosen as the base for the Entrance Examination Committee. An entrance examination was a major event in a person's life. The applicants all trained hard in middle school to prepare for this day. As chief proctor, I needed to be aware of my responsibility and conduct the exam without any mistakes.

## Deep breaths...

I had read the *Entrance Examination Implementation Guidelines* front to back many times. I'd also memorized the route to the test site, my instructions for the test-takers, what to do in an emergency, and more. I had done everything I could to prepare in the short three-week period I was given... Or so I hoped anyway.

...It'll all be okay, I told myself. I put on my armband signifying my position on the Entrance Examination Committee and inserted into my ear the small transceiver Chairwoman Reia had given me. Now I was good to go.

"Are you ready, Lia and Rose?" I asked.

"Yep, any time!" Lia answered enthusiastically.

"Same here," Rose said, matching Lia's energy.

Shortly afterward, I heard a voice in my ear.

"Reia here. Are you ready?" Chairwoman Reia asked through the transceiver.

"Allen here. We can start any time," I responded.

"Understood. Go ahead and move to the test site. Contact me immediately if you have any trouble. That's all from me. Over," the chairwoman said, ending the transmission.

"All right, let's move to the test site," I said.

"Yeah," Lia responded.

"Let's go," Rose said.

We walked to the test site in front of the main school building and silently waited for the examinees to arrive.

About ten minutes after we'd arrived at the test site, the deputy chairman came into view, leading a large crowd of examinees.

"Th-that's so many people...," I remarked quietly.

"You don't realize how many people three thousand is until you see it in person," Lia responded.

"Hey, look over there! It's Allen Rodol!"

"Wow, it's really him..."

"I've heard rumors about his power of darkness. I hope we get to see him use it at least once."

The examinees began to buzz excitedly when they laid eyes on me. The deputy chairman quickly had them line up. Once that was done, everyone stared at me.

"They're all waiting for your directions, Allen," Lia said.

"Try not to seem too nervous," Rose said.

"I'll do my best," I responded, stepping forward. "It's time to begin the Thousand Blade Academy Entrance Exa—"

"Listen up, Reject Swordsman!" someone yelled, interrupting me with an insult I'd heard many times before. I looked toward the source of the voice and saw three students wearing Grand Swordcraft Academy uniforms, glaring daggers at me.

"There's no way a loser like you with the worst grades in the academy could possibly have defeated Dodriel!"

"I don't know how you did it, but you must have cheated!"

"It's your fault that Dodriel lost his way... We're here to get our revenge!"

They all vigorously drew their swords. They clearly intended to fight me.

"Haah... Allen here. Sorry, but we already have trouble," I said to Chairwoman Reia after turning on the small transceiver in my ear. She was standing by in her office.

"Reia here. What happened?" she asked.

"A group of my underclassmen from Grand Swordcraft Academy seem to be out for revenge," I said.

"I see. Beat the crap out of them to make an example. Reia out," she said before ending the transmission.

"'Beat the crap out of them'? Really?" I said to myself, disappointed by her extreme answer.

I'm pretty sure I know what she's doing right now... I'd heard a page turn right before she hung up. That meant she was immersing herself in this week's edition of Weekly Shonen Blade. She never changes, even on days that will decide the fate of the academy...

I scratched my cheek awkwardly.

"What are you gonna do, Allen?" Lia whispered.

"You have to administer the special exam after this. Should we take care of these guys so you can save your energy?" Rose whispered. "...No, I'll handle it," I responded.

The three students had come here targeting "Allen Rodol from Grand Swordcraft Academy." If Lia and Rose drove them away, they would probably just come crawling back and find me again in the future. This was something from my past that I needed to close the book on myself.

"Okay... Should we do this?" I called out, stretching and taking one step forward.

Chairwoman Reia told me to beat the crap out of them, and I want to end this quickly. It was 8:55 in the morning right now, five minutes before the exams would start. If this took too long, the schedule would get pushed back. The last thing I wanted to do was make the nervous examinees wait longer than they should.

"Heh! I'm gonna expose you for the loser you are in front of this entire crowd, Reject Swordsman!"

"You were the worst student at Grand Swordcraft Academy! You're gonna pay for acting like you're better than you are!"

"It's finally time to get revenge for Dodriel... We're gonna beat you to a pulp and send you crying home to Mommy!"

The three swordsmen yelled at me abusively, darkening the mood of the test site.

... Yep, I can't overlook this. I couldn't care less about their insults. As chief proctor, however, I couldn't allow them to inconvenience the other examinees.

"We're all swordsmen here. How about we let our blades do the talking?" I warned them, allowing a little malice to seep into my attitude.

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"""...?!"""
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The three of them went pale and took a large step back.

"Why did a shiver just run down my spine?!"

"H-he's bluffing! Don't let him swindle you with his words!"

"Y-yeah...! Allen Rodol is nothing more than a Reject Swordsman!"

The three of them yelled to fire themselves up and shot their hands out into the air.

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"Burn Bright—Flame Axe!"
"Howl—Wind Kid!"
"Slay—Triple Blade!"
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They summoned their Soul Attires simultaneously.

"...Amazing," I remarked. It seemed like they were significantly more talented than me.

"Are you surprised?!" one of them yelled.

"Yeah, I am," I responded honestly. Their glares intensified.

"Ngh, I didn't expect you to keep your composure for this long... Show us what you've got!"

"You'll regret underestimating us, you failure!"

"Diiiieeee!"

They all screamed and charged at me. I faced a scorching hot downward swing on my right, a gale-infused upward swing on my left, and a three-blade downward diagonal slash up ahead. The students were performing three perfectly coordinated attacks from three different directions.

But their training is lacking. Their grips were weak. Their footwork was careless. And most importantly, they weren't putting their weight into their swings. Since they'd obtained tremendous power through manifesting their Soul Attires, they must have neglected the most fundamental swordcraft training exercise—practice swings.

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"Seventh Style—Draw Flash."

My lightning-fast attack rushed forward.

"Wha?!"

"...Huh?"

"What...the hell?!"
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My slash was so fast, it surpassed the speed of sound, severing not only their approaching slashes, but their Soul Attires as well. The three challengers' expressions stiffened in disbelief, and the test site fell silent.

"I recommend you surrender," I informed them.

Duels between swordfighters were serious affairs. That said, I didn't particularly want to attack them again now that victory was clearly in my hands. I hoped they would do the right thing and admit defeat.

"Damn it..."

"It...wasn't a trick?!"

"You'll pay for this...!"

The three swordsmen fled like mice from a cat.

Phew, I was able to get the situation under control, I thought with relief. I turned around to face the examinees.

"Th-that was so fast...I didn't even see him draw his sword!"

"I can't believe he handled three Soul Attire wielders that easily... Allen really is on another level!"

"Looks like they call him the strongest first-year in Liengard for a reason..."

The examinees buzzed excitedly in reaction to our battle.

"You captured the hearts of the examinees with a single swing of your blade...
You really are the best, Allen!" Lia said.

"Ha, those three jerks made for the perfect opening act," Rose said.

"Ah-ha-ha, I'm just glad everything worked out," I responded.

Now that I had repelled the Grand Swordcraft Academy underclassmen, I could focus on my role as chief proctor.

"Greetings, everyone. I am Allen Rodol, the chief proctor for this entrance examination. These are Lia Vesteria and Rose Valencia, my assistants," I said. Lia and Rose bowed when I introduced them.

The applicants stopped talking when they realized I was about to start the

test, and they looked at me seriously. *Man, it sure is overwhelming having three thousand people stare at you at once.* I was extremely nervous, but I did my best to project calm as I continued my explanation.

"As stated in the *Application Guidelines*, we are holding a general exam and a special exam this year. The general exam is divided into three sections: physical ability, swordcraft, and an interview. This is the same format as the exam that is offered every year. The special exam will be a one-on-one practice duel against me. Land one scratch on me, and you will be admitted on the spot. If I defeat you, however, that will mark the end of your test," I said.

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That proclamation sent a shockwave through the crowd of examinees.

"It is possible to pass the exam without defeating me, however. The deputy chairman will grade all of my challengers and pass anyone who meets Thousand Blade's admission criteria," I continued. The examinees looked relieved. "I should also note that this isn't real combat, but a test. I'm going to hold back, which means I won't perform any lethal attacks. You should be prepared for the possibility of injury, of course, but I will heal anyone who needs it with my darkness after the duel. You have nothing to fear."

I cut my left palm and repaired it with my darkness in front of everyone.

"Th-that was it! That was the darkness he used to defeat Idora Luksmaria at the Sword Master Festival!"

"I-it's beautiful... Coming here was worth it just to see it."

"It looks so cool, and it can do absolutely anything. Man, I'm so jealous..."

The examinees watched me with passion in their eyes. Demonstrating my darkness's healing ability must have eased their anxiety. I looked at Lia and Rose now that I was done with my explanation, and they both smiled and nodded.

Thank goodness... It seemed like my explanation was just fine. I sighed with relief and looked at the clock tower. Good, we're right on schedule. We'd had some unexpected trouble at the beginning, but we hadn't lost any time. The exam was going well so far.

"Now, please follow Lia and Rose if you wish to take the general exam. Those who wish to take the special exam can remain here," I announced.

"We're gonna head to the site for the general test, Allen," Lia said.

"We'll handle it just fine," Rose assured me.

"Good luck," I responded.

They both walked off leading a large group of examinees.

...More stayed behind than I expected. A great many applicants had excitedly lined up before me. There's over three hundred of them...

I thought back to what Chairwoman Reia had told me. "Not many of the examinees are gonna be idiotic enough to actually challenge you. I'm guessing that around ten will stay behind. Most are gonna be satisfied by just seeing you in person." Her prediction had turned out to be way off.

"Ahem—we will now begin the special exam. Please give me your exam number and name when you are ready to challenge me," I said.

One of the swordsmen spoke up immediately. "I'm Varan Seimgald, number 2551! Thank you for this opportunity!"

"Of course. Step right up," I responded.

And so the special exam began.

Over two hours had passed since the special exam started. I'd just defeated my one hundredth opponent.

"Haah, haah... Damn it...," the applicant before me cursed. He had fallen to his knees.

"Are you okay?" I asked, reaching out a hand.

"Y-yes...! Thank you for allowing me to fight you!" he said, getting up and bowing. It looked like he didn't need my darkness's healing.

Not a single examinee had managed to scratch me yet.

"Good lord... How is it possible for someone to be that strong?"

"Is he actually holding back like he said he would...?"

"I wonder if it's too late to take the general test."

The examinees whispered to each other as they watched me. I imagined they were sharing what they'd observed about my weaknesses and habits.

"The next person can come forward," I announced. A girl approached me.

"I'm Lou Lorenti, number 2710. It's nice to meet you," she said.

"Nice to meet you, too. Let's have a good fight," I responded. I assumed the middle stance, and she drew two short swords. *Huh, she uses short swords... It's rare to see a dual wielder, too.* 

Lou Lorenti was a pretty girl with medium-length flaxen hair. She was a little short at 150 centimeters. She had healthy, youthful skin and a toned physique. Her swordcraft academy uniform was primarily green.

...This girl's strong. She was clearly different from the other examinees I had fought so far. Her stance projected a sense of presence and experience.

"Are you ready?" Lou asked.

"Any time," I responded.

She jumped at me like a spring, covering the distance between us in less than a second.

"Hah!" Lou shouted, using her momentum to thrust with her right short sword.

...Her footwork is good, I thought, meeting her thrust with an upward diagonal swing. Our blades clanged loudly.

"Ngh... Take that!" Lou yelled. Realizing she couldn't best my strength, she quickly spun and performed a downward diagonal swing with her left short sword.

She recovered nicely after I blocked her first blow. I took a half step back, dodging her swing with the minimum movement required.

"I'm about to kick you in the side," I warned.

Lou quickly lowered her two short swords to guard her side, but I increased the force of my kick to push through them and hit her anyway.

"Oww!" she gasped as she flew backward through the air. She regained her balance to land on her feet.

Her reaction speed and body control are good, too. Her swings were a little weak due to her petite stature, but she could work on that as she grew.

"Haah, haah... You truly are a master of the blade. I thought I'd be able to land at least one blow, but I guess I was overconfident," Lou said. She frowned and bit her lower lip.

This is bad... I need to get into Thousand Blade and form a relationship with Allen, or it's all over, Lou thought.

She sighed loudly and dropped her two short swords. "Haah... I didn't expect to have to unveil this here," she said, her demeanor suddenly changing.

She's manifested it already... I'm not surprised, I thought. I had assumed as much.

"Fall—Codependent Lover!" she cried, summoning a reddish-brown sword from a rift in the air.

Her swordcraft is sharp, she's athletic, and she's manifested her Soul Attire. This girl had already met the criteria to pass the exam.

"Allen... You're going to heal my wounds when this fight is over, right?" Lou asked.

"Yeah, of course," I responded.

"Good. I don't do well with pain, so make sure to heal me right away, okay?" She smiled faintly, and...

"Phew... Yah!"

...thrust Codependent Lover into her own left hand.

"..."

Tears formed in her eyes as she did her best to bear the agony. *Oww, it hurts* so freaking much... But that should have hit Allen, too..., Lou thought.

I threw down my sword and rushed toward her.

"Wh-what are you doing?!" I yelled.

"What?! How?!" she shouted, staring at my left hand in shock.

"Give me your hand, now!" I commanded.

"O-okay...," she responded.

I quickly healed her with my darkness, closing the gruesome wound in an instant.

"There we go... Does it hurt?" I asked.

"Th-thank you... No, hold on! Why aren't you injured?!" Lou asked, leaning her face into mine. Her sweet girly scent quickened my heart rate slightly.

"Why would I be hurt...?" I responded. Her question didn't make sense; she'd stabbed herself, not me. I scratched my cheek, unsure how to respond.

"What the hell did you just do, you damn whelp?!" Zeon yelled, rousing from the depths of my soul.

"Huh?!" I gasped.

My left hand moved of its own volition and grabbed Lou by the neck.

"Acch...?!"

Lou struggled desperately to breathe as I lifted her into the air.

"S-stop, Zeon!" I shouted.

"Tch..." Zeon clicked his tongue loudly and vanished. I regained control of my left hand at the same time.

"S-sorry. Are you okay, Lou?" I asked, reaching for her. She was on the ground, gasping for air.

"N-no... Don't kill me...," she pleaded. Lou jumped up, hugged her body with both arms, and fled. I had clearly frightened her.

Damn you, Zeon... He'd taken control of my body while I was conscious. He'd

usurped my left arm only, but there was no telling how much of my body he would possess next time. I need to gain better control of my Spirit Core. I could end up hurting someone. Zeon didn't need to emerge to the surface for long to cause enormous destruction.

Okay... I need to calm down. My number one priority right now wasn't handling Zeon, but proctoring the special exam. I'll need to apologize to Lou the next time I see her. She was a gifted swordswoman, and I was sure the deputy chairman would pass her. I would see her again soon, assuming she didn't reject the offer to enroll.

Just then, I looked down and noticed there was a bit of blood on my left hand. *Huh? Whose blood is this?* It couldn't have been mine. Not a single student had managed to scratch me yet. I hadn't grazed Lou, either, so it couldn't have been her blood. The only time she bled was when she stabbed her own left hand, and I had already healed that wound when Zeon grabbed her neck.

That can only mean one thing... Does Codependent Lover link Lou's condition to her opponent's? That would explain everything. She'd asked if I would heal her before she stabbed herself, and she'd been shocked when I wasn't injured. And Zeon had only woken up after she harmed herself.

What if Zeon was so angry because her attack wounded his left hand...? I couldn't figure out why Codependent Lover had affected Zeon and not me, but that was the likeliest explanation for what happened.

Now that I had answered most of my questions, I turned around to resume the exam—and saw the applicants trembling in fear in response to Zeon's actions. They were huddled together, staring at me like I was a monster.

Shoot... This is really bad. I need to explain myself... I must have looked like a dangerous, unstable individual to them. One moment I was healing Lou's hand, and the next I was strangling her. Then I let her go and apologized just a few seconds later. I'm sure that made me look crazy...

The examinees didn't know anything about Zeon, so it was natural they would be terrified.

"Please calm down, everyone. That was, uh... It wasn't me that grabbed her neck, it was my Spirit Core... I'm very sorry I allowed that to happen," I

apologized sincerely.

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The students continued to cower. My apology had no effect. I guess explaining myself isn't going to work. I need someone else to vouch for me...

I looked at the deputy chairman.

"Ahhh...," he whimpered. He had also been so scared by Zeon that he couldn't move.

Yeah... This is an emergency. I turned on the small transceiver in my ear to contact Chairwoman Reia.

"Allen here. I'm sorry, but Zeon took over my body for a moment...," I told her.

"What?!" she shouted. I heard a crash from the transceiver that I assumed was her falling out of her chair.

"Wh-what do you mean?! What happened?!" she yelled.

"The truth is..."

I briefly explained what happened.

"...Okay. I understand. What's Zeon doing now?" she asked.

"Hmm... It feels like he's calmed down," I responded after looking into my soul and sensing quiet. Knowing him, he was probably sleeping on top of that cracked boulder.

"Zeon wrestled away control of your body even though you were in full health... We can assume that he's accumulating a lot of spirit power. Please take more care than ever before to make sure he doesn't take control," she warned.

"Yes, ma'am," I responded. I could not let Zeon out into the world. The chairwoman and I were aligned on that. "What should I do about the special exam?"

"The examinees are scared of you now, right?" she asked.

"Yes..."

I glanced at the applicants. They all responded by averting their eyes.

"That leaves us no choice. End the special exam there and have the rest take the general exam."

"Yes, ma'am."

The rest of the Thousand Blade Entrance Exam went off without a hitch.

It was February 7, which, to Shii Arkstoria's dismay, was just one week before Valentine's Day. She was currently burying her head in her arms on a desk in the Student Council room.

"Haah..."

It was four in the afternoon, the time that most students would be applying themselves to their club activities. Warm light shined through the window, and shouts were audible from the Practice-Swing Club in the schoolyard.

Urgh, what should I do...? I only have one week...

Shii fiddled with her beautiful black hair, feeling stressed. She had been trying to get herself to ask Allen what his favorite chocolate was in preparation for Valentine's Day, but her mind went blank every time she looked at him. She could barely get even a word out.

"Haah..." Shii sighed for the umpteenth time, frustrated with herself.

"What are you acting so stressed about, Shii?" Lilim asked.

"You've been really absent-minded lately...," Tirith said.

Shii shook her head in protest. "I'm not stressed about anything..."

Lilim and Tirith could tell from Shii's dead voice and weak eyes that their friend was at the end of her rope. They nodded to each other.

"Shii...we've been best friends for a decade. There are no secrets between us," Lilim said.

"You'll feel better if you speak to us...," Tirith added.

"About what?" Shii asked.

"Allen. You like him, don't you?" Lilim asked.

"It's been obvious for a while," Tirith said.

"HUH?! Wh-wh-what do you mean?!" Shii shouted, blushing deep red and jumping out of her chair.

"Hold your horses, Shii. We won't tell anyone. Try sharing your feelings with us. We might be able to help," Lilim offered.

"Believe it or not, we're romance pros who have studied countless textbooks on love. We have plenty of advice we can share," Tirith said.

"Y-you'll help me...?" Shii asked, giving in to the Devil's whispers.

Ha-ha, she bit! Lilim thought.

Just one more push! Tirith thought.

Both of Shii's friends smiled kindly. Neither one of them was about to pass up this opportunity.

"Duh! We'd do anything for our best friend!" Lilim exclaimed.

"All our knowledge is yours...!" Tirith said.

I'm totally lost right now. I can't even handle speaking to Allen. This situation is only going to get worse unless I take them up on their offer, Shii thought, reassured by her friends' words.

"O-okay. You're right. I think I like...no, love Allen!" she shouted, her skin flushing a deep red.

"Ha, you finally admitted it. That means it's time to start the 'How to Woo Allen Meeting'!" Lilim proclaimed. Tirith shot confetti into the air with a party popper she had been hiding.

They quickly sat down at their desks and began the meeting.

"I'm gonna start with a question, Shii... Why have you been acting so suspiciously lately?" Lilim asked.

"You always look away when you make eye contact with Allen and back off when he approaches you, and it's super obvious. You even respond coldly when he tries talking to you. Acting like that is only going to push him away."

"Urk. I, uh..." Shii looked down, unable to deny their accusations. "I've been feeling really self-conscious around him. I can't even speak properly..."

"Yikes, your symptoms are really bad," Lilim responded.

"I suppose you can't be blamed for that. You're a pure and inexperienced girl...," Tirith added.

*uuu ...* 

A heavy silence befell them. Lilim and Tirith then got up from their seats in perfect sync.

"This might be a little cruel, but...we need to make sure you know what you're getting into. Allen doesn't seem to be aware of it, but he's extremely popular. Ladies can't resist his kind face, warm personality, and nation-level strength. You can bet other girls are gonna shoot their shot!" Lilim said.

"He'll be taken before you know it if you don't make a move soon!" Tirith warned.

Shii went pale. Lilim and Tirith were self-proclaimed experts on romance—they had to know what they were talking about. At this rate, her prince was going to end up with someone else. The very thought threatened to tear her heart asunder.

"There are a lot of girls who are after Allen, and they're all formidable... Lia Vesteria definitely likes him, and I'd bet Rose Valencia and Idora Luksmaria do, too. Who knows who else could be lurking in the shadows!" Lilim said.

"You don't have time to sit around twiddling your thumbs!" Tirith insisted.

Oh no... What should I do?! Shii thought, panicking.

Ha-ha-ha... This is getting fun! Lilim thought.

Wow... Shii is the cutest girl in the world when she's stressed out like this! Tirith thought.

"Don't worry, Shii. We know for a fact that Allen likes you," Lilim said.

"You'll have a pretty good chance of wooing him if you just do the right thing," Tirith added.

First the stick, then the carrot.

"R-really...?" Shii asked, falling into their trap all too easily.

"Of course! Think about it. Allen went all the way to the Holy Ronelian Empire to save you. He wouldn't have done that unless he felt a lot of affection for you!" Lilim insisted.

"Allen has stuck with you despite all the selfish things you've said and done. What is that if not love?" Tirith asked.

"Heh-heh... You think so...?" Shii responded, acting like a bashful child.

"I'm guessing that Allen has zero experience with romance, just like you! His innocent reactions always leave no room for doubt!" Lilim declared.

"He might be inhuman, but Allen's still a guy. All dudes his age are beasts. Seducing him will be a cinch if you use your body!" Tirith said.

"M-my body?!" Shii responded, shocked.

"Don't worry. You have a banging figure," Lilim said.

"Lean your massive chest forward and casually press it onto him, and he's yours! Easy as that!" Tirith instructed.

"M-my chest...?" Shii looked down at her soft, prominent bosom.

Lilim and Tirith spent the next hour giving Shii fake advice about romance they claimed to have gotten from textbooks. The president greedily lapped it up.

"I...I feel like I can do this!" Shii said.

"Then you should strike while the iron's hot! Let's call Allen over right away!" Lilim urged.

"I have friends in the Broadcasting Club! I'll go ask for their help!" Tirith said.

"That would be great!" Shii responded.

Encouraged by her friends, Shii embarked on her plan to win Allen's heart.

It was February 7. I was devoting myself to practice swings, as usual.

Man, our numbers have really grown... At the time of its founding, the Practice-Swing Club had consisted only of my Class 1-A classmates, and we always swung our swords quietly in the corner of the schoolyard. Now, however, we had nearly two hundred members, which required us to rent the entire schoolyard.

"Hah! Yah! Ho!"

Some students shouted energetically as they swung their blades.

"..."

Some students meditated intently while holding the middle stance.

"Oh, that makes sense. You do it like...this!"

Other students practiced various slashes while referencing their textbooks.

Everyone in the schoolyard was seriously engaging with their swordcraft. The sense of unity was thrilling.

""Hah! Yah! Ho!""

Lia and Rose were in their regular spots to my left and my right, respectively. They had both worked up a sweat. The sight of them intently swinging their blades inspired me to also put my all into each flourish. I continued to do so until an announcement sounded over the intercom.

"Allen Rodol of Class 1-A, please come to the Student Council room alone. Allen Rodol of Class 1-A..."

"Huh? Alone?" I wondered aloud. That was a bit strange.

"It's one week before the big day... That can't be a coincidence. Be careful, Allen. Yell for help if anything happens, okay?" Lia said.

"I knew she'd been acting weird lately, but I didn't think she'd make her move so soon... She's a formidable opponent, Allen. Don't let your guard down," Rose said.

They both seemed to think I was about to head into danger.

"I don't really know what you're talking about, but...I'm gonna go," I

responded.

I took a break from the Practice-Swing Club and went to the main school building. One long, straight hallway later, I had arrived at the Student Council room. I knocked on the door.

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"C-come in...," Shii called out shrilly.
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I opened the door to find Shii, her cheeks slightly flushed. I didn't see Lilim and Tirith—the Student Council president seemed to be alone.

Oh, I see what this is... The fact that she'd told me to come alone, coupled with her nervous expression, made it obvious what was going on here. I knew it. So there is something she wants to tell only me.

Shii had been acting very strange lately. It was possible she had been keeping another major problem to herself, like when she'd been ordered to marry that Ronelian noble. I wonder if this has something to do with the imperial and noble factions. It could also be related to the Arkstoria family or something else entirely... Regardless, there was no doubt she was dealing with a major problem she couldn't handle by herself.

I'm glad, though. I was overjoyed that she had decided to rely on me. It's time to show my worth as a guy—no, as a swordsman! I needed to answer her trust by doing my best to help her.

"What's wrong, President?" I asked, making an effort to sound kind.

Shii looked at me nervously, sitting in her usual seat. "A-Allen...can you please sit right here...?" she asked, patting the chair next to her.

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"Sure," I responded, sitting down without asking why.
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"..."

"…"

We stared at each other in silence for a few seconds.

Uh... Is it my job as the guy to say something witty and start the conversation? I wondered.

<sup>&</sup>quot;Okay," I responded.

"D-does it feel hot in here?" Shii asked shrilly before loosening her tie and undoing two buttons on her shirt. This exposed some of her ample cleavage.

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I tried my best not to notice as I voiced a doubt in my mind. "It's winter..."

"...?! Y-yeah, I don't know what I was thinking...," Shii stuttered.

"Huh..."

"..."

"..."

Another awkward silence.

Was that an attempt at a joke? I wondered.

Is Allen even human? His instincts should be taking over right now... How is he staying calm when he can see my chest like this?

The only sound was the ticking of the clock.

"I-I've never told you this before, but I can do palm reading!" Shii said out of nowhere.

"Palm reading?" I repeated.

"Yeah. I'm gonna give you a special reading today! Give me your hand," Shii requested.

"Okay..." I held out my right palm.

"Hmm... Hmm... Interesting."

She leaned forward as she traced my life line with a soft, slim finger. It tickled slightly, but that was hardly a concern compared to the serious problem that was occurring before my very eyes.

Th-this is bad... Shii had yet to rebutton her shirt, so it was impossible to avoid looking at her large chest and cute pink bra as she leaned forward. This is more than I can take... Mustering every last bit of self-control in me, I jerked my head upward.

"H-hey, Allen...can I ask you a question to raise the accuracy of this reading?"

Shii inquired, her voice quivering.

"Sure, go ahead...," I responded.

"Thanks. Here we go..." She exhaled a large breath and adopted a look of concentration. "Wh-what's your favorite kind of chocolate?"

"Uhh... If I had to choose, I guess I'd say milk chocolate." I didn't see what that had to do with palm reading, but I answered anyway.

"You like milk chocolate the best?"

"Yes."

Shii pumped both fists, her eyes shining with joy for some reason I didn't understand. She was still leaning forward when she did that, so she ended up drawing even more attention to her breasts.

*"…"* 

I realized I was staring, then quickly shook my head and turned away to stare into space. I can't take any more of this... I cleared my throat, deciding that I needed to speak up.

"Um, President...?" I said.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I don't mean to be rude, but...could you please button up your shirt to hide your chest?" I requested.

"My chest ...?!"

Little of what Shii had done since I entered the classroom made sense, but that had apparently been an accident. She blushed furiously and quickly refastened her buttons and necktie.

Something is really weird about her today... She hasn't given me the results of the palm reading yet, and she's been acting erratically, I thought.

I'm so stupid! Stupid, stupid, stupid! I should've rebuttoned my shirt after my "does it feel hot in here" plan failed... Wait, did Allen see my bra?! I was only supposed to expose a little cleavage... Argh! Well, whatever. I got what I needed! I'll make my move on Valentine's Day with milk chocolate! Shii thought.

Shii looked both embarrassed and happy. Confused by her expression, I decided to be frank with her.

"You have something you want to tell me, don't you, Shii?" I asked, gazing directly into her eyes.

"Bwuh...? N-no, I just, uh...," she stuttered, her eyes darting left and right. I had clearly hit the bull's-eye.

"I'm ready to accept whatever it is. Do you want to try talking about it?" I asked seriously.

"...Okay," she responded, looking at me with determined eyes. "I-it's about you..."

"Me?" I said.

"Allen. I li—," she began, seemingly unable to force out the rest.

"Yeah?" I said, urging her to continue.

Shii's ears blushed a deep shade of red.

"S-sorry. Please wait a little longer for me...," she said before dashing out of the classroom.

"S-sure...," I muttered, dumbfounded. It was then that I sensed something from the closet.

...Huh?

I opened the closet and found Lilim and Tirith trying hard not to laugh.

"...Lilim and Tirith?"

""...Ah.""

They had been spying on us.

"Are you two the reason that Shii has been acting so strange lately?" I asked.

"N-no... We're innocent, I swear! It's Shii's lack of experience that's been making her act like that!" Lilim responded.

"Y-your smile is scaring me, Allen... And can you please put away that wicked darkness?!" Tirith pleaded.

They both insisted they were innocent.

"Haah... What do you mean by 'lack of experience'?" I asked.

"Oh, you know. She's just hit the wall that every girl has to deal with in her youth," Lilim said.

"We can't give you any details, but it's nothing to worry about," Tirith added.

"O-okay...?" I honestly didn't get it, but Shii apparently wasn't in any danger. "Anyway...why were you two hiding in here?"

The closet was meant for storing Student Council documents and equipment. It obviously wasn't supposed to be a hiding place.

"Uh, because...you know...," Lilim said.

"Don't worry about it. Look forward to the big day!" Tirith cried.

They both raced out of the Student Council room.

"Hey, wait...!" I called after them.

"Mwa-ha-ha, so long!" Lilim yelled.

"See you tomorrow!" Tirith shouted.

They zoomed down the hall like little kids. It would've been easy to catch them, but running down the hall at that speed would have been dangerous, so I decided to let them go.

"Haah... What in the world is going on...?" I wondered aloud.

Why were Lilim and Tirith hiding in the closet? Why was Shii acting so suspiciously? What did Tirith mean by "the big day"? I didn't understand any of it.

At least Shii isn't dealing with anything serious... Knowing those three, they were probably planning another prank against me. Did they ever learn? If that's all it is, I'll try to be a good sport.

It had already been a year since I'd entered Thousand Blade, so I was more than used to their mischief by now. I was just relieved that Shii was okay. I had been worrying about her for the last month. "Okay, time to head back to the Practice-Swing Club."

I returned to the schoolyard and swung my sword until sunset.

Today was February 14, otherwise known as Valentine's Day. As a guy, I couldn't help but be a little self-conscious about it.

Lia and I left the dorm at half past eight in the morning and headed for the Thousand Blade campus.

"Man, it's still cold outside...," Lia said, blowing white breath onto her hands. She was wearing a wine-red scarf. Nothing about her seemed different today.

That's not a great sign... To be honest, some part of me had gotten my hopes up that Lia would give me chocolate today. But it seemed like I had just let myself get a big head. I shouldn't be surprised. That was obviously never going to happen.

I was just a Reject Swordsman from the middle of nowhere. Lia was a Vesterian princess. Our respective social standings made us completely incompatible.

But I'm still curious... Who was Lia going to give her chocolate to? Did they even have Valentine's Day in Vesteria?

I grew distressed as I continued to think about that.

"Yeah, it is pretty chilly...," I responded, doing my best to sound normal.

A short while later, we reached Class 1-A and greeted our classmates as usual. The room felt unusually tense, presumably because it was Valentine's Day.

I reached my desk and set down my textbooks.

"Hey, Allen. This is for you!"

"Rejoice, Allen! Here's some chocolate from me!"

"Hmm-hmm, it's nothing special, but I hope you like it."

Three girls gave me small cute packages of chocolate.

"Th-thanks...," I said, too stunned to say any more.

"Just to make myself clear, I'm giving you this chocolate out of obligation, not as a confession of love. I'd be scared for my safety if I didn't say that."

"Giving you the real deal would lead to a world of hurt later..."

"You'd better be ready to fight if you want to enter the race for Allen..."

They all smiled awkwardly and stared at Lia for some reason.

"The race for me...?" I repeated, confused.

"Ah-ha-ha, don't worry about it."

"I'll see you later. Tell me what you thought of the chocolate, okay?"

"I'm looking forward to White Day."

The girls hurried back to their seats.

"Uh, sure. Thanks again," I said. I put their three cute packages into my bag.

"Hmm... Good for you, getting so much chocolate...," Lia remarked, her voice quivering.

"Yeah. I never expected I would get chocolate from three girls," I said.

"R-really..." She looked at me with an uncertain expression.

"..."

*"…"* 

An awkward silence stretched between us.

What's going on? She'd been acting like her normal self just a moment ago, but now she looked anxious. Did I say something to offend her? I racked my brains for an answer and was interrupted when the door opened to reveal Rose.

Wow, that's unusual. Rose was far from a morning person, and she always came to school with tired eyes and impressive bedhead. Today, however, her hair was properly combed, her eyes were wide open, and she projected a dignified air.

Who is Rose going to give chocolate to? I wondered before she walked

straight to my desk.

"Today is Valentine's Day, Allen. I'd like you to have this," Rose said, taking out a lovely package tied with a sakura-colored ribbon.

"Wh-what is it...?" I asked.

"I don't know if you'll like them, but it's a batch of chocolate chip cookies I made for you early this morning," Rose said.

"Wow, thank you so much!" I responded, accepting the package gratefully. I hadn't thought for a second that I would get chocolate from Rose.

"...You're a little dense, so let me make myself as clear as possible," she said, gazing at me seriously. "I, as a girl, have feelings for you, as a guy. I want you to know that."

Rose blushed slightly and gave a rare cute smile.

"F-feelings... You mean as a friend, right?" I said quickly, half-panicking.

Calm down, man... Just think about it. There's no way she would announce that she has romantic feelings for me in front of the whole class! I scolded myself as my brain raced a million miles an hour.

"No, Allen. I don't just like you as a friend—I mean that I have *romantic* feelings for you," Rose clarified.

"O-oh...," I stammered. I had no experience with romance, so I had no idea how to respond.

She continued, probably sensing how uncomfortable I was. "I'm not asking you to respond right now. I just wanted to let you know how I feel."

She had certainly done that.

"O-okay... Thank you," I told her.

Rose looked at the package. "Those cookies just came out of the oven, Allen. Could you please eat them right now?"

"Oh yeah, good point," I responded. I untied the sakura-colored ribbon and opened the box. Inside were cute chocolate chip cookies that were shaped like hearts. "Wow, these look good."

"Hmm-hmm, I didn't buy them. I baked them just for you," Rose said.

"Th-thanks... I'll try one now!" I said.

Doing my best to keep my heart inside my chest, I picked up a cookie that was the size of my palm and took a bite. It was delightfully crispy and sweet with abundant chocolate chips. It was a perfect cookie.

"D-do you like it...?" Rose asked timidly.

"Yeah, it's delicious. This is the best cookie I've ever had!" I responded.

"R-really? I'm so happy to hear you say that. Practicing every day paid off," Rose said with a wide, girly smile.

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It couldn't help but be entranced by the cuteness of her grin.

"Man, she's really bold..."

"That was so cool... Leave it to Rose to make a move like that!"

"Goddamn it, I feel intense resentment for you today, Allen..."

My classmates all began to talk at once. The homeroom bell rang shortly afterward. We all sat down, and Chairwoman Reia trudged gloomily through the door.

"Good morning, boys and girls. Another year, another Valentine's Day... It feels downright giddy in here, doesn't it?" she said with a dark smile.

She seems like she's in a bad mood today... That's unusual, I thought.

"Hey, did you guys know that the chairwoman has never been popular with men? It's 'cause she's too boyish."

"Yeah, I heard that from an upperclassman in the Swordcraft Club. You'd think guys would be all over her 'cause of her pretty face and busty figure... Romance is hard."

"Isn't she turning thirty this year? She's probably starting to panic about not finding a husband..."

"Oh yeah... I saw her enter the culinary classroom in a strange outfit the other

day. I wonder if she's training to become a better homemaker..."

My classmates muttered to each other, sharing information I would rather not have learned. Chairwoman Reia's eyebrows twitched; I wondered if she'd overheard some of the comments. Her expression looked at once angry and sad.

"O-okay, it's time for morning homeroom... But I don't have any announcements. Let's move on to first period. I've prepared a special course for you today. *Some of you* had better come prepared," she said, her voice trembling. She glared directly at me.

I don't know what's going on, but this seems like more trouble... Reia had put me through enough over the last year for me to know one thing—this next class was going to be a turbulent one.

Chairwoman Reia cleared her throat once all of Class 1-A had reached the schoolyard.

"Okay, today's special course is a group exercise. It'll be a free-for-all battle where anything goes, including Soul Attire, surprise attacks, and ganging up on one person. It's essentially the same as last September's Shadow Thousand Blade Festival," she said.

The chairwoman paused for a moment before continuing in more detail.

"The exercise will last until the bell rings for the end of first period, and your playing field is the entire schoolyard. I'm sure I don't have to say this, but lethal attacks aren't allowed. Hmm, what else... Oh, here's a piece of advice—how about you use this class as an excuse to attack the person you resent the most today?" she said, ending her explanation with a strange suggestion.

Oh, we're using today's class for combat practice. I had been on guard because of her ominous "special course" comment, but...it seemed like my fear had been misplaced.

My peers all prepared for combat by summoning their Soul Attires.

"Is everyone ready? The group exercise starts...now!" Chairwoman Reia

announced with a clap.

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"""DIIIE!"""
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All fourteen of my male classmates screamed and charged at me together in perfect sync. Their eyes burned with black hatred.

"Huh?!" I gasped as I somehow managed to block their fourteen slashes. Then I took a huge leap backward. "Hey, this is a class!"

I could tell they'd performed those slashes with murderous intent. Those weren't the kind of attacks you directed at a classmate during school hours.

"Shut up! I don't give a crap about that! It's your fault that we're all alone today!"

"Like those slashes would've killed you! Just let us cut you up and blow off some steam!"

"How dare you steal Rose when you already have a babe like Lia... You'll pay for this!"

They all pointed their swords at me, shouting total nonsense. They clearly weren't going to listen to me.

"Haah... Well, don't blame me for whatever happens... Dark Shadow," I announced, summoning wriggling ebon tentacles. They consumed the entire schoolyard, painting the world black.

"Th-there it is... The unfair ability he can use for attack, defense, and healing!"

"His output is just as ridiculous as ever..."

"Stand firm! We're the warriors of light, and Allen's the demon king! Let's end his reign of terror!"

They all went pale in the face of the abyssal darkness, but no one backed down. And so the showdown between me and my fourteen male classmates began...and ended in a terribly lop-sided fashion.

"N-no one should be that strong..."

"Damn it... I can't even touch him..."

"This isn't fair... At least forbid the cloak of darkness..."

I defeated thirteen of them in less than five minutes, leaving only Tessa Balmond, the practitioner of the Slice Iron School of Swordcraft.

"Haah, haah... You're a monster...," Tessa said.

"Hey, Tessa. How about we call it here?" I offered.

He was covered in slash wounds. On the other hand, I hadn't taken a single scratch. It was clear as day who was going to win this fight.

"Heh-heh, what's the rush...? I'm just startin' to feel warmed up. The real battle starts now!" Tessa yelled, thrusting his hand up high. "Sever—Heart Blade!"

A sword appeared out of a rift in the air.

That's Tessa's Soul Attire... I've never seen it before. It looked like a perfectly ordinary sword with a straight blade, a rectangular guard, and an easy-to-grip handle... But I could sense that it contained an astonishing amount of spirit power.

"This is my Soul Attire, Heart Blade. The more injuries I suffer, the more powerful it gets! Isn't this getting exciting, Allen?" Tessa asked.

"Yeah. You really are strong, Tessa," I responded. Getting hit by a Soul Attire that powerful would result in a serious injury.

I slowly assumed the middle stance, and he held his blade above his head.

*"…"* 

"…"

One second, two seconds, three seconds—sparks practically flew from our eyes as we stared at each other in silence.

Tessa is as straightforward as it gets. Given that stance...it's very likely that he'll swing his sword down from above, I thought.

I hate to admit it, but Allen is a much better swordsman than me. No cheap tricks are gonna work, and I don't wanna think too hard about this, either... The only option is to hit him with my hardest and fastest strike! That's how a real man fights! thought Tessa.

After sizing each other up sufficiently, we charged at nearly the same time.

"Haaaaaaaa!"'

"Oooooooh!"

Once we were both in range to attack...

"Slice Iron Style Secret Technique—Iron Cutter!"

...Tessa slammed his blade down on me, just as I thought he would. It was a simple attack that embodied the original goal of the Slice Iron School of Swordcraft—cleaving through iron.

Duels between swordsmen were serious business. He was giving his all—I owed it to him to do the same.

"Fifth Style—World Render!" I yelled, meeting his approaching slash with my strongest attack, one that had the strength to tear through the fabric of the world. My blade severed Tessa's and tore into his chest.

"Damn, you're strong... I didn't...stand a chance...," Tessa muttered before collapsing.

That completed my decisive victory over my fourteen male classmates in the group exercise.

I sighed loudly after winning the group exercise.

Man, I'm a little tired... Not in my wildest dreams did I think I would end up fighting every guy in my class at once. But it was a good experience, I guess.

Swordsmen had to fight every day. Witchblades made a living by fighting beasts and monsters, and holy knights did the same by battling wicked villains and criminal groups like the Black Organization. They often had to deal with large brawls that broke out without warning. The experience of overcoming an unexpected group attack like this would surely come in handy somewhere down the line.

I stretched as I continued to think about that.

"As if we needed another reminder about how powerful Allen is..."

"What were they thinking, taking on someone as strong as a nation? Boys are so stupid..."

"How does someone so kind produce darkness so wicked...? It's a startling contrast..."

The girls, who had broken into small groups of three for the exercise, glanced over at us.

They're not gonna attack me, too, are they...? Fighting all the girls right after defeating all the guys would be kind of tough. Lia and Rose were both rare prodigies with the blade; fighting those two at the same time would make for one of the toughest battles of my life. I don't need a class anywhere near that level of intensity when I'm still trying to wake up..., I thought, my face stiffening.

"Tch, they didn't even scratch him," Chairwoman Reia muttered angrily.

...That's weird. First my male classmates, and now the chairwoman... Why did everyone have it out for me today? I'm not doing anything to upset them... Am I? I racked my brain for an answer until the chairwoman cleared her throat.

"Well fought, Allen," she said.

"Th-thank you," I responded. Why did she click her tongue like that earlier? I'm a little worried. Not wanting unnecessary trouble with her, however, I refrained from saying anything.

"Sorry to ask this of you, but did you heal all their injuries? They're gonna struggle in class for the rest of the day if you don't," Chairwoman Reia said.

"Umm, I'm pretty tired, too...," I responded. I wanted a little break after being forced into such a disadvantageous battle. I was only human, after all.

"Good lord... Your stamina and spirit power far surpass human capability. Defeating and healing fourteen Soul Attire wielders should take the tiniest fraction of your strength," Chairwoman Reia said, smiling as if to say it should be a piece of cake for me.

I could tell that arguing with her would take more time and effort than just patching everyone up.

"Haah, fine...," I said. I repressed my complaints about how I was being treated and healed Tessa and the others.

Our second period strength-training class ended without incident. Once the bell had rung for lunch, Lia, Rose, and I took our food to the Student Council room for our regular meeting. I knocked on the door.

"Come in," Lilim called out.

"You can enter," Tirith said.

They both sounded a little stiff. That's odd. Normally Shii is the one who tells us to come in... What's going on? Feeling like something was wrong, I slowly opened the door.

"I've always liked you, Allen!" Lilim exclaimed.

"I want you to have this chocolate as a sign of my love...!" Tirith said.

They both blushed and gave me cute little boxes.

They're faking. I was sure of that right away. There's no chance they're actually confessing feelings for me. Hell would freeze over before the mischievous Lilim and Tirith would do something like this. They were definitely up to something.

I quickly scanned the room and saw a small box on Sebas's old desk in the corner. It was elegant and white, and it resembled either a music box or a treasure chest. If I remembered correctly, it hadn't been in the Student Council room yesterday.

That's suspicious, I thought. Upon closer examination, I saw that there was a tiny hole cut into it and a lens reflecting light on the other side. I see what's going on here... It took me only a few seconds to see through their trap.

"Oh, thank you," I said nonchalantly, accepting their chocolate.

""H-hey, wait!"" Lilim and Tirith shouted together, grabbing my shoulders.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Two pure young maidens just mustered up the courage to give you chocolate and confess their love! Is that really all you have to say?!" Lilim asked.

"Have you become a monster in your heart, too?! Your reaction was way too dull!" Tirith accused.

"Oh, come on... I know you don't actually have feelings for me," I said.

"So you're calling us liars...? Do you have proof?!" Lilim seethed.

"I'd like to see it, too...!" Tirith said.

"You want proof?" I asked them, walking toward Sebas's desk and opening the small white box. "Here it is."

Just as I thought, there was a tiny camera inside it.

"Wh-what?! No way!" Lilim shouted.

"How did you know that was there?! I want a detailed explanation...," Tirith demanded.

"It's not complicated. I'm just pretty good at spotting hidden cameras," I responded.

Letting other people see your cards meant instant defeat in games like poker and old maid. For that reason, Ol' Bamboo had taught me all about where hidden cameras were likely to be set and how to find them.

"Grk, nothing gets by you, Allen... Your defense is impenetrable," Lilim said.

"What a waste of money that hidden camera was...," Tirith complained.

They both surrendered and fell to their knees. They probably wanted to record my reaction to receiving their chocolate and use the video to tease me. Unfortunately for them, I wasn't so easily deceived. This prank was mean, though, even for them. I needed to scare them so that their practical jokes didn't get any more malicious in the future.

I cleared my throat and smiled kindly. "This camera just got some valuable footage, though."

""Huh?"" they responded together.

"It just recorded the two of you blushing and confessing feelings for me. That video's gonna be worth quite a lot," I said.

They both went white as a sheet.

Lilim was a bright and athletic young girl with distinctive short brown hair. Tirith had dark blue hair that covered her right eye, which gave her a downer vibe. They were both beautiful girls of totally contrasting types. And now I had rare footage of stunning young women giving a boy chocolate. There had to be a huge demand for that.

"A-Allen...? What's that wicked smile for?" Lilim asked nervously.

"C-could you please tell us what you're thinking...?" Tirith asked timidly.

"Hmm... I'm debating whether I should sell this video for a high price or show it for free in the gym or the audiovisual room. There are plenty of ways I could use it," I said, pretending to be in deep thought. Obviously, I wasn't actually planning on doing something so cruel. I just wanted to make them regret their actions.

"Th-that's so mean... Are you even human?!" Lilim shouted.

"You're a demon! A devil! An Allen!" Tirith seethed.

Uh, why did she use "Allen" as an insult?

I looked at them seriously. "A hidden video like this could be misused for any number of malicious purposes. Have I convinced you of that?" I asked.

"Urgh... Sorry. I guess we went a little too far," Lilim said.

"I feel bad about it. Please show us mercy...," Tirith requested.

They both slumped, looking apologetic.

"Haah... You'd better not do it again, okay?" I sighed, giving them the camera back.

"You're so nice, Allen!" Lilim exclaimed.

"Th-thank you...!" Tirith said.

They were visibly relieved.

After I'd easily avoided their prank, we started our regular meeting (in name only). What was usually a fun time quickly turned awkward and gloomy. The biggest reason for that was that Lia, who was usually the life of the group,

wasn't saying anything.

What's going on with her? She was totally normal when we walked to school this morning... But she'd suddenly started acting down during homeroom.

Shii was still being strange, too. She kept glancing at me and looking away whenever we made eye contact. Rose, meanwhile, seemed completely unbothered by the silence as she ate. For some reason, Lilim and Tirith seemed amused by the awkward atmosphere. I tried to bring up a number of things to lift everyone's spirits, but unfortunately, my shoddy conversational skills weren't enough to get us going.

I got through the rest of the regular meeting and afternoon classes without incident, then joined up with the Practice-Swing Club after school and devoted myself to my training as usual.

"Hah! Yah! Ho!"

I happily swung my sword until I eventually caught sight of trouble at the main gate. *Huh?* These were dangerous times—it was possible this was a Black Organization attack. *I should go see what's going on.* I went to the main gate and saw someone unexpected.

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"Huh...?"
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"Oh, hey, Allen."

The person arguing with the guards turned out to be...

"Idora...?"

"Long time no see."

...Idora Luksmaria, wearing the white uniform of White Lily Girls Academy.

Idora had clear amber eyes and long white hair, which she wore in a half-up style. Her skin was white as snow, she was tall and slender, and her face was so beautiful, it looked like it had been carved by a sculptor. Her ivory uniform with green accents gave her an elegant air.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"I wanted to give you this," Idora said, taking a cute box out of her bag.

"These are Valentine's Day chocolates. I made them myself."

"For me?" I asked.

"Yeah... Do you not want them?" she responded, looking sad.

"No, I never said that. I'm very grateful. I'm just surprised—I never expected to get chocolate from you."

"Good. I worked hard on them, so I'd like to hear your thoughts." Idora gave me the box. It seemed like she wanted me to eat them right now.

This isn't ideal... My throat was dry from performing practice swings, which would make eating chocolate difficult. But she'd felt obligated to make this chocolate—there was no way Idora had feelings for me—and had gone to the trouble of walking all the way to Thousand Blade to deliver it. Refusing to eat them because my throat was parched would be way too cold.

"Sure. I'll try one right now," I said, reassuring her with a smile. I opened the box. "Wow, these have a really nice shape!"

There were bite-size balls of chocolate inside.

"Hmm-hmm, I'm proud of them," Idora said.

"I'm excited. Here we go," I said, putting a chocolate orb into my mouth. "Gah?!"

A tsunami of pain assaulted my entire body, the likes of which I'd never experienced before.

This is beyond disgusting... A gross slime settled on my tongue, a ferociously bad odor stung my nostrils, and a peculiar, barf-inducing flavor assaulted my taste buds. A disaster like this couldn't be achieved with a simple mistake, like mixing up salt and sugar.

Is that faint lemon taste from dish detergent?! There was a lot I could say about this chocolate...but one thing was for sure: This could not under any circumstances be called food. It was straight-up poison.

How did this happen?! I thought Idora was good at cooking... No, wait... A conversation I'd had with Idora when she made breakfast in her dorm room at White Lily resurfaced in my mind.

"It's delicious! You're a great cook."

"Glad you like it. I'm not much of a chef, though."

"Really? I think this is impressive, personally."

"I guess I'm good at small dishes like this. I can't handle sweet foods like cookies and cakes, though. I always end up trying some secret ingredient that turns them into horrible monstrosities. My cookies caused an incident in middle school."



I could now see what she meant by that. Food this lethal could definitely cause an incident.

"So...do you like it?" Idora asked, looking both hopeful and anxious. I didn't see a trace of ill intent in her eyes.

It doesn't matter how gross—and potentially dangerous—this chocolate is. She made it for me! I ignored all the warning signals from my stomach and marshaled my facial muscles into something resembling a smile.

"Y-yeah... It's, urk, delicious!" I responded.

"...! Really? Thank goodness..." Idora put her hands together and beamed.

I did it... I actually ate the whole thing...! I thought, sighing with relief and a great sense of accomplishment.

"I'm so glad you liked it. I brought extra helpings just in case," Idora said.

"Extra helpings?!" I repeated, shocked.

Idora pulled five more boxes out of her bag.

Y-you can't be serious... I've never heard of anyone bringing extra helpings of Valentine's Day chocolate! I stared at her, dumbfounded.

"I've heard that guys eat a lot. I wanted to come prepared. Feel free to eat it all!" Idora said, smiling with childlike innocence. She had no idea how much that smile pained me. It left me with no choice but to accept my fate.

"Thanks, I really appreciate it," I said.

I couldn't possibly refuse the extra helpings after calling her chocolate delicious. I put the rest of her poison—or as she called it, chocolate—into my mouth at once.

"Ngh...?!"

The viciously disgusting taste of the sweet ravaged my mouth and burned my esophagus. *Are you serious?!* I couldn't believe it, but each of her chocolate balls tasted completely different. They were all poisonous enough to kill, and they combined to cause unknown chemical reactions in my body that tortured me relentlessly.

Three minutes later—after somehow overcoming the most disgusting assault of flavor I had ever experienced—I put my trembling hands together.

"Haah, haah... Thank you...," I panted.

"Was it good...?" Idora asked, hope in her eyes. Her expression was so innocent that I couldn't have told her this was deadly poison if I tried.

"Yeah, it's, uh...it's drop-dead delicious," I said.

"Wow... That's good!" Idora said, smiling happily and pumping her fists.

... Yeah, it was worth putting myself through that. I had never seen Idora so happy. Forcing myself to be brave and eat all that chocolate was the right decision.

We then chatted for a little bit and parted ways. Idora kept glancing back at me and waving, as if she didn't want to leave. I returned her wave and got a smile each time.

I sighed and rubbed my stomach after parting ways with Idora.

"Phew, that was really rough..."

I hadn't put my stomach through such a deadly assault since last April, when I'd eaten ramzac with Lia and Rose. I got through that by giving what I couldn't eat to Lia. That wasn't an option this time, however, and I'd had to fight harder than I ever could have imagined to finish.

As I recomposed myself, Lie and Rose spotted me, then raced toward me anxiously.

"Are you okay, Allen?! You looked deathly pale," Lia said.

"It looked like Idora gave you chocolate. Was it really that bad?" Rose asked.

"...No. It was a little unique, but it was really good," I lied to avoid making her sound bad, forcing a smile. The bell chimed for the end of club activities a moment later. "Oh, I didn't realize how late it was. Let's get ready to leave."

I used that as an excuse to end the conversation and walked to the corner of

the schoolyard to get my things.

"...What's this?" I asked. There was a piece of stationery on my bag that said, "To Allen." A letter for me... I wonder who it's from. I picked it up and read it.

Dear Allen,

I'm waiting for you on the roof.

Please come alone.

That was all the letter said. The sender hadn't left a name, but I recognized the stationery and the round girly handwriting. I think this is from Shii. On top of the similar handwriting, she'd used the exact same sheet of paper in the letter she'd left behind last month before heading off alone to the Holy Ronelian Empire. The anonymous sender was almost undoubtedly her.

"What's wrong, Allen?" Lia asked.

"Is that a letter?" Rose asked.

They both noticed the note I was holding after they collected their things.

"Yeah. The sender didn't leave a name, but...I think it's from Shii," I responded nonchalantly. Panic flashed on both of their faces.

"Allen...would you mind telling me what it says?" Lia asked, her voice shaking.

"I-I'd like to know that, too...," Rose said, also sounding scared.

They both gulped.

"Nothing interesting. She just told me to come to the roof alone," I responded.

"The roof?! Alone?!" Lia exclaimed.

"I guess she's making her move...," Rose speculated.

They both fell silent, their expressions turning troubled.

"U-umm... I know I'm gonna regret it later if I make Shii wait, so I'm gonna go ahead to the roof," I told them.

"Yeah... Okay...," Lia responded.

"...We'll wait here," Rose said.

They both nodded with dark expressions.

"I'll come back as soon as we're done," I said.

I left them in the schoolyard and walked toward the main school building's roof.

I opened the door to the rooftop to find Shii in her winter uniform. She was staring at the horizon with one elbow on the railing and a somber look on her face. The sight was picturesque.

"There you are, President," I said, still holding her note.

"Oh, that was fast. Good evening, Allen," Shii said, smiling kindly and turning to face me.

There was a strong resolve in her eyes. There was no sign of the timidity and anxiety she had displayed over the last month. She must have gotten over that.

"I came alone, just like you requested. What do you want?" I asked.

"Hmm-hmm, I was just getting to that... This is for you," Shii said, offering me a small white box tied with a stylish ribbon.

"What's that?" I asked.

"It's Valentine's Day chocolate from your favorite big sis," Shii said.

"Oh, thank you," I responded.

She had apparently been waiting under the cold winter sky just to give me this.

"This is a chocolate cake that I baked myself. I put my heart into it. I guarantee it's good enough to knock your socks off," Shii said.

"Ah-ha-ha, I like the sound of that," I responded.

"Make sure to tell me what you think after you eat it, okay?" Shii asked.

"Yeah, of course," I said.

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We both fell silent after she gave me her cake. The only sound came from the happily chatting students who had finished their club activities. The winter air froze my ears even as I felt the evening sun's warmth. Neither of us said a thing, but strangely, it wasn't uncomfortable. We both simply stood there and enjoyed the winter evening.

A few more minutes passed.

"...Hey, Allen," Shii murmured suddenly, her voice charming enough to penetrate the depths of one's heart.

"Wh-what is it...?" I asked, feeling my pulse quicken and trying hard to keep my voice steady.

"Do you think I gave you that chocolate as a friend...or because I like you?" she asked, her eyes moist.

"U-uhhh..."

From an objective standpoint, she'd undoubtedly given this to me as a friend. After all, Shii was the eldest daughter of the most powerful family in Liengard's government, and I was just a Reject Swordsman from Goza Village. I was way too far below her station. So logically, there was a zero percent chance she liked me.

But would she go out of her way to ask me that question if she didn't...? N-no, don't be ridiculous. My mind whipped into a whirlwind of confused thoughts.

"You still can't tell...? Well, allow me to clear things up," Shii said. She blushed slightly and moved toward me.

"P-President...?!" I exclaimed, panicking.

She put her hands on my shoulders and leaned in close enough for our breaths to overlap.

"It's a secret," she said, poking my cheek. "Did I make you nervous?"

"Uh... A little...," I managed.

Shii was as beautiful as a girl could be. Any guy would have his heart set

racing after being on the receiving end of that.

"Hmm-hmm, I guess we can consider this my victory," she said, putting a finger on her chin and smiling like a mischievous child. I couldn't help but be taken by her beauty. "I'll be expecting something three times as great on White Day."

"W-well... This is embarrassing, but I don't have a lot of money," I said, telling her in a roundabout way that I wouldn't be able to afford anything expensive.

"Hmm... Then how about you take me somewhere instead? I'll go anywhere with you, whether it's a café or a general store. I have one condition, though—it has to be just the two of us," Shii said.

"If you're sure that's good enough, I'd be happy to do that any time," I responded, consenting to her offer.

"Okay," Shii said. She stuck out her pinky finger.

"...? Oh, that's a pinky promise," I said once I'd realized what she was doing. I wrapped my pinky around her soft and slender one.

"...I love making promises with you. You're the most trustworthy person in the world," Shii muttered, looking relieved.

...Man, that makes me happy. It was wonderful to know that a dear friend thought of me that way.

"I like how nice you are," I said.

"Really...?" Shii responded.

"Yeah, really."

"Hmm... Can you give me an example of what makes me nice?" she asked, twiddling her beautiful black hair and shifting her eyes nervously.

"Hmm... When you joke around with someone, you always worry that you might have offended them. You always try to involve everyone equally in the conversation during our regular meetings. You always notice when someone is looking down and talk to them to cheer them up. Also—," I said, using my fingers to count the aspects that made Shii kind until she interrupted me.

"S-stop!" Shii yelled, blushing furiously.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Let's consider today a tie...," she said.

"Huh? A tie?" I repeated, confused.

"Anyway, see you tomorrow!" Shii said, fleeing back into the main school building.

After receiving Valentine's Day cake from Shii, I went back to the schoolyard, where Lia and Rose were waiting.

"Sorry that took so long," I said.

"How was it, Allen?!" Lia asked.

"Would you mind telling me what happened?" Rose asked.

They both hounded me for an explanation.

What are they so worked up for...? Oh, I see what's going on. Lia and Rose were worried that Shii was dealing with another problem as big as the political marriage, and they assumed that she'd just opened up to me about it. She had been acting weird for the last month. It made sense they would worry after she'd left an ominous note on my bag telling me to come to the roof alone.

"Don't worry, she didn't have anything important to say. She just gave me a chocolate cake," I reassured them, showing them the small white box.

"Oh, she just gave you a chocolate cake... Thank goodness," Lia muttered.

"It sounds like she put off her confession...," Rose said.

I had no idea what they were talking about, but they both looked relieved.

"Anyway...it's pretty late. Wanna head back?" I asked.

"Sure," Lia responded.

"Yeah, let's go," Rose said.

We split up and went back to our respective dorms.

""That hit the spot,"" Lia and I both said after we'd eaten dinner.

"I'll clean up," I said.

"Thanks," Lia responded.

Lia had made dinner today, so it was my job to clean up. I washed the dishes with practiced hands and put them in the drainboard. I finished by wiping up the moisture in the sink.

Oh, it's later than I thought. I looked at my watch and saw that it was seven at night. It was time for my nighttime practice swings.

"I'm off to my usual spot, Lia," I said.

"Okay... Be careful," she responded.

"Thanks, I will."

I put my sword at my waist and entered the grove behind the dorm.

"Man, it's still cold outside," I said to myself, walking briskly and rubbing my hands together. I continued until I had emerged into a small clearing. The spot —which was my and Lia's secret training ground—was surrounded by lush trees and lit by the moonlight overhead.

"Okay, let's get to it."

I started to swing my sword, but...

"...Haah."

...thirty minutes later, I could only sigh.

I'm grateful that I received chocolate from so many friends today, but...I can't stop thinking about how I didn't get any from Lia. Judging by her reactions throughout the day, I guess Vesteria doesn't have Valentine's Day.

She always looked uncomfortable when I received chocolate, like she didn't understand what was happening. Well, there's always next year...

Lia was a very curious person. I was sure she would research Valentine's Day within the next few days to figure out why people were giving me chocolate. I need to respond by training even harder! I had to become a swordsman worthy of receiving chocolate from her by this day next year.

With that desire in my heart...

"Hah! Yah! Ho!"

...I swung my blade faster, stronger, and more sharply than ever before, my heart behind each swing. I continued for about an hour until scorching black flames approached me from ahead.

"Huh?!" I gasped.

The flames weren't fast or slow, and I didn't get the sense that they were intended to hurt me. It was as if the assailant wanted me to block the attack.

"Hah!" I yelled, clearing away the black blaze with a single horizontal sweep. Is that who I think it is? I recognized that fire. I looked timidly toward the trees and saw Lia slowly approaching, Fafnir in hand.

"Let's have a duel, Allen," she proposed.

"Huh? A duel?" I asked.

"Yeah. If you beat me, I'll give you this!" Lia said, pulling something unbelievable out of her pocket.

"Is that...?!" I gasped.

"Yeah, it's Valentine's Day chocolate! It's handmade, of course! I might've even made it with...l-love!" Lia said, blushing.

"Hoo..." I sighed loudly, clenching my fists. The sight of her chocolate caught me completely by surprise, and I needed to collect myself.

"H-huh... Do you not want it?" Lia asked, sounding like she could cry.

I responded with the best answer I could give.

"Destroy—Rapacious Demon Zeon," I said, blanketing all of Thousand Blade's campus with an abyss-like darkness. It surged like never before, as if embodying my desire.

"What the...?! Is this absurd power what I think it is?!"

"This wicked spirit power... Yep, it has to be Allen Rodol! Is he fighting Lia Vesteria?!"

"Those two are fighting?! Are they having a lovers' quarrel?!"

I heard people yelling throughout Thousand Blade. I felt bad about the disturbance, but I hoped they would turn a blind eye this time. After all, Lia's chocolate was on the line.

After summoning my true black sword for the first time in a while, I assumed the middle stance.

"I'm gonna do whatever it takes to win this time, Lia. I'm not holding anything back!" I declared.

"O-okay! Bring it on, Allen!" Lia responded, gripping her sword with a joyous expression.

Lia and I dashed at each other, locking ourselves in fierce combat.

My duel with Lia was as grand as could be.

"Ooooooooooh!"

"Haaaaaaaaaaaa!"

Dark red sparks flew every time Zeon and Fafnir collided.

"Eighth Style—Eight-Span Crow!" I yelled.

"Hegemonic Style—Multithrust!" Lia shouted.

Lia met my eight slashes with a chain of thrusts accompanied by black flames. I had a huge advantage in physical strength, however.

"Ahhh?!" Lia screamed after my Eight-Span Crow sent her flying.

This is my chance! I rushed after her, intending to capitalize.

"Ngh... Draconic Rage!" She swung her sword to scatter black and white flames over a wide range. I used to have trouble with irregular and wide-reaching attacks like this, but that was the past.

"Not good enough!" I shouted. Enveloping myself in a cloak of darkness, I charged through the flames blocking my path and emerged unharmed.

"No way!" Lia yelled. She clearly hadn't expected me to overcome Draconic Rage that easily, and in her shock, she left herself momentarily vulnerable.

Right now! Once I'd entered the range for a finishing blow, I performed my fastest attack.

"Seventh Style—Draw Flash!" I shouted, severing Fafnir like a dead tree branch, and stopped my true black sword a millimeter from Lia's neck.

"...You win," Lia admitted, dropping to her knees.

"Phew... Don't move. I'm gonna heal your wounds," I said, covering her entire body with my darkness to heal her instantly.

"Thanks... You really are absurdly strong," Lia said.

"Ah-ha-ha, it makes me happy to hear you say that," I responded.

Not wanting to waste any more time, I moved on to the main issue at hand.

"So...can I have it?" I asked vaguely, too shy to actually say that I wanted her chocolate.

"Y-yeah. A promise is a promise," Lia responded, blushing bright red. She nodded as if working up her resolve. "Okay. H-here you go..."

She held out the small rectangular box, looking away bashfully.

"Th-thanks...!" I said, taking it. Lia's chocolate that I had dreamed of receiving was now in my hands. "Um, can I eat it?"

"Yeah, of course. I used the very best Vesterian chocolate, so I'm sure you'll love it," Lia responded.

"That sounds great," I said, feeling excitement swell in my chest. I carefully tore off the wrapping and opened the lid.

""...Ah.""

The three pieces of chocolate inside were hideously misshapen. *Are these supposed to be...hearts?* They must have been melted by Fafnir's heat during our duel. Whatever they had been before, they were now featureless black lumps.

"S-sorry...," Lia said, quickly grabbing the box from me and bowing.

"Umm..." I trailed off. I had no idea what to say.

"Urgh, I'm such an idiot...," she said, looking like she could cry. "I'm so sorry, Allen... I was too embarrassed to give you the chocolate normally... And you got chocolate from so many girls, so I wanted to do something special that you would remember... So, umm..."

Lia fell silent, unable to finish that thought.

...I'm really happy. I was grateful that Lia had put so much thought into this, and even more so for her warm feelings. It was such a lovely gesture that I felt an urge to hug her. But I can't do that yet. Lia and I hadn't reached that stage. I repressed my feelings of impatience and spoke to her with a kind tone.

"Hey, Lia," I said.

"...What?" she responded, looking up at me with moist eyes.

"As a guy, I want your chocolate. Would you mind giving it to me as a present?" I asked, pushing aside my shyness.

"...Huh?" Lia responded. "Do you actually want this?"

"Yeah, of course. That chocolate contains your affection, right?" I asked.

"Um... Well..." Lia blushed and nodded.

"Then I definitely want it."

*"…"* 

The pieces of chocolate were misshapen. But they contained Lia's affection, her feelings for me, and the memory of the duel we shared.

"I won't force you to give me the chocolate, of course. But you made it, so I want it more than anything," I said honestly.

"B-but...they melted into weird shapes, and the color is a little off," Lia said, sounding depressed as she looked at the chocolate.

"I couldn't care less about that."

I'd grown up in an extremely impoverished village in which there was only one criteria used to judge food: Was it edible or not? From my perspective, the shape of the chocolate didn't matter.

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"Fafnir's flames might have burned it and ruined the taste a little...," Lia said.

"And those flames came from you. I'm sure they made it more delicious," I responded.

"...Oh, and..."
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"Yeah...?"

"Urgh... If you insist...I'll let you have one, okay?"

Lia handed me the small box.

"Thanks. I'll try one right now," I said. I put one of the crooked heart-shaped chocolates into my mouth. The taste was sweet, rich, and gentle.

"H-how is it...?" Lia asked timidly.

"It's delicious. This is by far the best chocolate I've ever had!" I declared.

"R-really?!"

"Yeah, really. Anyway...can I have the rest?"

"Y-yeah, go ahead!"

I ate the other two pieces of chocolate in no time at all.

"Were they not burnt...?" Lia asked.

"No, they were fine," I said.

"They didn't taste weird?"

"They were sweet, just the way I like it."

"So they were actually good?"

"It was undoubtedly the best chocolate in the world."

I spoke with a kind tone to set her at ease.

"R-really? Thank goodness," Lia said with a sigh of relief.

"Thanks, Lia. You made this the best Valentine's Day I could've had," I said.

"No problem. Thanks for eating my chocolate!" Lia said.

It was late, so we decided to head back to the dorm.

"I'm so happy," Lia muttered on the way back. She looked more cheerful than I'd ever seen her.

"Umm, why...?" I asked.

"I just haven't seen you fight that hard in a while. Did you really want my chocolate that badly?" she asked, smiling mischievously and leaning forward.

"Uh, well..." I trailed off.

Of course I wanted it. I wanted it like a man craving water in a desert. But I was too embarrassed to say that again. I struggled for a response until Lia spoke up.

"I'm so, so happy right now," she said, throwing up her hands toward the wide, starry sky. She looked like a princess out of a fairy tale under the moonlight. "Haah... If only this happiness could last forever."

She spoke as if wishing upon a star. There was a deep sadness in her eyes.

"Hey, Allen. Just speaking hypothetically... What would you do if I told you the course of my life was determined by a god and that I couldn't escape my fate?" she asked with a fleeting, resigned smile.

I knew it. She's definitely keeping a major problem to herself. This wasn't the first time she had made this face. This is a dilemma... Was it okay for me to invade her privacy and ask what was going on? I had no way of knowing what to do until she opened up to me. For that reason, I just decided to answer her question honestly.



"I'll sever anything that might be restraining or tormenting you, whether it be a god or fate... It doesn't matter when or where you need my help; I'll be there to cut you free," I said.

I wielded my sword for one purpose—to protect my family, my friends, and all those dear to me.

"Hmm-hmm. You really could cut through anything, Allen," Lia said.

"You bet," I responded.

"Thanks... I'm so happy," Lia said, leaning into my chest.

And so my dramatic Valentine's Day came to a quiet end.

The day after Valentine's Day was the election day for the Student Council. It was currently twenty-five minutes after three in the afternoon, which was after the day's classes, and I and the rest of the Student Council members were lined up on the gymnasium's stage. Five hundred and forty students sat before us, each one looking our way.

Man, it's nerve-racking having so many people stare at you... I took a series of deep breaths to try to calm myself down. I glanced to either side of me and saw Lia and Rose looking dignified and standing with perfect posture. They were completely at ease and seemed mature beyond their years.

Oh yeah, we've done something like this before. Lia, Rose, and I—the three students to receive a scholarship—had stood on this very spot during the entrance ceremony and introduced ourselves to our year. I was given the impossible task of measuring up to two world-famous girls, one a Vesterian princess and the other a bounty hunter who was the sole inheritor of the Cherry Blossom Blade School of Swordcraft. The students gave me cold glares when I announced that I was a self-taught swordsman, and I remember wanting to cry.

That was a really hard day... I longed for a normal school life here after being bullied horribly at Grand Swordcraft Academy. I wanted to study, train, make friends, and hang out with my classmates like any student should. But then I became the most unpopular guy in school on day one. I was enjoying a fun

school life now, but I thought it was all over at that point.

Chairwoman Reia cleared her throat in the center of the stage.

"It's time to hold the election for the Student Council members. You all should have already heard about this from your respective homeroom teachers, but I'll repeat it just in case. No new candidates stepped forward for any of the positions, so we won't be holding a normal election. Instead, we're holding a vote of confidence for each member of this year's Student Council. Please prepare the ballot you received in homeroom," she said.

Each of the students pulled a white ballot out of their pocket.

"Now, starting in order with Class 1-A, cast your votes into the ballot box set at the front of the stage!" Chairwoman Reia said.

The students from Class 1-A through Class 3-F voted. Once they were done, ten election committee members opened the ballot box and counted the votes in less than ten minutes. They then shared the results—Shii, Lilim, and Tirith were voted to continue in their positions as president, secretary, and treasurer, respectively.

The Student Council president had the right to appoint clerks at their discretion, so no vote of confidence was held for me, Lia, or Rose. Our positions were secured the moment that Shii was reelected. *Phew, that was a relief...* Aside from Sebas, we'd had the same team for this entire year. I hadn't wanted any of them—neither Shii nor Lilim nor Tirith—to get voted out.

Just when I thought the vote of confidence was over, Shii walked over to Chairwoman Reia. They discussed something in a whisper and both smiled.

...?! That was when a chill ran down my back. Why do I suddenly feel a great sense of unease?! It didn't take long for me to get my answer.

"Greetings, everyone. It's Shii Arkstoria, your Student Council president. I have a proposal for you all. We don't have that much time, so I'll give it to you straight—I recommend Allen Rodol to fill the currently empty position of vice president," Shii said.

Everyone in the gym began to talk at once.

Oh, come on... Just when I thought she had been acting more mature lately... Naturally, I hadn't been told anything about this.

"President, what the heck are you doing?!" I demanded.

"Think about it, Allen. You would've turned me down if I didn't force you into it like this, right?" Shii said, tilting her head adorably without any sign of guilt.

"So you knew I would say no... This isn't going to work. The Student Council president doesn't have the authority to hold an election," I said.

The Student Council members had no major influence over the management of Thousand Blade Academy. An election could be held only on the authority of a staff meeting or someone in a high position in the academy. That meant there was nothing Shii could do as the Student Council president.

"Hmm-hmm, that won't be an issue," Shii said.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Chairwoman Reia just gave me her permission," Shii said, looking at the chairwoman.

"Yeah! It sounded like a fun idea, so I gave her the go-ahead!" Chairwoman Reia said, giving me a thumbs-up.

This isn't the first time I've thought this, but...I really would like to break that annoying thumb of hers one of these days.

"Haah..." I sighed.

She might not do any work, she might spend all her time holed up in her office reading manga...but unfortunately, she's the chairwoman of this academy. The chairwoman had more authority than a staff meeting, which meant that the election Shii proposed would be held.

She never gives any regard for my feelings..., I thought, slumping my shoulders. The chairwoman turned to me with a slightly serious expression.

"Shii's recommendation makes objective sense. You're an elite swordsman, you're good at paperwork, and you're caring. Your reputation outside Thousand Blade couldn't be worse, but...all the staff members think very highly of you. I'm sure that's true of the student body as well," she said.

"Sure, but I don't—," I began, but was interrupted when students began to shout.

"Heck yeah, Allen! No objections here!"

"You'll make a great vice president!"

"We'll all get stronger with you at the helm!"

It wasn't just one or two students—nearly everyone from all three years voiced their support.

"Hmm, it sounds like no one is opposed," the chairwoman said.

"Do you hear that? Everyone wants you to be the vice president," Shii said.

"B-but...," I stammered. However, I knew I was fighting a losing battle. Faced with the chairwoman and Shii on the stage and the entire student body below it, I had no choice but to go along with this. "Haah, fine... But you'll let me back out if the majority vote against me, right?"

"Of course. Okay, it's time to vote on whether Allen Rodol should be elected to the position of vice president! There's no rival candidate, so just vote your approval or disapproval like last time!" Chairwoman Reia announced.

The election was held through a simple show of hands, and...

"That's five hundred and forty votes in favor, and zero in opposition. By unanimous decision, Allen Rodol will be next year's Student Council vice president!" the chairwoman declared.

...unbelievably, the student body had chosen to elect me. It had been only about one minute since I was put forward as a candidate; this had to be the fastest election ever.

"This is remarkable... I'm sure you're the first person in the long history of Thousand Blade to be voted to a position unanimously!" the chairwoman said happily, clapping my back.

"H-huh...," I responded. I sighed, not knowing whether to laugh or cry.

Lia and Rose rushed toward me.

"Vice President Allen... That sounds so cool!" Lia said.

"You were basically already our vice president. Honestly, everything that happened is just your title catching up to your duties," Rose said.

"...Thanks. I'll try my best to be positive about it," I responded.

Lilim and Tirith walked up next.

"We won't have to do anything now that you're vice president! This is great!" Lilim cheered.

"Not that we've ever done any work...," Tirith added.

"So you're both aware that you don't do anything," I responded.

After we'd lost Sebas, I ended up taking on all of the Student Council's paperwork, management duties, and other random jobs. *Now that I think about it, Rose is right.* The only thing this election had changed was my title. I wouldn't have to do anything different.

"Hmm-hmm. I'll look forward to working with you again next year, Vice President," Shii said with a joyful smile. She was the biggest troublemaker and slacker in the Student Council.

...Oh well. Maybe being vice president would allow me to do a better job of keeping her in check. Her tyrannical behavior will continue if I don't take advantage of my new position. Someone had to stay by her side and stop her from getting any bad ideas.

"I'm gonna be a little stricter with you next year, President. I hope you're ready," I warned.

"Ah-ha-ha... Please go easy on me," Shii responded.

The members of next year's Student Council had been chosen. Time would tell how it would all play out.

I enjoyed a stretch of relatively peaceful days after the Student Council election. I spent my days in class and my after-school hours applying myself in the Practice-Swing Club, and my occasional days off going out with Lia or preparing for my final exams with my classmates. The calm was much

appreciated after the chaotic year I'd had.

It was currently February 28, a few days after final exams and the day of the graduation ceremony for the third years. The entire student body was in attendance. Jean Bael—the president of the Swordcraft Club—and my other upperclassmen all walked across the stage and embarked on the new journeys they had chosen. Some of the graduates had been members of the Practice-Swing Club.

This is a day of celebration, but I'm a little sad to see them go, I thought as we cheered them on.

After the ceremony, we returned to the Class 1-A classroom for the final homeroom of the year. Chairwoman Reia, who was wearing a black suit, spoke with an unusually serious expression.

"Good afternoon, class. First of all, I want to say well done for overcoming a year of difficult courses. To be honest, my classes this year were much more demanding than ever before. I didn't expect all of you to stick with them... That was a happy miscalculation on my part. I can declare with confidence that you all are fine swordfighters who are ready to take on the world!" she said emphatically, inviting an air of passion in the room.

"Anyway, there's nothing more boring than listening to a teacher prattle on. I'll let you go with this one warning," the chairwoman said. She cleared her throat and continued with a relaxed tone. "As you're all aware, the international climate has reached an unprecedented level of instability. We don't know when or where the Holy Ronelian Empire, the Black Organization, or the demons—who we could collectively call the Evil Axis—could attack. I ask that you keep the present situation in mind over your break and exercise caution if you do any traveling. I want to see you all back here and smiling a month from now. You're dismissed!"

We left the classroom after the final homeroom of our first year and then worked up a sweat in the Practice-Swing Club as usual. Lia, Rose, and I then headed back to our dorms under the evening light.

"Our first year is over... It feels like it went by in a flash," Lia said.

"I can't decide if it felt long or short, personally," Rose said.

"Yeah. We went through a lot, but now that it's over, it feels like the year flew by," I responded.

It was a truly eventful year. It'd all started with the 100-Million-Year Button. Those hellish billion-plus years completely changed my life.

I'd received a scholarship from Thousand Blade Academy, one of the Elite Five Academies, and crossed swords with Shido at the Elite Five Holy Festival. I'd worked as a witchblade after that and clashed with the Black Organization at the Unity Festival. I'd spent my summer break at a joint training camp with Ice King Academy and on a trip to Vesteria after being summoned by King Gris. The next semester started with Lia being kidnapped by Zach and Tor, and I saved her with the help of my friends. I then defeated Idora at the Sword Master Festival and fought off Fuu and Dodriel when they attacked the academy after the Thousand Blade Festival.

I even took classes at White Lily Girls Academy as an exchange student... I'd also defeated Raine Grad, one of the Thirteen Oracle Knights, when we went to Daglio as part of our senior holy knight training. I met the empress at the New Year's Jubilee and repelled the demon Seele Grazalio when he suddenly attacked the palace. I followed that by working with Kemmi Fasta, the chairwoman of White Lily and the top medical doctor in the world, to discover the Allen Cell, the first-ever cure for curses. And finally, less than two months ago, we infiltrated the Holy Ronelian Empire to prevent Shii's political marriage.

Looking back, this really was an insane year. Each of those events was packed with more drama and action than most people would experience in a lifetime. And I did it all in just twelve months. I can't believe I survived...

I sighed quietly as I reflected on the last year. *That's become a deep-rooted habit...* I was sighing more than ever before after everything I'd been through.

"Here's to a good second year, Allen," Lia said.

"I feel most fulfilled when I'm swinging my sword with you. Let's have a good second year, too," Rose said.

They both smiled gently.

...Man, this really was a good year. It was definitely hard. I often felt tired and

worried that I wouldn't be able to go on anymore. But I could still say with confidence that this was the best year of my life. After all, I'm not alone anymore.

The lonely Allen Rodol who'd been bullied at Grand Swordcraft Academy was no more. I had Lia, Rose, Tessa, and the rest of my Class 1-A classmates; Shii, Lilim, and Tirith; Shido and Idora at other schools; and also Chairwoman Reia, Rize, and Clown. I now have so many people that I care about.

Just as the chairwoman said, the international climate had grown chaotic. Our lives were only going to get harder going forward. But I felt like I could overcome anything as long as I was with my friends.

I felt a strange power well from the depths of my heart—or rather, my soul.

"Back at you, Lia and Rose," I said.

And thus, my first year at Thousand Blade Academy came to an end.

## CHAPTER 3 Cherin, the Land of Sakura

Thousand Blade Academy was on spring break for all of March. Spring break and summer break are the two long vacations that we get each year. I needed to use it well!

It was mostly by chance, but I had foiled multiple Black Organization plans over the last year. They surely wanted to kill me as a result, which meant more formidable foes were going to be sent my way. I needed to get even stronger to protect those dear to me. I couldn't accomplish that without strict training.

Okay, let's do this...

It was March 1. I fired myself up and applied myself to swinging my sword in the Practice-Swing Club. We were still meeting even though it was spring break.

"""Hah, yah, ho!"""

My classmates and I swung our swords with vigor until evening. Once the Practice-Swing Club disbanded for the day, I fought Lia and Rose in practice duels to prepare for real combat. I then immersed myself in another practice-swing session under the moonlight in the clearing behind the dorm. I continued until midnight, when I finally returned to the dorm and got in bed with Lia.

"Good night, Lia," I said.

"Yeah, good night, Allen," Lia said.

I devoted nearly all of my time over the next two weeks to honing my swordcraft, and after making it through an intimidating White Day, March 15 arrived. We were leaving today to go on a week-long training camp with the Student Council. Lia and I met Rose at Thousand Blade's main gate at seven in

the morning.

"Good morning, Rose. The weather's nice today," I said.

"Morning, Rose. I'm impressed you managed to get up," Lia said.

"... Mornin'," Rose responded with a large yawn and a small wave. She truly was remarkably bad with mornings.

"Ah-ha-ha, you look sleepy," I said.

"This is two hours earlier than we get up for school, so I don't blame you," Lia said.

"...Mm-hmm," Rose grunted, nodding like a small child.

Rose is usually so dignified that it's impossible to imagine her acting like this, but after spending a year with her, I'm used to seeing her this groggy.

"Rose, I know you're tired, but hang in there for a little longer. If you just make it to the airplane, you'll be able to get a little more sleep," I said to encourage her.

"...I'll try," Rose said, rubbing her eyes.

"All right, should we get going?" I asked.

"Yeah, let's do it!" Lia responded.

"...Sure," Rose grunted.

We started walking toward the Arkstoria mansion, where we had agreed to meet up. Our conversation naturally settled on the location of our training camp along the way.

"Cherin, the Land of Sakura... I'm excited," I said.

"Hmm-hmm, me too. Did you know that Cherin is famous for its sakura mochi? Make sure you eat your fill, Allen," Lia urged.

"O-okay... I'll do my best!" I responded.

We were going to Cherin for our spring training camp. It was a small island country located on the edge of the Commonwealth of Polyesta, one of the Five Powers. Its cherry blossom trees bloomed year-round, making it one of the

leading tourist spots in the world. The Billion-Year Sakura, which was an enormous cherry blossom tree that was said to be over a billion years old, was a national treasure and famous enough to be mentioned in textbooks.

Over a billion years, huh... It's the same age as me..., I thought, feeling a sense of fellowship with the tree.

"...Cherin is nice. The cherry blossom trees are beautiful...," Rose said, blinking repeatedly in an effort to wake herself up.

"Huh? Have you been there before?" I asked. She sounded as if she had seen the trees in person.

"...I'm from Cherin," she responded.

"Really?!" I said.

"I didn't know that!" Lia exclaimed.

"Oh... Did I never tell you? I left Cherin...fwah...when I was ten. I haven't been back in five years... You should be careful, though... We might see my...fwah...," Rose said, trailing off with a yawn. She looked too drowsy to continue speaking.

We might see her...what? I was curious to know what she was going to say, but I didn't want to push her too hard right now. I would ask her once she was fully awake.

"We're almost at the mansion, Rose. Hang in there," I said.

"...Okay," Rose responded, picking up her pace a little.

We continued on to the Arkstoria mansion, where Shii, Lilim, and Tirith were waiting.

#### **Afterword**

Thank you very much for purchasing the seventh volume of *100-Million-Year Button*. I am the author, Syuichi Tsukishima.

I would like to start by touching on the content of this novel. This will contain spoilers, so please be careful if you are the type to read the afterword first.

Volume 7 consists of three parts: the Political Marriage arc, the Valentine's Day arc, and the beginning of the Cherin arc.

Many established enemies—including Raine, Zach, and Fuu—made their reappearance in the Political Marriage arc! The unpredictable situation and the intense battles were fun to write!

In the Valentine's Day arc, all the heroines conveyed their feelings for Allen by giving him handmade chocolate! It's a bittersweet chapter brimming with young romance.

The volume concludes with the Cherin arc... Or an introduction to it anyway. You can look forward to unprecedented drama and shocking developments! You'll have to wait to see what that entails!

Volume 8 is scheduled to be released in October in Japan, four months from now! To the illustrator Mokyu, the lead editor, the proofreader, and everyone else involved in the production of this novel—thank you very much.

And most of all, thank you to the readers who picked up Volume 7 of 100-Million-Year Button.

Until we meet again for Volume 8 in October!

Syuichi Tsukishima

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