







I KEPT PRESSING  
THE

**100-**  
**MILLION-YEAR**  
**BUTTON** AND CAME OUT ON TOP

~ THE UNBEATABLE REJECT SWORDSMAN ~

**8**

**SYUICHI TSUKISHIMA**  
Illustration by **MOKYU**





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“Hmm-hmm,  
these are  
expertly  
arranged.”

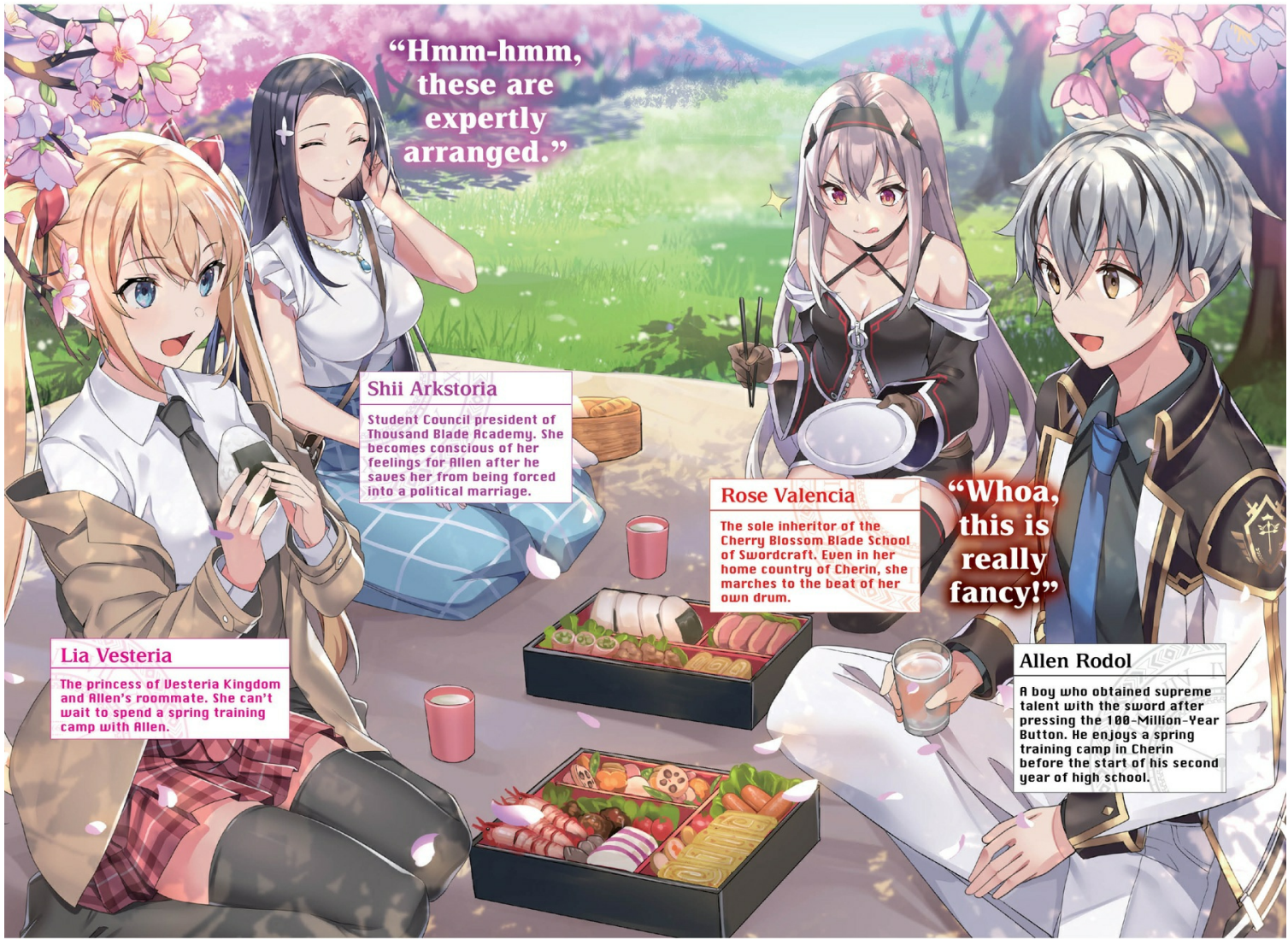
**Shii Arkstoria**  
Student Council president of  
Thousand Blade Academy. She  
becomes conscious of her  
feelings for Allen after he  
saves her from being forced  
into a political marriage.

**Lia Vesteria**  
The princess of Vesteria Kingdom  
and Allen's roommate. She can't  
wait to spend a spring training  
camp with Allen.

**Rose Valencia**  
The sole inheritor of the  
Cherry Blossom Blade School  
of Swordcraft. Even in her  
home country of Cherin, she  
marches to the beat of her  
own drum.

“Whoa,  
this is  
really  
fancy!”

**Allen Rodol**  
A boy who obtained supreme  
talent with the sword after  
pressing the 100-Million-Year  
Button. He enjoys a spring  
training camp in Cherin  
before the start of his second  
year of high school.







**Bacchus Valencia**

Rose's grandfather and a man with a fondness for booze and women. He was once known as the strongest swordsman in the world.

*Let's see how he handles this!*

**"Come on now! Is that all you've got, boy?!"**









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**SYUICHI TSUKISHIMA**

Illustration by **MOKYU**

**YEN**  
**ON**  
New York



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## CHAPTER 1

# Cherin, the Land of Sakura & the Seven Holy Blades

Today was March 15, the first day of the Student Council's spring training camp. Lia and I joined Rose at Thousand Blade Academy's main gate and headed for the Arkstoria mansion, where we'd agreed to meet up with Shii, Lilim, and Tirith. We chatted as we walked through the streets of Aures—Lia her usual energetic self, and Rose hopelessly groggy—and eventually reached our destination.

*No matter how many times I see it, this place never ceases to be stunning, I thought.*

The Arkstoria mansion towered before us. It was a three-story wooden building with a vast courtyard that even had a detached hangar for a private jet. Just how much wealth did one need to build such a luxurious residence?

*This kind of place is obviously out of my league, but I'd love to have a house of my own one day. A two-room home with a hundred-square-foot living room would be ideal for me. Add a yard I could use to perform practice swings, and I'd live in total bliss,* I thought, before I heard someone call out to me from a distance.

"Allen! Over here!"

I looked in the direction of the voice and saw Shii, waving and bouncing happily up and down by the door. Lilim and Tirith were standing next to her.

"President, Lilim, Tirith. Good morning," I said.

"Good morning," Lia said.



“...Mornin’,” Rose grunted.

“Good morning, you three. Are you ready for a fun week?” Shii asked, looking excited for the trip.

“Good morning! It’s been half a year since our last training camp. You’d better be ready to go all out!” Lilim said, hyper as ever.

“...G’mornin’,” Tirith grumbled, looking exhausted.

*Oh yeah... Tirith is bad with mornings, just like Rose.* I remembered her acting groggy before we left for the summer training camp, too.

“Where’s Chairwoman Reia? I don’t see her anywhere,” I pointed out. She was supposed to be our chaperone on this trip. Had she overslept?

“She won’t be coming, unfortunately. She ended up having to attend a very important conference,” Shii explained.

“Really?”

“Yeah. If I recall correctly, it’s a top secret conference to figure out what measures should be taken against the Holy Ronelian Empire. A lot of world leaders and even four of the Seven Holy Blades will be there, so it’s a big deal. The empress and Father are representing Liengard, and Chairwoman Reia is accompanying them as their bodyguard.”

“Huh, I didn’t know that,” I replied. It sounded like important things were happening in the world as we spoke.

*The Seven Holy Blades, huh...?* They were a group employed by the Holy Knights Association who were said to be the greatest swordsmen in the world, possessing a strong sense of justice and overwhelming power that far surpassed normal human capabilities. *I’m sure their reputation is deserved, but I wonder just how strong they are.* I would love the opportunity to cross blades with them one day.

“By the way, Allen... Wh-what do you think...?” Shii asked, looking down shyly.

“Umm... Oh, I see,” I responded, realizing that she was looking at herself. I gave her outfit a quick glance. She was wearing a simple white top, long plaid skirt, cute shoulder bag, and an elegant pendant necklace. It was a well-

coordinated and attractive outfit. “I think you look great.”

“R-really? That’s good...”

“Wow, way to go, Shii. Allen clearly likes your outfit,” Lilim said, grinning maliciously at the Student Council president.

Shii visibly twitched. “L-Lilim? What are you implying?”

“Oh, nothing. I’m just glad the clothes you made me help pick out all day yesterday got the results you were looking for.”

“H-hey! You promised not to tell anyone about that!”

Shii blushed and glared at Lilim.

“Oh, I’m shaking in my boots! You’re gonna scare Allen with that look!” Lilim teased.

“Grk... Oh, shut up! Let’s ignore this idiot and go, Allen!” Shii said.

“Huh? O-okay,” I responded.

The six of us walked to the hangar containing the Arkstoria family’s private jet.

“Over here, everyone. Watch your step on the way up,” Shii warned us. We followed her up the stairs leading into the jet. “Oh yeah, I forgot to tell you. I have a fun surprise planned for this training camp. You’re going to love it.” She winked and then entered the jet, humming to herself.

A “*fun surprise*”...? Did she mean it would be fun for everyone, or just her? Either way, it sounded like I needed to brace myself on this trip.



The aircraft departed without any issues, and I took my seatbelt off after we reached cruising altitude.





“...I’m gonna go sleep in the back,” Rose said.

“*Fwah... Goodnight...*,” Tirith said.

They both got up and drowsily trudged to the nap room at the back of the jet. The four of us, left on the main deck, chatted for a while until Shii spoke up with a proposal.

“Hey, do you all want to play a game?” she asked, getting out a rectangular box and putting it on the large table installed in the center of the jet.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“*Drrdrrdrrdrr... Ta-da!* It’s the Game of Life! No training camp is complete without it!” Shii said after performing an adorable drumroll with her mouth. She opened the box to reveal a colorful board game.

“Oh, this game! I played it when I was little! How nostalgic...,” Lia said.

“Wow, I haven’t seen this in forever!” exclaimed Lilim.

They both gazed excitedly at the event spaces.

“Hmm-hmm, I found this while preparing for the trip yesterday. I figured it would be fun to play with you all, so I brought it along,” Shii told us.

“Nice thinking, Shii!”

“I’m excited!”

The girls looked like they couldn’t wait to get started.

“You should play with us, Allen!” Lia said, leaning toward me excitedly.

“Yeah, sure,” I responded. She looked so happy, and there was really no reason for me not to play with them.

Once we’d all agreed to play, Shii clapped her hands together. “All right, Life it is! Let’s see... Lilim, Lia, and I know how to play, but what about you, Allen?”

“Hmm... I played Life a few times in Goza Village, but this looks pretty different from the version I know,” I told them.

The version I’d played with Ol’ Bamboo had a murky, reddish-brown box, giving it a much darker feel than this fun, colorful edition.



“Really? This is the standard edition of Life... Well, I’ll explain the rules for you just in case,” Shii said.

“That would be great.”

Shii went over the rules in a way that was easy for me to understand. Each player spun a wheel numbered from one to ten to determine the number of spaces they moved. Then they performed various events written on the spaces they stopped at across the board while trying to reach the goal in the center. Once everyone reached the goal, whoever had amassed the most wealth won. The rules were essentially the same as the version I’d played in Goza Village.

“I hate to break it to you, Allen and Lia, but you have no chance of winning. Lilim and I are masters at this game!” Shii bragged.

“Mwa-ha-ha! We’re the best Life players in all of Thousand Blade!” Lilim claimed.

“I wouldn’t be so confident if I were you. I’ve played this game hundreds of times with Father and Claude. I could recite every event space from memory!” retorted Lia.

Their eyes burned with competitive fire. I was starting to feel out of place.

“Ah-ha-ha... Go easy on me, okay?” I requested.

We spent the rest of the trip to Cherin, the Land of Sakura, playing the Game of Life.

A few hours later...

“N-no... I don’t believe it...”

“You can’t be serious!”

“Grr...”

The three girls held their in-game currency in tight fists, pale in the face.

“Let’s see, I have three hundred million...four hundred million...five hundred eighty million guld. Looks like I win again,” I said.

I finished in first place with five hundred eighty million guld, Shii came in second with one hundred ten million guld, Lia came in third with seventy million

guld, and Lilim finished last with negative sixty million guld. I had over five times as much money as second place, so it was a true blowout. And much to my opponents' chagrin, I had won all three of our games.

"Y-you have to be cheating! This doesn't make any sense!" Shii yelled.

"Allen, tell the truth. Are you cheating somehow?!" Lia asked.

"You're way too good for someone who's never played this version of Life. You're tricking us again, aren't you?" Lilim accused.

I would be lying if I said I hadn't expected that reaction...

"Please, calm down. I couldn't have cheated if I wanted to. You brought this game board, President. When would I have had a chance to mess with it?" I responded.

"W-well...", started Shii.

"That's true, but..." Lia trailed off.

"Grr... I should've known you wouldn't give up your methods that easily," said Lilim.

They all trembled with frustration, unwilling to accept I could have won fair and square.

"But...I've never seen anyone get over five hundred million guld in this game! That should be impossible!" Shii insisted.

"You didn't land on a single "bad event" square in all three games! How do you explain that, Allen?!" Lia shouted.

"Yeah, that's fishy as heck! You'd better tell us how you managed that!" Lilim piled on.

"Ah-ha-ha, why would I go out of my way to land on a bad event? That wouldn't make any sense," I responded matter-of-factly.

""...?!""

The three girls looked at each other in shock.

"That reminds me... I've heard stories of professional dealers in the underworld who can manipulate roulette wheels at will...", Shii said.



“Hey, Allen... Does your superhuman physical ability allow you to get any number you want?” Lia asked.

“You’d better tell us the truth!” Lilim insisted.

But they’d figured it out too late.

“Yeah, of course I can get the wheel to stop wherever I want,” I responded honestly. I saw no reason to hide it.

Ol’ Bamboo taught me how to play just about every game under the sun, so I had a general idea of how roulette wheels worked. I wasn’t quite as skilled with roulette as I was with cards, but getting the number I wanted was child’s play for me. That allowed me to avoid bad events, get the highest-paying career, and land on the few lucky spaces scattered throughout the board, which is how I’d won in such a dominant fashion.

“See? If I want a ten, I just spin it like...this,” I said, giving the wheel a good twist. It spun quickly, doing more than twenty revolutions, until it slowed down and finally came to a stop on the ten, just as I’d said it would.

“Y-you cheat... You’re a natural-born swindler, Allen! You’ve been messing with us this whole time!” Shii fumed.

“That’s not fair! No one stands a chance against you!” Lia yelled.

“That’s the last straw, Allen...,” Lilim said.

They all jumped out of their seats and angrily closed in on me.

“H-huh...?!” I said, unable to manage any more as they forced me back into the wall of the jet.

“Are you ready to face the consequences of your actions, Allen?” Shii asked.

“Allen, it’s not good to cheat!” Lia yelled.

“There’s no tricks in a duel between swordfighters. Don’t even try to claim ignorance,” Lilim warned.

I hurried to defend myself as they leaned their faces into mine. “Y-you have it all wrong! I didn’t cheat! That was skill!”

Using one’s skill and cheating were totally different things. Getting the wheel

to stop on the number you wanted took skill. Cheating would be stealthily soaking the spinner with hand sweat to adjust its speed. The real thrill of games came when all players were so skillful that they had to find ways of cheating to get the upper hand—that was what Ol’ Bamboo taught me, anyway.

Unfortunately, the girls ignored my protests and began to whisper to each other.

“Lia, Lilim, what should we do about Allen?” Shii asked.

“Hmm... Maybe we should make him do each of us a favor,” Lia suggested.

“Ooo, that’s a great idea! What should I ask...? Oh, I know! I want all-day, every-day sword training! His moves are so cool, and it would really come in handy!” Lilim said.

“I could ask him for something that will last, like jewelry...,” Shii mused.

“I’d like him to give me a massage. N-not in a weird way, though! My shoulders have just been really stiff lately!” said Lia.

“Flying Shadow, Draw Flash, Eight-Span Crow... Mwa-ha-ha! This new school year will be the start of the Lilim Chorine era!” Lilim declared.

Shii and Lia blushed slightly, and Lilim looked as excited as a young boy.

*I have a bad feeling about this...* I didn’t know what they were saying, but I knew it was going to mean trouble if I didn’t put a stop to this conversation. Shii, Lia, and Lilim are all very straightforward people at heart, and I had the perfect bait to satisfy their curious and hyper-competitive natures.

“Umm... Do you three want me to teach you how to get the number you want on the wheel?” I offered.

“““R-Really...?””” they responded, clearly taking the bait.

*Phew, I’ve got their attention.* Now that I had them on the line, I looked at the wheel on the table.

“If you want to manipulate a spinner, it’s important to understand its form. You see how the handle has these small indentations?” I asked.

“Yeah, I see them,” Shii responded.



“They’re to make it easier to grip,” Lia said.

“Hmm, are those important somehow?” Lilim asked.

They all urged me to continue with excitement in their eyes.

“Wheels with indentations in the handle are actually the easiest type to manipulate. It shouldn’t be too difficult to understand,” I said as a preface to my explanation. “There are a total of thirty-six indentations in this handle. They’re spread evenly along it and are the key to getting the number you want.”

““““They are...?”””” the girls said together.

“There are two things you need to remember. The first is to always spin the wheel with the same amount of strength. And the second is to remember exactly how many indentations you slid the inside of your thumb across. So for me, for example, if I slide my thumb across ten indentations, it will spin exactly ten times and stop on the current number. Just like...this.”

I spun the wheel, which was currently on the number seven. It spun ten times and ended up back on seven.

“No way!” Shii exclaimed.

“Th-that’s amazing!” shouted Lia.

“You really can get the number you want every time...,” said Lilim in awe.

Their eyes bulged as if I’d just performed magic.

“Once you figure out the number of indentations to slide your thumb across and the number that corresponds to, all you have to do is make minute adjustments. If I want the wheel to spin ten times and land on one, I’ll slide my thumb over 10.1 indentations. For a two, I’ll slide my thumb over 10.2 indentations. That’s all you have to do to get the number you want,” I continued.

“That’s way harder than you’re making it sound...,” Shii said.

“Allen, you’re asking too much of regular humans like us,” Lia responded.

“Just thinking about making decimal adjustments is making my head hurt!”

Lilim exclaimed.

They all shook their heads, looking grim.

“It might seem hard at first, but it’s pretty simple once you get the hang of it. You just need to practice until it turns into muscle memory, just like swordcraft,” I told them.

When swinging a blade, it’s important to know when to relax your muscles and when to apply strength, but there’s no time to think about that during a swordfight when every millisecond counts. The purpose of performing daily practice swings is to give your body the muscle memory required to perform a strong slash from any position. Learning how to manipulate a spinner wheel was the same at its core.

“That makes sense...,” Shii conceded.

“Huh, you might be right,” agreed Lia.

“Yeah, I never have to think when swinging my sword,” said Lilim.

Comparing it to swordcraft, which the three of them knew so well, seemed to have made sense because they all nodded.

“Do you want to practice a little? I’ll help as much as I can,” I offered.

“Hmm... I actually feel like I’ll be able to figure this out if you give me a hand with the grooves!” Shii responded enthusiastically.

“That would be great, Allen,” Lia said.

“All right, let’s give this a try!” Lilim chimed in.

The girls spent the next hour practicing.

“I-I did it...!” Shii cheered.

“Me too!” Lia exclaimed.

Shii and Lia were dexterous, so they quickly figured out the trick.

“Grr... This is so hard...,” Lilim grumbled. She was less particular than the others, which was causing her trouble, but she’d started to get close to the number she wanted.

“This is so cool, Allen! You’re a genius!” Lia gushed.

“Ah-ha-ha, I’m glad you like it,” I replied. Seeing Lia smile always lifted my spirits.

“You’re right, this is definitely a skill...,” Shii muttered while fiddling with the wheel.

*Phew, it seems like I convinced them I wasn’t cheating...,* I thought, relieved.

“Okay, now that we’re on even footing with Allen...,” Shii began.

“Let’s play again!” Lia finished.

“Mwa-ha-ha, we’re just getting started!” threatened Lilim.

They excitedly prepared the game board.

*Y-you’re kidding...* This would be our fourth game of Life.

“Haven’t we played this enough times already? Do you want to play something else?” I asked.

“No way. I’m going to keep at it until I beat you,” said Shii.

“I am a princess of Vesteria! I can hardly give up after being so thoroughly embarrassed!” Lia declared.

“Ha, we’re not letting you quit while you’re ahead!” Lilim said.

I could see the determination in their eyes. They clearly wouldn’t want to stop playing until I lost. *Should I just throw the game on purpose...?* No, that wasn’t an option. Duels between swordfighters were serious business; the very thought of going easy on them was an insult to their pride. *What should I do, then?*

I racked my brain for an answer, but was quickly interrupted.

*“We will arrive in Cherin, the Land of Sakura, in ten minutes. Please put on your seatbelts before landing. We will arrive in Cherin...”*

The pilot made an announcement over the jet’s intercom. His timing could not have been more perfect.

“O-oh yeah! I’ll go wake up Rose and Tirith!” I said.



“H-hey! Wait, Allen!” Shii yelled.

“We’re not done here!” Lia shouted.

“Just give us one more game, please!” Lilim pleaded.

“Ah-ha-ha... We’ll have to do it another time,” I told them. I went to the nap room at the back of the jet, having successfully escaped an endless loop of playing Life.

*Phew, they’re the most competitive people I’ve ever met...*, I thought, breathing a sigh of relief as I reached the nap room. I knocked on the door, but didn’t get a response. They were probably still fast asleep.

“Rose? Tirith? I’m coming in,” I announced, slightly raising my voice. I opened the door and found both girls breathing softly in their sleep.

*...They’re sleeping like logs.*

Rose was on her side with her hands clasped together in front of her face looking very comfortable. There were hardly any creases in her bed sheets—she seemed like a peaceful sleeper. Tirith, on the other hand, was snoozing with her face rammed into her pillow. Her sheets were a mess, which meant she tossed and turned a lot.

“Rose, wake up. We’re almost in Cherin,” I said, shaking her shoulders gently.

“Ngh...,” she groaned, slowly sitting up. “*Fwah...* Mornin’, Allen.”

“Y-yeah, good morning...,” I responded. My heart thumped at the sight of her waking up in bed; I had never seen her appear so vulnerable.



“It’ll be dangerous if you don’t wear a seat belt when we land, so do you wanna rejoin the others?” I asked.

“Sure... Thanks,” she replied, rubbing her half-open eyes.

“Tirith, you need to wake up, too. We’re almost in Cherin,” I said.

“Ngh. *Fwah*... Okay, fine...,” she muttered grumpily.

I led the two groggy girls back to the main deck and rejoined the others. Ten minutes later, the jet landed in Cherin, the Land of Sakura. We grabbed our things and disembarked. The blindingly bright sun forced my eyes shut, but once I adjusted to the light I was treated to the sight of a veritable world of cherry blossoms.

“Wow...,” I said, in awe of the sakura petals dancing through the sky. That sight, combined with the gentle scent of spring in the air and the warm sunlight, was enough for Cherin to capture my heart in seconds.

*Man, this place is just as nice as advertised...*, I thought, breathing in the spring air. It was instantly clear to me why Cherin was a popular tourist destination worldwide.

“Whoa, those cherry blossom trees are stunning!” gasped Lia, in awe of the scenery.

“They’re blooming beautifully again this year,” Rose said softly, sounding happy to be back in her home country.

“Mmm, it’s so nice and warm here!” Shii exclaimed.

“Makes you want to get out and move your body!” said Lilim.

“The cherry blossoms smell so nice...,” mumbled Tirith.

The three upperclassmen stretched, clearly enjoying Cherin’s picturesque spring scenery.

“All right, let’s go put down our luggage. There’s a villa owned by the Arkstoria family near here, so follow me,” Shii said. She hummed as she started to walk, and the rest of us followed after her.

*I love Cherin already...*, I thought as I enjoyed the warm weather and beautiful



cherry blossom trees. Every person we passed on the street was smiling. *I'd love to bring Mom here once I become a holy knight or a witchblade and earn a nice enough salary.*

I continued to enjoy the scenery as we walked to the Arkstoria villa.



We began to explore Cherin once we'd dropped off our luggage at the villa.

"The streets look so different from Vesteria and Liengard! This is so cool!" Lia gushed, charmed by the exotic scenery.

"...This really takes me back. Wow, that candy store is still there," Rose observed, looking around happily. She had finally gotten over her grogginess.

"I feel at home in Aurest, but it's exciting coming to a country with a completely different culture from your own," said Shii.

"Man, it's like we've wandered into another world! I'm getting chills!" exclaimed Lilim.

"Getting to experience another culture is the thrill of traveling abroad...!" Tirith followed up excitedly.

We all basked in Cherin's foreign atmosphere as we walked through the town.

I thought back to a travel magazine I'd read before we left for this spring training camp. Cherin, which was also known as the Land of Sakura, was an island and one of the small nations that made up the Commonwealth of Polyesta, one of the Five Powers. The island was originally uninhabited, but the discovery of the Billion-Year Sakura—a giant and beautiful cherry blossom tree on the southern tip of the island that was considered a national treasure—drew a stream of people to the island until eventually a nation was formed. The country grew more developed the closer you got to the Billion-Year Sakura, because that was where the first settlements had been established.

*These streets have a distinct charm.* There wasn't a steel or stone building in sight; instead, the town consisted of nothing but old wooden buildings. At first glance, they all looked frail enough to tip over at any moment, but upon close inspection revealed how sturdy the wood was. The lack of other types of

buildings must have been a conscious choice to preserve the country's unique character.

*I can't believe these crowds...* We were still pretty far from the Billion-Year Sakura on the southern tip of the island, but there was a sea of people around us. I saw people of all different races wearing a wide variety of clothes, which really conveyed Cherin's popularity as a tourist spot.

*This place is pretty different from Drestia.* The energy here was laid-back and gentle compared to the grand hustle and bustle of the Merchant's Town.

We walked for another five minutes savoring the sights and sounds until Shii, who was leading the group, turned around.

"Hey, do you want to go buy some sakura goods?" she asked.

"Sakura goods? That's apparel patterned with cherry blossoms, right?" I responded.

"Yeah, exactly. It's customary in Cherin to wear cherry blossom apparel. We don't have to do it, but I thought it would make a good memory. What do you think?"

"I think it's a great idea," I said.

"Me too!" Lia agreed.

"It's a hometown tradition, so no objections here," said Rose.

"Ooo, that sounds exciting!" Lilim cried out excitedly.

"I'm in too, of course," chimed in Tirith.

All in agreement, we decided to enter a large store that was nearby called Sakura Souvenirs.

"Whoa..." I gasped when we walked in. Cherry blossom tree decorations were set up all over the store, pink petals fell from the ceiling, and there was a stunning amount of merchandise. *There's sakura senbei, sakura alcohol, sakura folding fans, sakura swords, sakura towels... The sky's the limit when it comes to sakura memorabilia, apparently.* The store was positively drowning in products capitalizing on the popularity of Cherin's cherry blossom trees.

“Wow, it’s packed in here...,” Lia said.

“This place sure is popular,” Rose commented.

They both seemed overwhelmed by the number of people in the store.

“Hmm-hmm, I think it’s fun. It feels like a festival!” exclaimed Shii cheerfully.

“That’s true, but getting around with six people in this crowd is gonna be tough...,” Lilim pointed out.

“I’m already having a hard time...,” said Tirith.

Shii thought for a moment, then clapped her hands.

“In that case, how about we split up? We can buy our sakura goods individually and reveal them to each other outside,” she suggested.

“That’s a great idea!” Lilim said excitedly.

“Sounds good to me,” Tirith agreed.

We split up as Shii suggested and began to shop individually.



“Okay, what should I buy?” I said to myself.

Unlike Lia and the others, I had a pretty limited budget. *How much money did I bring again?* I pulled my coin purse out of my pocket and checked my war funds. *I have fifteen thousand guld...* That was the remainder of my earnings from the Sword Master Festival last year and all I had to spend on this spring training camp.

*...I need to spend this money carefully.* Now that I’d confirmed my funds, I began my reconnaissance of the enemy forces. *Th-these prices are unreal...* Even ordinary goods like shirts and handkerchiefs cost over three thousand guld. The prices were probably inflated because this was a popular tourist spot. *I hope I can find a good bargain and save some money.*

I searched the store for about ten minutes until I finally found something that fit my criteria. *Sweet, this is perfect!* The product I’d chosen was a light-pink wristwatch that cost two thousand guld. It was relatively inexpensive and



looked nice, too.

“Excuse me, can I please buy this watch?” I asked once I took it to the register.

“Certainly,” the cashier responded, and I paid for my sakura-colored watch.

*All right. Now that that’s done, I’ll wander around the store until the others are finished shopping.*

I caught sight of my friends as I walked through the crowded aisles. Rose was intensely examining a folding fan, Shii was joyfully trying on a collection of hats, Lilim was excitedly hunting for the right pair of sunglasses, and Tirith was looking at an accessory case. I paused when I found Lia.

*...Lia? She was peering into a glass case with a troubled expression on her face. I wonder what she’s looking at.* I followed her gaze and saw a beautiful sakura-colored ring. *Holy cow, it’s ten thousand guld... That’s really expensive.*

*...Actually, ten thousand guld was pretty cheap for a ring. But by my sense of money and the state of my wallet, ten thousand guld felt like an unfathomable amount to drop on one purchase. But why does she look so stressed? As a Vesterian princess, Lia was impossibly wealthy compared to me. I don’t see why she would be worried about spending ten thousand guld...*

I considered that until a light bulb went off in my head. *This reminds me of something Ms. Paula once told me...*

When I was twelve years old, I made a plan to buy Ms. Paula an apron on her birthday to repay her for taking care of me. *I went all the way to a neighboring town, but couldn’t find any extra-large aprons that were big enough for her. I got so stressed out among the crowds of strangers, too.* I could still remember the anxiety I felt as if it were yesterday. I searched from early in the morning to dusk to no avail, and when the sun set, I went to the nearest store and just bought the biggest apron they had. I could tell right away it was a size too small for her, though.

Despite that, she was thrilled when I gave her the apron that night. Confused by her reaction, I asked, “Why are you so happy? It wasn’t that expensive, and it doesn’t fit you at all...”

Ms. Paula smiled heartily and told me this: *“Listen up, Allen. Girls love nothing*

*more than receiving gifts. We just can't help but feel overjoyed. When you find a girl you like in the future, try giving her a gift that comes from the heart. Remember that it's the thought that counts, not the price!"*

This might have been the moment that Ms. Paula was talking about. I decided to act on that three-year-old piece of advice and approach Lia.

"Hey, Lia," I said.

"Wah?! Allen?! Where did you come from?!" Lia started, putting her hands to her chest in panic. I must have taken her by surprise.

"Sorry. You looked troubled about something, so I decided to check on you," I said.

"Oh... Thanks, but I'm fine," she responded, glancing at the sakura-colored ring for a quick moment. I caught that and decided to bring it up casually.

"That's a pretty ring," I said.

"Huh? O-oh, uh... Yeah," Lia stuttered, clearly thrown off guard.

"..."

"..."

We fell into an awkward silence.

*Crap, what am I supposed to do here?! Would it be better for me to keep pushing, or retreat? What if I offer to buy it for her and she refuses? Just the thought sent a chill down my spine. But... I need to be a man! I can't back down now!* It was time to muster my courage and shoot my shot.

Scolding myself to get over my fear, I took a big step forward. "Do you want that ring?" I asked.

"Umm, well...", Lia mumbled, startled, before looking up at me wordlessly.

*That reaction... There's no doubt about it!* Just as I'd thought, it was time to put my chips on the table. *All right, here goes...!* I steeled myself, took a deep breath, and looked her in the eyes.

"If it's okay with you...can I buy this for you as a present?" I asked.

"A-are you sure...?!" Lia leaned toward me, her eyes shining excitedly.

“Of course. You always cook for me and do so much to make my life easier. I want to repay you for that.”

“Oh my goodness... This makes me so happy!”

She clasped her hands before her chest, bursting with happiness.

*...I'm glad I offered. She was even more elated than I'd expected. Getting to see Lia this happy is worth more than ten thousand guld.*

A great sense of fulfillment coursing through me, I called over a free employee and asked them to get the ring out of the glass case. They said it was a popular item and that this was the last one in stock. It ended up fitting Lia perfectly.

“That was lucky,” I said.

“Yeah!” Lia agreed.

We went to the register so I could pay for the ring.

“Oh, how nice. Is this a present for your girlfriend?” the female cashier asked kindly. She had a relaxed attitude and looked around thirty years old.

“Huh? Oh, um... No, not yet...,” I accidentally blurted out.





“...!” Lia blushed and sidled toward me.

“Ahh...,” the cashier said with a teasing smile. “Hee-hee, good luck to you both.”

She gave me the small white box containing the ring.



Lia and I left the store and walked into a back alley. I was too shy to give her the gift where people could see us.

*Okay, there's no one here,* I thought, looking around to make sure we were alone. I took a deep breath. *Let's do this...* I wanted to make sure I got this moment right.

“Lia, thank you for everything you do for me. I want you to have this ring,” I said, holding out the white box for her.

“Thank you, Allen... I'm so happy!” She beamed from ear to ear and took the box with both hands. “Can I open it?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“Here we go...” Lia excitedly opened the box, revealing the beautiful sakura-colored ring inside. “It's so beautiful...”

She picked up the ring between her thumb and index finger and let out a small sigh. Then, she surprised me by putting the ring back in the box and returning it to me.

“Wh-what's wrong?” I asked, anxious. Did she decide she didn't like it?

“W-would you mind putting it on me...?” Lia asked, blushing. She held out her left hand.

“...!” Her alluring words and gesture set my heart racing. “Yeah... Sure.”

I picked up the ring carefully so I wouldn't drop it, and put it on Lia's pretty, slender index finger.

“Thank you, Allen. I'll treasure this ring forever,” Lia said. She stroked the ring wearing the happiest expression I'd ever seen her make.

Lia and I returned to Sakura Souvenirs after I gave her the ring. Rose, Tirith, and Lilim were already waiting outside, and we arrived just as Shii left the store.

“Sorry, did I make you all wait?” Shii asked, jogging toward us. Lilim and Tirith shook their heads.

“No, we just finished too,” Lilim responded.

“Your timing was perfect,” said Tirith.

“Hmm-hmm, that’s good to hear. Let’s show each other what we bought!” Shii announced excitedly.

We took turns revealing our sakura goods. Rose showed off an elegant folding fan with cherry blossom petals painted on it. Shii unveiled a straw hat with a sakura-colored ribbon around the brim. Lilim pulled out a pair of cool sunglasses with a blizzard of cherry blossom petals decorating the frame. Tirith produced an accessory case decorated by a large cherry blossom tree. All the items were very stylish and suited each of the girls perfectly.

My turn was next, so I showed them what I bought.

“Oh, cool! It’s a sakura-colored watch,” Lia said.

“Right? The coloring on the strap is striking,” Rose pointed out.

They were both impressed.

“Wow, that’s nice. It really fits you,” Shii commented.

“It’s not too flashy, which is just your style!” exclaimed Lilim.

“It’s chic in a subdued way,” Tirith added.

My upperclassmen liked it as well.

“Ah-ha-ha, thank you,” I responded.

That was a good amount of praise for an item that only cost me two thousand guld. This watch really was a bargain.

Once my turn was done, we all turned to the final person—Lia.

“What did you get... A ring, huh? It’s beautiful,” Rose said, impressed.

“That’s a really nice ring. The light sakura color is beautiful,” said Shii.

“That ring makes you look like a princess... Oh, wait! You *are* a princess!” Lilim laughed.

“It looks great on you!” Tirith said.

The other girls had nothing but praise for Lia’s ring.

“Hee-hee... Thank you,” Lia responded, smiling shyly.

Seeing Lia’s reaction, Rose and Shii both gasped.

“Lia, was that ring...” Rose trailed off.

“Don’t tell me... Was that a present from Allen?” Shii asked.

“It was, actually” Lia confirmed happily, blushing.

“...?!”

Rose and Shii looked taken aback.

“R-really?!”

Lilim and Tirith leaned forward excitedly.

*Wh-what’s the big deal...?* I thought, confused by the sudden shift in mood. Rose and Shii turned to me with fire in their eyes.

“Allen. It might not be right to ask this of you myself, but... I’d like to get a present from you, too...,” Rose said.

“Your big sister would also appreciate a present. You know, if you want...,” Shii teased.

“U-umm...” I was at a loss for words.

Rose had done so much to help me. She’d fought alongside me when Lia had been captured by the Black Organization and when we’d infiltrated the Holy Ronelian Empire to save Shii.

Shii had invited me to the summer training camp on Veneria Island and now the spring training camp in Cherin. Despite everything, she had done a lot for me at Thousand Blade Academy, too. I would have been fine with giving each of them a present. In fact, I would’ve loved to, but...

“Sorry. I don’t have much money on me right now, so would you mind if I buy



you presents another time?” I asked, hoping that wouldn’t make them sad. I only had three thousand guld left in my wallet, so finding them both a gift would be unrealistic.

“So you’ll buy me one in the future?!” Rose exclaimed.

“You’re sure you don’t mind?!” Shii asked.

They both looked extremely excited. I guess Ms. Paula was right—girls really do love presents.

“Of course. I’d be happy to,” I told them.

“O-okay...!” said Rose.

“Yay!” Shii cheered.

They both pumped their fists happily upon receiving my promise to buy them a present.

*This is kind of a problem, though...* It wasn’t like I had much money back at the dorm, either. *Should I find a part-time job when I get back? Or maybe I could enter a swordfighting tournament and try to win the top prize.*

Shii jerked me back to the present with a cheerful clap of her hands.

“Now that we all have our sakura goods, let’s resume our tour of Cherin!” she said, pulling a cute notebook out of her pocket. “How about we hit some tourist spots as we make our way toward the Billion-Year Sakura? It might be nice to grab some food and eat while we walk.”

“Ooo, I second getting some food!” Lia responded excitedly, never one to pass up a chance to chow down.

Rose, on the other hand, looked hesitant. “If we go sightseeing, we won’t end up getting to the Billion-Year Sakura until after noon.”

“Is there a problem with that?” I asked.

She nodded. “Picnicking under the Billion-Year Sakura is extremely popular year-round. People get up really early in the morning to stake out a good spot. Honestly, we’d be lucky to find a place to sit at the back of the park even if we headed there right now. Getting there after noon would mean we’d have to

stand.”

“Yeah, that’d be bad...,” I responded.

Shii didn’t look concerned. “That won’t be a problem. I’ve already sent some of my family’s servants to secure us a place. They’ve gotten food, drinks, and activities ready for us as well,” she said.

“W-wow, you didn’t have to do all that...,” I said. The Arkstoria family had already provided our transportation and lodging, and they were now feeding us and holding onto a cherry blossom viewing spot under the Billion-Year Sakura on top of all that. I was grateful, but I also felt a little guilty.

“Hmm-hmm, don’t worry about it. Father told our servants, ‘Those kids saved my daughter’s life. I want you to stake our family’s pride on giving them the best service you possibly can!’ I’ve never seen him in such high spirits. So please, feel free to enjoy yourself to the fullest.”

“Oh, I see.”

Rodis doted hopelessly on his daughter and was incredibly grateful that we had stopped her political marriage. It sounded like he intended to use this spring training camp to thank us. *In that case, we should take him up on his kindness*, I thought.

“All right, let’s get going!” Shii said cheerfully, and we began to tour Cherin, the Land of Sakura.

We started by going to the Sakura Lunar Temple, which was the nearest tourist spot. Our goal was to see the famous sakura incense sticks burned on the temple grounds. Legend has it that if a person covers their head in this smoke, it will make them smarter. Lilim—who had the lowest grades among us—immediately rushed over to the incense sticks and, for reasons unknown, inhaled as much of the smoke as she could, which naturally resulted in a violent coughing fit.

I asked her what inspired her to do such a thing.

“I thought it wouldn’t be enough just covering my head in smoke. If I really wanted it to work, I figured I had to use my whole body to take it in!” Lilim explained.

That only confused me even more. It seemed like the sakura incense sticks didn't have much of an effect, unfortunately.

Our next destination was the Union Sakuras, which were a pair of large cherry blossom trees that were so close together that their branches intertwined. Purportedly, it was a spiritual hot spot that brought people together in marriage. Lia, Rose, and Shii didn't want to leave, and the mischievous Lilim and Tirith teased them the whole time...which was stressful for all sorts of reasons.

After visiting a number of other tourist attractions, we entered a shop called Cherin Mochi which sold Cherin's famous sakura mochi. According to Rose, this shop was over five hundred years old, making it one of the oldest establishments in the country. We all ordered sakura mochi, but something bothered me.

*...What the heck?! Did that just happen?! Lia, who was the biggest glutton I knew, only ordered ten sakura mochi. Is she feeling sick? Is she in a bad mood?* I wondered, growing very concerned.

"Why did you only order ten?" I had to ask.

"I want to eat way more than this, but we're going to walk and eat, so I decided not to buy more than I can carry," she responded, smiling cheerfully as ever.

"Oh, okay. That was smart." It sounded like my concern was unfounded.

We resumed exploring tourist spots and enjoying Cherin's unique customs and local specialties until, finally, we arrived at the famed national treasure located at the southern tip of the island—the Billion-Year Sakura.

"Wow..."

A blizzard of vivid cherry blossom petals painted the world before us pink. I had never seen anything like it.

*So that's the Billion-Year Sakura...*

Its black trunk was so thick that not even a chain of one hundred people would be able to wrap around it holding hands. Firm roots protruded from the ground, and the tree was so tall that it seemed to reach the heavens. Most

stunning were its cherry blossom petals, which glittered like beautiful gems in the light of the sun. The sight of the Billion-Year Sakura conveyed a sense of both the magnificent power of nature and the great weight of time. It clearly deserved its reputation as the greatest cherry blossom tree in the world.

“Wow, it’s so pretty...” Lia gasped, deeply moved.

“This tree still amazes me every time I see it,” Shii said.

“I could stare at it forever!” exclaimed Lilim.

“It’s really easy to lose track of time while admiring it,” said Tirith, wistfully.

We all admired its beauty except for Rose, who watched the tree with a melancholic expression.

“It’s still growing weaker...,” she muttered.

...*Weaker?* The way she talked about a cherry blossom tree like that struck me as odd. *Rose looks a little down. I wonder what’s wrong.* I debated whether or not I should ask her until I saw an imposing group in black clothing approaching us.

*Are they Black Organization members...? No, they’re not. Their clothes are totally different. Who are they, then?* Their silent gaits and unreadable postures made it clear they weren’t ordinary civilians. They were swordsmen, and a strictly trained squad at that. I reached my right hand toward the sword on my hip and made sure I was able to draw on my darkness at a moment’s notice.

The group stopped before Shii.

“We have been waiting for you, Lady Shii,” one of the men said. They all bowed deeply with perfect coordination.

“Huh, I’m impressed you found us. I hadn’t even given you the signal yet.” Shii replied.

“Lord Rodis ordered us to give Allen’s group the finest possible service, so we have been constantly monitoring in all directions,” the elderly man leading the group told her.

*Oh, so that’s who they are.* These men appeared to work for the Arkstoria family.



“Another squad has already secured a spot. Please, follow us.” They led us to an empty space in the middle of the massive crowd of cherry blossom viewers.

*Wow, this is an amazing spot!* The location, which was marked by a sign reading ARKSTORIA and covered by a picnic blanket, was directly facing the center of the tree.

“We will now take our leave, my lady. Please call us on this if you need anything,” the elderly man said, giving Shii a black transceiver.

“Thank you very much,” she replied.

“Don’t mention it, my lady. Please enjoy your cherry blossom viewing.”

They bowed deeply and walked away.

*Man, they’re treating us like royalty,* I thought as I studied our spot. There were six three-tiered bento boxes on the picnic blanket that looked very expensive. They’d even provided us with wet towels, chopsticks, paper plates and cups, and multiple drinks including water, tea, and fruit juice. We couldn’t have asked for a better picnic to enjoy while admiring the cherry blossoms.

“Let’s get started!” Shii said cheerfully.

We all wiped our hands with a wet towel and grabbed our paper cups. Rose, Shii, and I chose tea, which had been kept warm in a thermal bottle, while Lia, Lilim, and Tirith each went for their favorite fruit juice. Once we’d all grabbed a pair of disposable chopsticks and a paper plate, we sat down and opened our bento boxes. They were packed with food including *onigiri*, sandwiches, bite-sized *karaage* and *tamagoyaki*, salad, and colorful fruits.

“Whoa, this is really fancy!” I said.

“It looks delicious...!” Lia murmured.

“The colors are nice, too,” commented Rose.

They were both excited.

“Hmm-hmm, these are expertly arranged,” Shii said, sounding impressed.

“Holy moly! My mouth is watering already!” Lilim exclaimed.

“I’m beyond starving...!” said Tirith.

The upperclassmen looked thrilled by the food as well.

“Let’s dig in!”

We all put our hands together and started our fun cherry blossom picnic.

Lia and Lilim, who tended to lose all common decency when it came to food, quickly got into an argument.

“Wha?! Hey, Lilim! That was my meat!” shouted Lia.

“Mwa-ha-ha, the early bird gets the worm! You only have yourself to blame!” Lilim countered.

“Grr, that’s not happening again!”

They both scrambled to grab the food they wanted from the bento boxes. Rose and Tirith, meanwhile, seemed to be on the same wavelength. Maybe it had something to do with them both being terrible in the mornings.

"Cherry blossom trees truly are beautiful..." Rose mused.

"I could stare at this tree forever," said Tirith.

They were both calmly eating sandwiches and gazing up at the Billion-Year Sakura, which was in full bloom. I sipped my warm tea as I watched them out of the corner of my eye.

*This sure is peaceful...* It felt like a reward for the turbulent year I'd just been through. The last month or so had been a much-needed breather.

*I am starting to feel a little antsy, though...* I hadn't swung my sword once today. *It's probably been more than ten hours since we left Liengard for Cherin.* That meant that I'd been awake today for ten hours without doing any practice swings, which was unheard-of for me. My heart was pounding with a fierce desire to swing my blade, and if I let down my guard for even a moment, I might jump up and draw it on impulse.

*I can't allow that to happen.* If I started doing practice swings while everyone around me was enjoying the sights of the Billion-Year Sakura, people would think I was insane. Even I could tell this was hardly a place to draw one's sword—it would be a nuisance to the other picnickers.

*I'm really dying here, though... What can I do to satisfy this urge?* My body was crying out for practice swings. Or was it the practice swings that were crying out for my body to use?

*Phew... Calm down. I need to think about something else.* I took a deep breath and tried to drive swordcraft out of my mind—when all of a sudden, a cherry blossom petal landed on my head, turning my attention to the Billion-Year Sakura. *This tree really is stunning...* My fierce desire to swing my blade subsided little by little as I gazed at the vivid colors of the tree.

“Hey, Allen. Can I sit next to you?” Shii asked, standing to my left. I hadn’t noticed her approach.

“Sure, go ahead,” I replied, brushing away the petals on the picnic blanket.

“Hmm-hmm, thanks.” She smiled softly and sat down. “Ahh... The sun feels wonderful today. We couldn’t have asked for better cherry blossom-viewing weather.”

“The weather forecast says it’s gonna be sunny for the next week. We came at the perfect time for our spring training camp,” I said.

“That’s karma rewarding me for being such a great big sister,” Shii said, nodding to herself.

“Ah-ha-ha, you might be right.”

“Hey, did you take that as a joke?”

“You’ll never know.”

We both laughed and looked up at the Billion-Year Sakura.

“...This tree sure is beautiful,” Shii said.

“Yeah, it is,” I responded.

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

We fell quiet, but it didn’t feel uncomfortable at all. The silence was peaceful and happy as we stared up at the tree and marveled at its beauty. Eventually, we both took a sip of tea...

““Haah...””

...and sighed together.

“Hey, don’t copy me,” Shii said.

“Ha-ha, I could say the same to you,” I replied.

We both chuckled at the silly exchange.

“This place is so peaceful...”

“Yeah. I just hope this isn’t the calm before a storm...”

“Way to bring down the mood, Allen,” Shii said, elbowing me in the side.

“Ah-ha-ha, sorry.” I smiled wryly and sipped my tea.

*We have no idea what the future is going to bring, though...* The state of the world had become more unstable than ever before. There were reports about the Black Organization in the newspaper and on the radio every day, and I had fought them many times myself. *And while we’re here enjoying a peaceful spring break, there’s a top secret global conference being held.*

According to Shii, the leaders of the world’s countries—including the empress and Rodis, representing Liengard—and four of the mighty Seven Holy Blades were in attendance, which conveyed the importance of the conference. They were discussing what measures needed to be taken against the Holy Ronelian Empire. *I wonder if they’ll decide to declare war on the Holy Empire, to wait and observe them a while longer, or to search for a third option...?*

A full-blown war between the Five Powers and the Holy Ronelian Empire could break out at any time. *I need to become stronger.* In the event conflict did break out, the enemies I would have to face would be more formidable than ever before. There was the mysterious Barel Ronelia, emperor of the Holy Ronelian Empire; Sebas and the other Four Imperial Knights; and the demons, who had joined hands with the Holy Empire and could use a fearsome power called Execration to inflict curses.

*I’m going to need great power to protect Lia and the others.* There was nothing I could do to prepare but keep at my steady practice-swing routine.

“Allen, would you like some warm tea?” Shii asked, snapping me back to the



present.

“Y-yeah, thanks,” I responded. Shii poured me some tea from the thermal bottle, and I took a sip while it was warm. “Ahh...,” I sighed.

“Hmm-hmm,” Shii chuckled as she watched me.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Oh, nothing. I was just thinking about how your mannerisms sometimes make you seem like an old man.”

“Interesting... You know, I might be much older than you think.”

Physically, I was fifteen years old, but mentally I was over a billion. Calling me an “old man” was greatly understating my age.

“What do you mean? I’m older than you,” Shii said.

“Ah-ha-ha, I’m just joking,” I responded.

I chatted with Shii for a while longer. Eventually, the other girls joined us, and we all enjoyed the cherry blossom viewing together.

*Man, I wish these happy times could last forever,* I thought wistfully, indulging in the moment as I sipped my warm tea.



Six empty bento boxes later, our cherry blossom viewing came to a satisfying end.

“That was a great picnic,” I said.

“Yeah, the food was beyond delicious!” Lia agreed, her mind going to food first as per usual.

“Nothing beats Cherin’s sakura trees,” said Rose, ever a fan of cherry blossoms.

“Hmm-hmm, I’m glad you all had fun,” Shii said with a relieved smile.

“Whew, I’m stuffed! That tasted three times better than normal!” Lilim exclaimed.

“We should do this again next year!” Tirith added, the two of them smiling contentedly.

As we excitedly shared our thoughts on the day so far, Shii decided the time had come...

“Okay, now that we’ve had our fill of food and cherry blossoms, let’s play a game!” She opened a bag that had been weighing down a corner of the blanket and pulled out several items including a frisbee, a badminton kit, and a volleyball.

“Are you sure we can play here?” I asked. We hardly had space for those activities while surrounded by picnickers on all sides.

“Don’t worry. There’s a small island behind the Billion-Year Sakura—we can move there and play with the tree in sight,” Shii said.

“Oh, I didn’t know that.”

“The island’s uninhabited, too! We can have as much fun as we want there without bothering anybody.”

“That sounds nice.”

I wasn’t great with crowds, which was a byproduct of growing up in Goza Village where there were more livestock than people. *I have gotten more used to large numbers of people after living in Aures for a year...* But Cherin was a world-famous tourist destination. The crowds here were a little overwhelming, and I’d started to feel dizzy surrounded by so many people. Honestly, going to a deserted island would be a blessing.

“An uninhabited island... That sounds exciting!” cheered Lilim.

“You’ve had one brilliant idea after another today, Shii,” Tirith said.

“Hmm?” Lia said, more hesitant to agree. “Playing games behind the Billion-Year Sakura sounds great, but...why is the island uninhabited?”

It was Rose who answered her question. “The ocean current around the island is really strong. You need a proper, sturdy boat to make it there. A plan was once proposed to build a runway and establish an air route to the island, but the government decided there wouldn’t be enough financial value in it.”

“Wow, you know a lot about this,” Lia said.

“I did live here until I was ten,” Rose responded, before asking a question of her own. “But how do you plan on getting to the island? You can’t reach it by sea, air, or land...”

“Hmm-hmm, that won’t be an issue. I’ve prepared some secret weapons to take care of that. You’ll see in a sec!” Shii said cheerfully. She pulled the small transceiver out of her bag and turned it on. “Hey, it’s me. Sorry for the hassle, but can you bring the things I gave you to the coast east of the Billion-Year Sakura? ...Yeah, that’s right. Bring enough for six people.”

She was clearly speaking to an Arkstoria servant.

“Okay, let’s go,” she said. With a wide grin on her face, Shii hummed and started walking.



We followed Shii to the coast east of the Billion-Year Sakura. The clear blue ocean and white sand were a sight to behold, but there was no one in the water.

*Those waves are huge...*

Rose was right about the strong current. Taking a boat out into those waters would be reckless, let alone trying to swim in them.

“Wow! Look, Allen! That shell is enormous!” Lia said excitedly, pointing at a giant conch shell in the sand.

“Whoa, that’s amazing.” The shell looked beautiful enough to pick right up off the beach and use to decorate a room.

“That’s a razul shell. Their insides are delicious if you spread butter on them and steam them in a pan. I used to eat them with Gramps after training,” Rose said, staring off into the distance nostalgically.

“Shellfish, butter...steamed in a pan...!” Lia said, looking toward the beach hungrily. “Let’s search the coast! There have to be more of them!”

“Huh? We just had those giant bento boxes, remember? And it’s not like we

can eat them straight away anyway...,” I argued.

“Yes, we can! I can bake them using Fafnir’s flames!” Lia responded.

We spent some time having fun on the beach until a group of Arkstoria servants in black clothing came into view. They were each pushing a trolley that was carrying an object about one square meter in size and covered by a gray sheet. I had no idea what the objects were, but they seemed decently heavy.

“What are those, President?” I asked.

“Hmm-hmm, this is the fun surprise I had planned for this spring training camp!”

“Oh yeah... I remember you mentioning something about that before we left Liengard.”

“Yep! Prepare to be amazed!” Shii smiled like a mischievous child and waved to her servants. “Hey, we’re over here!”

“I apologize for the delay, my lady,” an elderly servant said with an elegant bow after letting go of his trolley.

“Thank you very much.”

“It was our pleasure. I must say, however... While these machines did pass the safety test, that does not change the fact that they are dangerous. Please exercise caution while using them.”

“Thanks, but we’ll be fine. We’re all strong enough to use them safely.”

“Very well. Excuse me for speaking out of turn. I wish you all a comfortable flight.”

The elderly man led the black-clothed servants away.

“.....Flight?” the other five of us repeated, confused.

Shii tore off one of the gray sheets. “Ta-da! It’s a microminiature sailplane, also known as a glider!”

The vehicle she called a glider looked like a dragonfly without a tail. I looked closely and saw that there were folded wings on both sides.

“What is that thing? It looks weird...,” I said.



“Put simply, it’s a silent miniature airplane for one person,” Shii began, raising an index finger. “The Holy Ronelian Empire has mass-produced these as a method of transportation for swordfighters. They were invented by Rod Garf, who is known as the ‘magic artisan.’ Rod is a genius scientist from the Holy Empire who’s shrouded in mystery—no one knows what they look like, their gender, or their age.”

“Rod Garf, huh...,” I repeated.

I’d heard that name before. *Zach mentioned them when we infiltrated the Holy Empire two months ago.*

Shii continued speaking. “This glider was first used in combat on January first this year, which was the day that Ronelia teamed up with the demons to attack the Five Powers. Ronelia used these to send Black Organization members into the Principality of Theresia and conquer the country before the night was over. A holy knight who barely escaped with their life said there were so many gliders that they blanketed the sky.”

Lia spoke up next. “They ‘blanketed the sky’? What in the world were Theresia’s defense forces doing?”

“Theresia had skilled Soul-Attire wielders with long-range attack abilities who were trained to take down aircraft all along the border.”

“Then how did the gliders get through...?”

“What makes this glider special is its superb mobility.” Shii began to explain the difference between airplanes and gliders. “The reason airplanes have not become a preferred method of travel for swordfighters is because they are bulky and slow. Their size and lack of mobility make them an easy target for Soul-Attire wielders with long-distance attacks. But this glider is different. You’ll experience this for yourself in a moment, but the pilot can fly in any direction at a moment’s notice. It allows you to soar freely through the skies, as if you’ve grown wings. Shooting one down is no easy feat.”

“Oh, that makes sense...”

“The empress decided that we won’t stand a chance against the Holy Ronelian Empire if they have full control of the air, so she contacted a genius

scientist for help.”

“Who was that?”

This conversation was giving me déjà vu.

“Only Liengard’s greatest mind, whose name is known all around the world—Kemmi Fasta.”

“Oh, okay.”

I’d heard her name tied to so many different scientific fields that this revelation hardly surprised me.

“The empress had a message sent to the bridge Kemmi lives under, saying that if she successfully developed gliders within a week, the royal palace would shoulder her massive debt,” Shii continued.

“I’m sure she was thrilled at the opportunity,” I said, picturing the scientist jumping for joy.

“Kemmi lived up to her reputation and completed her glider in just three days.”

“There’s no denying her genius.”

Her personality was problematic to say the least, but she was an elite scientist.

*I’m stunned, though...* Kemmi had made a ton of money at the beginning of this year for discovering the Allen Cell. *It took her less than two months to go back to being broke and riddled with debt...* What kind of witchcraft had she used to pull that off...? Probably gambling.

“The major powers of the world, including Liengard and Vesteria, are currently getting ready to mass-produce these gliders in preparation for the inevitable all-out war against the Holy Empire. These six are the prototypes,” Shii said, tapping the glider.

“It looks about one-tenth the size of a small plane... Is it really big enough to fly?” Lia asked.

“Hmm... I’m not sure if I trust it,” said Rose.

They both looked doubtful.

“A microminiature sailplane... It’s so cool!” Lilim exclaimed.

“The name is perfect, too!” Tirith added.

Their eyes glistened like those of excited children.

*A glider, huh?* Its aerial maneuverability sounded amazing, but was it really safe?

“According to Kemmi, these gliders use a brand-new power mechanism that utilizes a soul crystal. In short, it lets you fly through the air using your own spirit power. These prototypes are still inefficient at converting spirit power to energy, but that shouldn’t be a problem for any of us,” Shii said.

Finishing up her explanation of the glider, she patted me on the back. “Okay, Allen. I know this is sudden, but can you do a test flight for us?”

“Huh? Why me?” I asked.

“As I just said, this glider is kinda inefficient. You need a lot of spirit power to achieve stable flight.”

“I can imagine.”

“And you might have more spirit power than anyone else in the world, Allen. That means, at least on paper, you’re the person most likely to be able to fly the glider smoothly. Seeing you soar through the air should dispel Lia and Rose’s distrust toward the gliders.”

“Oh, that makes sense.”

I couldn’t imagine that I was actually the best person in the world to perform a test flight, but I understood her reasoning.

“Plus, if you do happen to crash, I’m sure you won’t be injured,” Shii said.

“...That’s really why you chose me, isn’t it?” I realized. I wasn’t exactly thrilled about the reason she trusted me. “*Haah...* Fine.”

Resigned to my fate, I picked up the glider and set it down on the ground. *It’s much lighter than it looks.* It felt like it weighed less than ten kilograms despite being one square meter in size. Once I climbed into the glider, Shii spoke up.

“You start the glider by grabbing the control wheel in the middle of the aircraft and filling it with spirit power. That activates the power system and lifts the glider gently off the ground. Flying it is simple once you’re in the air. Just lean your weight to the left or right to go either direction, pull the controls toward you to gain elevation, and push them forward to drop elevation. Feed it more spirit power to accelerate and give it less to slow down,” she explained.

“Got it,” I responded. That sounded very intuitive.

“You can go ahead and start.”

“Okay.”

I climbed into the glider and grabbed the controls.

“Be careful, Allen,” Lia said gently.

“The moment anything feels off, clad yourself in your cloak of darkness and jump to safety,” Rose instructed.

They both sounded worried.

“Okay. Thanks,” I responded.

I took a deep breath and poured spirit power into the control wheel. The glider’s four folded wings shot out and began to flap with extreme speed.

“Wh-whoa...!” I cried as the machine gradually lifted into the air.

“I-it’s actually flying?!” Lia shouted.

“I can’t believe it...,” Rose muttered.

They were both wide-eyed with shock.

“Good, he started it without a hitch,” Shii nodded.

“Wow, this is mind-blowing...!” exclaimed Lilim.

“The future is now!” said Tirith.

Shii looked satisfied, while Lilim and Tirith were beyond excited.

“Allen, can you try flying through the air?” Shii requested of me.

“Sure.”

I gripped the control wheel as she had explained and flew the glider right, left, up, and down without any difficulty. Even sharp turns were a cinch. I moved through the air so freely it felt as if I had grown wings.

*The glider's mobility is even better than I expected!*

Once I'd had my fun flying around for a little while, I reduced the amount of spirit power I was supplying the aircraft and then carefully landed.

"I wanna fly, too!" Lia exclaimed, eyes shining.

"What an incredible invention. You flew like a bird!" Rose said, also excited.

"I want...that one!" Lilim shouted.

"You snooze, you lose!" Tirith said.

They both scrambled into one of the remaining gliders.

Shii smiled joyfully at their reactions. "Hmm-hmm, you don't need to fight over the gliders. They're all the same, and I brought enough for everyone."

Lia and the others climbed into their gliders and flew into the sky one after another.

"Wow... This view is stunning!" Lia shouted.

"The Billion-Year Sakura is even more beautiful from above," Rose said.

They were both taken by the view.

"Th-this is definitely an impressive invention, but..." Lilim trailed off.

"It consumes spirit power way faster than I expected," Tirith finished.

Those two, however, flew with troubled expressions.

"Now that you mention it...I definitely have lost a lot of spirit power already," Lia agreed.

"Considering the rate of consumption, I'll only be able to stay in the air for about thirty minutes..." Rose said.

"Yeah, the inefficiency is a problem... The average flight length was fifteen minutes among the holy knights who tested them, and no one lasted longer than twenty," Shii informed us with a heavy sigh.



*Is the spirit power consumption really that bad? I don't feel like I've lost any at all...* I did sense the glider absorbing spirit power, but it was only a minuscule amount. My spirit power regenerated significantly faster than the glider consumed it. I was pretty sure I could keep flying forever without the need for breaks.

*Are their gliders all defective?* Flying would be very dangerous if there was anything wrong with their aircrafts.

“Umm, my glider is barely using any spirit power at all... Do you think your gliders are malfunctioning somehow?” I asked.

“Huh? That doesn't make sense... Oh, it probably just feels that way to him because of Allen's absurd amount of spirit power,” Shii said.

“Apparently, he even has more spirit power than Black Fist Reia Lasnote... The amount the glider is consuming must feel like nothing to him,” Lilim observed.

“This monster could probably fly all day without breaking a sweat...,” said Tirith.

The three upperclassmen smiled bitterly.

Using our new method of aerial transportation, we made our way to the small island behind the Billion-Year Sakura.



The island we found ourselves on was beautiful and rich with nature. The lush trees and grassy fields were untouched by people, making it a perfect secret playground. We had already played badminton and hide-and-seek, and were now throwing frisbees back and forth.

“Here it comes, Allen!” Lia yelled.

“Let's see how you handle this chain attack!” said Rose.

They both threw a frisbee at me at the same time.

“Hmm-hmm, let's make it three frisbees... Yah!” Shii shouted.

“Here's one more for you...!” added Tirith.

The two upperclassmen grinned maliciously and sent two more frisbees my way.

“Four frisbees at once?! Really?!” I complained, catching the first three one at a time even as I spoke. *Okay, just one more!* I planted myself firmly and reached out with my right hand, when...

“Wha...?!”

...a strong wind suddenly blew the frisbee far over my head.

“Ah-ha-ha, what timing. I would’ve caught that one if not for the wind,” I laughed.

“Heh-heh, it felt good, though,” Lia replied. We smiled to one another as we enjoyed the beautiful Cherin weather.

“I’m gonna go get the frisbee,” I told her.

“Great, thanks.”

I parted from the group and walked briskly through the grassy field. *I think it flew in this direction... There it is.* I spotted the pink frisbee rolling along the coast. Unexpectedly, someone was fishing near it.

*Huh? That’s weird. Shii and Rose said this island was uninhabited.* Feeling uncertain, I went up to the frisbee. *He’s huge...*, I thought when I got close enough to the fisherman to realize how big he was. He was the size of a brown bear—it was the first time I had ever seen someone as large as Ms. Paula. *He’s jacked, too.* Even from a distance, I could tell that his muscles looked hard as steel. I also noticed there was a tachi at his waist. He was clearly no ordinary fisherman.

*...He looks like he’s really focused. I’ll grab the frisbee quickly before he notices me.* I crept toward the frisbee as quietly as I could.

“*Haah*, can’t get a bite to save my life today... Where’re all the fish, boy?” the fisherman asked casually, his back still to me.

*I’m not that skilled at stealth, but I still didn’t think he’d notice me that easily...* I watched him warily and gave him a half-hearted response. “Uh, I guess it’s just one of those days.”

“You got that right...” The strange fisherman picked up the bottle of alcohol at his feet and downed its contents. “Woo... *Hic!* You wanna drink?” he asked, offering it to me.

“Sorry, I’m still underage...,” I told him.

“Bwa-ha-ha! You’re way too young to be so uptight!” he said, laughing heartily.

I noticed that his cheeks were red, and his eyes were glazed. Looking down, I saw a number of empty bottles at his feet, too. It seemed like he was already pretty wasted, and I got the feeling he was a bad drunk.

*I should hurry back to the others before he causes me any trouble.* Deciding it was best to let sleeping dogs lie, I quickly grabbed the frisbee and turned my back to him.

“Hey, boy.”

“Yes? What is it— Hngh?!”

I turned around to see a slash tear through the air with tremendous speed.

*Man, that’s a skilled attack...*

I quickly ducked to dodge the horizontal sweep.

“Wow, nice reaction,” the fisherman said with a wicked smile. He stood up straight, cracking his neck.

“Wh-what the heck was that for?!” I shouted.

“Bwa-ha-ha! I just can’t help but wanna throw down against every elite swordsman I encounter! It’s in my nature!”

He drew the tachi at his waist and assumed a familiar stance. The moment he did, all the hair on my body stood on end, reacting to his incredible bloodlust.

*Crap, who is this guy...?! It was clear from that fearsome slash, his perfect guard, and his overwhelming aura that he was no ordinary swordsman. Why did this have to happen? I only wanted to get the frisbee...*

I quickly drew my sword and watched him as vigilantly as I could.

“ ... ”

“...”

We locked gazes, and the air between us became heavy. About a minute later, the strange swordsman spoke calmly.

“Boy. You have a monster inside you, don’t you?”

“...?!”

No ordinary man could have noticed the threat of Zeon that quickly.

“Bwa-ha-ha! I’ll take that as a yes... Today’s my lucky day! It’s not often you find an opponent of your caliber!” he said, beaming as he pointed his tachi at me. “Gimme all you’ve got, young swordsman! If you want to keep your head, that is!”





“You bet!” I responded.

He and I charged at each other at the exact same time.

“Hah!” I yelled.

“Hrnn!” he grunted.

Our full-strength slashes collided, leading to a tense sword lock. Crimson sparks flew as we both pushed as hard as we could.

“Haaaaaaaaa!” I yelled.

“Hrnnnnnnnn!” he screamed.

The screech of our blades echoed throughout the uninhabited island.

*Man, how is he so strong?!* I had decent confidence in my arm strength, but our sword lock was evenly matched— No, he was actually winning and slowly pushing me back.

“Bwa-ha-ha! You’re a strange one, boy! I never woulda thought you could match my power with that slim body of yours!” he laughed before performing a storm-like chain of slashes.

“...!”

Each blow was aimed accurately at a vital spot. I dodged, parried, and blocked, avoiding them all by a razor-thin margin. *These are just ordinary slashes, but each one is unbelievably powerful...!* I blocked each swing perfectly, but it felt like he was going to cut my blade in half each time.

“What’s wrong, boy? You can’t win by defending the whole time!” he yelled, taking a large step forward to press me with another attack.

I stepped forward to meet him. “I don’t need you to tell me that! First Style—Flying Shadow!” I shouted, counterattacking at point-blank range.

“Wow, that’s an interesting move!” he said, catching the airborne slash with his left hand and slamming it into the ground.

*Are you serious?!* Flying Shadow was far from my strongest attack, but I never would have thought that someone would be able to wrangle it with their bare hands like that.

*Let's see how he handles this!* I sprinted toward him to narrow the distance between us.

“Eighth Style—Eight-Span Crow!”

“Eight slashes with one swing, huh? Not bad!”

Unfortunately, he dodged all my slashes with the grace of a dancer. *He's so fast!* It was surreal watching a man who was over two meters tall move with such agility.

“Come on now! Is that all you've got, boy?!” he shouted.

“Ngh?!”

We traded blow after blow, our fight continuing for so long that I lost track of time.

*...This is starting to feel doable.* I was getting more used to his absurd strength with each blow we traded. On pure sword skills, we were clearly evenly matched. This fight would be determined not just by swordcraft, but by our Soul Attires as well.

*Okay, it's time to make my move.* I exposed my left side to bait him into attacking.

“Take this!” he shouted, slashing at my left side just as I wanted.

*Now I throw him off balance!*

I waited for his blade to touch my side, and then...

“Hah!”

...I summoned my cloak of darkness and repelled it.

“Wh-what is that darkness?!” he shouted.

“You're finished!” I yelled. Not letting this opportunity pass me by, I sheathed my blade and drew it to perform my fastest attack. “Seventh Style—Draw Flash!”

“Cherry Blossom Blade Style—Lightning Sakura!” the swordsman shouted, using a lightning-fast slash to erase my Draw Flash from his unbalanced position.

*What just happened?! He'd moved faster than should have been humanly possible. Wait a second, I know that move...*, I thought, my eyes opening wide in astonishment.

"What are you doing, Gramps?!" A female voice cut through the air from behind us.

I turned around to see Rose, out of breath. The other girls were behind her. They must have heard our duel and come running.

"Huh? 'Gramps'...?" I repeated, taken aback.

"Oh, Rose! It's been so long! You've grown so much since I last saw you!" the strange swordsman said with a kind smile, sheathing his tachi.

Rose sighed loudly, her shoulders drooping. "*Haah...* Why were you fighting Allen, Gramps?"

"Well... There aren't many swordsmen in the world housing such a powerful Spirit Core. The sight of him set my blood pumping!"

"You're too old for this, Gramps. You need to slow down."

"Bwa-ha-ha! You're such a nice girl, worrying about an old geezer like me!"

It was apparent from the familiar way they talked to one another that the old man was a relative of Rose's.

"Oh, sorry, Allen. This man is Bacchus Valencia, the sixteenth inheritor of the Cherry Blossom Blade School of Swordcraft. He used to be known as the strongest swordsman in the world," Rose said.

"Bwa-ha-ha! Get that 'used to be' out of here! I still live up to the name!" Bacchus objected, laughing heartily. "So, boy. I see you know my granddaughter. What's your name?"

"I'm Allen Rodol. I'm a friend and classmate of Rose's. We go to the same swordcraft academy."

"I see, so you're a schoolmate of hers? I'm Bacchus Valencia. As you just heard from Rose, I'm the sixteenth inheritor of the Cherry Blossom Blade School of Swordcraft and the strongest swordsman in the world. Nice to meet you, Allen," Bacchus said, holding out his boulder-like right hand.

“Nice to meet you, too,” I said, giving him a firm handshake.

Bacchus Valencia. The man had slicked-back gray hair and looked like he was in his mid-fifties. At over two meters tall, he towered over us, and his muscles appeared as hard as steel. He had a chiseled face with deep wrinkles, shining crimson eyes identical to Rose’s, and a prominent mustache that had been neatly trimmed. There was a black cherry blossom petal mark on the left side of his chest. He was shirtless underneath a long, blue *haori* jacket decorated with a blizzard of cherry blossoms, and he wore simple black pants with his large tachi at the waist.

*His grip is really firm.* It was the largest and most powerful hand I’d ever shaken. *I can tell he’s spent a massive amount time honing his swordcraft...*

“What the... That’s impossible...!” Bacchus muttered, looking troubled.

“What is it?” I asked.

“It’s your hands... How long have you spent swinging a sword, boy?” he asked sharply.

“U-umm... About ten years or so,” I responded, deciding to be vague. I had actually trained for over a billion years, but I couldn’t tell him that.

“Don’t play dumb. You might be able to fool most of the blockheads who call themselves swordfighters, but not me. Your rough hands clearly carry generations of diligent training!”

That was nearly the same thing Rose had said to me at the Sword Fighting Festival.

*...This isn’t good.* Chairwoman Reia had instructed me not to tell anyone about the 100-Million-Year Button or the Time Hermit. No one would believe the ridiculous story anyway. *How can I escape this line of questioning...?*

As I racked my brain, Bacchus leaned toward me and lowered his voice to a whisper. “Tell me, boy... Are you a Transcendent? Did you overcome the curse of the 100-Million-Year Button?”

“...?!”

I was speechless. The 100-Million-Year Button was supposed to be a closely

guarded secret known only to a select few. How did he know about it? *Is he a Transcendent, too?* Considering his superhuman strength and polished swordcraft, it was certainly possible.

*Is it okay for me to tell him? He is Rose's grandfather... But Chairwoman Reia told me to keep it a secret...*

"Hmm, I see what's happening here. You *are* a Transcendent, but someone made you swear to never speak of it," Bacchus said. He was so on the money that there was no point in denying it.

"...Yes, that's right," I admitted.

"I figured as much. Your hands are too well-developed. You can't become this skilled at the blade in just ten or twenty years. That left one possibility—that you used the 100-Million-Year Button created by the Time Hermit." After explaining his reasoning, Bacchus leaned his face even closer to mine. "So how long did you train in that hellscape? Five hundred years? A thousand? Or...did you cross the ten-thousand-year barrier?"

"I don't remember exactly, but it was about a billion years," I answered honestly.

"A...a billion?! Did you push it multiple times?!" he asked, shaking his head in disbelief.

"Y-yes," I said.

I had nearly lost my sanity on a number of occasions, but I never let that stop me as I frantically swung my sword and eventually managed to cut my way out of the World of Time.

"Bwa-ha-ha! I never dreamed I'd hear of someone who pushed that cursed button more than once! I applaud you for the mental fortitude it must have taken to keep swinging your sword for that long! I now see how you're able to remain sane with that monster inside of you!" Bacchus said.

"Th-thanks...?" I responded, unsure of why he was praising me so much.

"That said, I would've expected you to be a little stronger after a billion years of training..."



Bacchus studied my body appraisingly.

“I, uh... My total lack of talent is probably to blame for that.”

I’d had zero aptitude for swordcraft before I pushed the button, to the point that I even embarrassed myself. *That’s true even now...* I’d spent over a billion years—an absurd amount of time by any measure—focusing only on my swordcraft, yet I’d only reached a level where I could barely match natural-born prodigies.

“No, I don’t think that’s it. You clearly have good form with the blade. If you ask me, it’s almost like there’s something writhing around deep inside you, obstructing your growth... I wonder if that’s my imagination...,” Bacchus muttered, still looking at me with that same troubled stare. “Eh, whatever. I’ll give you the same warning you’ve already received—be careful who you tell about the 100-Million-Year Button. There are people out there who’re desperate to get their hands on Transcendents and the Time Hermit.”

“Thank you for the warning,” I replied. It sounded like the button really was something I should avoid telling people about. “Anyway, I have a question for —”

“Good lord, how long are you two going to hold hands?” Rose interrupted me with an exasperated sigh. I hadn’t realized how long we had been whispering to each other.

“Bwa-ha-ha, sorry! His hands are just really impressive!” Bacchus said, laughing loudly. “So are you all Rose’s friends, too?”

He was probably changing the topic to avoid any questions about what we’d just discussed.

“Yes. My name is Lia Vesteria.”

“I’m Shii Arkstoria. I met Rose at Thousand Blade Academy.”

“Lilim Chorine. It’s nice to meet you, Bacchus!”

“I’m Tirith Magdarote. It’s a pleasure.”

“Hmm, Lia, Shii, Lilim, and Tirith... All right, I won’t forget your names. I’ll take you to my house—what kind of grandfather would I be if I didn’t show

hospitality to Rose's friends? Follow me!" Bacchus said, laughing joyfully as he started walking with large strides.

*I'll need to have a more in-depth conversation with him later...* It was entirely possible that Bacchus knew more about the mysteries of the 100-Million-Year Button and the Time Hermit than I did.



We followed Bacchus along the island's coast for a little less than a minute.

*Oh yeah, where is his house?* I saw the whole island when flying above it in my glider, but I didn't see anything resembling a house.

"Mr. Bacchus, where is your house?" I asked.

"On the southern part of the mainland. It's a little old, but it faces the Billion-Year Sakura, so the view is to die for! I've got the best spot in the entire Land of Sakura!" Bacchus answered, throwing out his chest proudly.

"How did you get to this island, then?"

"You ask the strangest questions, boy. I walked, obviously. This island has a great spot for fishing that hardly anyone knows about. I come here for fun and to make a little money." He waved his fishing rod.

"You walked? I thought there was no way to reach this place...," I said.

"Huh? What are you on about? Look over there," Bacchus instructed, pointing ahead. I looked in the direction he'd indicated and saw a wooden bridge connecting the island to the mainland.

"H-huh? But that shouldn't..."

"What's wrong, boy? You look flabbergasted."

Bacchus stared at me with a teasing grin.

*Oh, I see...* I'd figured it out upon seeing his self-satisfied look.

"You made that bridge with your Soul Attire, didn't you?" I asked.

"Bwa-ha-ha, I did indeed! You're a sharp one, boy!" he said, clapping me on the back. I had been right—Bacchus had made this giant bridge with his Soul

Attire.

*The bridge looks like it's made of huge tree roots... Does that mean he has the ability to manipulate trees? No, none of the trees around here are large enough for that. Maybe he can grow new trees, then?*

"How did you kids get here?" Bacchus asked, throwing my own question back at us. "This isn't an easy place for people other than me to reach."

"We flew here from the mainland using miniature airplanes called gliders," I told him.

"Glai-durs...? Oh, those must be the new flying doohickeys I've heard rumors about," he grumbled. Bacchus didn't seem to know much about machines. "Well, I'll go on ahead and get us a feast ready. Come on over after you fetch your glai-dur thingies. You can show them the way, right, Rose?"

"Sure," Rose said, nodding.

"I'll see you shortly!" Bacchus said before crossing the bridge he created.



Rose turned to me after Bacchus had left.

"I'm sorry for my grandfather, Allen. He shouldn't have attacked you like that," she said, bowing in apology as we walked back toward our gliders. Her expression turned serious. "Please don't get the wrong idea about him, though. He can be a little eccentric, but he's not a bad person."

*...She clearly cares about her grandfather.* It seemed like Rose and Bacchus were very close.

"Oh, don't worry about it. I was definitely surprised when he swung his sword at me out of the blue, but it turned out to be a good experience," I reassured her.

I'd gotten to face off against Bacchus Valencia, the sixteenth inheritor of the Cherry Blossom Blade School of Swordcraft. If anything, I should probably consider it a wonderful stroke of luck.

"Thanks. I'm relieved to hear you say that," Rose said, sighing and smiling

gently.

“Your grandfather sure has a lot of energy... How old is he?” I asked.

His hair was completely white, and deep wrinkles lined his chiseled face. *Those features make him look quite old.* His abundance of energy and steel-like muscles, however, suggested he might be younger. He was also impossibly athletic. I couldn’t even hazard a guess at how old he was.

“Gramps is my great-great-great-great-great grandfather. Or was it great-great-great-great-great grandfather...? I don’t remember. Anyway, he’s at least two hundred years old,” Rose said.

“T-two hundred?!” the other five of us repeated in shock.

“People in my family tend to live a long time,” Rose explained.

“That’s clearly underselling it...,” I said, dumbfounded. Two hundred years far surpassed what anyone would consider a long lifespan.

“Hey, Rose. Is it true that Bacchus is the strongest swordsman in the world?” Lia asked. I had been wondering about that, too.

“Yeah, it’s true. He used to be called that, anyway. He was unbelievably strong, to the point that he didn’t seem human. They used to say that not even a thousand foes would have been a match for him. I can’t even imagine him losing a fight,” Rose said, her eyes shining with admiration. “That was years ago, though. He’s not half as strong as he was in his prime.”

“Really...?” I responded. He certainly hadn’t seemed like a man on the decline when I fought him.

“...Gramps has an incurable illness. You would never know from how he looks, but his body is falling apart on the inside. He shouldn’t even be able to stand. Our family physician told him ten years ago that he only had half a year to live,” Rose said.

“They said that a decade ago...?” I repeated, confused by the contradiction.

“Sorry, that was a little misleading. It would have been half a year for a normal person. Gramps has been able to live a normal life due to his incredible mental fortitude and unbeatable Soul Attire.”

*...An unbeatable Soul Attire, huh?* Rose wouldn't say that unless his powers truly were exceptional. *If his Soul Attire can hold off an incurable illness, does that make it a self-strengthening type? Or maybe a healing type? He used it to form that wooden bridge, though...* I was still mulling it over when I heard a scream.

"Eek!" Shii, who had been walking next to me, had tripped over a tree root. I quickly grabbed her hand and pulled her close before she fell.

"Are you okay, President?" I asked.

"Th-thanks...", Shii muttered into my chest, blushing slightly. That was when it happened.

*What...in the world...?!* I felt an intense bloodlust pierce my body.

"Who's there?!" I shouted, hurriedly coating my body in my cloak of darkness. No one attacked me, however, and the repulsive bloodlust quickly disappeared.

*...What was that?* It had felt like a murky ball of feelings, colored by rage and hatred. It'd been a while since I'd been the target of such intense negative emotions. *Was it Dodriel? ...No, I don't think so.* His malice had a slightly different flavor to it.

"What's going on, Allen?!" Lia asked.

"Did something happen?!" said Rose.

They both drew their swords and looked around cautiously as my mind raced over the source of the bloodlust.

"Is it the Black Organization?!" Shii cried out.

"Did you see someone dangerous, Allen?" asked Lilim.

"I don't see anything...", Tirith said cautiously.

The upperclassmen put their backs to each other and kept watch from every direction. Their reactions suggested I had been the only one to sense the bloodlust. *I guess I was the only target,* I realized, quietly sheathing my sword.

"Sorry for scaring you. I felt an intense bloodlust from someone, which put me a little on guard," I explained.



“Bloodlust?” Lia repeated.

“I didn’t feel anything,” Rose said.

They both looked confused.

“It only lasted for a moment, and it was concentrated entirely on me. I think whoever it came from must be very skilled,” I told them.

Only an elite assassin could have projected such spine-chilling hatred and then hidden themselves from us so completely. *Were they sent by the Black Organization or the demons? Or is there another group...?* Whoever they were, one thing was clear—someone who harbored incredible hostility toward me was lurking in Cherin. *This spring training camp may not be so peaceful after all...*, I thought with a sigh.

“The fact that they’re targeting Allen specifically means they must be confident they can beat him,” Lia said.

“That makes sense, but...that doesn’t leave many candidates. There aren’t many people in the world who’d stand a chance against him,” Rose pointed out.

They both looked concerned.

“We don’t know enough to figure out who it was, but I know Allen will be able to defeat them... Right, Allen?” Shii prompted me, tilting her head adorably.

“Ah-ha-ha, I’ll do my best,” I responded. The trust in her eyes was so strong it made me a little embarrassed.

“Well, we don’t want to keep Bacchus waiting. Let’s hurry back to our gliders!” Shii said cheerfully.

We quickly retrieved the gliders we had left in the grassy field and flew toward Bacchus’s house.



We followed Rose in our gliders and arrived at Bacchus’s home in just a few minutes.

*Wow, that’s a really impressive house...*

Bacchus's residence was a massive single-story wooden estate. Its distinctly old-fashioned architectural style gave it an air of history, and the burnt timber cladding of the outer wall conveyed the power of nature. A thick pillar supported the house in each corner and the large front door—big enough for Bacchus to fit through—was majestic. Best of all was its position facing the Billion-Year Sakura—you couldn't have asked for a better view of the tree.

"Such impressive wooden architecture is rare even in Vesteria," Lia remarked, impressed.

"It feels both bold and profound... And just plain cool!" Lilim exclaimed excitedly.

"Hmm-hmm, I'm glad you like it. My family has lived in this house for generations. I've heard that it's easily over a thousand years old," Rose said.

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

"Ahh, this really takes me back. It's been five years since I left..." Rose patted a pillar with a distant look in her eyes. "Whoops, this isn't the time for a trip down memory lane. Gramps is waiting for us. Let's go."

Rose opened the front door.

"We're here, Gramps," she called out.

"Hey, perfect timing! Come on in to the sitting room!" Bacchus said.

We followed his voice down a long hallway and arrived at a set of doors. Sliding them open, we found ourselves looking at a large sitting room that was over thirty-three square meters.

"Bwa-ha-ha, thanks for coming! You're the first friends Rose has ever brought over. Help yourselves!" Bacchus told us. He was sitting on an extra-large chair taking huge swigs of alcohol from the bottle in his hand.

*Does he mean "help yourselves" to that?* I wondered, looking at an oblong table in the center of the room. It was piled high with bottles of alcohol and snacks.

"Um, are those...?" I trailed off.

"Alcohol and drinking snacks," Bacchus confirmed.

“...That’s what I thought.”

It had been obvious at a glance.

“I’ve had everything under the sun, from bottles of alcohol worth thirty million guld to meat costing a hundred million guld per kilogram. But nothing tastes better than a cheap, thousand-guld bottle from home. Go ahead, drink up!” Bacchus encouraged with a cheerful laugh.

“*Haah...* Have you gone senile, Gramps? We’re all underage,” Rose said.

“Oh, don’t be such a stick in the mud. When I was little—”

“Underage drinking is illegal,” Rose interrupted, brooking no argument. She began taking the alcohol off the table.

“R-Rose... Getting drunk is one of the few pleasures I have left. Can’t you look the other way on this?”

“Absolutely not,” Rose said flatly. She walked over and took the bottle from Bacchus’s hands.

“H-huh?!” Bacchus cried.

*Ah-ha-ha, I can tell how close they are.* As big and strong as Bacchus was, right now he just looked like an ordinary grandfather.

“Grr, do you have to be so hard on me? We haven’t seen each other in years...,” he complained, tossing a thick slice of salami into his mouth.

“Sorry about that, everyone. I’ll make some tea, so make yourselves comfortable,” Rose said. She bowed slightly and walked out of the room with her arms full of bottles of alcohol.

“Good, she’s gone,” Bacchus said a few seconds later. He smiled mischievously as if that had all gone according to plan. “I have something special to show you all.”

He pulled a thick book out of a cabinet.

“What is that?” I asked.

“It’s the most precious thing to me in the world,” he told us, caressing the book gently. It seemed really important to him. “Hoo... Are you ready? I’m

gonna open it.”

His expression turned serious as he opened the book and flipped through the pages. He stopped on a page with a picture of an adorable girl smiling in front of a birthday cake. She was young, but her graceful features, clear crimson eyes, and sleek silver hair were unmistakable.

“Whoa, is that...?” I trailed off.

“Ha, you recognize her. This is a childhood photo album of my beloved granddaughter! This picture is from when Rose turned three! Isn’t she as cute as an angel?!” Bacchus said proudly.

“Aww, she’s adorable! She looks like a doll!” Lia said, leaning forward excitedly.

“Hmm-hmm. It seems she’d already achieved her signature grace even at this young age,” Shii said.

“She looks cute and cool!” Lilim exclaimed.

“She was already so beautiful...!” said Tirith.

The upperclassmen were all impressed as well.

*She really is cute.* Her birthday cake had three candles sticking out of it. Rose was so adorable as she stood there smiling in front of her cake that she looked like she’d jumped out of the pages of a picture book.

“Bwa-ha-ha! You got that right! She’s been the most adorable girl in the world since before she could walk. She’s the apple of my eye!” Bacchus said.

He looked as happy as I’d ever seen anyone, hearing us compliment his beloved granddaughter. It seemed like he doted on Rose just as much as King Gris doted on Lia and Rodis doted on Shii.

“I want to see more pictures!” Lia said, eyes shining excitedly.

“Oh, you want to see more? Who am I to say no to a guest?! I’ll show you all the pictures you want!” Bacchus declared cheerfully.

He turned the pages carefully so as not to tear them. The next page had a picture of Rose in a sakura-colored kimono enjoying a candy apple. She was

much bigger than in the last picture, and I assumed she must've been around eight.

"This was when we went to Liengard together. I think this place was called Drestia, the Merchant's Town? Anyway, there was a big event called the Unity Festival, and the streets were packed like you wouldn't believe," Bacchus said, reliving old memories.

As he spoke, I thought back to my time at the Unity Festival with Lia and Rose last April. *Now that I think about it, Rose told me that her grandfather once took her to the festival.* I thought back on our conversation as Bacchus continued to flip through the album.

"Oh, this one takes me back! I took this picture when Rose was four. She'd just wet the bed!" he said.

The picture showed a small Rose looking sorrowfully at a child-sized futon hanging on a clothesline. If you looked closely, you could see a small stain on the mattress.

"She was insisting she wasn't scared of ghosts, so I told her a ghost story late at night...and this was the result. I still remember her grumbling to herself about how I got the best of her!" Bacchus said joyfully, making us all laugh.

That was when Rose walked through the door holding a tray with teacups.

"Sorry for the...wait..." She froze when she spotted us all looking at the old photo album in Bacchus's hands. Her cheeks flushed a deep red. "Wh-wh-what are you doing?!"

"Oh, you're back. That was faster than expected," Bacchus said.

"Gramps...! Why did you get out my photo album?!" Rose seethed.

"Do I really need a reason to show off my adorable granddaughter?" Bacchus retorted with a question of his own, showing no guilt.

"Don't turn this back on me! I'm taking that!" said Rose, quickly reaching for the album.

"Whoa, I'm not giving it up that easily!" He lifted the album high overhead.

"H-hey! Give that to me right now!" Rose shouted, trying desperately to grab

it.

“Bwa-ha-ha! You’re gonna have to do better than that, Rosie! I’ve got two hundred years of experience on you!”

“Damn it, how are you still so fast...?”

Not only was Bacchus much taller than Rose, but he clearly had a massive strength advantage as well.

“Come on, Rosie. Show me how much you’ve grown,” Bacchus taunted.

“...Fine. You’re on!” Rose shouted, veins bulging on her forehead. She tried as hard as she could to take the album, but...

“Bwa-ha-ha! You still have a long way to go!”





“Damn it...!”

Bacchus kept it just out of her grasp, toying with Rose like she was a small child.

“Hmm-hmm, you two seem really close,” Shii said warmly.

“Wow, you guys are so fast! I can see why you were both chosen to inherit the Cherry Blossom Blade School of Swordcraft!” said Lilim.

“Not just anyone can fend off Rose like that...,” commented Tirith.

A few minutes later...

“Okay, okay... I can’t say no to you for long, Rosie. You can have it,” Bacchus said, succumbing to his granddaughter and giving her the photo album.

“*Haah, haah...* Next time you do something like that, I’m *really* gonna make you regret it...!” Rose said, panting heavily. She put the book back in the cabinet.

“You’re so harsh on your old grandpa... I remember when you used to follow me all over the place like a duckling, calling out ‘Gramps, Gramps!’ to get my attention...”

“Shut up! That was ages ago!” Rose shouted, blushing at the revelation of yet another childhood anecdote.

*...I love seeing family members act like this with each other,* I thought. Being able to trade barbs, mess with each other, and make up in the end was a sign of real trust. Rose also looked adorable, and like the fifteen-year-old girl she was, as she lashed out at her grandfather.

“Allen, you didn’t see any...embarrassing pictures in there, did you?” Rose asked, looking down timidly.

“No, don’t worry. They were all really cute,” I replied.

“Really? Thank goodness...!” She looked extremely relieved.

Now that the photo album was safely tucked away, we treated ourselves to the array of snacks on the table. Bacchus had set out common drinking snacks like edamame, yakitori, and *karaage*, as well as rarities like *ankimo*, *karasumi*,

and *konowata*.

“This is kinda making me want a beer...,” Lia told me.

“Let’s wait until we’re adults, okay, Lia?”

“Y-yeah, of course!” she said, but I could see the longing on her face.

*She might become a drinker in the future...*, I thought anxiously, sipping the tea Rose had brewed.

Bacchus entertained us as we ate. He told us about an intense fight he’d had against a giant ice-controlling wolf about one hundred and fifty years ago that he barely escaped with his life, shared funny stories from his travels with an old friend, and gave us a tip about a famous hot spring tucked away in Cherin called Drops of Sakura that he frequently visited. Each of his tales was as interesting as the last, and he enhanced them all with his gestures and lively storytelling ability.

Once we’d eaten all the snacks, Bacchus turned to me.

“So, boy. You said your name is Allen Rodol, right?” he asked with a strange expression.

“Y-yes.”

“You used some unique moves when we fought earlier... Who was your teacher? What school of swordcraft do you use?”

“...”

That was one topic I really didn’t like to talk about. Admitting that you were self-taught was as good as calling yourself a Reject Swordsman. But hiding that here would make me seem insecure about it, so I decided to tell him the truth.

“Honestly, I asked a number of swordcraft masters to take me as a pupil, but they all turned me down because of my lack of talent. As a result, I had to teach myself,” I answered.

“You claim to have no talent? Interesting...,” Bacchus muttered.

He fell silent and studied me. *Would the Time Hermit really approach a talentless swordsman and let him press his precious 100-Million-Year Button*

*over and over again...? No, there's no way. That conflicts with his goal. There's also that darkness the boy produced during our little face-off... Is it possible he could be...?*

"Hmm. I think I understand," Bacchus finally said, looking unsatisfied by my answer. "You may be self-taught, but you are clearly good enough to cross blades with me. It's unlikely that studying just any old school of swordcraft would make a difference for you at this point. I'll give you an offer then: How would you like to learn the strongest school of swordcraft in the world—the Cherry Blossom Blade style?"

I was so stunned by Bacchus's offer that it took me a moment to collect myself. "You want *me*...to learn the Cherry Blossom Blade School of Swordcraft?! Are you sure I'm worthy?!"

"Of course, boy. I wouldn't teach it to just anyone, but I find myself intrigued by your strength. I'll make an exception for you." Bacchus gave me a wide grin.

"Th-thank you so much...! That would be wonderful!" I said, shaking at my sudden stroke of good fortune. *This is amazing! I never would've thought I'd get to learn the Cherry Blossom Blade School of Swordcraft after getting rejected by all my teachers in middle school!*

"B-Bacchus! Could you please teach me the Cherry Blossom Blade School of Swordcraft too?!" Lilim asked.

"I wanna learn, too...!" Tirith added.

They both leaned toward Bacchus hopefully. I understood why they were so excited. The Cherry Blossom Blade School of Swordcraft was famous worldwide; anyone would react this way if a chance to study it fell into their lap.

"Lilim, Tirith. The Cherry Blossom Blade School of Swordcraft is a secret style that's passed through the bloodline to only one child a generation. Bacchus just said that Allen is an exception," Shii chided.

"Bwa-ha-ha, I don't mind! I'm feeling especially generous today! I might just give away all my secrets! You're free to join us, Lilim and Tirith!" Bacchus said, laughing cheerfully.

"A-are you sure?!" Shii responded, astonished.

“Woo-hoo! You’re so nice, old man Bacchus!” Lilim celebrated.

“Your heart is as big as your frame!” Tirith said.

Lilim and Tirith gave Bacchus a high five.

“U-umm, could you please teach me, too...?!” Lia asked hesitantly.

“Can I join as well?!” Shii asked.

“Why, of course! I can’t refuse close friends of my beloved Rosie. What kinda man would I be if I said no to beauties such as yourselves, anyway? Bwa-ha-ha!” Bacchus said, laughing heartily and admiring the girls.

*Ah-ha-ha... I see he likes women as much as he likes alcohol...* He seemed like the kind of person who had no problem indulging his desires.

“*Haah...* You never change, Gramps...,” Rose said.

“Bwa-ha-ha, don’t give me that look. You’ll still be the only one to inherit the True Sakura,” Bacchus said, patting her head.

*The True Sakura...?* I’d never heard of that before.

Rose cleared her throat. “I wouldn’t get too excited if I were you all. Gramps’ teaching style can be a little...catastrophic. Besides, the essence of the Cherry Blossom Blade School of Swordcraft is something that can’t be learned.”

*...Huh? It can’t be learned?* I thought, curious.

Bacchus clapped his hands. “Okay, it’s getting late. How about we call it there?”

I looked at the wall clock and saw that it was past eight at night. It was totally dark outside.

“Do you all have a place to sleep? You’re free to stay here if you want,” Bacchus offered.

“Thank you for your concern, but my family has a villa here. We’re going to sleep there,” Shii refused politely.

“Oh, that’s good,” he said with a relieved smile. “We’ll begin our training at noon tomorrow on the island behind the Billion-Year Sakura. No one will get in our way there. Once we’re done, we’ll walk to a bathhouse to relax and wash

off our sweat, so make sure to come with a change of clothes and a bath towel!"

""""""Okay!""""""

“Bwa-ha-ha, I’m excited!”

Now that we knew the time and place to meet tomorrow for training, we left Bacchus's house.

*Tomorrow, I finally get to study a school of swordcraft...and it just so happens to be the famous Cherry Blossom Blade Style!*

Doing my best to hold down the excitement welling inside my chest, I got in my glider and flew to the Arkstoria villa with the girls.



The next morning, we ate a simple breakfast and worked up a sweat with a light workout. We canceled our plans to do more sightseeing in Cherin today; as swordfighters, we couldn't possibly pass up a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to learn the Cherry Blossom Blade School of Swordcraft. We were all on the same page there.

“Don’t worry about me,” said Rose, who’d already mastered the Cherry Blossom Blade Style. “It’ll be fun training under Gramps with you all.”

It was thirty minutes before our meeting time at noon.

“Are you all ready?” Shii asked once we’d all gathered at the entrance of the villa.

“You bet I am!” Lilim said.

“I have a towel, a change of clothes, a drink, and a first-aid kit... Yep, I’m all ready,” Tirith confirmed.

They both gave her a thumbs up.

"I'm ready whenever," I told them.

"Me too!" Lia said.

"All good here," chimed in Rose.



The three of us nodded.

There was a palpable excitement in the air, each of us motivated by the opportunity that awaited.

"Then let's go!" Shii said.

We climbed into our gliders and headed for the island behind the Billion-Year Sakura. After flying for a little while, we caught sight of Bacchus and touched down near him.

"Good morning, Mr. Bacchus," I said.

“Morning,” he responded casually. “So these are the glai-dur machines you were talking about... I’ve never seen anything like them. How do these hunks of metal even fly? The world sure has changed... It’s too much for this old man to keep up with.”

He shook his head in disbelief as he stared at the gliders we'd parked in the shade of some trees.

“Eh, whatever. Let’s get this training session started!” Bacchus said.

""""""Okay!""""""

We left our things in the shade and gathered before Bacchus.

“I’ll start by explaining the nature of the Cherry Blossom Blade School of Swordcraft,” he said, fiddling with his magnificent white mustache. “It’s not by any means a complicated style. It was actually designed to be as simple as possible for use in real combat. It requires a thorough foundation, efficient body control, and zero wasted strength—these three things combine to make it the strongest school of swordcraft in the world.”

*Oh, that makes sense...* Rose's fighting style was as efficient as could be. Her swings, defensive technique, and evasive maneuvers were all very faithful to the fundamentals. This optimized movement gave her blade a weight that was remarkable coming from her slender frame.

“Well, that stuff’ll be easier to learn through hands-on experience. I’ll give you a demonstration. Watch closely, and try your best to mimic my movements afterward,” Bacchus instructed.

He reached for the sword on his left hip and dropped his center of gravity low.

“Cherry Blossom Blade Style—Lightning Sakura.”

Bacchus swung his sword, sending a slash as fast as lightning racing through the air.

“.....?!”

Lia, Shii, Lilim, Tirith, and I were shocked speechless by the speed of his swing.

“...Impressive as always,” Rose muttered, familiar with his skill.

*I saw that move during our fight yesterday, but I’m still shocked by how fast it is... That was definitely the quickest I had seen anyone draw their blade in my life. But I get it now... I understand the technique behind that attack!*

Bacchus held his scabbard horizontally to reduce gravitational resistance when he drew his sword. He then bent his arm like a whip to produce tremendous acceleration within the scabbard and snapped his wrist to add one final burst of speed.

*I can use that technique to increase the speed of my Draw Flash!* I balled my fists with excitement after picking up such a valuable tip just seconds into our training session.

“Phew...,” Bacchus exhaled, calmly sheathing his blade after performing Lightning Sakura.

*...That was beautiful.* One moment he was performing a move with the intensity of a flash of lightning, and the next he was sheathing his sword with the calm of a gentle stream. The smoothness of his follow-through took my breath away.

“That was Lightning Sakura, a fundamental sword-drawing technique of the Cherry Blossom Blade School of Swordcraft. Give it a try,” he said, giving us a serious look.

*Okay, let’s do this!* I took a deep breath and concentrated. *The three key points are to angle your scabbard, bend your arm, and snap your wrist.* I ran the steps I’d just observed through my mind and applied them to my swordcraft. Once I had a firm image in my mind of the technique, I drew my blade.

“Cherry Blossom Blade Style—Lightning Sakura!” I shouted, sending a lightning-fast slash racing through the air. “I-I did it...!”

It didn’t come close to matching Bacchus’s version, of course, but I felt like it packed at least some of the same punch.

“Wow... I’m impressed you approached the true essence of the attack after observing it just once. Your speed isn’t quite there yet, but that wasn’t bad! Good job, boy! Bwa-ha-ha!” Bacchus laughed heartily, clapping me on the back.

“Th-thank you...!” I replied.

I was so happy. Hearing someone praise my swordcraft had me feeling like I was walking on air. This was a real sign that my billion-plus years of training was paying off. The source of the praise being Bacchus Valencia—the sixteenth inheritor of the Cherry Blossom Blade School of Swordcraft and a man who was once known as the strongest swordsman in the world—made the words mean so much more, too.

*Oh man, this is so amazing... I can still get stronger!* I thought excitedly.

It was then that I noticed the eyes boring into my back.

*...Huh?*

I slowly turned around...

*“uuuuu ... ”*

...and saw the girls staring at me in blank amazement.

“Hm? What’re you waiting for? Did you miss my demonstration?” Bacchus asked, confused.

“Sorry, but...can you please show us the move again? And slower this time?” Lia asked apologetically.

“Uh, if you insist... Make sure to pay attention this time.”

He shifted his weight down low again, looking unoffended.

“Cherry Blossom Blade Style—Lightning Sakura.”

He sent a slightly slower slash flying through the air.

“You do it just like that. Go ahead and try it,” he said once his demonstration was over.

Lia and the girls formed a circle. It looked like they were discussing something.

““...?””

Bacchus and I shared a confused look, both unsure of what they were doing.

“Gramps... Normal people like us can’t see your Lightning Sakura. And we can’t study what we can’t see. Training us by your inhuman standards isn’t going to do us any good,” Rose said exasperatedly. The other girls nodded their agreement.

It turned out that Bacchus’s slash had been too fast for the girls to learn from. After some discussion, we came up with a solution and adjusted the format of the training session.

First, Bacchus performed his example just as he’d done before.

“Cherry Blossom Blade Style—Sakura Flash,” he said, performing a straight thrust that resembled a flash of light.

Rose performed the same move directly afterward.

“Cherry Blossom Blade Style—Sakura Flash!” she yelled, performing a thrust that was quick but slower than Bacchus’s godly speed.

Watching two examples performed at different speeds would allow us all to keep up and learn the techniques of the Cherry Blossom Blade Style of Swordcraft. Once the two inheritors of the style were done with their demonstration, Bacchus would go through the key points for us to learn the move more quickly.

“The trick to Sakura Flash is to *grrk* your weight down and then *shnk* your arm out like this,” he said.

Calling Bacchus’s teaching style “catastrophic” was putting it kindly. *He’s using gestures and is trying really hard to get the point across, but his explanations are vague and hard to follow.* There was only so much meaning one could glean from sound effects like “*grrk*” and “*shnk*.”

Once Bacchus had finished his incredibly abstract explanation, it was Rose’s

turn.

“There are three key points to keep in mind when performing Sakura Flash. The first is the angle of your thrust, the second is the timing with which you drop your center of gravity, and the third is the position of your pivot foot. First, with the angle, you don’t actually want to thrust straight forward. The tip of your sword should point slightly down and away to the side. That will let you shift your weight...”

After her grandfather’s mystifying breakdown, Rose’s explanation was a godsend. It was specific and easy to follow, and she’d even made sure to pause and check that we understood what she had told us so that no one would fall behind. *Rose might make a good teacher...*

She only gave more evidence to support that notion.

“Hey, Rose. Is this when I should drop my weight?” Lia asked.

“Yeah, that’s perfect. You’re a fast learner, Lia.”

“Rose, is this where my pivot foot is supposed to go?” Shii asked.

“Hmm... Move it a little to the left. Yeah, that’s good.”

She had immediately become the girls’ preferred teacher, and they asked her question after question about the move... That left me with what was essentially a man-to-man training session with Bacchus.

“Mr. Bacchus, can I ask a question?”

“Of course.”

“I’m having a hard time figuring out when to drop my weight... Do you have any tips for me?”

“Hmm... Move backward when you *grrk* your sword toward you, then forward when you *shnk* it back out. It’s that easy.”

“...Thanks.”

Unfortunately, it didn’t seem like he was going to be much help.



We were now a few hours into our training session. Surprisingly, I had gotten used to Bacchus's catastrophic teaching method; the adaptability of humankind truly was impressive.

"Phew..." I exhaled as I held my sword in front of my navel, forming the middle stance. I closed my eyes, collected my breath, focused my mind, and performed the move I had just been taught. "Cherry Blossom Blade Style—Night Sakura!"

A slash sharp enough to cut the black of night raced forward from my blade.

*Sweet, that felt good!* I turned around, looking for feedback.

"That was so close! You're almost there! Night Sakura needs to be performed with a little more *oomph* and a *shing!*" Bacchus said, giving me his unique brand of advice.

"Okay... A little more *oomph*...and then *shing!* Got it!"

I performed Night Sakura one more time according to his instructions.

"Hey, there you go! That was perfect!" Bacchus said with a grin, thumping me on the back.

"Thank you!"

Bacchus's teaching style was definitely a little vague, but you could reason out the meaning behind his words if you listened to him enough. I now felt like an expert on his sound effects.

*He's right. You do need oomph and shing to pull Night Sakura off properly.* It was now hard to imagine a more appropriate choice of words.

"...Hey, Rose. How is Allen getting so much better?" Lia asked. "I can't understand a word Bacchus is saying to him."

"Those two aren't even human anymore, so they probably don't need words to communicate. Their interactions are beyond the understanding of normal people, and that's probably for the best," Rose responded.

I felt like Lia and Rose were glancing over and talking about me... It was probably just my imagination, though.

We continued training for another two hours or so before Bacchus clapped his hands and called out to everyone. “All right, it’s time for a break!”

We all put our swords down to rest.

“Phew, I really worked up a sweat,” panted Lia.

“Gramps likes to push his students,” Rose said.

They both used their towels to wipe off their sweat.

“I feel like I’m getting the hang of the Cherry Blossom Blade Style,” said Shii.

“Yeah, no doubt! I feel even stronger now!” Lilim exclaimed.

“I feel like it’s gonna take more than a few hours to actually master, though,” Tirith commented.

The upperclassmen drank some water from their bottles, rehydrating.

While the girls rested, I had other ideas. *Awesome, I can use this time to practice on my own!* I thought excitedly, picking up my sword. *I can apply the draw slash I just learned, Lightning Sakura, to my own swordcraft.* I’d planned to use the technique from that move to make Draw Flash even faster. *I need to keep an eye on the angle of my scabbard, how my arm bends, and the snap of my wrist...* I ran through these points, forming a perfect image of the movement in my head.

“Boy! Got a moment?” Bacchus called out.

“Uh, yes, sir.” I sheathed my blade and walked toward the stump he was sitting on. “What is it?”

“I have a favor I wanna ask of you.”

“What’s that?”

What kind of favor would Bacchus want of me?

“There’s a ridiculously strong Spirit Core inside of you, right?”

“...Yes. As far as I know, he’s the strongest swordsman in the world. He’s a literal monster,” I told Bacchus.

Zeon was a madman who believed himself to be the center of the universe,



but his strength was undeniable. I couldn't imagine him losing a fight.

"Wow. I like the sound of that!" Bacchus said, looking excited. "So, Allen. Do you think you could let me take on this monster?"

"Wh-why would you want to do that?! He's really dangerous!" I responded. Choosing to battle him would be suicide.

"Remember what I said yesterday? It's in my nature to wanna go up against every elite swordfighter I encounter. If this Spirit Core is strong enough that even a powerhouse like you considers it a monster... Just the thought of sparring with it gets my blood pumping!"

"H-huh..."

It sounded like he was just as big a fan of fighting as he was of booze and women.

"But...how can you duel my Spirit Core?" I asked him.

Spirit Cores have no physical body. I could grant Bacchus's request by surrendering my body to Zeon, but... *That's not an option.* I didn't know how it worked, but my Spirit Core's strength increased with mine. *He crushed Shido before I even knew how to use the darkness, and he easily defeated Fuu and Dodriel before I manifested my Soul Attire.*

What would happen if Zeon took control of my body now that I was able to use the darkness and my Soul Attire? He would probably envelop himself in darkness of unprecedented strength and go on an unstoppable rampage. *The Land of Sakura could be completely leveled. It would actually be lucky if he stopped there.* A chill ran down my spine at the thought.

"There's only ever been one safe way to fight a Spirit Core. I have to enter your Soul World!" Bacchus said.

I couldn't believe my ears.

"Y-you can do that?!" I asked.

While you could still be harmed mentally, it was true that you couldn't take physical damage there. *But can you really enter another person's Soul World?* My concerns turned out to be unfounded.

“Bwa-ha-ha! That’s child’s play for a true master of Soul Attire like me!”

“What does that mean?”

I remembered Clown saying something like that before we’d gone to the Holy Ronelian Empire.

“Oh, has no one told you about True Attire yet?” Bacchus asked.

“...True Attire?” I repeated.

“Swordsmen who achieve true mastery of their Soul Attire and move beyond it attain True Attire. You’re too young to worry about that yet, though. You should focus on mastering the foundation that is your Soul Attire first.”

“I see...”

I wasn’t sure if I understood that or not, but it sounded like I was only at the base stage of using my Soul Attire, and that it would be a while before I could move beyond that.

“Anyway... Could I *please* fight your Spirit Core? It doesn’t have to be for long,” Bacchus asked, putting his hands together and pleading.

*I don’t have a choice, do I...?* I didn’t want to refuse him after he’d just given me a lesson in the Cherry Blossom Blade School of Swordcraft.

“*Haah...* Fine,” I said.

“Great! Thank you so much!” Bacchus said, his face bursting into a childlike smile.

“But please be careful. My Spirit Core has a violent disposition. I want you to withdraw the moment that you feel you could be in danger,” I warned him.

You couldn’t be physically harmed in the Soul World, but dying there could inflict serious mental damage. *According to Rose, Bacchus is over two hundred years old and physically impaired by an incurable disease.* I didn’t want to think about it, but serious mental damage could lead to disaster.

“Okay, I promise! I’ll return to the real world as soon as I feel I’m in danger!” Bacchus agreed with a nod.

“Then how do you enter my Soul World?” I asked.

“By gently joining our spirit power. It’s kinda complicated, but I’ll take care of it. You don’t have to do a thing,” Bacchus responded. He put a hand on my right shoulder. “Okay, I’m going in.”

He closed his eyes and entered the Soul World ruled by Zeon. I lost track of time after that.

*This feels weird...* I could tell there was a clash of tremendous spirit power unfolding deep inside my chest. One side was dark, wicked, and full of anger—that had to belong to Zeon. The other spirit power was pure and reminded me of Rose—Bacchus, without a doubt.

*Please let this end without incident...*, I prayed as I waited for Bacchus to return.

“Gah...”

Bacchus suddenly swayed and pitched forward to the ground.

“M-Mr. Bacchus! Are you okay?!” I cried.

“Bwa...ha-ha... This is...nothing,” he muttered before coughing up blood and falling motionless.

*Oh no...* He must have been killed by Zeon in the Soul World and suffered heavy mental damage. That could have even aggravated his incurable disease. *Maybe I can do something to hold it off!*

I quickly covered his body in pitch-black darkness to try to heal him, but it didn’t seem to do anything. *Crap, I was afraid of that...* Zeon’s darkness cured all external wounds and curses, but had no effect against illnesses. That meant it had to have been Bacchus’s chronic disease that caused him to cough up blood.

“Rose, come over here! Hurry!” I shouted.

“What is it...? Huh?!” she cried, stiffening after she rushed toward me and saw Bacchus on the ground. “G-Gramps?!”

She quickly looked around, put her hand to his chest, and breathed a sigh of relief.

“Thank goodness...”

“Is he okay?!” Lia asked.

“I’m no doctor, but he looks like he should be rushed to a hospital right away!” Shii said.

Rose calmly shook her head. “No, that won’t be necessary. Gramps used to be called Bacchus the Immortal. He won’t die unless he uses up all his strength or is killed instantly. I appreciate the concern, but he’s fine.”

She bowed slightly and turned to me. “What happened, Allen? Did his condition get worse all of a sudden?”

“So, actually...”

I gave them a full rundown.

“I see. He fought your Spirit Core...,” Rose said.

“...Sorry. This wouldn’t have happened if I stopped him,” I apologized.

Choosing to go head-to-head with Zeon was as good as suicide. I should have kept him from doing that, no matter what he said.

“No, I should be the one to apologize. Gramps shouldn’t have asked that of you. He’s always loved fighting above all else, and he has a bad habit of hounding strong swordsmen for a match until they relent. I’ll make sure this doesn’t happen again,” Rose said, ashamed. It seemed like she had all sorts of troubles to deal with.

Once the situation had calmed down a bit, I turned my attention inward and called out to that massive idiot.

*Hey, Zeon. I knew it was a bad idea to let him fight you, but surely that was overdoing it,* I scolded him.

I heard his deep voice respond from within my chest.

*That’s my line, you brat. Don’t you ever send anyone like that annoying old fart in here again. And don’t get too close to him. I don’t know who he heard it from, but he knows more about me than he should,* Zeon spat.

*What does that mean?* I asked.

*That’s not for you to know yet. Forget about it and go do some practice swings*

*or whatever the hell it is you do for fun*, Zeon said, clearly ending the conversation. He was as self-centered as ever.

*That's rare, though...* He always acted too superior to praise any opponent he crossed blades with and was much more likely to insult them. *But he'd called Bacchus "annoying."* That meant Bacchus had put up a good enough fight to annoy Zeon. *I can see why he was once called the strongest swordsman in the world...* He was clearly not your average swordfighter.

About three minutes after he lost consciousness, Bacchus stirred.

"Urgh...", he moaned, slowly sitting up.

"Mr. Bacchus, are you okay?" I asked.

*"Haah, haah, I'm fine... Sorry for worrying you."* He crossed his legs and caught his breath.

*I can't believe how quickly he recovered...* Color was already returning to his face, which had been deathly pale a moment ago. I was worried when he collapsed, but it looked like he would be fine.

"Have some water, Gramps," Rose said, offering him a giant bottle.

"Oh, thanks!" He grabbed the bottle and drained it voraciously. *"Phah... Man, that guy really is a monster... I'd forgotten what it feels like to put my life on the line! Bwa-ha-ha!"*

"So... How did it go?" I asked timidly, wanting to hear about the fight.

"Oh, I didn't stand a chance," Bacchus said, shrugging. "I might've been able to beat him in my prime, but not since I've been weakened by my illness. I'd get slaughtered a hundred times out of a hundred."

"You're saying you could've beaten him in your prime?!" I asked, shocked.

"Honestly, I couldn't say... Regardless, that wasn't fair for either of us." Bacchus stroked his white mustache, a troubled expression on his face. "I wasn't the only one being held back. It seemed like he had a major handicap, too."

"He did?"



southern Cherin. *This place is really in the middle of nowhere...* According to the old man, there was a bathhouse called Drops of Sakura at the end of the trail.

“Is there really a bathhouse down this path?” Shii asked doubtfully.

“We’re already pretty far from human civilization... Are you sure we’re going the right way, old man Bacchus?” asked Lilim.

“It’s hard to believe there’s a famous hot spring all the way out here...,” Tirith said.

“Bwa-ha-ha! Don’t worry, I haven’t gone senile yet! Drops of Sakura is just up ahead!” Bacchus told them confidently, marching forward with long strides.

*Drops of Sakura...* Apparently, it was a very famous, yet secluded, bathhouse with waters that had all sorts of health benefits. The owner was a sullen man who refused entry to first-time customers, but Bacchus was an old drinking buddy of his, so he and his friends were always allowed in for free.

After another five to ten minutes of walking, we finally reached a clearing.

“We’re here,” Bacchus said, motioning to the large and slightly worn-down bathhouse before us. “I come here all the time to rest my weary bones. I’ve been to many hot springs in my time, but none have ever topped this one! The waters aren’t just relaxing, they’ll also rejuvenate your skin, loosen stiff shoulders, and improve your cold tolerance. It’s a spring of life!”

“It rejuvenates your skin?!” Lia exclaimed.

“And loosens stiff shoulders...?!” asked Shii.

Their eyes were shining with excitement.

“It’s four in the afternoon... So let’s meet back here at half past five,” Bacchus said. “Let’s go!”

Bacchus enthusiastically lifted the short curtain hanging in the entrance and burst into the bathhouse.

“...Oh. Hey,” a man inside muttered before looking back down at his newspaper. He must have been the owner; he appeared just as sullen as we’d been told.



We split up, Bacchus and I going to the men's bath, and the girls going to the women's. I passed through the curtain leading to the men's side and emerged into a very simply built changing room.

*This place is really nice.* Lockers with net baskets set atop them lined the walls. There was a small fridge containing mixed fruit juice and coffee-flavored milk. I found the traditional aesthetic very comfortable.

"This place is so relaxing," I said. The atmosphere reminded me of Goza Village's sole bathhouse.

"Bwa-ha-ha, you've got good taste. I prefer simple, modest places like this over newer bathhouses and their gaudy interiors," Bacchus told me.

We got ready as we chatted. I put my things in a locker, took off my clothes, picked up a towel—and was struck by Bacchus's naked body.

*He has a seriously impressive physique...*

Along with the steel-like muscles I'd noticed before, he also had numerous scars all across his body. They were from slash wounds, stab wounds, and even bites, burns, and explosions. They clearly communicated how many fierce battles he had been through. His body was a work of art representing his two centuries as a swordsman.

*...It's beautiful,* I thought as I continued to admire him. He had been through an extraordinary number of battles, bloodbaths, and life-or-death situations. You didn't develop a body like that without a profound amount of experience.

"What is it, boy? I hate to break it to you, but I don't play for that team," Bacchus said with a teasing smile.

"Wh-what are you implying?! I'm straight, too!" I responded, panicking.

"Bwa-ha-ha, you could've fooled me!"

He laughed and opened the changing room door. We stepped outside into a picturesque, secluded hot spring.

"Wow...!" I gasped.

It was an open-air bath fenced in by large stones. White steam rose from the clear water, and cherry blossom petals illuminated by the evening glow fell

through the air. The sight was so fantastical that I felt as if I had stepped into another world.

“This bath has such a great atmosphere!” I exclaimed. The natural beauty of the hot spring far surpassed my expectations.

“Bwa-ha-ha, right? It’s the best bathhouse in the world!” Bacchus said cheerfully, sitting on a stool to wash himself. “Go ahead and wash off so you can enjoy the hot spring!”

“Yes, sir!”

I turned on one of the showers to clean myself before I entered the water. There was a bottle of shampoo and one of body wash, both of which had a simple soapy smell.

*This is a good chance, now that I think about it.* I had been wanting to have at least one proper conversation with Bacchus. *Zeon told me not to get too close to him, but he doesn’t look like a bad guy to me. Plus, he’s a relative of Rose’s.* Most importantly, I hadn’t gotten a bad feeling from him when we fought yesterday. Each one of his swings conveyed his pure approach to swordcraft.

*...Okay, I’ll talk to him.* I cleared my throat and spoke up.

“Mr. Bacchus, would it be okay if I asked you a question?”

“There’s no need to be so formal with me, boy. We’ve already crossed swords, so I’ll answer anything you wanna know,” Bacchus replied.

“Thank you. I’ve been wondering... How much do you know about the 100-Million-Year Button?”

“Oh, that’s what you want to talk about...?” He paused from washing his body. “I don’t know if you pushed the button willingly or not, but you’re clearly involved... Okay. I’ll tell you all I know.”

“Thank you so much!”

Bacchus turned toward me and stroked his damp mustache.

“As I’m sure you already know, the 100-Million-Year Button is a cursed button created by the Time Hermit. Pushing it traps you in the World of Time for one hundred million years,” he said, starting with the basics. “The human mind is

not strong enough to withstand one hundred million years of solitude. A person will last a thousand years at most before they choose to commit suicide, and some won't even make it one year. All who press the 100-Million-Year Button must slice their way out of that world and escape before they lose their mind."

"R-really...?" That was news to me.

"Yep. Until you, I'd never heard of anyone lasting all one hundred million years, let alone willingly pushing it again. You're a massive anomaly."

*Oh yeah...* Chairwoman Reia had been shocked when I told her I'd spent over a billion years just focused on swinging my sword.

"It appears a 100-Million-Year Button can only be produced after meeting a strict set of conditions—the Time Hermit can't just pump out a bunch of 'em. That's why he's very selective about who he has push the button," Bacchus continued.

"He is?"

"Yeah. He travels the world searching for the most talented swordfighters he can find. He only reveals the button to those who meet his standards."

"...What's the Time Hermit's goal?"

It was unlikely he was flying around the world offering his precious 100-Million-Year Button to people without any benefit to himself.

"He has but one aim—to find the Child of Destruction," Bacchus said gravely, giving me a sharp look.

"The Child of Destruction...?" I repeated, overwhelmed by his gaze.

"The Child of Destruction is a person who is fated to possess tremendous power and bring about a revolution that will destroy the natural order of the world. The Time Hermit is frantically trying to find them."

"What does the Time Hermit plan to do when he finds them?"

"No clue. I was never told that... It was also a very long time ago that I heard all this."

Bacchus scratched his head awkwardly.

“So you met someone who knew about the 100-Million-Year Button?”

“Yeah. This really takes me back... That strange man seemed to know everything...” Bacchus stared off into the distance as he spoke. “About one hundred and fifty years ago, I embarked on a training journey to find swordfighters who were stronger than me. I was at my physical peak at the time—I could part the seas or tear a rift in the sky with one swing of my sword, and I ended up defeating thousands...tens of thousands of opponents! There was no one in the world who could beat me! Bwa-ha-ha!”

“Tens of thousands...?” I repeated, figuring he had to be exaggerating.

“It’s the truth, boy. I’ve never told a lie in my life!” he said, clapping me on the back. “It was while I was wandering all across the world that I encountered a swordsman in the Principality of Theresia. He was a thin, gentle young man, but his swordcraft was as sharp as it gets. We fought nonstop for three days and three nights, but neither of us bested the other. If I close my eyes, I can still recall the fight as if it were yesterday. That duel was some of the best fun I’ve ever had...”

This guy had been a match for Bacchus back in his heyday... He must have been absurdly strong.

“We became friends after that and traveled together for a time. He was searching for powerful companions to help him achieve his lifelong ambition. He knew far too much for his young age... He told me about the 100-Million-Year Button, the Time Hermit, Transcendents, and other stuff like eidolons and demons on our travels. So really, I’m just telling you what he told me.”

“Oh, okay... If that was one hundred and fifty years ago, then your friend must have passed away, right?”

I thought talking to his friend could have been the chance I was waiting for to learn about the 100-Million-Year Button and the Time Hermit, but I guess it wasn’t meant to be. *There’s no way there’s anyone else in the world who’s lived two centuries like Bacchus...*, I thought, disappointed.

“Nope, he’s still alive and kicking. I barely ever see him anymore, but he occasionally sends me troubling news,” Bacchus said casually.

“H-he’s still alive?! Can you please tell me his name?!” I asked.

“Yeah, of course. His name is Ba—” he began before being interrupted.

“Sorry, I’ve run out of bodywash. Can I borrow yours, Allen?” Sebas asked from beside me with a look of embarrassment.

“Yeah, sure. Here you go... Wait, what?!” I cried, doing a double take.

Somehow, Sebas Chandler—the former Student Council vice president at Thousand Blade Academy and one of the Four Imperial Knights—was sitting right beside me. I jumped back in shock.



“S-Sebas...! What are you doing here?!” I asked.

“I’m just taking a little holiday. Thanks for the bodywash,” he replied, scrubbing his body.

“H-huh...?”

Were the Four Imperial Knights—the greatest military power in the Holy Ronelian Empire—really allowed such freedom?

“Who is this man?” Bacchus asked me, studying Sebas’s naked body with interest.

“Sebas Chandler, a member of the Black Organization who concealed himself among the student body at Thousand Blade Academy. He’s one of the Four Imperial Knights, who are the strongest members of the organization.”

“Oh-ho, I thought he looked strong!” Bacchus’s lips twisted into the smile of a predator. “Whaddaya say, Sebas? Care for a match after we get out of the bath?”

“I’d actually rather not. I just finished a multi-year undercover mission and kinda just wanna take it easy for a while. Besides, I don’t think I’m quite strong enough to go toe-to-toe with Bacchus the Immortal,” Sebas said, his usual casual smile replaced by a tense glare. It seemed like Bacchus Valencia was intimidating even to the Four Imperial Knights.

“Bwa-ha-ha! I wouldn’t have expected one of the four knights chosen by Barel Ronelia to be so timid!”

“...It’s not that I don’t think I have a chance. I’d just need to mentally prepare myself before fighting you. Sorry, but we’ll have to do this another time.”

Sebas smiled awkwardly and bowed.

“Hmm... You should consider yourself lucky. Normally, I wouldn’t take no for an answer, but I can’t afford to cause any trouble today of all days. I guess I’ll have to let you go,” Bacchus muttered, disappointed. I hadn’t expected him to back down.

Once we were all done cleaning ourselves off, I resumed the conversation.



“Sebas, why are you really here?” I asked, cutting right to the chase.

Diplomatic relations between the Five Powers and the Holy Ronelian Empire were at an all-time low. It was highly unlikely one of the Four Imperial Knights would enter Cherin for no reason when a full-scale war could break out at any moment. *And that’s to say nothing of him happening upon us in this secluded bathhouse...* I didn’t know if he was after Lia, Shii, or me, but he had to be up to something.

I looked Sebas directly in the eyes, and he shrugged with resignation. “I guess you’re not gonna believe that I’m on vacation... You’re right—I came here on an important mission.”

“You did?” I responded.

“Hey, what’re we doing standing around naked? I’m sure we have a lot to talk about and, seeing as we’re at a hot spring, why don’t we continue this conversation over there?” Sebas said, pointing at the sauna.



Sebas, Bacchus, and I each grabbed a white towel and entered the sauna.

*Wow... This just looks like an old log house from the outside, but it’s a genuine sauna...*

There were three levels of benches built into three of the four walls. A beautiful slatted wooden drainboard was set out on the floor, and a clock and thermometer hung on the wall. A large number of heated stones had been packed together in the corner next to a bucket full of water. It was just as well-equipped as the sauna in Thousand Blade’s expansive bathhouse.

“Hmm, we need a little more steam,” Bacchus said. He picked up the bucket and poured it on the heating stones. The water sizzled and evaporated, filling the room with steam and quickly raising the temperature. I started to sweat.

*He doesn’t do anything by halves...*, I thought with a wry grin.

Sebas nodded with satisfaction. “I didn’t expect to find such an impressive sauna here... I see Drops of Sakura didn’t earn its reputation as one of the best bathhouses in the world for nothing.”

“Bwa-ha-ha! Nice to see you understand! Nothing feels better than taking a cold bath after sweating your butt off in here! It’s heavenly!” Bacchus said.

“Ha-ha, I can’t wait,” Sebas said.

The two of them seemed to hit it off immediately.

We all chose a spot on the benches a good distance from each other and sat down.

“All right, how about we exchange information?” Sebas suggested with a soft smile.

“Information about what?” I asked.

“Well, for one... Aren’t you interested in hearing whom the Holy Ronelian Empire’s leaders consider responsible for your rampage through the country?”

“...! Yes, I am.”

I’d been worried about that ever since it happened.

“In short, all the crimes were put on your shoulders. That includes ruining Shii Arkstoria and Numelo Dohran’s wedding, cutting down the Oracle Knight Grega Ash, and assaulting Zach Bombard and many other Black Organization members during your escape. Thanks to my report to the emperor, they believe that you were the ringleader for the greatest disaster in the history of the Holy Empire and that the others were simply following your orders. Is that what you wanted?” Sebas asked.

“Yes, thank you,” I responded. I was the one who’d said I wanted to save Shii, convinced Clown to let us go, and put our plan into action. I should absolutely take all responsibility for the incident.

*Thank goodness...* I was relieved that Lia, Rose, Lilim, and Tirith wouldn’t suffer any consequences for following me into the heart of enemy territory. We might have been enemies, but I was grateful to Sebas for covering for my friends.

“Hah, I thought you would say that,” Sebas said with an exasperated smile.

“Bwa-ha-ha! I like you, boy! You look no different from all the meek young men of your generation, but I guess you can’t judge a book by its cover! I’d

never have thought you'd do something so daring!" Bacchus laughed and clapped me on the back.

"I have something important to tell you next," Sebas said, staring at me with an unreadable expression.

"What is it?" I asked.

"His Majesty is highly impressed by your skill as a swordsman. He wants to invite you into the Black Organization and give you a spot on the Thirteen Oracle Knights... What do you say?"

"Emperor Barel Ronelia wants me?"

"Yeah, he does. Your swordcraft is superb, you're only fifteen, you have unlimited potential, and most importantly, your Spirit Core appears stronger than an eidolon. The emperor thinks very highly of you. He said that you're still green, but that you'd be capable of becoming one of his four personal knights in the future."

"He really does think highly of me."

Hearing such praise from the enemy's leader made me feel sick.

"That shouldn't surprise you. After all, you single-handedly defeated three of the Oracle Knights—Fuu Ludoras, Raine Grad, and Grega Ash—and even escaped from Berios Castle while leading a sizable group of comrades. By this point, there's not a single person in the Holy Empire who doesn't know your name," Sebas told me. "The Holy Ronelian Empire wouldn't be so bad for you. Over there, power is justice. You'd have all the wealth, fame, and authority you'd ever want. So, what do you say? Wanna join us?"

Sebas put out his hand.

*Me, join the Black Organization...?* I'd laugh if I didn't find the idea so offensive.

"Sorry, but I have to refuse. I will never join the Holy Empire," I said flatly.

The Holy Ronelian Empire and the Black Organization were forces of evil that threatened world peace with fear and chaos. Pigs would fly before I swung my sword for them.

“Eh, I’m not surprised. That side does suit you better,” Sebas said, withdrawing his hand and smiling.

“...I didn’t expect you to give up so easily,” I responded. I thought I might’ve had to fight him over this, but it seemed he was happy to let it go.

“Ah-ha-ha, I didn’t think for a second you’d actually accept the offer. My position comes with certain responsibilities, though. If His Majesty orders me to trek all the way to Cherin, I’ve gotta do it,” he said with a shrug. It sounded like he had a lot to deal with. “Okay, that’s all the info I have to offer. Now it’s your turn.”

“What do you want to know?” I asked, gulping nervously. Was he going to ask about the 100-Million-Year Button, the Time Hermit, or something else entirely?

“Hah, need you even ask?” Sebas smiled boldly. “Tell me what Shii’s been up to since I left!”

“...Oh, right.” I had forgotten about that eccentricity of his.

I sighed, suddenly feeling exhausted.



I filled Sebas in about Shii’s life over the last couple of months while taking care to protect her privacy. I told him that we ate lunch together and chatted every day at our regular meetings, that she hung out with Lilim and Tirith after school, and that she occasionally joined the Practice-Swing Club, where she would train seriously to hone her swordcraft.

“So yeah, she’s having a very fun time at school,” I concluded.

“...That’s good to hear,” Sebas said, nodding with satisfaction.

He looked both happy and sad. Happy to know that Shii, Lilim, and Tirith—all old friends of his—were doing well, but sad that he couldn’t rejoin them. I could see those competing emotions in the conflicted expression on his face.

*I wonder why he joined the Black Organization.* If he cared about Shii that much, he should have stayed by her side to protect her. *I’ll bet there was*

*something that forced his hand.*

Two of the Oracle Knights I'd met had joined the Black Organization because it was the only way to achieve their dreams. Fuu Ludoras had joined to learn about the World's End Waterfall at the edge of the world. Raine Grad joined to save Serena, who had been suffering from the Rain Curse. So what had driven Sebas to become a member?

Suddenly, Sebas's voice shook me from my thoughts. "Is there anything else you can tell me, Allen? I want any little detail you can think of, no matter how trivial. Tell me about a time she laughed, got angry, or pouted... Give me a story that I can feel her through," he begged.

"Hmm... Oh yeah, there was this one time..."

A few days before the third years' graduation ceremony, a boy had barged into the Student Council room during our regular meeting (that was really just us eating lunch together). He loudly proclaimed that he was about to graduate, that he had loved Shii ever since he first laid eyes on her, and that he wanted to date her and eventually marry her, concluding with a bow. The attempt ended in miserable failure—Shii gave him a gut punch by apologizing and saying that she liked someone else.

"...And that's what happened. I'd never seen someone confess their love like that, so I was pretty sho—"

"Wait. Who was this piece of trash? Tell me his name," Sebas interrupted, his handsome features twisting into a menacing scowl that set my hair on end.

"..."

The intensity of his anger and hatred rendered me speechless.

"Wow, I'm impressed...", Bacchus said. The aura Sebas was projecting was enough to put even him on guard.

*The Four Imperial Knights really are on another level...* The malice I felt from Sebas was far more imposing than what an Oracle Knight could manage. This wasn't the first time on this trip I had sensed such negative emotions. *I might as well ask to make sure...*

I cleared my throat and addressed him timidly. “Sebas... Was the bloodlust aimed at me yesterday on the island behind the Billion-Year Sakura from you?”

“...Oh. You mean when Shii tripped and you caught her...,” he muttered, clutching his head with quivering hands. “I got so jealous when I saw you holding her! I hated you so passionately at that moment that I ended up leaking some bloodlust even though I was supposed to be tailing you...”

Sebas tore at his hair and screamed.

“H-huh...”

It sounded like he really was the source of the incredible malice I’d felt yesterday. *But I guess that’s one thing less to worry about,* I thought. The enemy hiding in Cherin had turned out to be Sebas, and all he’d wanted was to invite me into the Black Organization and exchange information. That meant I wasn’t in any danger. *I can’t let my guard down completely, of course, but I can ease up a little.*

We left the sauna once Sebas calmed down. After a quick shower to wash off the sweat, the three of us submerged ourselves in an ice-cold bath.

*Ahh... This feels so good!* The chilly water permeated my flushed skin, tightening my pores and filling my entire body with a sense of relaxation. *This is the first time I’ve ever experienced a sauna and a cold bath back-to-back, and it certainly won’t be the last. I could get addicted to this.* I would have to try it at Thousand Blade’s bathhouse as well.

Once we’d had our fill of the cold bath, it was finally time for the main event—the hot spring. It was a natural hot spring with crystal-clear water, and a ring of large stones had been set around it to transform it into an open-air bath. I enjoyed the sight of the cherry blossom petals floating on the surface as I stepped leisurely into the water.

“Ahh...,” I sighed lazily once I’d submerged myself up to my neck.

*This water feels incredible...* The gentle yet powerful warmth of the bath traveled from my feet to my thighs, from my thighs to my trunk, and from there to the rest of my body.

“Wow, this sure is hard to beat...,” Sebas said, looking utterly relaxed.

“Bwa-ha-ha... This hot spring really is the best...,” Bacchus said drowsily, stretching his large body.

Now that we were all in a great mood, we started to chat about ourselves. I told them about my hard yet fulfilling life in the agricultural Goza Village. Sebas talked about the culture and customs of the Holy Ronelian Empire, the makeup of the Black Organization, and the duties and hardships of the Thirteen Oracle Knights and the Four Imperial Knights. Bacchus recounted rare delicacies and famous brands of alcohol he’d found on his training expedition, along with all the strange Soul Attire abilities he’d encountered. Our vastly different experiences in life made for exciting conversation.

It had been about half an hour and our hands were all wrinkled when Sebas announced, “Okay, it’s time for me to go,” and got out of the bath gently enough to not disturb the water.

“Sebas... Thank you for all you’ve told us,” I said.

He’d shared a lot of confidential information about the Black Organization while passing it off as small talk. He’d told us that the Four Imperial Knights would be fully occupied for a while with Barel Ronelia’s orders to capture eidolons. Many of the Thirteen Oracle Knights, on the other hand, were free and potentially up to something, and he said we should be wary of them. He’d also mentioned that Dodriel was still obsessed with me and was currently training to obtain his True Attire. I was grateful for everything he’d shared.

“Don’t worry about it. It’s just my way of showing thanks for protecting Shii with your life,” Sebas responded, smiling kindly.

“You’ll have to give me that duel next time we meet, Sebas!” Bacchus said, lifting his right hand out of the bath and grinning.

“Ah-ha-ha, I hope the opportunity never arises,” Sebas said. He waved with an awkward smile and headed in the complete opposite direction of the changing room.

...*Huh?* He was walking toward the tall wooden fence that divided the men’s and women’s baths. *No, don’t tell me...*, I thought, watching him with a bad feeling.

“Up we go,” he muttered as he grabbed the fence and began to climb.

“W-wait, Sebas! What do you think you’re doing?!” I cried.

“Isn’t it obvious? I can’t pass up this chance to see Shii’s beautiful naked body,” he responded with an innocent smile.

“You’re going to peep on her...? If Shii finds out, she’ll kill you,” I warned.

At the very least, she would never talk to him again.

“Don’t worry, I’m a stealth expert. She’ll never know,” he said before continuing to climb the fence.

“Stop!” Bacchus called out in a deep, booming voice. “My adorable granddaughter is on the other side of that fence. Try to peep, and you’ll regret it.”

He stood up and glared at Sebas. If looks could kill, Sebas would be on the ground taking his final breaths.

“...!”

Sebas and I gulped. Bacchus’s malice and rage seemed to encroach on the air itself.

“Besides—I’m the one who should get to peep on those beauties, not you!” Bacchus declared shockingly.

“...You may be Bacchus the Immortal, but I can’t let you see Shii naked,” Sebas said.

“Oh-ho... Defy me and you’ll end up in so much pain you’ll wish you’d never been born.”

“Sorry, but this is one line in the sand I won’t budge on.”

They were about to start fighting over one of the most despicable things I could imagine—which of them would get to peep on the women’s bath. *I sense true malice from both of them... They’re actually going to do this.*

A bloody duel was about to break out between two of the strongest swordsmen in the world. The smart thing to do would be to run and take shelter. *But unfortunately, I need to fight, too...!* Lia was on the other side of



that wall with Shii and Rose. *Whether Sebas or Bacchus wins, the result will be the same—one of them will peep at the women's bath.* I had to beat these two to stop that from happening!

“Stop! I can’t let either of you see Lia naked!” I shouted, joining the standoff as a third party even as their bloodlust sent shivers down my spine.

“Wow, Allen. I didn’t take you for a peeper... So, it’s Lia Vesteria you’re after?” Sebas asked.

“Oh-ho, you’ve got the hots for that blond beauty, do you? You look so pure and innocent, but I guess you’re more of a man than I thought!” Bacchus added.

They looked at me inquisitively and I shook my head. “Don’t get the wrong idea. I have no intention of peeping on the girls. I just don’t want someone other than me to see Lia naked.”

“Hah, I should’ve known you’d say that... You’re as straitlaced as it gets,” Sebas said.

“Bwa-ha-ha! You’re clearly smitten with her!” Bacchus laughed.

Bacchus and I climbed out of the bath and Sebas jumped down from the fence.

“We’re gonna level this hot spring if we go all out. None of us would get to peep then, and we’d have much bigger problems to deal with. So how about we fight with these?” Sebas said, taking three mops out of a cleaning cabinet and passing one each to me and Bacchus.

“Uh...”

“You wanna fight with mops?”

“Yep. Leaving the men’s bath and using your Soul Attire are forbidden. When your mop breaks, you lose. Do those rules sound good?”

“Yeah, I’m fine with that.”

“No objections here. I don’t care if we use swords, mops, or tree branches, I’m not losing to a couple of high schoolers.”

Once we’d decided on the rules, we took our respective stances. We stared

each other down, three towel-clad men with mops in hand. *This must be a bizarre sight...* But it was, without a doubt, a serious battle. If I let my guard down for a moment, my mop would be broken.

“””” ...””””

Our tense standoff continued until a cherry blossom petal fluttered down and landed directly between us. We all took that as our cue to strike.

“Eighth Style—Eight-Span Crow!”

“Cherry Blossom Blade Style—Night Sakura!”

“Peerless Blade—Violet Thrust!”

My eight slashes collided with Bacchus’s downward diagonal cut and Sebas’s thrust in a massive *boom*, sending tremendous shockwaves through the bathhouse.

“Hngh?!” I gasped. I sent the impact from the mop into my body and then into the ground, thankfully preventing the wood from breaking.

“Man, let this be the last time I ever take on an inhuman and an immortal at the same time... I’m not quite as strong as you guys without my Soul Attire,” Sebas said with a pained expression, shaking his left hand.

“Bwa-ha-ha! I thought I’d break your mops with one blow. You two are good!” Bacchus laughed confidently, waving his undamaged mop.

*He really is skilled...* Bacchus had performed Night Sakura at a perfect angle, neutralizing both my Eight-Span Crow and Sebas’s Violet Thrust. *I’d expect nothing less from the sixteenth inheritor of the Cherry Blossom Blade School of Swordcraft.* In terms of pure technique, he clearly stood above both me and Sebas.

Our battle continued with the utmost ferocity. Bacchus hounded us with slash after slash, displaying his superior strength and skill.

“Is that all you kids’ve got?! Cherry Blossom Blade Style—Sakura Flash Chain!”

Sebas and I did our best to hold off his assault and search for a chance to counterattack despite our disadvantage in strength and skill, respectively.

“Grk...!”

“Seventh Style—Draw Flash!”

Unfortunately, neither of us could land a decisive blow, and our battle raged on.

*The mops are probably the reason none of us can put an end to this.* I didn’t know if it was because they were old or had absorbed too much moisture, but they were very brittle. One wrong move, and they would break.

*And the wet floor isn’t helping things, either...* The effort I had to expend to avoid slipping prevented me from putting all my weight into my mop. The circumstances were hardly conducive to putting together a solid attack.

Bacchus and Sebas’s expressions darkened with each blow we traded.

*Grr, this is taking too long...*, Bacchus grumbled internally.

*Crap. I need to figure something out, and quickly...*, Sebas thought desperately.

*Sweet, this is perfect!* I was making steady progress toward achieving victory.

My opponents were growing stressed because they knew they needed to win quickly. When we’d arrived at Drops of Sakura, Bacchus had told us, *“It’s four in the afternoon... So, let’s meet back here at half past five.”* That had given us only an hour and a half at the bathhouse. *We washed ourselves when we got here, enjoyed the sauna and a cold bath, then spent a while talking in the hot spring...* It must have been at least an hour already.

Considering the time the girls would need to dress and dry their hair, they were likely only going to spend another ten to fifteen minutes tops in the hot spring. *If I can hold them off for that long, there’ll be no one left to peep at!* That was all I needed to do to send Sebas’s and Bacchus’s evil plans up in smoke. *Keeping the battle going like this is fine for me. Better than fine, in fact.* If I just maintained this balance of being neither too aggressive nor too defensive, then victory would be mine!

I held them off for three more minutes, their swings growing wilder and their eyes more impatient all the while.

“Grr, Cherry Blossom Blade Style—Night Sakura!”

“Crap! Peerless Blade—Red Light Slash!”

“Not good enough!” I shouted, easily blocking their slashes and jumping backward. *I can do this. I can beat them!* Victory was within my grasp.

That was when Sebas spoke up with a shocking proposal.

“...Bacchus. Do you want to join forces?”

“What was that...?” Bacchus responded with a scowl. It was clear to anyone watching that he was going to reject Sebas’s offer.

“...Think about it: If one of us wins, that person gets to feast their eyes on those knockouts over there. But if that rationality monster wins, no one gets to look at them! The girls’ bath will remain unpeeped, and we both go home angry! This battle will be pointless! So what do you say—should we join forces and crush this dweeb?!” Sebas beseeched, gesturing passionately.

*Just how badly does this guy want to see Shii naked...?* He was willing to forsake his dignity as a swordsman to satisfy his desire. I actually found myself in awe of how earnest he was with his motives.

*Too bad his request is going to get turned down.* Duels between swordsmen were serious business. To join up with someone and fight two-on-one would be to abandon all honor. Bacchus had been a swordsman for over two hundred years and surely knew that better than anyone. His pride would prevent him from stooping so low, no matter how convincing Sebas’s argument was.

“Hmm, you have a point...”

“M-Mr. Bacchus?! ” I shouted, shocked.

His pride was much shallower than I’d expected.

“Come on, you two! Duels between swordsmen are sacred! You have to know that!” I said, appealing to their consciences as practitioners of the blade.

“Trust me, I do. But take a good look at our weapons. Do you see a handle, a guard, or a blade? These are mops, not swords. This is hardly a duel between swordsmen,” Sebas argued.

“He’s right. This is a duel between men. That means anything is fair game. All that matters is winning!” Bacchus declared.

So much for appealing to their consciences. That only made them double down.

“What sort of an excuse is that...?!” I asked. What they were proposing was unacceptable by any measure.

“Cry all you want. We’re coming for you, Allen!” Sebas said.

“Bwa-ha-ha, time to turn this fight around!” Bacchus roared.

Driven by their vulgar desire to peep into the women’s bath, the two of them joined forces and attacked with renewed vigor.

“Haaaaaaa!”

“Raaaaaah!”

“Ngh...!”

I dodged, parried, and blocked their blows, somehow managing to hold off their storm of attacks.

“Your tenacity is something else, inhuman... But let’s see how you handle this! Peerless Blade—Rainbow Strike!” Sebas shouted, swinging his mop to send seven slashes racing through the air.

“Grk... First Style—Flying Shadow Times Seven!” I yelled, making a split-second decision to send seven projectile slashes back at him. My attacks collided with his, creating a massive shockwave.

*Phew, I canceled out his attack, I thought with relief.*

“Peerless Blade—Violet Thrust!”

“Cherry Blossom Blade Style—Sakura Flash!”

Without a moment’s delay, Sebas and Bacchus both stabbed at me with godly speed.

*Geez, that’s fast! Should I block them? No, my mop will break... I can’t dodge, either... I was in a real pinch.*

“Got you! We win!” Sebas shouted confidently.

“I applaud you for lasting this long against the two of us!” Bacchus praised me.

*...I wanted to have more of these in place, but this'll have to do.* I sighed internally and turned to the ace up my sleeve.

“Second Style—Hazy Moon.”

I swung my mop horizontally, triggering the slashes I had set in the air throughout the fight. Those slashes triggered more slashes, unleashing a devastating chain.

“What the hell...?!” Sebas cursed.

“B-boy...!” Bacchus let out in surprise.

The barrier of slash attacks before me engulfed my two opponents.

*Sweet, that worked perfectly!*

My preset Hazy Moon slashes left a slight disturbance in the air that elite swordsmen such as themselves would normally never miss. *This is no ordinary duel, however.* The floor was wet and hard to get traction on. We were using long wooden mops instead of metal swords. Our bodies were swollen from our time in the sauna, cold bath, and hot spring. This environment made it difficult for us to make full use of our normally sharp senses.

*The steam rising from the hot spring helped, too.* That had hidden the distortions in the air and allowed me to place a large number of slashes.

*...Is it over?*

I watched as, unfortunately, my Hazy Moon chain was torn apart by a tremendous slash.

“What?!” I cried.

“Hah, I was worried for a second there. You made it look like you were only killing time, but you were actually preparing that move... It’s dangerous to assume anything when fighting you, Allen. You’re meaner than I thought,” Sebas said.

“Slashes preset in the air, huh...? Nice job using the unique environment of the bathhouse. I would’ve been a goner if you’d set thirty more of those. Your fighting style is crafty beyond your years,” Bacchus said.

Sebas and Bacchus had both suffered a number of shallow slash wounds, but their mops were still intact. *Crap, I wasted them...* If only I’d set a few more Hazy Moon slashes before being forced to trigger them.

*...I’m out of moves.* There was no other choice for me now but to endure their vicious assault and kill time. *Man, why did this hot spring trip have to turn out this way...?*

I used this moment of calm to look over at the tall wooden fence dividing the men’s and women’s baths. Lia, Rose, Shii, Lilim, and Tirith were probably enjoying a warm bath on the other side of that barrier.

*Lia... Are you having fun over there?* The men’s side had turned into a living hell. We came here to relax after an exhausting training session. So how had I ended up fighting one of the Four Imperial Knights and a man once known as the strongest swordsman in the world? I felt more exhausted than before.

*But this is no time for complaining.* I only had to last a little longer. It wouldn’t be too long until the girls left the bath, leaving Sebas and Bacchus with no one to target for their nefarious plan. I exhaled and assumed the middle stance.

“We only have about five minutes left... It’s do or die now,” Sebas said.

“Let’s finish this, boy!” Bacchus yelled.

They both held their mops in the middle guard position, looking more serious than I’d ever seen them.

“Bring it on!” I shouted.

Five more minutes until Lia and the girls would leave the hot spring. For someone who’d swung their blade intently for over a billion years, that would feel like the blink of an eye.

At least, that was what I’d thought.

“Ooooooooooooooh!”

“Haaaaaaaaaah!”

“Raaaaaaaaah!”

In actuality, five minutes of trying to fend off two of the greatest swordsmen alive ended up feeling like an eternity.

*Ngh...! I suffered slash wounds and dark bruises with each blow we traded. Come on... Just a little longer...! These injuries were temporary. I could heal them with darkness as soon as this battle was over. Right now, all that matters is protecting this mop so I can save Lia and the girls from these awful Peeping Toms! I just needed to be brave and keep on attacking!*

“This isn’t over! Sixth Style—Dark Boom!” I shouted, putting everything I had into the attack.

“Grk, how does he have that kinda strength left...?” Sebas muttered through gritted teeth.

“This kid just won’t go down...!” said Bacchus.

They both paused their assault to deflect Dark Boom. I stepped forward to take advantage of that brief moment.

“Eighth Style—Eight-Span Crow!”

“Wha?!”

“Hrn...!”

Sebas and Bacchus blocked the eight slashes and retreated half a step.

*Sweet, that’s just what I wanted!*

They’d hesitated to attack after blocking Eight-Span Crow because they were wary of another vicious counter like Hazy Moon. *Sebas and Bacchus don’t know all my moves.* The truth was that I had no more aces up my sleeve, but I was the only one who knew that. They must have assumed I was still hiding something.

*Bluffing is one of the core strategies of card games, and it translates to swordcraft too!* I went on the offensive in this last stage of the battle to make them think I had a final trump card that didn’t actually exist. *The threat of a counter is preventing them from hitting me with all they’ve got!* That was why I couldn’t afford to fight defensively. The best way to buy time right now was to grin fearlessly and attack!



*I'm also getting used to my opponents.* The longer we fought, the better I became at dealing with Sebas's Peerless Blade and Bacchus's Cherry Blossom Blade Style. *I've internalized their rhythms and their movements. I know exactly what they're going to do!*

This nearly naked battle had allowed me to observe how their muscles moved as they fought. Muscles revealed much more than a person's eyes or mouth, or even their sword. I could watch their bodies to predict how they were about to swing their blades, essentially letting me see into the future. Thinking about it, this battle had actually turned into a valuable learning experience.

*I just have to keep this up! I can hold them off long enough!*

After another three minutes continued in that manner, Sebas sighed loudly.

"I can't believe you've learned how to handle our swordcraft styles so quickly... Your adaptability is honestly frustrating, Allen," he said, breaking his Peerless Blade stance to shrug.

"Are you ready to give up peeping on the women's bath?" I asked.

"Never! Hell will freeze over before I give up on Shii. I'll follow her as long as I draw breath!"

"I see..."

I admired his resolve, but he was only being a nuisance to Shii.

"I clearly don't have enough time to finish you with normal attacks, though. It's time to use my trump card," Sebas said, cracking his neck and giving me a sharp look.

*He must mean a secret technique of his Peerless Blade Style...* I gulped and braced myself.

"Secret Technique—Mad Scramble!" Sebas shouted, before dashing about and chucking wooden buckets at me. He'd obviously made that move up on the spot.

"Hey, you can't just make up a secret technique like that!" I shouted, quickly cutting down the buckets. "Wait, what?!"

One of the ten buckets was full of bubbly water. *How in the world did he fill*

*one with soapy water that quickly...?* The water burst out of the bucket when I sliced it open, splashing into my face.

“Crap, my eyes...!” I said, blinded.

“Good job, Sebas! Cherry Blossom Blade Style—Sakura Flash!” Bacchus shouted, not overlooking the opportunity to finish me off.

“Not a chance!” I shouted. I relied on the sound of the mop slicing through the air to deduce its location, then jumped backward to avoid his thrust.

“Is this kid some kinda wild animal?!” Bacchus exclaimed.

“He’s off-balance! Now’s our chance!” Sebas shouted.

Sebas grabbed two bars of soap and threw them my way while I was still in the air. They slid quickly along the wet floor and ended up directly beneath me.

“Huh?! Whoa...!”

I landed on the bubbly bars of soap and slid backward, unable to quell the momentum of my jump...

“Gah!”

...and smacked into the wall behind me.

“Owww...,” I moaned, sweeping away the chips of wood underneath me, then looked up...

“A-Allen...?”

“Wha-wha-wha...?! ”

“...?! ”

...and was greeted by the sight of Lia, Rose, and Shii without a shred of clothing on. Lia hid her chest with a nearby towel, Rose wrapped her hands around herself and crouched down, and Shii, who had been soaking her feet in the hot spring, pushed herself into the water up to her neck.

*You can’t be serious...!* I had apparently crashed through the wooden fence and landed in the women’s bath.

“...!”

The three girls flushed with embarrassment and glared at me. *Th-this is bad...* I went so pale that I could have passed for a ghost. *What should I do...?! This is a complete disaster!* My life flashed before my eyes as panic overwhelmed me.

*I certainly haven't had it easy, have I...?* I endured three hellish years at Grand Swordcraft Academy trying and failing to make up for my lack of talent for the sword. I'd suffered horrible setbacks and hardships in my life and had nearly been killed more than a few times. *I can say this with confidence, though.* In my billion-plus years of life, this was easily the biggest crisis I'd ever faced.

*If I fail to convince the girls that this was an accident, I'll be labeled a Peeping Tom and shunned by society.* I'd have to spend years in a cold, dark jail cell with nothing but the harsh reality of being a jobless man with a criminal record awaiting me upon release. And it went without saying that I'd have no chance of becoming a holy knight. Instead of achieving my goal of giving Mom an easy life, I'd just make her sad.

*Calm down. I need to think this through...* I quickly racked my brain and tried to explain myself.

"W-wait... This is a misunderstanding! I wasn't trying to peep on you! Please believe me!" I shouted. The first thing I needed to do was deny it all. I had to make it clear that I hadn't crashed through the fence intentionally to see them naked. "This was an accident! I was fighting Sebas and Bacchus to prevent *them* from peeping! Just look at them! See how they're both holding mops and blee... ding..."

I turned around and saw that there was no one there.

"Huh...?"

There were no mops, no bloodstains, and no broken buckets. The men's bath was perfectly clean and peaceful. *Those jerks...* Sebas and Bacchus had fled to pin all the blame on me. They'd even managed to leave no evidence they were ever there. They couldn't have pulled that off without incredible speed and a superb sense for danger. I thought that *this* must be what it feels like to have your blood boil.

*Those two are awful and they deserve to pay for this.* I trembled with anger as I sat in the women's bath.

“Allen... This is your second offense,” Lia said, glaring at me. The first offense she was referring to was when I accidentally saw her naked on the day of our entrance ceremony.

“I told you on Valentine’s Day that I have feelings for you, Allen, and I meant it...but, um, I don’t think I’m ready for this...,” Rose muttered, panicking slightly as she crouched in the water.

“I-I understand that boys have an interest in girls’ bodies. But that does not make peeping okay. If you had just spoken to me, I might have...you know...okay?” Shii said, blushing furiously and glancing at me.

“Urk...”

They weren’t buying my explanation. *I guess I can’t blame them...* There wasn’t a single piece of evidence to corroborate what I said. Not only were there no mops, bloodstains, or broken wooden buckets, but Sebas and Bacchus were nowhere to be seen. The girls had an incomplete picture of the facts, only knowing that I’d suddenly burst through the wooden fence and landed in the women’s bath.

*I’m finished, aren’t I...?* I was the sole perpetrator. There were three victims. No evidence existed that could prove my innocence. If I was arrested, it’d be an open-and-shut case.

*I really didn’t do anything, though...* I’d fought so hard. I’d given my all to prevent those reprehensible men—one an Imperial Knight and the other the former strongest swordsman in the world—from peeping on the girls. I’d just wanted to protect my friends. *I hardly deserve to be labeled a Peeping Tom for my efforts...!*

Anyway... I needed to settle down and have a proper conversation with them. I’d crossed blades with Lia, Rose, and Shii many times. *If I tell them the full story, they might just believe me.*

I banked on that small chance and decided to try explaining myself again.



We decided to return to our respective changing rooms and get dressed

before speaking. *There's no way we can have a proper conversation like this...* As a guy, I wouldn't have been able to keep my composure in front of three beautiful, naked girls. They would've struggled to speak to a guy in the buff, too, I'm sure.

As such, we split up and gathered in front of Drops of Sakura at half past five. Lia, Rose, and Shii were wearing loose *yukata*, their complex expressions displaying a mixture of anger, embarrassment, and concern. Their faces were a little flushed, and I didn't think it was only because they'd just gotten out of the bath.

*What should I say first...?* I wondered.

"Aww man, I can't believe we were in the sauna during the greatest moment of our spring training camp... I'll regret it forever," said Lilim.

"I would've killed to see Shii's reaction... She must've been so red...," Tirith grumbled.

Their shoulders slumped in disappointment.

It seemed like I hadn't seen Lilim and Tirith when I crashed through the fence because they'd been in the sauna at the time. *That's one silver lining*, I thought. Mischievous as they were, they probably would've found a way to make the situation even more uncomfortable than it had already been.

*Anyway, everything is riding on this moment.* I took a deep breath and tried to fire myself up, but was interrupted by one of the main offenders before I could speak.

"Ahh, that hit the spot... Nothing beats a drink right outta the bath!" Bacchus exclaimed, cheerfully taking a swig from a bottle. He leaned against a cherry blossom tree, clearly tipsy.

*He's unbelievable...!* Bacchus was acting as if he'd had nothing to do with this situation, and it was really starting to annoy me. *Calm down, Allen... I just need to focus on explaining what really happened.* I steeled myself and looked the three girls directly in the eyes.

"Lia, Rose, President... I'm very sorry that I saw you all naked. I know my apology doesn't change anything, but I feel guilty. Please believe me, though.

That really was an accident. I was not trying to peep into the women's bath," I said.

I launched into a full explanation of what happened, starting with how Sebas—who'd appeared out of nowhere—had begun to climb the wooden fence to see Shii naked. Bacchus had told him to stop, saying that he couldn't let him see Rose naked and that *he* was the one who would get to peep on the girls. Then, they'd nearly come to blows over who would get the privilege of feasting their eyes on the women's bath.

I'd challenged them as a third party, unwilling to sit back and let them commit the unforgivable act of peeping on the girls. We'd ended up fighting a battle with mops instead of swords, in which Soul Attires were forbidden and we lost if our mop broke. I'd had the advantage until Sebas and Bacchus teamed up and turned the tables. They'd eventually gotten the best of me with a fierce chain of attacks that sent me flying backward through the wooden fence, causing me to land unintentionally in the women's bath.

"I ended up in the women's bath by total accident. I had no bad intentions. Please believe me!" I'd told them the whole truth, not a word of it was a lie.

"...Gramps. You *still* haven't grown out of your peeping habit?" Rose asked, glaring at Bacchus.

"Hmm, I dunno what to say... My memory's not what it used to be. I don't remember much of what the boy detailed," Bacchus told her, probably not wanting to lie to his beloved granddaughter. He used his age as an excuse, scratching his cheek distractedly all the while.

"*Haah...* Okay. I believe your story completely, Allen. And...I apologize for Gramps. He's caused you no end of trouble on this trip."

"R-Rose!" I grabbed her hands, overcome with gratitude. "Thank you so much for believing me!"

"N-no problem...but will you please back up?" Rose said, blushing in response to my heartfelt gratitude.

That was one girl down. Now if I could just convince Lia and Shii, my name would be cleared.

“Allen, can you look over here?” Lia asked, looking me directly in the eyes. Her beautiful azure irises made my breath catch in my throat.

“S-sure. What is it?”

“I just want to make sure... What you just told us is the truth, right?”

“Of course. As a swordfighter—no, as a man—I would never stoop to peeping.”

I looked her directly in the eyes as I spoke.

“...Okay. I believe you, too.”

“R-really?!”

“Yeah... Don’t tell anyone, but the women of the Vesteria royal line all have special abilities,” Lia whispered in my ear.

“They do...?”

“Yeah. My power is the ability to see through lies. If I concentrate and look into someone’s eyes, I can tell if they’re lying or not. You can’t tell anyone though, okay?”

She smiled adorably after sharing her unbelievable secret.

*The ability to see through lies... I need to be careful if she really has this power.* Lia’s birthday was in less than a month, on April 1. I’d learned the date after many attempts to get it out of her naturally through conversation, and I was planning to surprise her with a birthday present.

*This could be dangerous...* The moment she asked me if I was hiding anything, the surprise would be ruined. She would realize I was planning something and keep asking questions until she found out that I was getting her a birthday present. *I’ll have to take extra care not to act suspiciously on the big day...*

Lia continued while I was lost in thought. “According to Father, this power comes from the woman who sealed away Fafnir. She had many different abilities, and her female descendants all inherit one of her powers.”

“Wow, really?”

That reminded me...I’d heard about the relationship between Vesteria and

the Primal Dragon King Fafnir before. Fuu Ludoras, one of the Thirteen Oracle Knights, told me about it when we'd invaded Berios Castle in January. It had served both of our interests to sit down for a cup of tea at that moment, and he'd used the occasion to tell me about the history of Vesteria's royal family.

About seven hundred years ago, the mighty Fafnir suddenly descended on Vesteria and razed the nation with its flames. A woman from a distant land—Lia's ancestor—rose to challenge the eidolon and sealed it within her womb using a special power in her blood. Fafnir had been passed down in the Vesterian royal family ever since, and it was now Lia's Spirit Core.

Considering what Fuu told me, there was little reason to doubt that women of the Vesterian royal family possessed strange powers. Lia probably really did have the ability to tell when someone was lying. *That revelation threw me off guard, but her power saved me this time...*

After convincing Rose and Lia, I turned to the final obstacle—Shii Arkstoria. *This is gonna be difficult...* Rose was aware of Bacchus's fondness for women and his history of peeping. Lia could tell if someone was lying. They both had solid reasons to believe me. *Shii doesn't have anything like that, though.* How was I going to convince my stubborn upperclassman?

*First, I need to get her to talk to me.* I wasn't going to make any progress otherwise.

"Umm... President?" I began after mustering my courage.

"Yes, Mr. Rodol?" Shii responded with a gentle smile.

"Mr. Rodol"...? Clearly, this incident had drastically lowered her opinion of me.

"Umm... As I just explained, I wasn't trying to peep—," I began before I was interrupted.

"You still saw me naked, didn't you?" Shii retorted, her smile never wavering.

"W-well..."

I couldn't deny it—I had seen it all. *I've been trying my best to forget the sight of her naked body, but...* Removing such an intense memory from your mind



was all but impossible.

“What you did was perverted and wrong. You should atone for your crime of shaming us by spending time in the Holy Knights Association’s dungeon,” Shii said, looking away in a huff.

*This is bad...* The Arkstorias were the most powerful family in the government. They had great influence and deep connections with the Holy Knights Association. If she reported this incident to the holy knights, I would be arrested on the spot.

“I feel really bad about...you know, seeing your chest and...everything else. But I swear it wasn’t on purpose, so can you please forgive me? I’ll do anything...,” I pleaded, putting my hands together in front of me.

“...Anything? You just said you’ll do *anything*, right?” The corners of Shii’s lips curled upward as if she had been waiting for that.

“Yeah, but...just so you know, I don’t have any money.”

I did say I would do anything, but there were limits to that promise. *I don’t like to tell people, but I am incredibly poor...* If she asked for jewelry or brand-name clothing or a purse, I probably wouldn’t be able to grant her request.

“Hmm-hmm, don’t worry. This won’t cost you anything,” Shii said, holding up her index finger. She suddenly sounded like herself again.

“Then what do you want me to do?” I asked.

“I’ll tell you in a second... But first, can you make me a pinky promise?”

Shii blushed and held out her right pinky.

“Huh? A pinky promise?”

“Y-yes. I want you to promise that you’ll never lie to me again. Then I’ll believe everything you say to me.”

“Really?!”

Lia, Rose, and Shii were very important to me, so I would never lie to them anyway. *That means this is a no-risk opportunity to gain her trust!* I quickly entwined my pinky around her soft, slender one.

“I promise. I will never lie to you for the rest of my life,” I vowed, looking directly into her eyes.

“D-do you really mean that? You’ll hold on to this promise for *as long as you live*?” She blushed deeply, emphasizing those last five words.

“Of course.”

“I might end up lying to you on occasion... Are you okay with that?”

“Yep. That’s totally fine.”

Shii was an incredibly kind person. She might lie every now and then, but never if someone might get hurt.

“If you lie...I’ll stick a needle in your eye,” Shii warned.

“Sounds good to me.”

She could’ve threatened to stick a needle in both of my eyes for all it mattered.

“Okay. I believe that everything you told us is the truth... And I’ll forgive you for seeing me n-naked, just this once.”

“Thank you so much!”

Relief washed over me. I’d now won all three of the girls’ trust.



The hour had grown late by the time I cleared my name of false peeping charges, so we decided to leave it there for the day. Shii spoke up on the way back to the Arkstoria villa.

“That was such a relaxing bath... My shoulders feel totally loose now,” she said, rotating her shoulders.

“Yeah, the water felt amazing!” exclaimed Lilim.

“It really hit the spot,” Tirith agreed.

“Vesteria has hot springs, too, but not many that warm you to the core like that... My skin feels so smooth, too,” commented Lia.

“Hah, I’m happy to hear you say that,” said Rose.

The girls were all in a good mood.

“What did you think, Allen? Was it relaxing?” Shii asked me.

“Hmm...” I was unsure what to say.

That had certainly been the greatest hot spring I’d ever experienced. *But the nonsense I went through kind of prevented me from enjoying it.* I was physically exhausted from fighting Bacchus and Sebas, two of the greatest swordsmen in the world, and mentally exhausted after nearly being arrested for peeping.

*I honestly came out of the experience more tired than before...* That said, I didn’t want to bring the mood down by being the only one to complain.

“The open-air bath was heavenly. The sauna and cold bath, in particular, felt incredible,” I said to avoid spoiling the mood.

*There’s something I still don’t understand...* I’d healed the injuries I suffered in the bathhouse using Zeon’s darkness. *But how did Bacchus recover?* I’d nicked him in a number of spots with my Hazy Moon chain, yet he didn’t have a scratch on him when I met him in the changing room.

*That must mean his Soul Attire has a healing power.* That would explain how he looked like he was in his mid-fifties and surpassed an Imperial Knight in strength despite his incurable illness and two centuries of life. He’d also healed his injuries instantly, and was even known as Bacchus the Immortal. I felt like that was enough evidence to determine that his Soul Attire had the power to heal.

*That doesn’t explain his ability to produce trees, though...* He’d created a large wooden bridge to reach the island behind the Billion-Year Sakura. *His Soul Attire can probably do more than just heal. It must have some other special power.* Rose had called it an “unbeatable Soul Attire,” so I was sure there must be something that set it apart.

I continued to speculate about Bacchus’s abilities as we walked, and before I knew it, we’d arrived at the Arkstoria villa.

After returning to the villa we ate a delicious dinner, played cards and board games in Shii's room, and talked on the second-floor terrace while enjoying the cool air. It was a peaceful, fun night.

I looked at my watch and saw that it was already half past eleven. Bacchus was giving us another lesson in the Cherry Blossom Blade School of Swordcraft tomorrow, so we needed to get to bed.

"Wow, where did the time go? I think we need to call it a night," Shii said, sighing in disappointment. She had just checked her watch as well.

"Wha?! How the heck is it already past eleven?!" Lilim exclaimed.

"There's so much more I want to talk about...," grumbled Tirith.

They both looked astonished; they had been so immersed in conversation that they totally lost track of time.

"Ah-ha-ha, time flies when you're having fun," I said.

"Yeah. It feels super slow when you're bored, though...," commented Lia.

"You've got that right," agreed Rose.

The two of them shrugged.

"I wish we didn't have to, but let's go to bed and resume talking tomorrow. I'll guide you all to your rooms. They're on the third floor. Follow me," Shii said.

We followed Shii as she led each of us to our luxurious rooms.

"Wow, this is amazing...," I said.

There was a collection of fancy paintings on the wall, an elegant couch made with real leather, a lavishly decorated king-sized bed, a dresser made of high-quality wood, and more. It was much too extravagant for the likes of me.

"Hmm-hmm, I'm glad you like it. Goodnight, Allen."

"Goodnight, President," I responded, and we gave each other a small wave as Shii walked away. "Okay... I should go get ready for bed."

I quickly got ready to go to sleep and climbed into the bed at the end of the room.

“Wow, this is so comfortable!”

The bed was just the right mix of soft and firm. It was just as good as the wonderful mattress I’d had in the World of Time.

“*Fwah...* I need to sleep...”

I turned off the main lights, switched on the soft, indirect lighting, and closed my eyes. About ten minutes passed.

“...It’s no use.”

I’d tried sleeping on my side, on my back, on my stomach, but nothing had worked. I was still way too excited by the day’s events to sleep. *That was so incredible...* I could remember the moment clearly when I closed my eyes.

“*Seventh Style—Draw Flash!*”

“*Cherry Blossom Blade Style—Sakura Flash Chain!*”

“*Peerless Blade—Rainbow Strike!*”

That duel had been an exhilarating display of high-level swordcraft. We’d fought over every millisecond, every inch of space, until even blinking was a risk.

*I had so much fun.* Fighting Sebas and Bacchus was such a blast. *I don’t like how much I’m sounding like Zeon right now...* But the battle had been so thrilling that I didn’t really care.

“*Haah*, this isn’t gonna work...”

I had no chance of falling asleep in this state. I glanced at the clock and saw that it had just turned to midnight.

“...I might as well get some practice swings in.”

Swinging my sword for twenty to thirty minutes would probably be enough to calm me down.

“Okay, let’s go!”

I opened my eyes and leaped out of bed.

“Should I get dressed...? No, this is fine.”

I wasn't going to swing my sword for the usual four or five hours. There was no reason to change back into my uniform.

"I need to move quietly so I don't wake anyone up."

I took my sword off the wall, put it on my hip, and quietly left the room. I then crept along the long hallway and down the stairs, careful not to make any noise.

*...Huh?*

I caught sight of a *yukata*-clad Rose standing on the second-floor patio. She was gazing sadly at the Billion-Year Sakura under the moonlight.

*What's she doing out there this late?*

I approached and cleared my throat to avoid scaring her. "It's nice out. Mind if I join you?"

"Oh, hey, Allen. Not at all," Rose responded with a gentle smile.

We gazed at the Billion-Year Sakura together, and enjoyed the cool night breeze.

"This tree really is beautiful. I could stare at it forever," I told her.

"Yeah, it's the greatest cherry blossom tree in the world," Rose murmured sincerely, her words punctuated by a firm nod.

We were pretty far from the Billion-Year Sakura, but we could see it clearly because it was lit up at night. I was sure there was a crowd of people enjoying a nighttime picnic under the tree as we spoke.

"What brings you out here, Allen? Couldn't sleep?"

"Yeah. I was still too fired up about today. I left my room to calm myself down with some practice swings and spotted you on the way outside."

"Hah, practice swings after midnight? You never change," Rose said, giggling and shrugging.

She was more beautiful than words could describe as she put her hand to her mouth and smiled under the moonlight. *So pretty...* The backdrop of the Billion-Year Sakura made the sight before me so perfect it should have been framed.

"...What's wrong? Is there something on my face?" Rose asked, tilting her

head adorably and touching her cheek. I was so taken by her beauty I hadn't realized I'd been staring.

"I-it's nothing... Oh, right! Can I ask you something?" I said, quickly changing the topic.

"Of course. Go ahead."

"What did you mean when you said that the Cherry Blossom Blade School of Swordcraft is something that can't be learned? I've been wondering about that."

Nearly all swordsmen joined a school of swordcraft where they learned a variety of techniques. *I mean, isn't that just generally how it's done...?* Rose made it sound like that wasn't an option with the Cherry Blossom Blade of Swordcraft, though.

"Oh, that. Hmm, where should I begin...?" Rose muttered anxiously.

She put a hand to her chin and thought.

"First of all, the Valencias have always had a great fondness for cherry blossom trees," Rose began. "Rochs Valencia, the founder of the Cherry Blossom Blade School of Swordcraft and my distant ancestor, was born and raised in a faraway land. The family records describe him as a man who wasted all his time drinking and chasing after women."

"R-really...?"

It sounded like all Valencia men inherited a fondness for booze and women.

"He was a useless man, but he transformed into a mighty warrior when he picked up a sword. He only lost a single duel throughout the entirety of his long life."

"That's amazing... Who did he lose to?"

"No idea. The records don't mention his opponent's name. However, Rochs wrote that 'the one who defeated me was a monster with god-like strength and the foulest mouth around.' He also said that after the fight, they spent the whole night drinking under a cherry blossom tree in full bloom."

"Wow... That sort of relationship sounds kind of nice."

They were able to share drinks after their duel without any hard feelings over who won or lost—I thought that was pretty awesome. *Rochs and Bacchus sound a lot alike*. He seemed to have inherited many of his ancestor’s traits.

Rose cleared her throat and continued. “This is the important part. While Rochs Valencia constantly indulged in booze and women, nothing rivaled his love for cherry blossom trees. One day, he embarked on a journey to find the most beautiful cherry blossom tree in the world. He traveled for around two thousand years until he finally found a ‘living sakura’ with enchanting beauty. Rochs then made a binding vow with the tree.”

“Uhh...”

I had so many questions. Valencias may have long lifespans, but two thousand years was absurd. And what did she mean by a “living sakura”? I couldn’t imagine what a “binding vow” with a tree was, either.

“Sorry. I’m sure that all sounds hard to believe. Even I, the heir apparent, have doubts about what’s written in the family records. I can’t imagine a person being able to live two thousand years, and I’m gonna have to see a living sakura with my own eyes before I actually believe one exists. But I can tell you for a fact that the binding vow is true.”

Without warning, Rose loosened her sash and began to pull apart her *yukata* to bare her chest.

“Rose, what are you doing?!” I shouted, darting my eyes about in panic. My heart felt like it was going to beat out of my chest.

“D-don’t get the wrong idea! Just look right here! See this cherry blossom mark?!” she said, blushing. She pointed at her slightly exposed left breast.

I looked closely and saw a vivid pink mark on her white skin shaped like four cherry blossom petals. *Oh yeah... I’m pretty sure Bacchus had a similar mark*. If I remembered correctly, he’d had a black cherry blossom on the left side of his chest. *She’s probably showing it to me because this cherry blossom marking has an important connection to what she just told me*, I thought as I stared at her left breast.

“D-do you have to stare like that? It’s a little embarrassing...,” she said,



blushing and looking away.

“S-sorry...”

She may have told me to look at her chest, but I shouldn’t have stared like that. I turned to face the opposite direction.

“I’m going to retie my sash, so please don’t turn around,” Rose said.

“Okay... Tell me when you’re done.”

I heard the sound of rustling clothes as she re-dressed herself. *I’ll never get used to this sound...* The special sound their clothes made when women dressed always set my heart racing.

I felt a tugging on my sleeve about thirty seconds later.

“...You can turn around now.”

“Okay...”

“...”

“...”

An awkward silence descended around us.

*As the guy, I have to be the one to restart the conversation, don’t I...?*

I thought hard to try to come up with something clever to say, but Rose cleared her throat and spoke first.

“O-oh yeah! The mark I just showed you—the binding seal—is proof that the binding vow is real!” Rose said quickly, trying to brighten the mood. Not wanting her thoughtfulness to go to waste, I expanded on the topic.

“Can you tell me what the binding vow and seal are?”

“Yeah, of course,” Rose nodded. “Rochs apparently found the living sakura on a distant, uninhabited island. However, the island was being slowly eroded by waves and had less than a century left before it ended up completely underwater.”

“That would be such a waste,” I responded, imagining the cherry blossom tree being swallowed by the sea with no one to miss it.

“Rochs loved cherry blossom trees too much to allow that to happen. He told the living sakura that he would move it to a land where it could live peacefully,” Rose said.

“Wouldn’t that have been really difficult?”

I didn’t know much about trees, but Ol’ Bamboo had told me many times about how challenging it was to transplant one. A number of conditions, including the geological features, climate, and number of hours of daylight had to be close enough to the tree’s previous home for it to take root in a new environment. *But the living sakura was on an uninhabited island...* Transplanting it should have been beyond the capabilities of any one person.

“You’re right—it would have been impossible by any normal means. However, Rochs managed to pull it off by offering his own body as the tree’s new home.”

“He used his own body?!”

“Yep. He took the living sakura into his body and made it his Spirit Core.”

“Huh? Can you really make a tree your Spirit Core?!”

A Spirit Core was a mass of power that resided within a person’s soul. There were many known types including ancestral spirits, cryptids, and lost souls, but I still didn’t know much about them.

“Beats me. These journal entries were written over two thousand years ago, so it’s hard to believe everything they say. But there’s no doubt that Rochs made a vow with some kind of inhuman being,” Rose declared confidently. “According to the journal, the living sakura was incredibly grateful to Rochs for providing it with a safe place to live. The tree repaid Rochs for the privilege of living in his body by promising to pass down memories.”

“It did?”

“Yeah. The living sakura said that it would transmit memories of Rochs’s choosing to his descendants.”

“Oh, does that mean...?!”

There was only one thing a swordsman would want to pass on to his descendants.

“Hah, you catch on quick. The memories Rochs chose were knowledge of the Cherry Blossom Blade School of Swordcraft—his secret style that’s only passed down to one child each generation. In short, Rochs gave the living sakura a safe place to live, and the living sakura promised to pass the memories of his school of swordcraft on to his descendants. That was the binding vow,” Rose summarized. “All Valencias are born with a cherry blossom pattern on their left breast, like the one I just showed you. That is proof that the binding vow is still in effect. I’ve known how to perform the Cherry Blossom Blade School of Swordcraft for as long as I can remember.”

“Wow, really?”

“Yeah. That’s why the Cherry Blossom Blade School of Swordcraft can’t be learned. The Valencias reproduce it by relying on Rochs’s memories.”

And with that, I’d gotten the answer to my question.

“I see...”

I’d left my room for a light practice-swing session and ended up learning the shocking history of the Cherry Blossom Blade School of Swordcraft instead.

“By the way, what happened to Rochs and the cherry blossom tree he took into his body?” I asked.

If the founder of the Cherry Blossom Blade School of Swordcraft had been two thousand years old at that point, then maybe he was still alive. *There’s also the binding vow...* If that held, then the living sakura must still exist somewhere.

“The family records mention nothing about the end of his life. Gramps told me that ‘the living sakura still blooms to this day,’ but unfortunately he won’t tell me where it is,” Rose said, shaking her head. “Rochs also ended his thick journal with the following words: ‘To my dear descendants I have yet to meet, please develop my Cherry Blossom Blade School of Swordcraft and defeat that monstrous friend of mine. Rochs Valencia.’ It sounds like he was haunted by the one defeat he suffered in his life.”

“Ah-ha-ha. His hatred of losing reminds me of someone else I know,” I joked.

“Is that supposed to be a compliment?” Rose asked. She frowned dramatically, giving proof to the notion that a beautiful girl could make any

expression look adorable.

“Yeah, of course.”

“Good.”

“Ha-ha, why wouldn’t it have been?”

We both laughed.

“Remember that what I just told you is a Valencia family secret. Don’t repeat it to anyone,” Rose warned, putting a finger to her lips in a shushing gesture.

“Got it. Why did you tell me, though?” I asked.

“Oh, Allen. Here’s one thing about girls—they love to tell the guy they like all about themselves,” she said, giving me the most mature grin I had ever seen from her.

“...”

She was so beautiful as she smiled under the moonlight that I could easily have stared at her for hours.



I parted from Rose and went outside for the practice swing session I’d originally left my room for.

“Hah! Yah! Ho!”

I lifted my sword, then swung it down. Lift, swing. Lift, swing. I’d spent over a billion years performing this repetitive motion, so it was now as natural to me as breathing. I could feel myself relax a little more with each swing.

*A monster with god-like strength, huh...*, I thought about the person who had defeated Rochs Valencia. They must have been a true powerhouse to best the founder of the Cherry Blossom Blade School of Swordcraft. *I wonder if they were stronger than Zeon...?* As a swordsman, I was really curious to know the answer to that question.

Zeon had two major advantages that made him such an unbeatable opponent: his overwhelming darkness and his inhuman physical strength.

*There's not much you can do when he envelops himself in darkness and makes himself harder than steel... A sword was more likely to break against his darkness than get through it and cut his skin. And then there's his unfathomable strength.* Lose focus for a moment, and he would close the distance and end the duel with a devastating blow.



*I really can't imagine Zeon losing... He was rude, violent, and problematic in more ways than I could count, but I couldn't help but admire his strength. I need to keep training so I can become a swordsman capable of defeating Zeon!*

I spent about an hour swinging my sword with that goal in mind, then returned to my room and easily drifted off to sleep.



We spent the next five days learning the basics of the Cherry Blossom Blade School of Swordcraft from Bacchus and Rose. We only had a week for our spring training camp, so we focused on mastering three fundamental moves—Sakura Flash, Night Sakura, and Lightning Sakura: a thrust, a downward diagonal cut, and a draw slash.

*This is incredible...!*

I honed my strikes further each day as I internalized the principles of the Cherry Blossom Blade Style, and improved my defensive movement by following Bacchus's expert example. My swordcraft had never improved at such a rapid rate.

*...I can do this! I can still get stronger!*

We continued to apply ourselves to our harsh yet fulfilling training, and at the end of the sixth day's session we turned toward Bacchus and Rose.

""""""Thank you very much!""""""

"Bwa-ha-ha, you kids worked hard again today! I can't believe how much stronger you've gotten since you started!" Bacchus nodded with satisfaction. Suddenly, his eyes opened wide, as if he'd just realized something. "Oh yeah... Tomorrow's your last day, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir. I hope we can make the most of it," I replied with a bow.

"I'm gonna miss you all..., " Bacchus mumbled, looking away.

We were leaving Cherin tomorrow to return to Liengard. *I wish we could extend our spring training camp to spend more time studying the Cherry Blossom Blade School of Swordcraft, but that's not an option, unfortunately...*

Shii and I had to attend the empress's emergency meeting as soon as we got back.

*Haah, how did I get roped into that...?*

Shii had pulled me aside yesterday to ask me for a favor. The top secret conference between the world's leaders was apparently nearing an end. That meant the empress would soon be returning to Liengard, and once she did, she was going to hold an emergency meeting to determine the noble faction's plan of action based on the resolutions from the conference. That meeting would be attended by the empress and Rodis Arkstoria, representing the noble faction; Shii, as the heir of the Arkstoria family; and for some inexplicable reason, me.

*I have some reservations about the empress, and I don't know anything about politics. I can't imagine why they want me there.* But I couldn't refuse a request from Shii after all she had done for me. That had made it difficult to extend the spring training camp, so tomorrow would be our last day studying under Bacchus.

"I would've liked to spend more time on the fundamentals first...but I guess I've got no choice, so consider this a farewell gift. Tomorrow, I'll teach you the secret technique of the Cherry Blossom Blade School of Swordcraft, Mirror Sakura Slash!" Bacchus declared.

"Really?!"

Mirror Sakura Slash was Rose's signature move. It was a powerful attack that produced eight slashes—four from the left, and four from the right. *Bacchus's Mirror Sakura Slash has got to be insanely powerful!* I thought excitedly.

"Are you sure about this, Gramps?! Your Mirror Sakura Slash takes a big toll on your body," Rose said anxiously.

"Your" Mirror Sakura Slash? It sounded like there was something special about his version of the move.

"Bwa-ha-ha, don't worry your pretty little head about me, Rosie! I'm not leavin' this world until I live over two thousand years!"

*"Haah... Fine."*



Bacchus thumped his chest proudly, while Rose let out a deep sigh.

Two thousand years was how long Rochs Valencia supposedly lived. *Has he turned his lifespan into a competition?* It sounded like Bacchus had his mind set on outliving the founder of the Cherry Blossom Blade School of Swordcraft. *The Valencias really are the most competitive people I've ever known...*, I thought with a wry smile.

“The Mirror Sakura Slash training will be by far your most difficult session yet. Make sure you recharge with nutritious food, a warm bath, and a good night’s sleep. You’re dismissed,” Bacchus said.

“““““Thank you very much!”””””

We parted ways with Bacchus and flew back to the Arkstoria villa in our gliders.



Once we’d each relaxed in the villa’s large baths, we gathered to eat dinner. The table was set with freshly cooked rice, thick steaks, fresh vegetable salad, and warm consommé. It was a simple and nutritious meal that brought the most out of the ingredients. After we’d all had our fill, we returned to our rooms.

*Normally we would’ve hung out in Shii’s room, but that’s not an option tonight.* Bacchus was teaching us Mirror Sakura Slash—the secret technique of the Cherry Blossom Blade School of Swordcraft—tomorrow. As he said, we needed to rest up.

“Okay, I should get to bed.”

I glanced at the clock and saw that it was ten at night. It was a little earlier than I normally went to sleep, but I didn’t mind.

“...Actually, I should go to the bathroom first.”

I didn’t really have to go, but it would be annoying if I ended up waking up in the middle of the night. I left my room and started walking down the silent hallway. Soon, I started to hear a melodious female voice coming from far up ahead.

“Okay... Got it,” the voice said.

*Is that Shii...?* She sounded down. Who was she talking to?

“...Yeah. I was afraid of that.”

Shii’s voice grew louder as I walked down the hall; she must have been talking near the bathroom.

*Hmm, what should I do...?* I could either keep going to this bathroom or make a detour and use the one on the second floor. *Eh, I don’t think there’s any need to go out of my way like that.* If Shii didn’t want anyone to hear this conversation, she wouldn’t be talking in the hallway.

I decided to keep walking, and when I turned the corner, I saw Shii holding a black transceiver to her ear.

“Yeah, I’m doing fine. I’ve had a blast with my friends. I think Allen is coming, by the way... Yeah, I guess that’s one silver lining.”

She sighed heavily and fiddled with her long black hair using her free hand. Whoever she was talking to, it didn’t seem like a pleasant conversation. *And did she just say my name...?* I was curious to know what they were talking about.

“All right, I’ll see you tomorrow. Good night, Father,” Shii said before hanging up.

“Ahem. Good evening, President,” I said, softly clearing my throat.

“Oh, Allen. What are you doing up so late?” She looked surprised for a moment, but quickly adopted her usual kind expression.

“I couldn’t sleep, so I decided to go for a stroll,” I lied. I’d actually wanted to pee before bed, but I didn’t feel like saying that.

“That sounds like a good idea,” Shii said, crossing her arms and nodding. “But don’t stay up too late, okay? We’re learning the secret technique of the Cherry Blossom Blade Style tomorrow. It’s important that we rest up.”

She sounded just like an older sister, giving me that warning with her index finger raised.

“Ah-ha-ha, got it. I’ll go right back to my room after getting some air.”

“Hmm-hmm, glad to hear it.”

After that lighthearted exchange, I decided to ask her a question.

“By the way, it looked like you were talking to someone... Who was it?”

“Ahh... I figured you heard me. That was Father.”

Rodis Arkstoria was the head of the Arkstoria family, and he’d been a central figure in the government for a long time. He was currently attending the top secret conference between the world’s leaders along with the empress and Chairwoman Reia.

“If that was your father...then he must have called to talk about the top secret conference. It was supposed to end by noon today, right?”

“Yeah, it was supposed to, but it ended up going long. Father said they only just finished now.”

Shii shrugged and looked at a clock on the wall. It was currently past ten at night, which meant that the talks had gone more than ten hours over time.

“Man, they went way past schedule... Did something go wrong?” I asked.

“Yeah. Father just called to tell me about it. They ran into some trouble—some foreseen and some not—and the talks got really heated.”

She put a hand to her forehead and sighed loudly. Shii seemed really stressed about this.

“...Hey, Allen. Would you mind talking to me for a bit? I’ve got a lot on my mind.”

“Sure. You can tell me anything.”

“Hmm-hmm, thanks. You’re always so nice.” She smiled softly. “I don’t know all the details yet, so I guess I’ll just tell you about the couple of big things that went wrong...”

She leaned her back against the wall and began speaking calmly.

“I’ll start with the problem we foresaw. The major countries that participated in the top secret conference—the Liengard Empire, Vesteria Kingdom, Commonwealth of Polyesta, and the Republic of Ronzo—had a difference of

opinion,” she said, using her fingers to count off the four countries making up the group that, until recently, had been known as the Five Powers.

*Originally, the Principality of Theresia would have participated too, but...* The country was currently under the rule of the Holy Ronelian Empire after being attacked by a demon and the Black Organization.

“The issue they couldn’t agree on was how we should respond to the Holy Ronelian Empire. Liengard and Polyesta believe we should watch them carefully for now and try diplomacy. Vesteria and Ronzo, on the other hand, argue that we should not show them any leniency and go to war immediately. Neither side has been willing to budge,” Shii explained, a pained look on her face.

“...I see,” I responded.

World leaders had been split into moderates and extremists over the issue. It was no wonder the talks had gone so poorly. *Lia’s country wants to go to war...* King Gris Vesteria must have been taking such a hard stance against the Holy Empire in retribution for the Black Organization abducting his beloved daughter last August.

“That’s not that big of a concern, though. We knew before the talks started that it would be difficult to reach an agreement on this issue. And the world leaders are all well aware that we can’t possibly oppose the Holy Ronelian Empire unless all of the Four Powers are on the same page,” Shii continued.

“So you’re saying we can’t go to war unless all Four Powers are in agreement?” I asked.

“Yes. No matter how hard Vesteria and Ronzo push to open hostilities, it won’t happen unless Liengard and Polyesta give their consent. We need the abundant resources of each of the Four Powers and the cooperation of the Seven Holy Blades scattered throughout the continent just to even the odds against Ronelia.”

“We’d need all that just to stand a chance...”

The Holy Ronelian Empire really was the most powerful country in the world, as harsh as that truth was. It had an abundance of fertile land, a massive population, advanced scientific technology with highly developed medical care,

and, most of all, the mighty weapon that was the Black Organization.

Just how had the Holy Empire become so powerful? What kind of person was Barel Ronelia, who'd ruled the superpower for so many years? The country was ever wrapped in mystery.

"This is far from the first time our debates have turned heated over how we should deal with Ronelia. The discussion always gets pushed to the next meeting, and this time was no different," Shii said. "What I'm about to tell you is the real problem. Just as the talks were about to end this afternoon, something happened that no one could have expected."

Her expression turned serious.

"As you know, the Holy Empire conquered Theresia earlier this year, ending its status as one of the Five Powers."

"Yeah, on New Year's Day."

She was referring to when the Holy Empire announced its alliance with the demons by attacking each of the Five Powers simultaneously. Much blood had been spilled—not just in Liengard, but all across the world on that nightmarish day.

"That's right. This information isn't known to the public yet...but one of the Seven Holy Blades happened to be in Theresia at the time."

That was news to me.

"His name is Von Mustang. He's a fearsomely strong swordsman with a just heart. He disappeared after fighting a demon and one of the Thirteen Oracle Knights, and everyone assumed he'd died in battle." Shii paused to collect her breath. "But today, Von showed up without warning at the top secret conference. And shockingly, he was wearing that black overcoat we all know too well."

"Wait... Are you saying one of the Seven Holy Blades joined the Black Organization?!" I exclaimed.

I didn't know what kind of swordsman Von Mustang was, but what could possibly drive a righteous holy knight to join such an evil group? It was an

unforgivable betrayal.

“It appears that way... Von announced that he had joined the Thirteen Oracle Knights, taking Grega Ash’s position, whom he claimed you killed.”

“Grega...”

Grega Ash was an incredibly dangerous man I’d crossed blades with at Numelo Dohran’s estate. *It was actually Sebas who finished him off...* But, thanks to the skillful way he manipulated information, the blame for our infiltration of Ronelia had fallen entirely on my shoulders.

“Von’s betrayal apparently caused a lot of problems at the talks, but I don’t really know what happened. My father didn’t go into much detail.”

“Right. I bet it would...”

*Why had Von Mustang, one of the Seven Holy Blades, joined the Black Organization? Why did he show up at the top secret conference? And what sorts of problems did he stir up there?* My mind raced with question after question as I silently tried to process what Shii had told me.

“Actually, there’s one thing I want to ask you... Is that okay?” Shii asked timidly.

“There is?”

“Yes. Her Majesty and Father really want to ask you this as well.”

“Really? What is it?”

I couldn’t imagine what sort of question those two could possibly have for me.

“They want to know about someone you have deep ties to. Just, um... Keep in mind that this is only speculation, okay? Please don’t get mad.”

“Okay. I won’t,” I told her. It was rare for Shii to speak so hesitantly.

“The conference itself was a total mess, but...the biggest issue we have to figure out is who leaked the top secret location to the Holy Empire.”

“Yeah, that’s a good point.”

Somehow, our enemies had learned of the secret location where the world

leaders were meeting—it was too great a threat to ignore. We needed to figure out who their source was and deal with them as quickly as possible.

“The talks concluded with an effort to identify the culprit,” Shii said.

“Huh...”

That sounded like another tense topic of discussion.

“The site of the top secret conference was chosen by the commander of the holy knights and communicated directly to the sovereigns of the Four Major Powers. Every measure was taken to prevent the information from leaking. The site was conveyed via handwritten letters so they would leave no digital record, and four Holy Blades who were scheduled to attend the conference were chosen to deliver them.”

“Wow, they went all out.”

“Yeah, they chose the safest and most reliable people in the world to send those letters. Any leak should have been impossible.”

“Yet it seemed to happen easily.”

“Yeah... Which suggests the presence of a traitor among the Four Major Powers.”

A traitor. The first person who came to mind when I thought of that word was the former vice president of Thousand Blade Academy’s Student Council, Sebas Chandler. He’d lived undercover in Liengard for years and had been involved in a number of incidents in the country during that period. *But Sebas returned to the Holy Empire at the beginning of this year and has been operating behind the scenes as an Imperial Knight ever since.* He’d left Liengard far too long ago to be a real suspect.

“There are only nine logical suspects: the sovereigns of the Four Major Powers, the four Holy Blades who delivered the letters, and the commander of the holy knights who chose the site,” Shii said, counting each person off on her fingers.

“Only nine people... That really narrows it down.”

Shii nodded and continued. “First off, we can eliminate the four sovereigns

including Gris Vesteria, Lia's father. There's no way they leaked the information."

"I don't want to suggest this, but...is it possible that one of the sovereigns sold out their country to the Holy Empire?" I asked. It wasn't impossible to think that one of the rulers might have handed over their country in exchange for being personally accepted into the Holy Ronelian Empire.

"I might have considered that a few months ago, but now I don't think there's any chance of that happening. When Ronelia conquered Theresia on New Year's Day, they killed all of its leaders and their subordinates. And that was after the leaders surrendered and pledged their allegiance to the Holy Empire."

"They killed them all...?"

It took a special kind of evil to take the lives of people who weren't resisting. Slaughtering civilians was also against international law.

"By all reports, Barel Ronelia is both incredibly secretive and an uncompromising perfectionist. He'll execute anyone in an instant if he believes there's even a slight chance of betrayal. He probably slaughtered Theresia's leaders because he feared a coup... Remember that this is all off the record, okay? None of this information is known to the public."

"Of course."

News of the massacre in the Principality of Theresia would probably spawn mass hysteria. Restricting information on the incident was obviously the right call.

"But President... Why then did Barel Ronelia invite Von Mustang into the Black Organization?"

If he was afraid of a coup, I would think a Holy Blade with a track record of betrayal would be the first person he'd want to eliminate.

"Hmm, that's a good question... Maybe his conviction that the strong should rule outweighs his desire for perfection?"

"Huh..."

I wasn't really satisfied by that answer, but there wasn't much use thinking



about it further.

“Regardless, I doubt that any of the sovereigns would side with Barel Ronelia unless he was blackmailing them somehow. That’s why I think it’s impossible that the culprit is one of them,” Shii reinforced her point.

Blackmail, huh...?

“I think it’s even less likely that the culprit is one of the Seven Holy Blades,” Shii said with a bitter smile and a shrug. “The four Holy Blades who were chosen to deliver the letters are all... How should I put this? They all have their fair share of problems.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. The Seven Holy Blades are all eccentric, but these four are especially so. They’re incredibly stubborn and simple-minded and can only do exactly as they’re told. The commander of the holy knights chose them because they are literally incapable of leaking the information.”

“Huh...”

The Seven Holy Blades were the pride of the Holy Knights Association—the strongest swordfighters alive. *I never expected such paragons of righteousness and swordcraft to be so problematic...* It sounded like they were quite different from the cool image I’d always had of them.

“So we can assume they had nothing to do with the information leak. We’d better pray that’s the case anyway...”

“Yeah...”

Losing Von Mustang had greatly weakened the fighting strength of the Four Major Powers. If there was another traitor among the Seven Holy Blades, then there would be no realistic chance of stopping the Holy Empire.

“That leaves the commander of the holy knights, and he’s even more unlikely to be the culprit. If he sided with the Holy Empire, he’d be able to misuse his powerful position to sabotage us through more direct means. He wouldn’t need to go out of his way to leak information.”

“Yeah, that’s true...”

The damage would have been far greater if the commander of the holy knights was the traitor. It was safe to assume it wasn't him.

"That unfortunately eliminates all nine of our suspects," Shii said.

"But someone had to have leaked the site of the conference to the Holy Empire, right?"

"Yeah. So once they reached that conclusion, the leaders at the conference had to approach the problem from a new angle. And, after further discussion, they arrived at a new suspect. Please don't get upset, okay? It's someone you know very well."

"Wh-who is it?! Just tell me!"

Someone I knew might have leaked information to the Holy Empire? I couldn't possibly keep my cool after hearing her suggest that.

Shii looked calm as she revealed the name of the traitor.

"The infamous Blood Fox, Rize Dorhein, one of the Five Business Oligarchs and the manager of Fox Financing. All sovereign rulers except for Her Majesty put Rize's name forth as the most likely suspect."

"What?!"

Rize, a traitor...? But she was such a kind person...

*There's no way it was her...* Last August, when Lia was kidnapped by Zach Bombard and Tor Sammons, Rize gladly gave me the location of the laboratory she was taken to. *And that's not all... She also saved our lives when we first met at the Unity Festival.* The Black Organization had set bombs to blow up the Unity Trade Center, and Rize used her Soul Attire to stop an explosion and save the day. Without her, Lia, Rose, and I would have been badly wounded, and Drestia would have suffered massive damage.

*They think she's the traitor...?* I thought, grinding my teeth angrily. This had to be some kind of terrible joke.

"H-hey, Allen! Calm down! An incredibly evil darkness is leaking from your body! You're scaring me a bit...!" Shii said with a strained smile, stepping back.

"Hoo..."

I took a large breath and retracted the darkness.

“...H-have you calmed down?” Shii asked.

“Sorry, I got a little upset,” I told her, shaking my head to compose myself. “So...why do they suspect Ms. Rize?” She shouldn’t have had anything to do with the top secret conference.

“I haven’t heard all the details yet...,” Shii warned me in advance. “But apparently, Rize Dorhein visited the holy knight headquarters on the day the four Holy Blades were entrusted with the letters.”

“She did...?”

“All four of the Holy Blades gave the same testimony, so we can accept this as fact. If Rize took time out of her busy schedule to visit their headquarters, we can assume she had plans to speak with the commander of the holy knights.”

“...That seems likely.”

Rize was so busy that she planned her schedule by the minute, and even the empress struggled to get an appointment with her. She wouldn’t have visited the headquarters of the Holy Knights Association in person unless it was for something very important.



“Rize Dorhein happened to visit the commander right after he chose the site of the top secret conference. Everyone knows that she has deep connections with the underworld and an astounding information network. A number of people argued that ‘that vixen’ must have used a mental manipulation Soul Attire to pry the information from the commander’s mind and sell it to the Holy Empire.”

So they were blaming Rize because of her reputation. *Those world leaders don’t know her at all. They’re letting their opinions be influenced by hearsay that probably isn’t even true.* I honestly had all sorts of opinions about the leaders, but my anger wouldn’t get me anywhere here. For now, I had to remain calm.

“What did Her Majesty say?” I asked. Shii had mentioned earlier that the empress didn’t suspect Rize.

“She said she would refrain from commenting on the matter until they had more information. I suspect she only said that to avoid offending you.”

“...Huh?”

What did I have to do with anything? And why would she be afraid of offending me? I had so many questions.

“As we told you before, the imperial faction believes winning you over is our key to victory.”

“You’re talking about the political struggle between the imperial faction and the noble faction?”

There was currently a fierce conflict in Liengard between the imperial and noble factions, which Shii had told me about before.

“That’s right. The noble faction has one of the Seven Holy Blades on their side, so we need someone just as strong to oppose them. That someone is you,” Shii said, poking me in the shoulder.

*I hardly think a high school student like me is a match for one of the strongest swordfighters in the world...* It sounded like the empress and Rodis grossly overestimated my capabilities.

“Anyway, returning to the matter at hand... At this point, everyone in the underworld knows about your intimate relationship with the Blood Fox,” Shii said.

“I-intimate? That’s an exaggeration...”

Rize had done a lot to help me, but I would never call our relationship “intimate.” That made us sound like lovers.

“I’m going to be frank with you, Allen. Her Majesty and Father are likely just as suspicious of Rize as the rest of the world leaders. But voicing that would risk incurring your displeasure and, worst-case scenario, pushing you toward the noble faction. That would render the imperial faction completely hopeless,” Shii confessed with a shrug.

“I think Her Majesty and Father put off their decision about Rize to avoid that worst-case scenario. They want very badly to ask for your opinion on whether or not they should voice their suspicion against her at the next conference.”

“...I think I get the picture.” I processed what Shii had told me and arrived at a conclusion. “I’m still just a student, so someone like me has no right to tell Her Majesty and Mr. Rodis what to think. If they publicly voice their suspicion of Ms. Rize...I won’t object.”

I was in no position to argue with the ruler of Liengard and her long-serving advisor.

“I want to make my own stance clear, though—I believe there is no way Ms. Rize passed information to the Holy Empire,” I told Shii outright.

There were clearly a lot of misunderstandings about Rize, but she really was a kind person. She would *never* betray the Four Major Powers.

“Hmm-hmm, I thought you’d say that. I’ll relay your response to Father,” Shii said.

“Please do.”

Shii sighed quietly once the matter had been resolved. “Phew... Thanks for talking to me, Allen. I feel much better now.”

“No problem. I’m glad I could help.”

The heavy nature of what we'd discussed had my stomach turning, but if I'd helped Shii feel even a little better, it was worth it. *I really should get to the bathroom.* We'd talked for longer than I expected; I needed to relieve myself and get to sleep.

"So...you're not mad?" Shii asked timidly.

"No, I'm not."

I obviously had problems with Rize being treated like a suspect, but I'd be barking up the wrong tree blaming that on Shii.

"Do you really mean that?"

"I *really* do. Don't you remember the promise I made to never lie to you again?"

"O-oh yeah, I forgot!" She blushed and smiled with joy. "Well, I'm going to bed. Goodnight, Allen."

"Goodnight, President."

We waved to one another and went our separate ways.



It was the final day of our spring training camp, which doubled as the very important day that Bacchus would teach us Mirror Sakura Slash, the secret technique of the Cherry Blossom Blade School of Swordcraft.

"All right, I'm ready."

I'd gotten up early in the morning to stretch, run, and do some practice swings for a bit of light exercise. I was loose and ready to go.

*Heh, I can't wait!* Bacchus Valencia had once been known as the strongest swordsman in the world; his version of Mirror Sakura Slash was sure to be incredible. *I wonder just how strong it'll be...* I'd been giddy with excitement all morning.

"Oh, it's later than I thought."

I looked at the clock and saw it was noon. It was time to meet the others for



lunch.

“Let’s go.”

I wiped off my sweat with a towel and headed for the Arkstoria villa’s dining room where I joined the girls for a light lunch—the final one of the spring training camp. After we’d finished eating, we all met at the villa’s entrance carrying as little as necessary.

“Are you all ready to head out?” Shii asked, holding a small shoulder bag.

“You bet! I’m in peak physical condition!” Lilim exclaimed.

“I slept like a log, so I couldn’t feel better!” Tirith replied energetically.

“I’ve got my towel, water bottle, first aid kit... I’m all ready!” Lia said after checking her cute handbag.

“Yeah, I’m fine.” Rose nodded. She wasn’t taking anything.

“What about you, Allen?” Shii asked.

“I can leave whenever,” I said.

I’d worked up a light sweat and had a nutritious lunch, and could feel the warmth of the sun on my skin filling me with energy. The weather really was perfect for training.

“Great! Let’s head out!”

We climbed into our gliders and headed toward the uninhabited island where Bacchus was waiting. We flew for about ten minutes until we spotted him from overhead, then dropped altitude and landed near him.

“Hmm...? Oh, you’re here,” Bacchus said, standing up and putting down his fishing rod.

“Hello, Mr. Bacchus. Thank you again for doing this.”

“No problem, boy. Today’s training will be quite demanding, so how’re we all feeling? Did you get plenty of shut-eye last night?”

We all nodded in response to Bacchus’s question.

“Good, seems like you’re all prepared. Then let’s get right to it! It’s time to



teach you the secret technique of the Cherry Blossom Blade School of Swordcraft: Mirror Sakura Slash! Just like we did with the other techniques, I'll start with a demonstra... Huh?"

Bacchus sheathed his partially drawn sword.

“.....?.....”

We all looked at him in confusion, wondering why he'd stopped. Then he looked up at the sky.

“Those doohickeys up there... Are they friends of yours?”

He was looking at two large, dark silhouettes in the sky. It was hard to make them out flying in front of the sun, but they were shaped like gliders and headed our way.

*Are they Arkstoria servants? That would explain how they know about this island,* I thought idly, just before a yellow ball fell from the sky. *What's that...?* I studied the fist-sized ball and realized that it was made up of small grains of sand. One thing was off about it, though—it was floating in the air.

“What's that? It looks weird,” Lilim said, leaning toward the ball curiously. At that same moment, Shii's cry tore through the air.

“Allen, protect us!”

The yellow ball exploded powerfully, blasting a crater in the ground, sending trees flying, and producing a massive shockwave.

“...Huh? We're alive...?” Lilim said, dropping to the ground.

“Th-that shaved three years off my life...,” Tirith muttered, holding her hands to her chest.

“Well done completely blocking that attack, Allen. You saved us. Thank you,” Shii said, looking relieved. She seemed to have some sort of idea as to what was going on.

“I should be thanking you. I only blocked it in time because of your warning.”

I had summoned my cloak of darkness and enveloped myself and the girls just before the massive explosion, successfully preventing any of them from getting

hurt.

“Thanks, Allen. Are you okay, though?” Lia asked.

“Sorry. You’re always having to protect us... You’re unhurt?” Rose confirmed.

They both looked at me with concern.

“Yeah, I’m fine. What about you, Mr. Bacchus?” I asked.

He’d been so far away from me that I hadn’t been able to reach him in time with my darkness. *If he took that explosion head-on...*, I thought with concern.

“Grr, what the hell is this annoying sand?!” Bacchus growled angrily. He swung his sword and cleared the cloud of sand around him.

*I should’ve figured... He was completely uninjured after that explosion. I wonder if his physique is somehow different from a regular person’s...*

Meanwhile, the two gliders touched down right in front of me.

“...Don’t let your guard down, everyone. These two are as strong as any opponents we’ve fought so far,” Shii said nervously as two swordsmen climbed out of the gliders.

“You don’t have a subtle bone in your body, boss. You’re a member of the Black Organization now—you gotta learn how to sneak around,” said a glib man in a black overcoat. He had an air of affectation that made him seem shady, but he was clearly watching us vigilantly. There was no doubt in my mind that he was very strong.

“Silence. You will not tell me how to operate. And I don’t recall ever joining the Black Organization; this is a temporary alliance,” said the other man. He was slender with sharp eyes and wore an outfit that looked a lot like the holy knights’ uniform.

“What do you want with us, Von Mustang, traitor of the Seven Holy Blades?”

The thin man twitched in response to Shii’s question. “I remember you... You’re Rodis’s daughter, Shii Arkstoria. That would explain how you learned of my defection so quickly.”

Von Mustang had golden hair that went all the way down to his back. He

appeared to be in his mid-twenties, standing at around 170 centimeters tall, with a face that was handsome yet cold, and he had a thin build for a swordsman. He wore a black overcoat on top of his holy knight uniform.

*So this is Von Mustang...* Standing before me was the traitor Shii had told me about late last night.

“What do you mean ‘traitor of the Seven Holy Blades’?!” Lia cried.

“This is the first I’m hearing about that!” said Rose.

They both looked astounded.

“No freaking way... Do we really have to fight a Holy Blade right now?!” exclaimed Lilim.

“My stomach just started hurting...,” Tirith grumbled.

The fighting hadn’t even started, and the two of them were already getting cold feet.

“I’ll fill you all in later. Just get ready to fight!” Shii yelled. She drew her sword and glared at Von with open disgust.

“Shii Arkstoria, you—or rather, you all—seem to be under the wrong impression. Let me take this opportunity to correct you,” Von said.

“...Go on.”

“I am by no means a filthy traitor. I simply left the Seven Holy Blades and allied with the Holy Ronelian Empire.”

“.....?!”

The rest of us struggled to follow Von’s logic.

“Umm... Von, boss, what you just described is kinda the exact definition of betrayal,” his companion pointed out, but Von just snickered.

“Then you need to change your definition of that word, fool. ‘Betrayal’ is when a good person chooses to walk a path of evil. All I did was transfer to a different organization to put myself in a better position to do what I think is right. I moved from one righteous position to another. I have betrayed no one,” Von said.

“If you say so...,” the other man replied.

That didn’t sound like logic—more like Von was splitting hairs. He seemed like a very finicky person.

“Anyway, forget all that trivial stuff for now, boss... The job takes priority, right?” his companion said, scratching his cheek awkwardly.

Von completely froze, almost as if time had stopped.

“...‘Trivial,’ you say? You’re wrong. Nothing I do or say is trivial. It’s you all who fail to pay close enough attention to detail. Correcting minor mistakes like I did earlier is a small act of justice. Perform enough of these ‘small justices’ and they will eventually add up to bring about the greatest justice of all: world peace. In fact, this is the perfect opportunity. Allow me to remind you the true meaning of justice...”

The former Holy Blade droned on, clearly obsessed with his idea of justice.

“*Haah...* There he goes again with his ‘Justice and Happiness for All’ bullcrap. Why’d the emperor have to pair me with *this guy*? We ain’t compatible at all...,” his partner complained wearily, dropping his frivolous act for a moment.

“You’re...Diehl Reinstad, aren’t you?” Shii asked, not letting her guard down at all.

“Ohh? You know who I am, too, little lady?”

“Yes. I heard about you from the Holy Knights Association. You’re a former Imperial Knight.”

“Oh, wouldn’t you know... Seems word of my demotion’s gotten out. How embarrassing...”

The man gave a vague smile and scratched his head.

Diehl Reinstad had shoulder-length purple hair and wore light-colored sunglasses. He was about 180 centimeters tall and looked to be in his late twenties. His gentle smile came off as kind at first glance, but each action he made was so affected that everything about him seemed suspicious. His black overcoat was embroidered with the familiar crest that signified his position among the Thirteen Oracle Knights.

*He might have been demoted, but he used to be one of the Four Imperial Knights...* That probably meant he was about as strong as Sebas. I couldn't afford to let my guard down.

"So... What do a former Holy Blade and a former Imperial Knight—two of the most dangerous men in the world—want with us? I doubt you're here to watch the cherry blossoms together," Shii said.

"We have but one purpose—to collect the eidolon that you, Bacchus Valencia, have been hiding for all these years. I am referring, of course, to the Billion-Year Sakura," Von answered.

I couldn't believe my ears.



# Afterword

Thank you very much for purchasing the eighth volume of *100-Million-Year Button*. I am the author, Syuichi Tsukishima.

I would like to start by touching on the content of this volume. This will contain spoilers, so please be careful if you are the type to read the afterword first.

Volume 8 is comprised of the first and middle parts of the Cherin arc, and introduces three new characters, each one full of personality.

The first is Bacchus Valencia. I have a real soft spot for “strong old man” characters like him, so I always seem to write scenes with him thirty percent faster. By the way, I already knew I would eventually introduce Bacchus when I wrote the Unity Festival scene in Volume 2, and was very happy to finally be able to do so.

The next two characters are the Holy Blade, Von Mustang, and the former Imperial Knight, Diehl Reinstad, both of whom appeared in the final pages of the volume. This is a duo of...problematic personalities, to say the least. They’re both severely lacking in the morals department. I hope you look forward to seeing Von and Diehl’s exploits (?) in the next volume.

Also... The traitor Sebas Chandler makes a sudden reappearance in this volume. He remains obsessed with Shii, but there is a special reason for that... I hope I can write about Sebas’s past later on.

Volume 9 contains the fiercest battles and most shocking developments yet in the *100-Million-Year Button* series! Please look forward to it!

I’m running out of space, so I’d like to give some words of thanks. To the illustrator Mokyū, 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 8 of *100-Million-Year Button*.

Until we meet again for Volume 9!

*Syuichi Tsukishima*



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