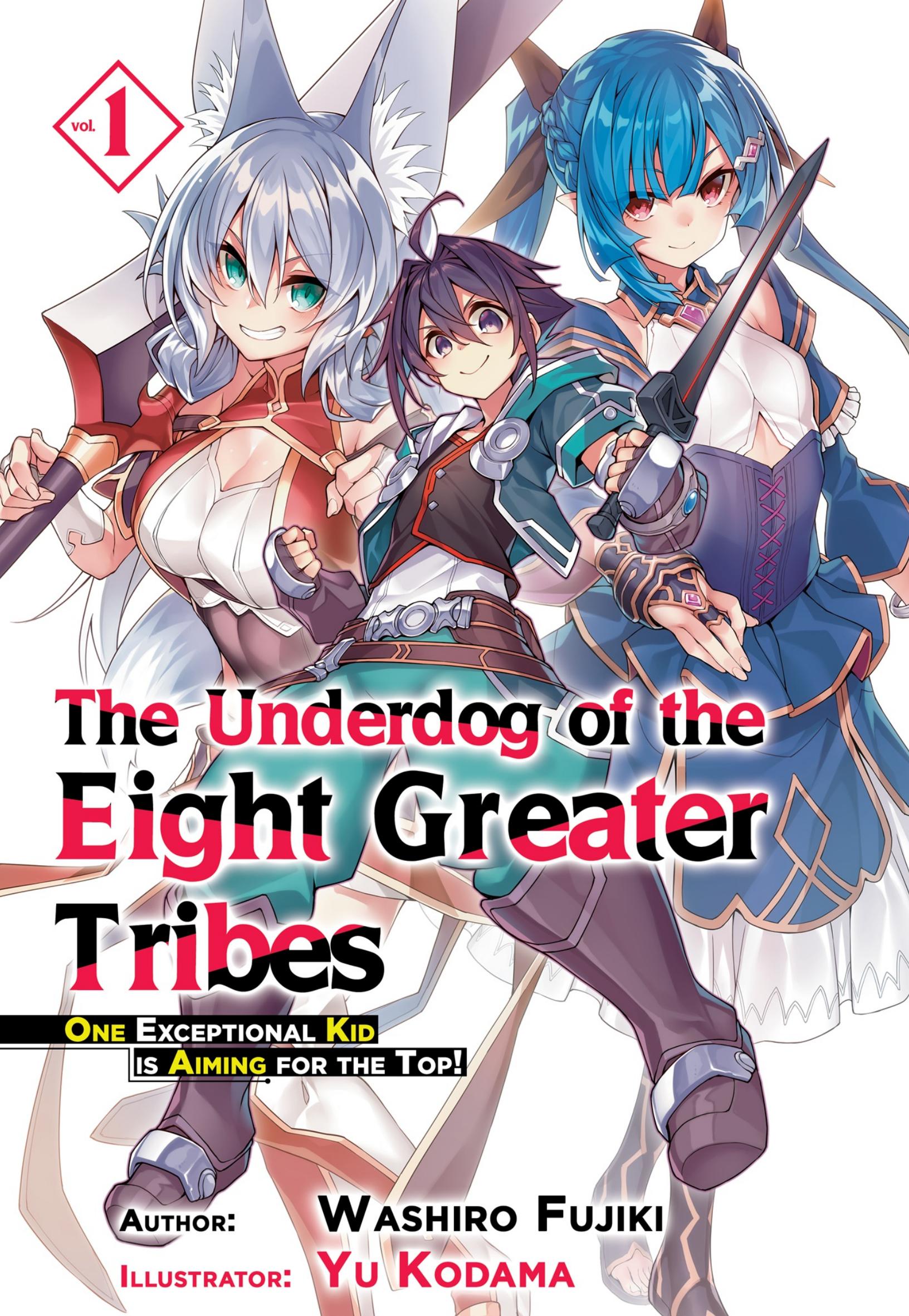


vol. 1



The Underdog of the Eight Greater Tribes

ONE EXCEPTIONAL KID
IS AIMING FOR THE TOP!

AUTHOR:

WASHIRO FUJIKI
YU KODAMA

ILLUSTRATOR:

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“And
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Fram,
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“For a child
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The two of them smiled, enthralled, through the bloodlust and fighting spirit. This was the new form of battle that took place in a peaceful world: battle entertainment.

This was simply the day-to-day—of Duel City Babel.



Athena Crossford

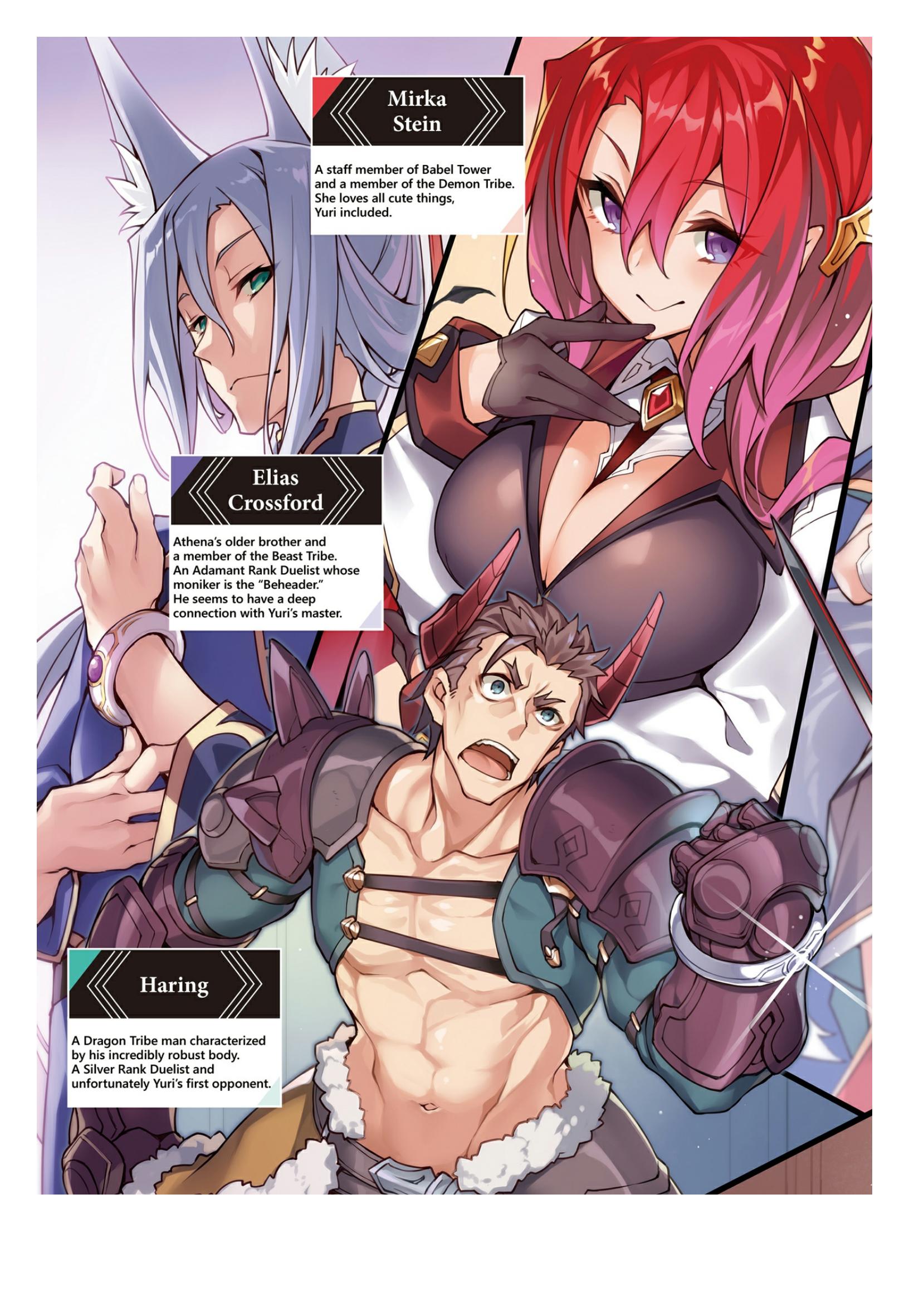
A fox-girl and member of the Beast Tribe who excels in physical combat. A Silver Rank Duelist, her moniker is the "Flame Deva." Bright and cheerful, she has proclaimed herself the "Big Sis" of both Yuri and Fram.

Fram Aizberg

A member of the Spirit Tribe specializing in magic. A Silver Rank Duelist, her moniker is the "Ice Jailer." While usually cool, she can occasionally be quite emotional. Avoids physical activity.

Yuri Eniastar

A boy from the Human Tribe aiming to be the strongest duelist. Having trained under his master from a young age, he came to the duel city with combat capabilities and spirit unbefitting his age. While usually rather mild, he will do anything to win a duel.



Mirka Stein

A staff member of Babel Tower and a member of the Demon Tribe. She loves all cute things, Yuri included.

Elias Crossford

Athena's older brother and a member of the Beast Tribe. An Adamant Rank Duelist whose moniker is the "Beheader." He seems to have a deep connection with Yuri's master.

Haring

A Dragon Tribe man characterized by his incredibly robust body. A Silver Rank Duelist and unfortunately Yuri's first opponent.

Your death
won't come
easy...

A close-up of a purple-haired character with a shocked expression, surrounded by a large, cracked, reddish-brown rock formation. The character is shouting "braa aaaaat!" in a white, jagged font. A speech bubble from the character contains the text "So this is a real Dragonification...!!" in blue. The background is filled with the jagged edges of the rock formation.

“So this is a real Dragonification...!!”

Its crooked mouth split as the stone dragon raised a roar to the high heavens. The walls and floor quivered under its might. With each step the dragon took, the marble beneath it cried out and then shattered.

No fear in his eyes, Yuri gleefully gazed up at the beast towering before him.

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Prologue

The world was at peace. It was a world shared by many tribes: The Human Tribe, the Beast Tribe, the Dragon Tribe, the Elf Tribe, the Dwarf Tribe, the Angel Tribe, the Demon Tribe, and the Spirit Tribe.

The eight tribes settled their relations, established their livelihoods, built their countries, avoided pointless wars amongst themselves, and—with only the occasional exchange between tribes—spent their days in peace.

A world where many different tribes existed, yet its tranquility prevailed from end to end.

In such a peaceful world, perhaps inevitably, there were those who wished for conflict. Those with strong battle instincts, overpowering conceit, vehement disdain for others...among various other reasons, there was no scarcity of those who wished for a conflict zone where they could fight and prove themselves.

And so, the dueling city was built, to allow them to fight to their heart's content.

“—Aight! I’m not gonna lose today!!”

On a street of an old-fashioned townscape, a cheerful girl’s voice echoed far and wide. The girl sported silver hair, her pointed beast ears twitching back and forth as she lifted up her straight sword. Her sword was so large it was taller than she was; its blade overly wide, almost like a shield. She turned both this sword and her large, round, turquoise eyes toward the enemy who stood before her.

“And if I win...Fram, your cheeks are mine to squish!!” Her voice made it clear she was having the time of her life, her silver tail wagging in pure delight.

Upon seeing that, the girl called Fram let off a long and deep sigh. “...Athena. Enough already. Why don’t you stop challenging me each and every day?”

“No way! Your big sister’s not going to end off on a losing streak!”

“I’m over four hundred years older than you.”

Her voice level and composed, Fram swept back her deep blue hair. By all appearances, she looked to be a child around twelve. Additionally, her hair, done up in two tails, only accentuated her youth, and wearing a dress a doll might wear, it was hard to believe she was over four hundred.

However, while the girl appeared to be human, she was not of the Human Tribe.

“For a child with no respect for her elders...perhaps some discipline is in order.”

Fram rather indifferently held up her right hand, enveloped in a black decorative gauntlet.

It happened just as Athena burst into a blooming smile upon seeing Fram enter her battle stance: a white inferno emitting a blinding radiance manifested, warping and swaying behind her.

“Hmhmm! It’ll be real embarrassing if you lose a duel while calling it ‘discipline,’ you know?”

“That’s quite alright, because I won’t lose. I’ll give you a good spanking later, do prepare yourself.”

“If you want to hit my bottom, it feels really good at the base of the tail!”

“Taking that statement out of context, you sound like a complete deviant.”

Despite their nonchalant exchange, the aura surrounding them had changed in an instant. They readied their weapons, the air growing more and more tense with every passing second.

“Righty-ho—let’s do this thing!!”

With Athena’s call, the two of them held their left hands to the heavens. This was the sign of a duel. The surrounding spectators erupted in cheers as the bracelets on their left arms started to glow.

And, as the cries and cheers enveloped them, the two took on their stances.

“Now, now! I’ve got work after this, so let’s end this with a bang!”

“Yes. Let’s finish up quickly.”

“Ah, come to think of it, whaddya want me to do if I lose?”

“Treat me to a nice dessert.”

“Okay! Anything you want, your Big Sis’s treat!!”

“I’m getting the feeling you’ll treat me regardless of the outcome.”

The two of them smiled, enthralled, through the bloodlust and fighting spirit. As duelists, they sought out battles, enjoyed battles, their minds always racing for the next one. Finding lighthearted fun in the act of fighting, at times staking their all on these fights.

This was the new form of battle that took place in a peaceful world: battle entertainment. A form of entertainment to be shared among all of the eight tribes. In the midst of each battle, the duelists would learn, pile up experience, better themselves, and aim for the summit. They walked forth with dreams of becoming the strongest duelist of all.

This was simply the day-to-day—of Duel City Babel.



Meanwhile, there was another...a boy fascinated by battle who would stop by the duel city. Under a cloudy sky of plucked cotton strands, the boy narrowed his eyes through the salty sea breeze.

“Just a little more, a little more, I should see it soon...”

He stood on the deck of a ship cutting its way through the pastel blue waters; the black-haired boy continued gazing forward as if he simply couldn’t wait for what was to come.

Appearance-wise, ‘boy’ was the perfect word to describe him. Neither an adolescent nor a man. He was small-built for a human, and his facial features were considerably young. However, only a human adult would be allowed to ride the ship alone...meaning he had to be over fifteen.

“Wah... There it is! It’s really there!”

His eyes locked onto the large structure peeking through the clouds, and he

leaped at it with such force he nearly stumbled over the handrail.

A massive tower rising high into the sky. The symbol of the artificial continent...Duel City Babel.

“It’s been ten years...!”

The tower firmly in his sight, the boy’s expression glimmered as he recalled a past he could never forget. Ten years ago, the boy aspired to be a duelist. He was charmed by the battles and prayed he would one day take part in them himself. It was then and there that he decided he was going to become stronger than anyone.

“I’m going to enjoy my fill of fighting!!”

The boy laughed innocently at the wide-open sea and yelled at a distant tower. All the while praying he could delight in fighting with all his might. His thoughts racing toward the strong contenders he had yet to see.

With all manner of emotions, past and present, embraced in his chest—Yuri Eniastar, from the bottom of his heart, rejoiced at the fact that he would be a duelist.

Chapter 1

Once upon a time, there existed those who established the rules to form the modern world. The denizens of the world were generally classified into eight tribes and divided among the continents. All conflicts and excessive contact between tribes were prohibited, and by modifying each continent into an optimal environment suited to its specific tribe, the world had maintained a longstanding peace.

Within these rules, the ninth landmass—Duel City Babel—was the sole exception. “Let’s all enjoy our fights” was both its creed and its role. A special stage prepared for those who wished for conflict in a peaceful world.

It was, additionally, a place to find excitement in watching others fight.

Here, the duelists who desired battle would contest their abilities through duels. Grappling matches of raw power, armed battles of technique, tactical battles of war, and psychological battles of superseding an opponent’s thoughts or actions... No means were off the table when it came to victory.

“Mnnn... I want to hurry and fight!”

The closer the structure towering over the center of the duel city loomed over him, the greater the sparkle grew in Yuri’s eyes.

“—The ferry will soon arrive at Duel City Babel. Spectators and sightseers please exit to the left of the boat, duelists please disembark from the right. I repeat—”

Hearing the ship-wide announcement, Yuri went over his belongings for the umpteenth time.

“Err... I haven’t forgotten anything. I have the letter from master too!”

He leafed through his rucksack, far too large for his small stature, before lightly hoisting it over his shoulder. He walked along the deck, as instructed, and observed the forms of those proceeding in the same direction.

Human, beastman, dragon-kin, elf, dwarf, angel, demon, spirit—a mishmash of tribes under various appearances, they all shared one thing in common: the weapons each held in their hands. Even these weapons showed off the characteristics of their owner's heritage, not a single one the same. And the act of holding weapons signified these were duelists.

By the time he was filled with elation at the sight of those he might fight in the future, another announcement signaled the boat's stop, and the bridge to the pier was lowered. Those on standby stepped down onto land one after the other. Yuri went along with the flow onto the pier, but— “Oi, quit dawdling, move along!”

“—Wah!? S-Sorry!!”

The moment he was off the ship, he found himself sealed in and jostled around by the crowd. Each time his large rucksack was brushed aside, his small body would be thrown left and right.

“Err... First, I have to go to the registrar to register, so—ah.”

When he tried unfolding the pamphlet that had been handed to him on the ship, another push from the crowd sent it up into the air, and splat into the ocean. Yuri watched its blearing symbols sway in the waves before he nodded to himself and stood.

“...Alright, I can just ask for directions!!”

For the time being, he decided to be optimistic and give up on the map. A look around informed him the congestion was thinning, and all that remained were a few people standing around chatting with their acquaintances. He could ask any one of them, and he would just as quickly be off on his way. Calling out to the first shadow to cross his path...

“Excuse me! I'm a little lost—”

“—Wazzat? What's yer problem, shrimp?”

An irritated reply from a frame so large he had to look up to take it all in. This man's height had to be three heads higher than Yuri. His protruding, sturdy muscle and thick, log-like limbs told tales of his fortitude.

All this was topped off by...large, curved horns sprouting from his head, along with a scaly tail growing from his tailbone. The Dragon Tribe, one of the eight tribes.

“Don’t talk to me if you don’t got business. I’ll slaughter you.”

Watching Yuri space out, the Dragon Tribe man showered him with threats. However, not only did this fail to ruin Yuri’s mood, his face lit up like a torch.

“Are you by any chance a duelist!?”

“Shut yer yap, if you don’t get outta my sight, I’ll—”

“Ah! That bracelet on your arm is a Duelist’s Proof, isn’t it! That’s amazing!”

“Yer not listening to a word I’m saying, are you.”

Regardless of the dragon man’s low growl, Yuri was getting worked up, sheer glee on his face.

“By the way, would you be able to give me directions!?”

“Brat, I’m surprised you thought you could get anything outta me at this point...”

“I’m sorry, I just dropped my map... I have to go to the registrar to register myself as a duelist. Could you tell me where that is?”

“Meaning...you just got here today?”

“Yes! I’m going to become a duelist today!” Yuri meekly lowered his head...causing the corners of the dragon man’s lips to rise.

“That makes things quick. Why don’t I lend you a hand?”

“R-Really!?”

“The name’s Haring. Since I’m at it, I’ll lead you straight to the registrar.”

Hearing the dragon man...Haring’s reply, Yuri clenched his fist victoriously. He had heard from his master that a large majority of duelists sported rough temperaments, but there were those who warmly welcomed newcomers as well. Haring looked rather hard to approach, but it wasn’t right to judge a book by its— “Aight, then pay the guide fee,” he said as he thrust out a large hand right before Yuri’s eyes.

“Y-You want money?”

“Course I do. You plan on puttin’ me to work with no compensation?”

“Err, I didn’t bring too much money with me...”

“Then give me all you’ve got.” Haring stepped in, pushing Yuri into a corner. “If you don’t wanna pay—then duel me.” His fiendish features warping into a sickly smirk, he turned his sharp, pointed eyes to the boy. “In this duel city, you either settle matters with money or have the other guy lose and obey you. That’s the rule.”

From an outside perspective, Haring’s words sounded insane, but he’d said nothing wrong. Disputes, quarrels, troubles...every problem could be resolved with a duel. That was common sense in the duel city; Yuri had learned so from his master.

“You get it now, rookie? If you’ve got no money and can’t fight, you won’t get anywhere here. Want a guide? Then catch some other goodie-two-shoes or fool.”

Seeing Yuri frozen in place, Haring disinterestedly exhaled before turning to leave— “Then a duel it is!!”

“.....Huh?” Haring’s feet stopped at Yuri’s proud, spirited reply.

“You do look strong, Mr. Haring! It would be a blast to fight you!!”

“No, wait a sec!! Yer supposed to lose yer nerve and pay up or run!”

“Eh? But you can fight, can’t you?” His stance all up for dueling, Yuri tilted his head, perplexed. “I’ll give it my all, no matter who I’m up against!”

His face was one of innocent delight, genuinely desiring a fight. Seeing Yuri’s smile...Haring irksomely frowned.

“Tsk... What an irritating brat.”

“Huh? Please wait! Weren’t we going to fight!?”

“No money? Then I got no business with you. In the first place, you haven’t even—”

Just as Haring was finally going to shake him off and cut all ties, an endlessly

thoughtless voice resounded.

“Aaaah! Someone’s up to no good!!”



Long and silky hair of silver thread swaying in the sea breeze, round turquoise eyes brimming with energy. And—flapping, pointed ears and tail.

“Big Sis definitely doesn’t approve of bullying the weak!” With those words, the Beast Tribe girl raced up, angrily swinging around a large sword. The moment he saw her, Haring let out a long, heavy sigh.

“Goddammit... Of all people, it just had to be the stupid Flame Deva Fox...”

“I don’t wanna be called stupid by a guy who’s got croissants growing outta his head!”

“Don’t you mock a Dragon Tribe’s horns! Then what about those dog ears of yours!?”

“I’m not a dog! I’m a fox! The nerve!” she said, her large tail swishing back and forth. “So anyway, Haring—if you’re doing mean things to a newbie again, you’re really in for it.”

Such spirit and malice unthinkable of such a young woman hit Haring head-on.

“Tsk...” he tutted again, “Can it. Bloody brainless fox.”

And, with that parting line, he went on his way, his large body swaying. After making doubly sure he was gone, the girl shuffled over to Yuri.

“Are you okay? Did he do anything to you?”

“Oh, no! I’m perfectly fine!”

As she suddenly peered straight into his face point blank, Yuri lurched back in surprise. Determining that he was fine, the girl gave a vibrant, lighthearted smile.

“That’s great! It wouldn’t be fun if you got injured or traumatized right off the bat!” She ruffled up Yuri’s hair before proudly thrusting out her chest to introduce herself.

“I’m Athena Crossford! What’s your name?”

“It’s Yuri Eniastar! Are you a duelist, Athena!?”

“Course I am! I’m a pretty strong one too!”

Voila, she turned her chest away as she held her left hand at his eye level. Glimmering on her left wrist—a bracelet embedded with a silvery-white gemstone. This was the Proof that displayed a duelist's strength and rank.

“The fact that your jewel is white means...you’re Silver Rank!?”

“Mmhmm... And I’m crazy strong for a Silver too! I’m nearly up to Gold, and I’m peerless with my Silver peers, the young up and coming—”

Her words were interrupted by a cold voice from behind. “—Calling yourself peerless just makes you sound weak. You should give up on that one.”

A girl whose hair was a shade reminiscent of the depths of the ocean. While she was young in appearance, her calm demeanor carried a peculiar dignity and wisdom.

“Athena, quit playing around, and get to seeing if there are any other registrants.”

“I’m not playing! I’m teaching Yuri how amazing I am!”

“Even when you just lost to me?”

“I didn’t lose! I got the audience on my side, so it all evens out!”

“Fine, then we’re even. You still owe me a dessert,” came her indifferent reply before she swept back her two blue tails of hair. “So, did you come to this city to register?”

“Yes! Yuri Eniastar, I want to be a duelist!”

“I am Fram Aizberg. Athena and I were entrusted with guiding any lost registrants,” the girl said as she held out a small hand.

“Err... Fram, you’re from the Spirit Tribe, correct?”

“That’s right. I’m probably somewhere around four hundred years old.”

“That sounds rather arbitrary...”

“When you live long enough, it just becomes a pain to keep counting.”

The members of the Spirit Tribe were beings formed from an immense amount of magical energy. Their appearance and physical abilities weren’t much different from humans, but their bodies of mana were close to immortal,

eternal. They could live a thousand years without changing in appearance.

In order to decrease mana expenditure, they tended to take on smaller, younger forms, and this could be considered a characteristic of the tribe.

“Now then...it doesn’t look like there are any other potential registrants around. Athena, lead this child to the registration office.”

“Leave it to me. What about you, Fram? Want me to piggyback you?”

“You shake too violently, I’ll have the child carry me.”

“Y-You want me? I think my backpack will get in the way...”

“I don’t care if I have to be over the bag. For us spirits, even the lightest exercise chips away at our mana and tires us out, so I refrain from walking on my own feet as much as possible.”

Without waiting for Yuri’s reply, Fram took a light leap and mounted the rucksack. Perhaps he should have expected it from her young appearance, but her body was so light he couldn’t even feel the difference.

“Fram! I’ll drive safely next time, please come back to your Big Sis!”

“What is this seventeen-year-old whelp mouthing on about?”

“The Beast Tribe considers ten an adult, meaning seventeen makes me a Super-Big Sis!”

“Yes, please come again when you’re an adult mentally.”

As Athena closed in on her, Fram flapped her legs to ward her away.

“For the time being, what am I supposed to do...?” Yuri asked.

“Right. Do you see that tower over there? That is our destination.”

He followed Fram’s outstretched finger and found his gaze back on the tower that rose high into the heavens.

“That tower...Babel Tower isn’t only the symbol of the city. It’s also an office where the duel city’s management, duelist registration, and other necessary civil duties for our daily lives are carried out. You want to hurry up and duel, don’t you?”

“Yes! I want to duel ASAP!”

“Oh, you’re quite the spirited child.”

“I mean, I came to this city because I wanted to fight!” Yuri proclaimed, his eyes sparkling brighter than the stars at night. “I want to fight a lot of people...and win a lot!”

He spoke his mind with sincere eyes. Seeing that, the two girls exchanged a look and laughed.

“You’re quite an interesting child.”

“Yep, yep! Your Big Sis welcomes kids who love to fight!”

“Right! Well then, as his guides, shall we do the line?”

They both nodded before saying in unison, “Welcome to Duel City Babel! We always await new battles!!”



Under the guidance of Athena and Fram, Yuri finally set foot into the duel city. Along the way, he found himself restlessly taking in the sights.

“Wow...the eight tribes really do live together!”

A truly wide assortment of folk strutted the streets. A human clapping her hands to call in customers; a beastman busily running around with his tail in the air; a dragon-kin whose manly curled horns and scales glimmered in the sun; an elf whose long ears twitched back and forth; a dwarf carrying around a basket about as big as she was; an angel basking in the sun, their pure white wings fully spread; a demon whose black wings drooped as he scowled reproachfully at that same sun; a spirit taking it easy in the middle of a bonfire— The sight of all eight tribes all in one place was unique to the duel city, and its influence made its way into the cityscape. There were elevated elven inns surrounded by greenery; small buildings only a dwarf could enter; rest areas for each element of spirit to recharge; shops with sunshades put out for demons; the diverse cultures of the tribes were clear to see.

Yet, Yuri couldn’t see any walls between them.

“I heard this was where all sorts of tribes gathered, so I thought there would

be more difficulties living together.”

“Hmm, well, there are some things you worry about living shoulder to shoulder, but generally, most people who come to the duel city are like, ‘dueling is number one, everything else comes second.’”

“Right. And even if there is a problem, this city always offers an applicable resolution,” Fram said, as she prodded at Yuri’s head and pointed. At the end of her outstretched finger—a man of the Human Tribe, and another of the Beast Tribe.

“Oi, bastard! Don’t think you can just set your stall on my property!”

“Aah? What’s that!? It’s not more than a fingertip over your property line!”

“What part of that is a finger!? Are you talking about those big, meaty beastman claws of yours!?”

“Well you try and find someone who says a nail isn’t part of a finger!”

The two men quibbled in front of their stores, and after glaring so hard that sparks were flying— “Then let’s settle this with a duel!!”

Right after they cried out in unison, the cheers and roars erupted down the street. Weapons and howls were simply normal in town, and the onlookers were already gleefully heckling the pair.

“Oh, Hank and Richard are at it again! Do your best, both of you!”

“You can really just fight in the middle of town!?” Yuri asked in amazement.

“Yes. Time and place are irrelevant, that is the duel city’s reason for existence.”

A duel began the moment both sides decided to fight. Whether it was the beach or the forest, inside a room, or in the middle of town, the entire city was a fighting arena. Yuri thought back to his master’s explanations as his eyes were stolen by the spectacle, only for the beastman who had initiated the duel to be sent flying right at him.

However—his body never collided with Yuri. It passed straight through as if he had no substance at all.

Yuri could hear the voices and the clash of steel, but the weapons they swung would never hit their onlookers and rubbernecks, nor would they touch the buildings or the merchandise in the stalls.

“Hmm... So this is the duel city’s Field!”

“Yep, yep. The safe and sound duel system! When the duelists are in the Field, they can’t affect anything around them in any way! Everyone’s safe and sound!”

“I’ve been wondering for a long time now, but what principle does the Field work on?”

“No clue! You’ll have to ask Fram!”

“...Why did Mirka think this girl was capable of being a guide?” Fram sighed before adding, “The Field is a separate dimension that a duelist can be transferred to through their Proof. A reality that isn’t reality. No matter what happens in this dimension, it cannot impact reality in any way, shape, or form. I can’t explain the actual inner workings myself, but at the very least, it is a technology that has existed since this city’s founding.” And there, Fram narrowed her eyes ever-so-slightly. “Additionally, the effect of *death* within the Field doesn’t reflect on reality either.”

“If I’m remembering right, once the Field is undone, everything is put back to how it was before, right?” Yuri asked.

“Correct. If you die from a fatal wound, the Field will be forcibly dissolved and you’ll simply be dragged back to reality. Once you’re back, it’s all put back to normal.”

“You still feel it, by the way! You can’t actually die in duels, but you still feel it; the wounds really, really hurt, and if you die, it’ll be so painful, you won’t be able to move right for three days!”

Her ears drooping, Athena made a large X with her arms. She was a veteran duelist, so if she was saying it, it must be considerably painful.

“To a duelist, death is complete and utter defeat. And the winner’s orders are absolute,” Fram stated, indifferently spelling out the philosophy of the duel city.

The winner of a duel was fully justified in everything they did. In the duel city

where battles were respected above all else, this was an unshakable, unwritten rule. That was precisely why, whenever a problem broke out, it would be solved with a duel, and the result of this duel would make for an undeniably clear outcome.

“So death is defeat, and victory is justice. That’s nice and easy!” Yuri concluded.

“Child...your adaptability astounds me.”

“Normally, they get really confused or scared when they hear about artificial death, you know.”

After which, the two exchanged a perplexed look before ruffling up Yuri’s hair.

“Good boy, good boy! You’ll make a fine duelist, Yuri!”

“You really think so!? You think I can be a strong duelist!?”

“Sure you can! I guarantee it! You’ll be strongest, second to me!!”

“...What are you trying to accomplish, comparing yourself to a newbie?”

Fram delivered a chop to Athena’s head, and by the time that was over with, the entrance was finally in sight. The symbol of the duel city—Babel Tower. A symbol of battle that continued to stand where it was, never discoloring or decaying in its lengthy history.

Yuri was left stock-still, looking up at the tower, while Athena easily clambered her way up the stone staircase.

“Righty-ho, let’s hurry and get your registration over with! We must’ve met each other for a reason, so how about you let Big Sis show you around town!?”

“Are you sure about that? You were only supposed to guide me to the registrar.”

“It’s fine, don’t worry about it! Big Sis has taken a liking to you, Yuri! I get the feeling you’re going to get up to all sorts of interesting antics, and I’d be happy if we continued to get along!”

Seeing Athena flash her teeth in delight, Fram offered a slight sigh. “I’m sorry,

it looks like Athena has taken a liking to you. You have my pity, but just give up,” she whispered.

“Is she that bad?”

“She’s strong in a fight, but as you can see, her head’s completely empty. Still, she’s not a bad kid, so do try to get along with her.”

“It’s kinda like you’re the big sister here, Fram.”

“Naturally, I’m somewhere around four hundred.”

Sounding half resigned, Fram stared at Athena in the distance. However, her eyes did not seem to belittle the girl. More so, as fellow duelists, it felt as if she properly recognized her as a rival.

Precisely because they had come to understand each other through battle, and recognize each other’s abilities, they were able to build a bond of trust across tribes and grow close enough for friendly banter. Having witnessed this relationship unique to the duel city, Yuri couldn’t help but smile.

“Well then, I should work hard to be like you two!”

“That’s the spirit. Though I think it will take quite some time to reach us.”

Once a gently-smiling Fram had settled back down on his back, Yuri followed behind Athena.

She was waiting for them at the top of the stairs. The sight that greeted him as she threw open the doors—he stopped in his tracks. A gorgeous, bright and colorful circular hall. Seamless smooth walls and a carefully polished marble floor along with the lamps placed around made the hall almost blinding in its uniform light.

While he stood in a daze, Athena was a step ahead, barreling full-throttle toward the center register. “Mirka!” she shouted, “I brought a kid who wants to register!”

Upon hearing Athena’s voice, the woman at the counter turned with a languid voice. “Yes, yes. Good work, Athena.”

Black bat-like wings extended out from her back. Those small wings performed a few test flaps as the crimson-haired woman lowered her head to

Yuri.



“Pleasure, pleasure. My name’s Mirka Stein, I work for Babel Tower. Am I right to assume that boy is looking to register?”

“That’s right! Yuri Eniastar, here to register as a duelist!”

“My, my, what an energetic boy—can’t say I hate that.”

As Mirka licked her lips, her sharp, pointed canines caught the light. The sight caused Yuri to hit his hands together as if something had finally fallen into place.

“You’re from the Demon Tribe, Ms. Mirka! Do you really suck blood!?”

“Yes, that’s right. Why, I’d love to eat you up too, little Yuri.”

“Quit hitting on him and finish his registration, you pedo demon.”

“You’ve got me all wrong, Fram! I just happen to prefer the blood of younger men; there was no deeper meaning!!”

“Then Mirka, tell us what crossed your mind when you first looked at Yuri.”

“Why of course! In exchange for some blood, I want to support him for the rest of his life!”

“Don’t get any closer to this innocent child, and finish your work as swiftly as possible.”

“Oh, I was only joking. You shouldn’t take it so seriously.”

Firmly locked in Fram’s glare, Mirka pouted as she tapped against a gemstone in her hands. The next moment, a pale blue screen manifested in the air.

“This goes here, that goes there and... Yuri, was it? Before we begin registration, would you like an explanation on what it means to be a duelist?”

“Yes! Please guide me from the top!”

“Okay, okay. When you put it like that, it really makes my job feel worthwhile.”

She nodded firmly, her finger sliding over the pale screen. Eventually, she turned it to face Yuri.

“First, our duels go off what we call the Rate System. Your rate fluctuates

based on the outcome of your duels. It's pretty much a value that determines your ranking."

The screen displayed eight differently-colored words in the common tongue. A bluish-gray, a green, a black, an orange, a white, a gold, a purple, and a red.

"The ranks are, from lowest to highest, Iron, Beryl, Chrome, Bronze, Silver, Gold...and then there's Adamant and Orichalcum. Once your ranking reaches a certain value, this Proof here will change to the appropriate color, so it's quite easy to tell."

She handed over a bracelet equipped with a bluish-gray—Iron—gemstone. "This Proof is not only a duelist's identification, it also signals an intent to duel and is used to deploy a Field. Please keep it on your left hand at all times."

"Got it! Can this tell me the details of my ranking?"

"Of course. Just tap on your Proof like I did, and it will project a display to let you know your current status."

After equipping the bracelet on his left arm, Yuri tapped on the jewel portion as he had seen Mirka do. Once he did—a pale screen floated above it, spelling out his present state.

Duelist Name: Yuri Eniastar

Tribe: Human

Rank: Iron

Rate Ranking: 61491st Place

Rate: 10000

With a quick look at the screen, Mirka continued with her explanation.

"That, my dear Yuri, is your current status. You've only just registered, so your rate is at exactly ten thousand. Your ranking is around sixty thousand."

"Err... The fact that ten thousand puts me around sixty thousand means the people above me have a lot more rate, right?"

“Yes, yes. Just look at Athena and Fram. They’re both at Silver, so their ranking has to be within the top one thousand, and I’m guessing their rate should be over three million.”

“They have that much rate, and there’s still people ahead of them!?”

“That’s right. When you get to the top five hundred—the Gold Rank—the people there generally have over seven million. The top one hundred is Adamant, and even the lowest person there should have over ten million.”

Yuri currently possessed ten thousand, and the top was that over a thousand-fold. When he thought about it that way, he had to wonder just how many duels the higher ranking members had fought in.

“However, it’s possible for even a newbie to catch up!” Mirka exclaimed.

“You really think so!? What do I have to do!?”

“That’s easy, you just have to keep winning.”

“...Umm, is that it?”

“That’s it. More specifically, you’ll have to fight opponents stronger than yourself.”

Returning a sweet smile, Mirka fiddled with a gemstone on her desk.

“The amount of rate wagered on each duel is determined by rank. One thousand for Iron, two thousand for Beryl, and it just keeps going up from there. The winner makes off with the entire pot.”

“Meaning... What does that mean?”

“Well, to put it simply, if you win against a Silver like Athena, you’ll acquire a hundred thousand rate just like that. It’s what we in the business like to call ‘giant slaying.’”

Mirka continued smiling as she tapped away with her hands, but Yuri tilted his head in wonder.

“...In that case, is there any merit in fighting someone who ranks lower than you?”

“Well, first off, there’s proving your own strength. Your Proof broadcasts your

duels all over the continent, and strong and interesting duelists can get sponsors. You can earn popularity from viewers who want to see your matches on a regular basis.”

“Ah, I’ve seen those match broadcasts! If you register your favorite duelists, you can see their duels whenever you want, right?”

“Yes, yes. Recording and broadcasting matches are standard functions of the Proof, so it will record your duels too. It also automatically archives past matches, so you could watch your old battles and work out where you went wrong.”

Mirka held up a finger to add to her explanation. “Another reason to fight a lower rank would be an easy victory. Your odds are around fifty-fifty going up against an equal, but you can earn rate more reliably against a lower-ranking opponent. This is also a chance for the lower ranker to earn a huge load of rate, so even with a difference in ranking, there are those who will assertively want you to challenge them.”

“Got it! Then I should go around challenging lots of people stronger than me!”

“Slow down there; if you don’t have the ability, you’ll ruin yourself. Do take care, okay?” Mirka calmly narrowed her eyes, her voice lowered into a remonstrative tone. “In this city, the victor is just, and the loser is worthless. If you pile up too many losses and lose all your rate—you won’t be able to become a duelist again. To a duelist, his rate is his strength, his worth, and his lifespan. To continue to fight without a thought to any of this is not strength, it is merely foolhardiness.”

Even if he didn’t die, if he repeated reckless battles, he would lose his life as a duelist. But Yuri gripped his fist, brimming with confidence.

“That’s alright! I’m not going to lose to anyone!”

He spoke out with unwavering confidence and enthusiasm. Upon seeing his sparkling expression, Mirka let out a languishing sigh.

“Mnnnnn! How honest and adorable! Want to do something nice with this lady after this!?”

“Mirka, not a step past the counter, or else.”

“You can’t! I won’t let you have Yuri!”

Mirka’s frenzied state prompted Athena and Fram to pull the boy back and out of the danger zone. Once Mirka returned to her senses, she gulped down her spit.

“Oh dear, I’m getting ahead of myself. By equipping your Proof, you have completed the provisional registration, so next, I’ll need your personal information for the city registry. This one will be a paper form, so if you would —”

“Ah, come to think of it, I’ve got a letter from my master!”

He fished through the contents of his rucksack, produced a letter and held it out to Mirka. But Mirka quizzically tilted her head.

“By letter, do you mean a recommendation? But generally anyone can become a duelist, so you don’t really need any recommendations.”

“Oh really? My master said I had to hand it in during registration no matter what.”

“Did he? I’m sure your master is a former duelist, but... Incidentally, might I ask what his name is?”

“Err... My master is called Reilly Malbork.”

“...Reilly Malbork?”

Mirka furrowed her brow as she carefully went over the contents of the letter. After she had looked it over...she slowly nodded.

“...I see, so you’re one of those kids.”

“Err, what did my master say?”

“Oh, no, the letter simply contained your personal information. I will be able to fill in the appropriate documents based on this info, so I’ll save you the trouble of filling out any forms.”

She smiled as she did some further fiddling with the gem in the counter. Soon after...the gemstone let off a faint light, and countless lines of letters and numbers streamed out, only to be sucked into and carved into Yuri’s Proof.

“And that concludes your registration. Please make sure you equip and carry your Proof with you at all times.”

“Got it! Thank you!”

After gazing at the radiant blue-gray Proof on his wrist, Yuri triumphantly nodded. “This means I can duel now, right!”

“Yes. Next, let’s go and find a duel, so I can explain how—”

Mirka tried to continue her explanation, only to be interrupted by the sound of breaking ceramics resounding across the hall.

This was soon followed by the angry yell of a man, causing them to reflexively turn in that direction. A certain individual, leaned over the counter, was raising his voice in rage.

“—Quit screwing with me!”

“P-Please calm down, Mr. Haring!”

“Can it! What do you mean they didn’t send a reward!?” His large frame, conspicuous even from afar, was topped off by the characteristic curved horns of a dragon-kin.

“Look into it again! If this is your mistake, you won’t hear the end of it!!”

Each time Haring screamed, the receptionist dealing with him leaked a short shriek.

“...Whoa, we ran into Haring again. Bad luck,” said Athena.

“That stupid dragon-kin really never learns,” added Fram.

“Are the two of you knowledgeable about Mr. Haring?” Yuri had to ask.

“Well, Haring’s the same Silver Rank as us, see,” Athena explained, “So I know a bit, and I’ve fought him before, but...since he’s like that, he’s always standing out, and not in a good way...”

“He is the sort of misunderstanding ruffian you can find on any street corner. The sort who misunderstands rank and rate as some sort of social status,” Fram flatly stated.

“Hmm... I see.” In the midst of their description of him, Yuri ended up

directing all his attention on a single point. “If he’s Silver, that means he’s strong, doesn’t it?”

“His behavior aside, his skills are quite up there, I would say. While I hear he fell to Bronze for a while, he has returned to Silver.”

After taking in Fram’s explanation, Yuri gave a satisfied nod. “I see, and thank you!”

He turned to Haring and raced at him, waving his hand.

“Mr. Haring! I must thank you for what you did for me back there!”

While Haring experienced a brief window of surprise the moment he saw Yuri running up to him with a full smile on his face, he immediately sent him a look of disgust.

“You’re...that brat I met at the pier.”

“Yes! I just became a duelist!” Yuri brandished the Proof on his left hand, proudly showing it off. “And so, please fight me!”

“.....Huh?”

“I mean, back at the pier, you told me to choose between fighting you and paying money! That’s why I’ve come to request the fight!”

Faced with Yuri’s beaming smile, Haring tutted intentionally loud enough for everyone to hear. “Tsk... What an incorrigible brat. Yer the least of my worries right now. Get lost.”

“Don’t want to!!”

“Why are you the one refusing with all yer might!?”

When the brunt of Haring’s anger began to point at Yuri, Athena and Fram rushed to his aid.

“Yuri! You can’t just go off on your own!”

“That’s right. If you hang around Haring too long, you’ll catch his idiocy.”

“...So this time, you don’t just got the stupid Flame Deva, you’ve got the shrimp Ice Jailer with you too.”

He acknowledged the two who came up, his disgust and repugnance only thickening.

“Oi, just take the brat and get lost already.”

“We were going to do so without your instruction. It would be rather troublesome if you had a negative influence on the newbie.”

“Also your breath stinks, stay away!” Athena added as she glared at Haring.

“Can it! At least let up on the psychological attacks!”

“Yes, excuse me! What do Flame Deva and Ice Jailer mean!?” Yuri inquisitively cut in.

“And you need to consider the situation before you start asking questions! Flame Deva and Ice Jailer are the sorta nicknames those folks who watch the broadcasts arbitrarily tack onto ya!!”

Indignant as he was, Haring provided an honest answer to Yuri’s question. He presumably thought things would only become more troublesome if he stayed silent.

“Aah, dammit... I got involved with a bothersome brat...”

“If it’s that much of a bother, then we really must settle this with a duel, right? Right!”

“I wasn’t talking to you! Stupid fox, shrimp spirit, how about you talk some sense into him!!”

“Point taken. Yuri, you don’t stand a chance, so give up.” Fram tugged at his sleeve as she shook her head to the side. “The color of a Proof is a proof of one’s strength. A newcomer won’t be able to win.”

“But my best bet is to fight strong people, right?”

“Even if that’s the case, you shouldn’t take on fights you’ll definitely lose. No matter how confident you are in your skills, these duels aren’t so charitable for you to win on your first—”

“—We won’t know until we try.”

Cutting Fram off, Yuri drew the sword hung at his hip.

A black one-handed sword. Both its body and grip were short, making it closer to a dagger than a sword. But in a boy's hands it was surely a sword. Its pitch-black blade let off a peculiar dull glimmer, as if a remnant of light had been sucked into its void, and its center was colored with a single line the color of fresh blood.

And the moment Yuri drew his sword, the air around Haring changed.

"Pull a sword on me...and we won't be joking and jeering no more." His expression distorted as his voice lowered in tone; his eyes, turned to Yuri, filled with anger and murderous intent. "Right, if yer gonna be like that, I'll kill you so hard you'll never try it again."

Haring held his left hand high as if to show off his white Silver Proof. After silently gazing at the bracelet a while— "—Ah, do I need to do something specific to start a duel!? Are there any special words!?"

"Brat, are you really saying that here and now!?"

"I'm sorry! I haven't been taught yet!"

"Oi, do your job properly, receptionist lady!"

After an angry complaint at Mirka, Haring reluctantly turned back to Yuri.

"Fine, listen up. First, you gotta point the jewel in yer Proof at yer opponent, right? And once our Proofs have recognized one another, our bodies are sent off to the Field. There's no manners or magic words to it. If yer opponent's up for it, you can just silently point your Proof and that's that."

"I see! Thank you so much!"

"Fer god's sake... Why am I teaching a newbie..."

Seeing Yuri gratefully lower his head, Haring irksomely sighed.

This time was for real. Both parties confronted one another, their eyes locked.

"Well then—here's to a good fight!!"

The instant Yuri proudly raised his Proof—a flash of static noise ran across his field of vision. Every person in sight was dyed sepia. This was different than reality, a dimension that existed on a separate phase. In such a muted world,

only a single entity retained its color.

“Rookie, if nothing else, I’ll praise your pluck for picking a fight with me.” Haring smirked as he hit his gauntlets together. He stood in Yuri’s path, the opponent he would now have to fight.

At that moment, Yuri heard voices from outside the Field.

“Quit trying to look cool, croissant! Your head’s just right for a balanced breakfast!”

“Rather than Yuri picking a fight, it’s more like Haring is a walking provocation.”

Subject to the relentless heckling from the girls, Haring’s body shook, and a vein surfaced on his brow.

“Can it, peanut gallery! Just because you’re outside, you think you can—”

The moment Haring lost his composure and took his eyes off of Yuri—Yuri’s flying kick slammed straight into his face.

“Koh—!?”

Though Haring raised a farcical cry, Yuri did not hesitate to swing his foot. A blow without the slightest bit of mercy. What’s more, the attack caught him by complete surprise, sending Haring’s body forcefully tumbling across the floor.



Yuri laughed, flashing his teeth.

“If there’s no starting signal—then sneak attacks are valid, aren’t they?”

The spectators watching their duel grew heated.

“Hyooh!” an onlooker whistled, “Good going, rookie!”

“There are no rules in battle! The one who wins in the end is just!!”

“What’s wrong, Haring!? Conceding the first hit to a newbie!?”

Having just witnessed Haring’s overbearing attitude, the surrounding duelists began to jeer at him one after the next. As they showered him with boos, Haring slowly rose to his feet. His face had taken quite a blow, but forget falling unconscious, his nose wasn’t even broken.

One of the Dragon Tribe’s traits was their sturdy constitution. Thick skin that could repel a blade, tough muscles to catch any blow, bones hard enough to beat out metal—all combining to form a body specialized in defense.

No half-hearted attacks would get through to a member of the Dragon Tribe. And the other ability they possessed—

“You’ve got spunk, rookie. I’ll give you that.” Haring’s face turned red with anger, putting Yuri on his guard. “I was looking down on you for being a newbie, but you asked for it. I’ll crush you with all I got.”

After a quiet murmur, the air started to tremble. The vibrations spread out until the floors and walls were shaking violently, the sand born from the tremors squirming and swelling as if it had a will of its own.

Though the Field existed in a different dimension, it recreated the surrounding environment: geographical features and buildings. And, while events within the Field couldn’t impact the real world in any way, it was possible to manipulate the objects created within it.

“I’ll kill you so thoroughly—you won’t fight again!!”

The instant he clenched his fists in rage, the area around him changed. The sand grains floating in the air gathered to envelop Haring’s body. Gradually, those grains became gravel, and gravel upon gravel formed stone. Haring’s

body was transforming into something grotesque as these massive boulders enveloped him.

Long ago, before the world had its *rules*... In the long and bloody wars among the tribes, each of the eight tribes developed their own unique skill to overwhelm the others.

These were the tribal skills—and they were still around for anyone to use in a duel.

“This is—my Dragonification!” A roar jumbled with all sorts of grating noises echoed across the hall.

To change one’s body into that of a dragon, this was the Dragon Tribe’s tribal skill: Dragonification.

A long neck of adjoined stone. A body enshrined as a single hulking boulder. Four limbs formed from complex rock formations to support a thick and massive body—a form truly worthy of being called a ‘dragon of stone.’

“You won’t die easily...you irritating brat!!”

Its crooked mouth split as the stone dragon raised a roar to the high heavens, showing off the dull color that coated the insides of its oral cavity.

Faced with the overwhelming draconic form—

“So this is a real Dragonification...!!” Yuri muttered. No fear in his eyes, he gleefully gazed up at the beast towering before him.

“If you’re getting serious, then I should give it my all!”

With this declaration, he kicked off, practically sliding full speed at the dragon.

“A human’s all ain’t worth nothing!!” the beast roared as a tail of joined stones swung at Yuri. The marble floor was cruelly hollowed out, fine white particles scattering as the stone tail ripped its way toward him.

“You won’t know until you try!”

Yuri leaped over the tail creeping along the ground. But the tail carried right on with its momentum, colliding with the ceiling and sending a shower of rubble and debris down.

Dodging the falling fragments, Yuri continued sprinting without rest—only to come to a sudden stop, turn, and take a large leap to the side.

“Hey now, what’s wrong!!? You won’t win running around like that!” Haring scoffed as he maneuvered the massive bulk to give chase. The moment its foreleg lifted, Yuri turned to face the dragon—

“Running is—sometimes—necessary to win!” he declared as he forcefully slashed at the stone dragon’s limb. Feeling a definite sense of cutting into something, he kicked the leg and sent his own body flying back and away.

And the moment Haring slowly lowered that leg—it fell apart with the ear-rending sound of scraping stone, bringing the dragon to its knees. Its body lurched forward, as if it had no leg to stand on, and indeed the stone that had formed its forelimb crumbled away until nearly nothing remained.

“When the body is so large, an immense load is placed on the legs supporting it. In order to move them, you have to create joints—if I can just aim for that gap, my sword won’t be repelled.”

The four legs were a complicated construction of stone, but precisely because they needed to be operational as legs, they were not simply coated in solid rock. Instead, they were a complicated arrangement that allowed for joints to form.

The moment a gap was born between stone and stone—meaning, when the leg was lifted—its sturdy armor couldn’t simply repel a blade. And if he managed to deal damage to the joint, and then its bulk was set back on the ground...the weight of the body would crumble its construction, and it would consequently fall apart from the weight of the stones that formed it.

“Your size and weight are a threat, but if you lose one of the legs supporting you, it will largely throw off that body’s balance. In such a state—your tail isn’t going to go where you’re aiming.”

And right after he said this, a destructive sound erupted behind Yuri. A lowered stone tail. Unable to hit the boy, it deviated and simply smashed the marble floor.

“Hah... You fight calmly for a rookie.”

Even with one leg crumbled, Haring's tone showed no impatience. His superiority had yet to collapse. The stone armor that enveloped him was still sturdy as ever, and his means of attack, his tail, was still in one piece. He had missed because he attacked right after his sense of gravity shifted, and if he continued attacking until he successfully corrected for this, he would soon regain his accuracy.

“Now—keep on running until you’re crushed flat!!”

He recklessly flailed his stone tail about, sending it at Yuri again, but—

“—So that’s your angle!”

Face at full smile, Yuri sprinted full speed at Haring’s dragon.

By sealing the movements of its legs, he had restricted Haring’s main attack to his tail. This was a wide-open space, and a tail that could move freely in all directions was a threat. But there was one safe zone: directly beneath the giant of stone.

Yuri slid under, slipping beneath the stone dragon’s bosom, and carefully observed the formation above him.

“If I know your attacks won’t hit, I can take careful aim.”

With the chest of a stone dragon right above him, Yuri focused all his strength—and forcefully thrust out his black sword.

A shrill metallic shriek echoed more than a few times as the blade’s tip stabbed into solid rock. It stuck fast, but...Yuri could tell from the sensation that it hadn’t pierced into a heart, or even skin.

“You fool! Even with the Human Tribe’s Armament skill, there’s no way you can pierce through my Dragonified body!!” Haring scoffed as he lowered the massive dragon to crush Yuri underneath. It would, quite literally, be no different from being crushed under a massive boulder.

Yuri had no means of opposing the stone armor; he would be smashed to death by an overwhelming difference in weight. Even if he managed to slip out from underneath, he would lose his weapon. And if he continued to fight with this disadvantage, he would eventually lose regardless.

“Get crushed, twerp!!” Haring raised an ear-splitting roar, completely convinced of his victory.

Even so, Yuri did not move. He could see the mass approaching overhead, but he showed no motion to avoid it...and yet, his eyes had by no means given up victory.

“Certainly, with my strength, I’m unable to pierce your armor, but—” Locking in on the black sword stuck in the stone dragon’s chest, Yuri clenched his fist tight. “This should work especially well on you!!”

Against the sinking bulk, Yuri lifted his fist and delivered a powerful punch to the hilt of the sword. The sword warped and swayed, filling the hall with a strangely comforting hum. As this mysterious, lingering sound gradually faded away...

Haring’s massive body was frozen in place. It was as if time itself had come to a halt; the stone dragon stood lifeless, unmoving.

A wide grin spread across Yuri’s face as he declared—

“And that—is my win!”

Right after his proclamation of victory, the stone dragon’s body soundlessly crumbled. The solid stone returned to grains of sand before losing shape and fading away. And, as the grains of sand danced through the air...the sepia world gradually regained its color.

Returning to reality, the first thing to catch Yuri’s eye was a fallen Haring, laying flat over the white marble floor.

Right after he confirmed his fallen form, the unanimous cheers of his surroundings broke the silence.

“Whooooooah!! The rookie went and beat Haring!!”

“What happened!? Did that rookie use Armament!?”

“Oi, Haring isn’t getting up! Don’t tell me he went and croaked!?”

Despite the onlookers loudly speaking over one another, Haring neither reacted nor moved. The exposed whites of his eyes were completely still. While he had been convulsing at first, even that stopped as he remained motionless

on the ground.

“H-Huh!? Is he going to be alright!?” Yuri frantically called out.

“Don’t worry about it, rookie. It’s not like he’s dead, he’s just feeling intense pain, like his body’s being ripped apart and every blood vessel’s bursting, among other terrible experiences.”

“That doesn’t sound alright!”

“Hey, don’t worry about it. Everyone goes through it once in their life. It’s supposed to be as harsh as death, and you’ll be left an empty husk with no motivation to do anything for about three days, but once you’ve recovered, you’re right back to normal.”

The onlooker spoke of it so lightly, with a chuckle here and there. Athena had said something similar, but Yuri never thought it would be that bad.

Physical death did not exist within duels. Precisely because of this, to make sure duelists didn’t fight without care for their own lives, an artificial *death* experience was introduced. It forced the duelist to comprehend first-hand that they had faced a decisive defeat. A system to give meaning to death.

“Err... Umm, I’m sorry for killing you without really understanding what would happen!”

After lowering his head to an unconscious Haring, Yuri hightailed it out of there. Whatever the case, he managed to achieve victory in his first fight.

“So I...really can properly win against other people...!”

He burst into a joyful sprint as he reflected on the feeling of true victory.

“Athena, Fram! I actually won! It was my first time fighting against anyone other than my master, but I can actually win—”

As he walked up to them waving his hand, excited to share how it felt to win his first fight—the three of them grasped him firmly by the shoulder.

“Huh? Athena, Fram, even Mirka... What’s wrong?”

“Congrats on your first win...is what I’d like to say, but...!”

“...Thankfully, you won, but you should listen when someone is warning you.”

“Yuri...when registering, you have an obligation to hear my explanation in its entirety.”

Though the three of them threatened him with cheery faces, Yuri hesitantly posed the question.

“Oh, well...since I won, can’t we just say all’s well that ends well?”

The three of them shook their heads, the smiles still plastered on their lips. What followed was an ample lecture.



Around the time the duel city was being colored by the setting sun...

Yuri and the gang had come to the southern parts of the city, commonly called the sightseeing district. As its name implied, the sightseeing district contained numerous stores geared toward the tourists who stopped by from the other continents.

Not only restaurants and stands targeted at specific tribes, the district boasted all manner of specialty stores that took on all sorts of shapes. A majority of those stopping by the duel city would find themselves quite overwhelmed by all this. Yuri had the guidance of the girls, so he had eaten a fine dinner, but—

“—Yes! Next question!”

Athena, sitting across the table, mercilessly pointed a finger at Yuri. “Apart from deploying a Field, what can a duelist’s Proof do!?”

“Yes! It serves as a duelist’s identification, but it can also record and stream duels and manage fight money and other finances. It has communication and map features restricted to the city, and it lets you see other peoples’ duels and view the city bulletin board.”

“Correct! Full marks from me!”

Every time Yuri energetically answered a question, Athena would lean in and ruffle up his hair. She had gone through them all now, and Fram and Mirka breathed sighs of relief.

“That’s good... I would seriously have to hold my head if it turned out you

were as hopeless as Athena,” noted Fram.

“Unlike Athena, you pick things up fast,” Mirka mercilessly joined in.

“Why are you two ganging up on me!?”

“Because you forgot everything by day two, and were crying, lost and alone.”

“You forgot how to use your Proof’s communication feature, and in the end, we had to search all over for you...”

“I’m fine now! I remember everything now!!” Athena smacked the table as if to insinuate this was all completely uncalled for.

“But little Yuri,” Mirka said, turning the conversation back to him, “You really do have to listen to the explanations, okay? It turned out fine since there were a lot of people around, but we would have some real trouble if you’d gotten into a contractual duel.”

“A contractual duel is a duel where you decide on the ramifications of the outcome beforehand, right?”

“Yes, yes. The usual term of ‘the loser must obey the victor’ is a tacit understanding, but you can make a more official agreement by exchanging a contract,” she explained before letting out a deep sigh. “If you hold a contractual duel, the loser must unconditionally abide by the details of the contract. There are quite a few duelists who’ll misuse this, tricking newbies who don’t know a thing. It really is troublesome.”

Eyebrows bent angrily, Athena puffed out her cheeks. “Right, right! Haring was doing something like that before!”

But, hearing that, Yuri tilted his head. “Yeaah...he didn’t seem like that much of a bad guy to me...?”

“Haring aside, just know it can happen, and be careful. I get that you like fighting, but listen to the warnings of your predecessors.”

“Erk... Sorry...”

Yuri’s body curled up under Fram’s firm rebuke.

Mirka lightly clapped her hands together.

"Yes, yes. That should be everything, so how about we call it a wrap? We'll be returning to our duelist housing, but what inn did you book, Yuri?"

"Me? I didn't book an inn."

Yuri tilted his head, and Mirka tilted hers back.

"Oh...then where do you plan on staying?"

"I was thinking I'd camp out for a while. The ferry pretty much emptied my pockets, and I had to camp to get to it anyway. My master told me I have to live strong no matter where I find myself!"

Yuri spoke with high spirits, but Mirka drew her hands closer to her face with each passing word.

"Yuri...you're not allowed to camp outside in the duel city..."

"You can't!? But camping is the greatest way to spend time and doesn't cost a coin!"

"You're the first human I've met to sing such praise of camping," Fram tiredly noted.

Athena added, "Yuri, you're feral in the strangest places..."

While the two of them exchanged a sigh, Mirka held her head and groaned. "Mnnn... But it will be hard to book a Human Tribe inn on such short notice..."

"Athena, you know a lot of people. Do you know anyone who works at an inn?"

"Yeah...at this point, it will be hard for even the people I know."

"I'm sorry, this is all because of my lack of planning..."

A dark atmosphere loomed as the four of them hung their heads. All of a sudden, Mirka's face snapped up.

"No...we do have one surefire option!"

"We do!? Do you know someone who'll—" Yuri tried to ask, but he was cut off as Mirka grasped him by the shoulders.

"Yuri...you can just stay with me!!" she proposed from a drooling mouth.



Duel City Babel, the circular artificially-made continent, was largely divided into four districts.

The southern sightseeing district was always flourishing with tourists and duelists; it was always the district that saw the most people. While the northern artisanal district wasn't visited as often, it contained rows of weapon and armor shops geared toward duelists. A great many merchants opened specialty shops there to make sure the fighters were always in perfect condition.

The western purgatory district was a special zone even within the duel city, closely packed with artificially-made dungeons. Here, duelists could test their skills against magical creatures and collect materials as a source of income.

And the remaining eastern district was the residential district where the duelists lived. It was divided into eight blocks, separated by tribe, with each block given scrupulous consideration in creating an environment suited to its specific tribe.

Within it, the Human Tribe block was the only one to allow other tribes to take up residence.

Despite differences in appearance, the eight tribes were humanoid without exception, and in the Human Tribe block, which essentially had all the necessary facilities as long as one had hands and feet, there were generally no major drawbacks to anyone's livelihood. As the rent was cheaper than the tribe-specific blocks, there were those of other tribes who found it preferable.

Yuri and the others had gathered in a room in an apartment complex in that Human Tribe block.

"Urgh... Why am I tied up...!"

The landlord, Mirka, bawled as she was tied to the bed. Fram looked at her with nothing but coldness in her eyes.

"It's for Yuri's safety. There's no telling what you'll do to him while he's asleep."

"Shouldn't it be the opposite!? You should tie Yuri up so he doesn't do

anything crazy!"

"Yuri won't do that!" Athena protested.

"But what if I want him to?!"

Watching the bed grate as Mirka thrashed back and forth, Fram quietly closed the door to the bedroom.

"Yuri. We brought our futons over. Let's sleep in the living room."

"Umm... I can't help but feel guilty just abandoning Mirka like that..."

"It's fine, perfectly fine! That's generally how you deal with that girl!" Athena lightly stated as she flopped down onto the futon laid out over the floor.

"Come to think of it, the two of you live in the same building as her, right?"

"Mirka bought up an abandoned duelist lodging facility, and we ended up here somehow or another."

"...Wait, she bought the entire building?"

"Right, right. We were surprised, too, but Mirka does strange things on a regular basis."

"There's no doubt some screw's gone loose." Fram plainly stated.

"You're both merciless toward your landlord..."

"I am grateful. She does look after us regularly," Fram said with a glance at the bedroom. She would never say it to her face, but she did place some trust in her.

"Even so, you sure were strong back there, Yuri! It takes some nerve to pick a fight with Haring, but you went and won just like that! You took me by surprise!"

"I have to agree. I was sure you would lose."

The result of a duel was not decided solely by strength and talent, but by experience, knowledge, and trial and error as well. This city was the only place in the world where fighting other tribes was permitted, making it inevitable that all newcomers shared a fatal lack of experience. It was nigh impossible to win against seasoned opponents. In fact, in all duels, more often than not the more

experienced fighter came out the victor rather than the stronger one.

“And...I never thought you would win that way.” added Fram.

“Err, did I do something wrong?”

“No, I’m impressed. You won with pure technique.”

When it was spelled out, what Yuri had done seemed exceedingly simple. By punching the sword stuck in Haring’s chest, he used the immense vibrations and shock to forcefully stop his heart. As a result, Haring was visited by *death*, but to execute that attack required complicated and fine-tuned technique.

“You realized that your opponent was wearing solid armor that would block a slash but amplify a vibration. You effectively used this information to devise a strategy against your opponent. You have both the physical capabilities and accurate sword techniques to make it possible... That isn’t the sort of thing you learn overnight, and it’s not nearly as easy as it sounds.”

But his victory wasn’t only technical. He had led Haring by making it look like he was running away; he had restricted attacks to his tail by destroying a leg; and by getting under him, he had made it so the only viable attack for Haring was to crush him with the dragon’s massive body—not to mention using the opponent’s weight to heighten the impact of his own blow. In his control of the match, Yuri had far transcended the realm of a newcomer.

“If I’m remembering right, you had a fighting master, right?” asked Athena.

“Yes! I learned all sorts of...things about fighting...under my master...” The moment his master came up, Yuri’s eyes gradually lost their glimmer. “My master was a really harsh person...!”

“Ah! Yuri’s eyes went cloudy for the first time!”

And as his shoulders trembled, Fram cocked her head as if she had caught on to something.

“I heard the name at the desk. Reilly Malbork. Did he used to be a duelist? I think I’ve heard that name somewhere before...”

“Mnn, I’m pretty sure I—Aah!!”

Athena’s ears pricked up as she lifted her face. “That person was on the same

team as my brother ten years ago!!”

“Now that you mention it...the name might have come out in conversation a few times.”

“Yep, yep! He was a mix-blood but was still really strong!” Perhaps recalling the stories she heard from her brother, Athena began to prattle on with a gleam in her eyes. “If a Human Tribe member is mix-blood, they can’t even use their Armament Tribe Skill, but he was an amazing person who continued to win with sheer technique and tactics! My brother was always talking about him!!”

Armament, Release, Secret Art, Hyper Dash, Dragonification, Divine Might, Familiar, Creation. These tribal skills were abilities that could completely change the outcome of a duel.

The attributes of the eight tribes greatly differed from one another, and using the special traits of one’s tribe—at the right place and the right time—could immediately reverse the flow of the match. It was difficult to win without using tribal skills.

As an experienced duelist, Fram couldn’t help but display a sliver of surprise. “If your brother praised him, he must really be amazing.”

“My master is incredible! It wasn’t just swordplay... The appropriate measures to take against each tribe, how to lead an opponent’s train of thought, how to restrict their movement! There were loads of other things too—”

“Yes, yes, you already proved how amazing your master is just from how you fought. But if you get too excited, you won’t be able to sleep.”

Seeing that Yuri was getting eager again, Fram gently patted him on the head. “You really love dueling, don’t you, Yuri?”

“Rather, you’re about as enthusiastic as me!” Athena exclaimed.

“Yes! I really am!” Yuri cheerfully replied. “Once I came to the duel city, I dreamt of fighting every hour of the day!”

“I totally get you! But it’s important to sleep and rest your body!”

“You heard her. Well then, let’s sleep for tomorrow.” After a good stretch, Fram pulled the string on the magic lighting device and extinguished its glow

from the room.

As the moonlight streamed in through the window, Yuri abruptly asked, “Come to think of it, why did the two of you choose to become duelists?”

“Mnn... It just sorta happened for me. My brother was a duelist, see. I’d watched him since I was a little kid, and I thought it looked interesting!”

“For me, it was simply because the earnings were good. I struggled to earn money at first, but now my name has spread, and I have a stable income through my fight money.”

“Hmm... So there are all sorts of reasons to duel,” Yuri muttered as he stared at the ceiling.

This time, Athena asked back. “What about you, Yuri? Why did you decide to be a duelist?”

“Umm, I don’t really have any major reason,” he said, smiling as he explained why he set off on his path. “Winning fights is really fun.”

“Hmmmm...? That’s it?”

“Yep, that’s it! It’s fun to win, and really irritating to lose! That’s why I do my best to win. I’ll do anything to get stronger.”

From an early age, Yuri had learned all sorts of techniques and strategies under his master. He wasn’t lying when he said he had done everything he could.

“And that’s why—I won’t lose to you two either!”

He laughed innocently as he held out his fist, causing Athena and Fram to laugh along.

“Hmmm! You really are a good kid, Yuri!!”

“Right. That desire to win is an important trait for a duelist.”

“Yes, thank you!”

“You’ll definitely become a fine duelist, your Big Sis is rooting for you!”

“I’m looking forward to seeing what sort of duelist you’ll become.”

And Yuri replied proudly, exuberantly, “Yes! I’ll do my best!”

Like that, night fell on Yuri’s first day in the duel city.

Chapter 2

The duel city was constantly enveloped in some ruckus or another. Even at night, there was always some kind of activity, and because of this, the lights in the southern sightseeing and northern artisan districts never went out, and the silence of night was often broken by the clash of steel.

Despite this, as a courtesy, the eastern residential district maintained a relative quiet, and the block for the human tribe was the furthest from the noise.

“Uwaaaaaaaaah! I overslept!!”

Not that this mattered to Athena, whose scream resounded far and wide across the sleepy townscape.

As the noise pierced her ears, Fram irksomely rubbed her sleepy eyes.

“What’s wrong... What are you shouting for?”

“Wake up, wake up, Fram! I have work today!”

“I’m off duty. You can go on your own. You’re a big girl...”

“Get out of bed! I don’t want to be alone when my brother gets angry at me!”

Athena forcefully yanked away the cover Fram pulled over her head.

It wasn’t long before Yuri frantically stamped in to see what the commotion was.

“Wh-What happened!? I heard a really loud scream!”

“I have to go to—wait, Yuri, you went somewhere?”

“Me? Yes. I make it a habit to move my body every morning.”

At some point, Yuri had changed out of his travel clothes into light training equipment. He also had a towel wrapped around his neck.

With an absentminded glance at his attire, Athena snapped back to her senses.

“You went out alone!? You didn’t get lost without Big Sis’s help!?”

“Ah, no, I was perfectly fine. I had Ms. Mirka tag along.”

“Yuri, going out alone with Mirka is suicidal!”

“Hey Athena. How about you say that somewhere I can’t hear you?”

Popping her head out from behind Yuri, Mirka casually picked up a cup and began pouring coffee from the enchanted boiling pot.

“So Athena, why were you screaming, my dear?”

“I have work today! Today’s the day my brother gets back from restocking!!” she curtly answered while hurriedly readying herself.

The word “work” made Yuri tilt his head.

“Err, by work, do you mean a duel?”

“No, no. The work Athena is talking about is an obligation in the dueling city. Yuri, do you remember the creed of Babel?”

“Yes. It was, ‘Let’s all enjoy our fights,’ right?”

“Yes, yes. In order to preserve that ideal, duelists are tasked with two obligations.” Mirka slowly lifted two fingers to bolster her explanation. “First, they have to duel at least five times per month. This stands to reason, being a duelist and all.”

“Yeah, you can’t really call yourself a duelist if you don’t duel.”

“And the second is to maintain public order and take care of other necessary work so that everyone can have fun fighting together. This is an indispensable duty. By entrusting this to the duelists, we maintain a duel city that everyone can enjoy.”

Non-duelists rarely ever left their own continent. While there were those who aimed to rake in a profit setting up shop in the duel city, that still left an overwhelming shortage of hands. Even if Babel was far smaller than the other continents, it required a considerable amount of manpower to maintain.

So to ensure an environment that everyone could “enjoy,” the duelists were put to work and taught that they were the ones who built and maintained their

own utopia.

By the time Yuri's thoughts had reached that point, a sour look had formed on his face.

"I don't have much confidence in anything apart from fighting..."

"Yeaah, but labor is an obligation. Even the popular ones who earn a good share of fight money and the ones with sponsors from the other continents still work, more or less." Mirka mercilessly informed him.

"What sort of work do you think I can do...?" he cautiously asked.

"Hmm... Well what exactly can you do?"

"I can survive anywhere with one knife!"

"A fine survival skill. Then a hunting or harvesting job in the purgatory district might work, but the earnings are good, so the job market is harsh..."

"I'm confident in my strength and stamina!"

"Stevedoring and other stamina-intensive jobs are usually filled by beastmen and dragon-kin. Demons and spirits dominate enchanting, angels have a foothold in medicine and therapy, and dwarves have a monopoly on mechanical jobs."

"...So what do I do if I can't find a job?"

"The town center will issue appropriate work to make sure you can fulfill your obligation, but neither your income nor your livelihood will be stable, and you'll spend each day anxious for what's to come."

"I'd really like to avoid that...!"

Yuri was a bit dim on the general jobs of the world. He had lived on the human continent, on one of its furthest outskirts, and rarely had the chance to interact with anyone apart from his master. It was quite a high hurdle to suddenly put him to work.

While he contemplated this unanticipated danger to his life as a duelist, Athena, who had stood a sleepy-eyed Fram on her feet, called out.

"Ah, then how about you work in my brother's shop?"

“Your brother owns a shop?”

“Yeah, yeah! It’s a formal café, but there are lots of odd jobs to do apart from serving customers and cooking. We occasionally go to the purgatory district to pick ingredients too. With so much to do, he might have a job for you!”

“But I can’t ask you to do so much for me...”

“It’s fine, perfectly fine! I’m pretty sure your master is my brother’s friend, and he’ll be delighted to hear about him!”

“But still... Hmm...?”

Yuri was undeniably grateful for the proposal, but the girls had shown him around, offered him a place to stay, and at this point he mulled over whether he could with clear conscience ask them to take care of anything else for him.

Perhaps reading his mind, Athena giggled.

“...At our shop, you can duel as a job.”

“Please let me do it!”

“Yay! I’ll be working with Yuri!”

“...Yuri, you’re pretty easy to convince when it comes to duels,” Mirka sighed as she watched the two of them link arms and celebrate.

To Yuri, fighting far outweighed any anxiety he had about work. “I’ll do my best in work and duel!” he declared while enthusiastically clenching his fist.



The sightseeing district was the most prosperous locale of the duel city. Night or day, there was no scarcity of customers, and some shop somewhere would always be open.

In a corner of this district was a café decorated with a sign that read “Argent.”

After inspecting its old-style exterior, Yuri turned to Athena and asked, “Your brother is a really strong person, isn’t he?”

“Yep, yep! He’s stronger than me, and his rank is Adamant! Second from the top!”

“I get to meet someone that strong!?”

“He is strong, but Athena’s brother is also famous for another reason. In the Babel Roulette ten years ago, his team lasted into the top eight, and he put up a good fight against an Administrator,” said Fram.

“Ten years ago... Then maybe I saw him when I was watching my master’s duel.”

“Perhaps. Whatever the case, I do think you’ll be able to get some substantial information out of him.”

After Fram said that, Athena, at the lead, forcefully threw open the door.

“Heeey, Eli! I’m sorry for being late!”

Inside, a single man appeared from the kitchen.

“...Athena. How many times must I tell you? Enter the shop from the back door.”

His tone was sharp and cold as a blade. Long, flowing silver hair and pointed fox ears. A handsomely arranged face and a slender body.



His scathing glare pierced Athena as she stood in the doorway.

“And to repeat myself again, open the door gently. You’re going to break it.”

“Yes sir! Sorry sir!”

“An enthusiastic apology, but how about you show some effort to improve?”

He painstakingly closed his eyes as he exchanged a back and forth with Athena.

Upon seeing him, Yuri’s eyes opened wide. He recalled a tale, a story of the only friend his master ever spoke of. A master who would otherwise never tell old tales.

“Mr. Elias... You’re my master’s dear friend, Mr. Elias, aren’t you!?”

As Yuri’s eyes sparkled in excitement, Elias slowly turned toward him.

“Athena, who is this boy?”

“Well, you know! He’s Yuri!”

“Aizberg, her description is strikingly lacking. Please supplement.”

“He’s a duelist who only just registered yesterday, and Athena took a liking to him.”

“I see. I understand.”

After calmly nodding at Fram, Elias turned back to Athena.

“Athena, put him back where you found him.”

“Yuri isn’t a stray dog!”

“You’ve always had a habit of picking up strange things, but nabbing a human will get you arrested.”

“No way! Yuri is going to be my little brother!”

“I get it. As you are the youngest child, I understand why you always wanted a younger sibling, but if you want to make this boy your younger brother, please understand there is a proper process to follow. First, you need to discuss the matter with our parents, go through the adoption proceedings, and—”

“Would the Crossford siblings please get the conversation back on track? If we get sidetracked anymore, the shop will open late,” Fram interrupted, fed up with the exchange, before explaining Yuri’s identity again.

“This child says his master is Reilly Malbork. Does that ring any bells?”

The moment he heard the name, Elias turned to Yuri in surprise.

“Boy, is it true that Reilly’s your master?”

“Yes! My amazing master!”

Elias furrowed his brow and narrowed his eyes. And then he smiled.

“I see... So that’s the path that Reilly chose.” he quietly muttered, before calmly ordering Athena to get to work. “Athena, change and get ready. I will talk with the boy.”

“Right on it! Then Fram, you change too, and let’s get to work!”

“I just tagged along, I don’t have a shift today...”

“Aizberg, if you work, I will offer a free serving of today’s dessert.”

“...What’s the menu?”

“Milk agar pudding. With seasonal fruit and sauce.”

“You’d better have enough for seconds.”

“You will get an extra serving of fruit.”

Once the terms were settled, Athena and Fram disappeared into the back of the shop.

“Boy, please tell me a bit about Reilly. Are you alright with coffee?”

“Yes, by all means! Thank you so very much!”

“There is no need to be so formal. Especially when you’re that person’s disciple.” Elias heartily nodded and began grinding the beans to brew coffee. He only spoke again once he had presented Yuri with a steaming cup. “And so...is Reilly doing well?”

“Yes! Very...to a troublesome degree, I’d say...”

“By your reaction, I’d say nothing has changed. Just as the moniker, the Iron-

blood, implied, Reilly was always the sort to never accept compromise, to always carry everything to its very limit.” Elias spoke as if speaking of an old friend.

Seeing the nostalgia in his eyes, Yuri decided to ask about his own master.

“Mr. Elias, how long did you know my master?”

“We only knew one another for a few years at most, but we registered around the same time, so I guess we shared a sense of kinship. We pushed one another to new heights, and ten years ago, we took part in the Babel Roulette on the same team.”

Yuri inadvertently leaned in. “Right, the Babel Roulette! I was there, I saw it when I was still a kid!”

“Hmm. Does that mean you came ten years later to take part in the next one?”

“No, I was just a kid, so I don’t even really remember what it was!”

“...I see. Certainly, a child would only recognize that the duelists were in a festive mood. I can’t blame you for not knowing the specifics.” With a wry smile, Elias offered an explanation. “The Babel Roulette is a team battle that takes place once every decade.”

“A team battle... But duels are one-on-one, aren’t they?”

“That’s right. But while the Babel Roulette is taking place, a special team-battle format is added.” Elias took a swig of his own coffee. “The duels we usually fight in are one-on-one battles, no one is allowed to interfere in any way. But during the event period, members of your team are able to freely participate in your duels.”

“By freely, does that mean that one person can fight multiple opponents?”

“Apart from that, they can fight in duos or trios. Eight is the maximum for a team, and large battles of eight against eight do break out at times. Those are the festivities I spoke of.”

“So many duelists can fight at once...!?”

“Indeed they can. You have to be mindful of allies you usually wouldn’t worry

about, and implement tactics you couldn't pull off alone. Purposely using small teams is also a valid strategy."

"Just listening is getting me pumped up!"

"Your excitement is not misplaced. My own heart was dancing when I took part ten years ago." Not a duelist for nothing, Elias's expression softened when he spoke about duels.

"But the greatest event of the Babel Roulette—is the chance to fight the Administrators."

Elias brought up a name known to all. The eight tribes of the world were unified and controlled by a certain group of people who each boasted overwhelming power, the transcendent beings tasked with supervising the new order. They were called Administrators, the eight entities that stood at the summit of each tribe.

"To win against the Administrators, who have been crowned as the strongest of each race... That is the greatest honor for any duelist."

In Elias's words, Yuri could see the spirit of a man aiming for the summit of battle. He found himself nodding again and again.

"I totally get it! A duelist really should set their sights on the top, right!?"

"Hmm, when I talk to my comrades on these matters, they call me a 'battle maniac.'"

"I'm a battle maniac too!"

"I see. Then I feel you wouldn't be too interested in the reward that comes after beating the Administrators."

"A reward... Do they give out a boatload of money, or something?"

"No, the reward is to have a wish granted by the creator," Elias plainly stated as he glanced out the window at the tower that reached to the heavens. "At the very top of Babel Tower, the symbol of the city, lives the creator who built this world. And those who defeat the Administrators are allowed to set foot on the tower's top floor. The creator shall grant any wish to honor your achievements."

Even if it was a wish that would bend the very fabric of the world, the wish would be granted. Duelists set their sights on the heavens, to make what otherwise could never be.

“When you really get down to it, I could count the number of duelists who’ve defeated the Administrators on one hand. While the reward definitely exists, it’s half a rumor, and quite close to an urban legend. Therefore, I value a duelist’s pride over such nonsense.”

Elias’s words spurred something in Yuri, and he decided to speak his own mind.

“I’m a similar story myself. Ten years ago...I saw my master’s battle with the Administrator and wanted to have a battle like that one day. That’s why I became a duelist.”

The words were so natural to Yuri, he could say them as if they held no weight at all. But they were words that caused Elias to narrow his eyes.

“That duel moved your heart?”

“Err... It did. Why do you ask?”

“...I mean no harm to you, boy, but it feels rather strange to hear that. If you were there, watching the duel, you should remember how the spectators reacted.”

Yuri reflected on an old memory... The Human Tribe Administrator Velt Helrik who continued to stand completely unperturbed. The Iron-blood Reilly Malbork who continued to face him, wounded all over.

As they watched the spectacle, the spectators’ vilification was endless.

“You think we want to see such a boring battle?”

“Just stay down already, weakling.”

“Quit it with your pointless struggle; give up and end this farce already.”

Such heartless words flew about the hall. Yuri knew why. He knew all too well.

“Boy, do you know what it means to be a mix-blood?”

“...Yes. My master told me too many times to forget.”

Among the eight tribes, the Human Tribe was the only one able to have children with other races. The child born from this union was a mix-blood and could exhibit traits of the non-human tribe. They looked no different from humans, but they inherited some special foreign properties.

However, to duelists, mix-blood carried a different meaning.

“A mix-blood is the weakest thing a duelist can be... That’s what I was told.”

“That’s right. Not only are a mix-blood’s tribal traits a far cry from the original, they cannot even use the Human Tribe’s Armament Skill.”

In duels, the Human Tribe would wield equipment compatible with their Armament Tribe Skill. These items were embedded with special gemstones, which a human could pour mana into to draw out various abilities, raising physical prowess and magic capabilities, among other things. This was a powerful Tribe Skill that allowed them to compete with the other tribes.

However, the gemstones used for Armament would only accept the mana of a pure-blood human. A mix-blood whose magic was tainted with the blood of other bloodlines couldn’t use the skill—and a Human Tribe member who couldn’t use Armament was, on all fronts, weaker than every other tribe.

“A mix-blood’s physical capabilities and mana level are equal to the rest of the Human Tribe. However, their heritage prevents them from using Armament, and the skill gained by virtue of being a mix-blood is too weak to compete. They are an entity that falls short of not only the other races, but even their kin.”

That was why duelists would speak of mix-blood as synonymous with weakest.

“Mr. Elias... Do you also think of mix-blood duelists as weak?”

“Naturally. In a duel, Tribe Skills are an absolute advantage. The Human Tribe’s Armament is no different, and without it, a mix-blood has no hopes of moving up,” he said, but for some reason his expression softened. “But...Reilly, Reilly was different. Maximizing technique, researching the weaknesses of each tribe, training the physical body to its absolute limit. With a heart that would never fold, Reilly climbed into the top rankings despite being a mix-blood.”

Reilly had continued pressing forward, never yielding to innate adversity. That

was precisely why Elias could speak straight from the heart.

“After the duel with the Administrator, Reilly left the city without a word...but I’m proud to think of Reilly Malbork as a dear friend and fellow duelist.”

Yuri quietly took in Elias’s words.

“You have a great master. Hold your head high.”

“Yes. I owe my life to my master.” Hearing his dear teacher praised, Yuri sincerely returned Elias’s smile. “That being the case, I want to join in on the Babel Roulette! When does it begin!?”

“Calm down, boy. The Babel Roulette opens once every ten years. One of the Administrators should make the declaration soon. Until then, concentrate on raising your rank.”

“Err, by rank, you mean this Proof thing, right?”

Yuri looked at the bluish-gray Iron gemstone embedded in the bracelet on his arm.

“Only Beryl and higher can participate. Raise the rank of your Proof to be accepted as a first-rate duelist.”

Yuri gazed at his Proof and gripped his fist.

“Got it! I’ll hurry up and become first rate!”

“That’s the spirit. Incidentally, how did you come to know Reilly?”

“Yes, well, I entered the waiting room when Mr. Velt and Master were having a talk, and then—”

As the conversation over a shared friend livened, the door in the back opened, and Athena pranced her way out.

“Hey, Elias! We finished changing!”

“I’m ready for the dessert.”

The two of them waved their skirts. Long, black one-piece dresses with frilled, pure white aprons. Athena wore a headdress made for her ears while Fram wore a rather large maid cap. With one wearing a ribbon over her chest and the other a tie, there was a peculiar gap between them.

“Umm... Why are they dressed like that?” Yuri asked.

Elias promptly replied. “It’s the shop uniform.”

“Are they going to serve customers like that?”

“No. Athena not only gets orders wrong, she also forgets them entirely. And, as a member of the Spirit Tribe, Aizberg gets extremely fatigued from moving around. So neither of them are fit to serve customers whatsoever.”

“Then why did they have to change?”

Elias crossed his arms as he answered with a completely straight face. “To attract customers, and as a service to our patrons.”

Completely irrelevant to their conversation, Athena twirled toward them as if she had only just remembered.

“Ah, that’s right, Eli! Yuri doesn’t have a job yet, so can he work here?”

“Alright, get the boy into the uniform.”

“You want me to wear that? Are you insane!?”

“You’ll be fine,” Fram chimed in. “Yuri, you can definitely pull off women’s clothing.”

“I don’t want to!”

Seeing Yuri hectically shaking his head, Elias let out a slight sigh.

“Then just watch for today. I’ll put in a new order for a male uniform.”

“Are there people who make clothes like that in the duel city...?”

“All the uniforms in this shop were hand-made by Mirka Stein.”

“My apologies. I’m starting to understand how these things work...”

While Yuri dejectedly hung his head, Athena and Fram were on their way out of the store.

“C’mon now!” shouted Athena, “If you’re going to watch, you need to come with us!”

“What exactly am I supposed to watch?”

“You’ll know when you see it. It won’t be a bad deal for you,” said Fram.

And, pulled by both their hands, Yuri was dragged out of the shop.

The streets were already as lively as any, and all races walked down the sightseeing district’s main street. After taking her position—Athena lifted her weapon, her giant straight sword, over her shoulder.

“Righty-ho Fram, let’s get to work!”

“I’ll put in some moderate effort, so the onus is on you.”

“Okay! Leave it to Big Sis!!”

Athena gazed at the passing people—



“—Release.”

After a quiet murmur, the change came. Red seeped into her turquoise eyes. Nine silver tails spread wide out behind her like a lotus. This was Release, the tribal skill of the Beast Tribe.

And right after she took a swing with her large sword, a white flame danced through the air, tracing the lines her blade had drawn.

“Righty-ho—let’s kick things off with a big one!”

With a bouncy tone, Athena shot a white inferno into the air. The boom it made as it burst resounded through the streets, causing passersby to look to the sky, wondering what had just happened.

She fired off a few more infernal fireworks before stabbing her straight sword into the ground.

“Come one, come all! Café Argent is open for business! We have food for all tribes! Lunch and dinner, perfect for an afternoon break!”

Declaring the shop’s opening, Athena raised her voice even higher, her wide grin filled with confidence.

“And that’s not all—if any of you duelists can defeat either one of us, you can eat all you want for free! Think you can do it? Then you’ve come to the right place!!”

At her strong proclamation, an energy suddenly spread across the pedestrian traffic. A number of duelists stepped out from the crowd.

“Alright! I’m not gonna lose today, Athena missy!!”

“Oh, Mr. Vander! Is your shop going to be alright without you?”

The dwarven man named Vander lifted up a poleaxe with a hearty laugh. “I can’t get my head in the game without a match and a meal!”

Curiously watching this exchange, a passing angel came to a stop.

“Hmm... So it’s free if you win? Are you going to fight too, Madam Spirit?”

“Yes. But if you lose, not only will I take your rate, you’ll also have to place an order at the shop. Do you mind?”

"I see, so that's the price of the match. That's not much of a problem, but... I'm going at it to win, don't cry if you lose."

Confronting the Angel Tribe man, Fram's lips curled into an elegant smile. "Of course. You will be the one crying, after all."

Yes, confronting their challengers, they both smiled fearlessly—holding their left arms with their Proofs high to the heavens. The duels commenced. A blinding flash came from their bracelets as they and the challengers were transferred to the Field.

While the surrounding rubberneckers cheered, Yuri looked on incredulously.

"This is the service our humble shop offers, boy."

"Err... You mean a free meal if you can win a duel?"

"That's right. Those uniforms draw a lot of attention on the main street, so they're a good fit for pulling in customers."

"I-I see... But is the shop going to be financially stable like that?"

"Naturally. Those two are strong enough for me to acknowledge them."

An Adamant Rank who had once confronted an Administrator, Elias recognized their strength.

Following his line of sight, Yuri stared at the duels.

"— Ah, for crying out loud! If you're not going to attack, I'll have to do things my way!!" Athena shouted, her sword clad in white flames.

She swung around the weapon taller than she was with one hand as she leaped from place to place with the lightest of steps. At a glance, her movements seemed crude and directionless, but her sword strokes showed a clear and accurate grasp of her opponent's movements.

It was no simple feat to block the power of a giant sword swung with such ease, and while her opponent had managed to put up a defense against her relentless offense, he was clearly being cornered.

But, more than anything, it was the power of her white flames that caught Yuri's eyes.

“Wow... Are those white flames an attribute of the Beast Tribe?”

“Correct, but that girl is a little special. Under normal circumstances, the Beast Tribe’s skill is exceedingly simple: all it does is greatly boost our already high physical capabilities.”

The Beast Tribe’s Release Skill often consisted of pure physical strengthening. They were unable to produce fire and ice like the Spirit Tribe; they were unable to turn into dragons that breathed fire and ice like the Dragon Tribe—however, there were times when this physical augmentation reached ungodly heights.

Feet graced with speeds the eye could never hope to follow; fists that pulverized everything that stood before them; eyes that saw with such clarity they could look into the future. This was the strength of the Beast Tribe, and their strongest trump card.

That being said, Athena’s white flame seemed to be something else entirely.

“The Beast Tribe’s Release is a sacred art that draws upon the strength of one’s ancestors. The power that girl is drawing upon...harkens back to the ancient days of the Great Solar Fox, a monster fox who embodied the power of the sun itself.”

A flame that blazed as brilliantly as the sun. Athena, who beamed in all her glory within it, truly did deserve to be called a sun of her own.

“It is rare for the Beast Tribe to draw out those sorts of powers, and these exceptions are more difficult to deal with the more experienced one is at fighting the Beast Tribe. Even if you do grow accustomed to fending off the white flames—it is not so easy to surpass the girl’s talent for battle.”

Athena manipulated her flames as if they were her own limbs, using them to cut off her opponent’s vision to inhibit his attacks, positioning herself with skillful swordsmanship, and completely controlling the flow of battle.

A God-given talent that understood battle by wild intuition.

“If you keep blocking—have a hot one!!”

With that, Athena took a conspicuously large swing with her large sword. The white flames enveloping her blazed up to massive proportions. They swelled

and swallowed up her opponent as a massive wave. With their field of vision completely cut off, Athena delivered a rending blow.

Understanding her own abilities on instinct, she fought while fully utilizing her power. But while Yuri was entranced by the battle, a large cheer rose from elsewhere.

“It does seem like Aizberg has settled her battle as well.”

When he looked her way, Fram was confronting the Angel Tribe man. She had not moved a single step from her initial position. She had suppressed her opponent so one-sidedly she had no need to move.

“...See? You really are the one crying.”

Her indifferent tone never crumbling, Fram elegantly brandished the gauntlet encasing her right hand.

“—Ice Prison.”

Hail danced around her foe with a will of its own.

Creation, the Spirit Tribe’s skill. Its power allowed the user to create individualized magics in line with their own elemental attribute. A power permitted only to the Spirit Tribe, whose bodies were comprised of vast wells of magical energy.

Faced with such power, her opponent was frozen solid in a torrent of hail.

“That’s amazing! A perfect victory for Fram!”

“Hmm, you have good eyes, boy.”

In the duel he’d missed seeing, Fram had won with complete control over the enemy from start to finish.

“One hit from her magic, and the opponent can’t avoid taking lethal damage. Even if her magic is avoided, Aizberg has the next move ready. Her control of a match and her view of the big picture is a cut above the rest.”

Numerous clumps of ice were embedded in the pavement. Those thick ice shards restricted her opponent’s evasive actions, and even if he were to weave his way through them, Fram would use that very opportunity to hammer in a

far more powerful magic.

Not only did the ice restrict enemy movements, it prevented any attack from reaching Fram, stealing away any opportunity to get a hit in on her. She had intentionally created a perfect scenario where the opponent could neither attack nor avoid. Her calculated use of magic controlled her foe until she could reliably take him out.

It was not that her pure output was anything extraordinary, it was that she had full knowledge of her own powers and a deep understanding of what influence they would have on her enemy.

And—right before ice shards could impale her foe, the colors returned to her. The Field was dispelled, the duel's victor was determined.

“Huh... She didn’t have to land the last blow?”

“The angel had no chance of winning if things continued. There is no physical death in a duel, but being slain is followed by excruciating pain. Additionally, if a match is settled in death, the amount of rate exchanged increases. What I’m trying to say is that the man surrendered.”

Hearing those words, Yuri’s expression clouded ever so slightly.

“You never know... You should still fight to the end.”

“That spirit is important for a duelist, but not knowing when to give up is simply foolish. To a duelist, his rate is akin to his life. It’s important to know when to pull out.”

During their exchange, Athena also announced the end of her duel. The moment she and her foe were both back in color, she happily bounced up and down.

“Yaaay! I win!!”

“Waaaah! Another loss for the record!!”

“Hmhmm! You’d better not learn your lesson! Please come again!”

“Course I will! Athena missy, when’s your next shift!?”

“No idea!!”

“Saw that coming! I’ll ask your boss over my meal!!”

“Woohoo! Thank you for your service!”

Athena saw him off with a wave of her hand and her tail, and the dwarf man headed into the store.

“Yes! Then, will the next challenger please step up! I’ll take on as many as I have to, so keep ‘em coming!”

As Athena energetically raised her voice, an overwhelming cheer rose with her.

“Thank you, thank you! I’ll take you on one at a time, why don’t you have a good meal while you wait!!? Get the okay from the shop-keeper, and you can jump right to the front of the line!!”

Those who wished to fight formed a line as if they were accustomed to all this. A few of them went into the store to book a seat.

“So this is what she meant when she said I could duel for work.”

“It’s a duelist’s way of advertising. This is how Athena and Aizberg piled up enough duels to climb to Silver. They’ve gained considerable strength in the process.”

Without relying on talent, they had gained unshakable strength simply by stacking up countless matches each day. Yuri quietly gazed at them.

“And they were far more suited for this than working in the shop.”

“So they’re no good at customer service...”

“I was honestly holding my head when those girls broke around half of the tableware I owned.”

Just as Elias turned to him with bitter cynicism, Fram lazily trudged her way up.

“Elias. I worked, give me dessert.”

“Wait, you only fought a single battle.”

“I’m off-duty. You know the drill. If a child works hard, you must give them a reward.”

“I don’t know any four-hundred-year-old children. If you don’t get in there, Athena won’t be able to handle them all.”

“Then just put Yuri up to it.”

Yuri abruptly snapped toward her at the sudden mention of his name.

“You mean me?”

“You’ve been restless this whole time. You want to duel, don’t you?”

“I really, really want to fight!”

“You heard him, Elias. He’s all up for it.”

“Hm... Fine. It’s not a bad idea. He’ll need at least around three hundred thousand rate to make Beryl. If he wants to take part in the Babel Roulette, he’ll have to take every chance he can get.”

Nodding along to Fram’s proposal, Elias turned back to Yuri.

“Boy, what’s your current rate?”

“Err, my rate is...”

As he took a look at his current rate value, Yuri tilted his head.

“...One hundred and sixty thousand?”

“Boy...how many duels did you fight in one day?”

“N-None at all! I only had one duel yesterday!”

He had only just arrived then, and after that, he was under close surveillance by Athena and the others, so his only duel was with Haring. According to Mirka, the rate wagered by Silver was a hundred thousand, but even if he took that into consideration, the extra fifty thousand was a mystery.

As he pondered over his own status, Fram raised her face, only now recalling.

“Oh, come to think of it, you killed Haring yesterday. If you settle a match with death, the loser pays an extra fifty percent of their bet.”

“Oh, I see...” replied Yuri, “Rather, kill is quite a harsh way to put it.”

“It’s not wrong. The Field’s in another dimension, but there’s no changing the fact you killed him.”

“Aizberg’s right. In a duel, the intent to kill an opponent has a great influence on both a technical and psychological side. An awareness of death changes how you conduct yourself, and subsequently, your acquisition of rate.”

The two of them spoke like this was terribly obvious. Even if it was just entertainment to the spectators and outsiders, it was a real life-and-death battle to those involved, where mercy and compassion could influence the fight.

In a duel, the slightest hesitation could determine the outcome.

“While you can earn far more rate against stronger opponents, not only is it difficult to win, the risk of death is higher. That’s why it’s a general rule to fight people around your own level,” Fram explained.

“Eeeh...but it’s a lot more fun to fight strong people, isn’t it?”

“You’ve only just become a duelist, there’s no need to rush. It’s important to experience things as they come.”

While Yuri looked quite dissatisfied, Fram lightly patted him on the head.

Meanwhile, Elias was putting a hand to his chin in thought. Eventually, he raised his head and looked at Yuri.

“...Very well. Boy, you fight in Aizberg’s place.”

“Is that really alright!?”

“If you not only won against a Silver in your first match but won by killing, you should be skilled enough. What’s more, if you’re Reilly’s apprentice, I want to see your skills up close.”

“I’ll do it, I’ll do it! I want to fight!”

Seeing Yuri’s expression brighten, Elias broke into a wry smile.

“Then fight to your heart’s content. I’ll overlook a loss or two.”

“Alright, I definitely won’t lose!”

Now that he had the permission, Yuri gleefully took off toward Athena.

“Athena! I’m going to fight in Fram’s place!”

“Oh! And here we have our rising rookie!” she shouted in her sales pitch voice, “The kid only became a duelist yesterday, but don’t think you’ll win so easily. Challenge him with the utmost caution!!”

The moment Athena introduced him, the surrounding crowd began to measure him up.

“If he’s a new duelist, isn’t he easy picking?”

“No, wait, he could be that rookie that beat Haring yesterday.”

“That’s right! I saw it on the city bulletin, Haring’s opponent was a black haired shrimp from the Human Tribe!”

“I mean, if he beat a Silver in his first fight, this should be promising.”

And while the onlookers leaked their impression of Yuri, a single demon stepped forward.

“Umm... I’m next in line, but...will you really be alright...?”

“Yes! I’m looking forward to it!”

Not shying back in the slightest, Yuri drew his sword with a smile. They both raised their Proofs and were quickly whisked away to the Field.



It had only been an hour since Yuri stepped up to the plate, but the clientele of Café Argent was ablaze with heated enthusiasm.

“Whooooah! You’re on fire, rookie!!”

“If he cleans up here, that will be a seven-win sweep!”

The spectators shouted eagerly, gazing at Yuri’s duel. However, that wasn’t the only reason for their excitement.

“Is he going to kill the seventh too!?”

“Wouldn’t surprise me. That rookie’s out for blood!”

Taking into consideration that Yuri was new to the business, Elias had restricted his opponents to the lower ranks—Iron, Beryl, and Chrome. Even so, it was certainly abnormal for an inexperienced duelist to achieve so many

consecutive victories on top of killing all of his opponents.

Fram watched the fights from the terrace in front of the shop. Having gotten everyone seated, Elias joined her outside.

“How does it look? Is the boy still winning?”

“Yes. He’s even stronger than I thought, and his stamina is extraordinary.”

“So it seems. Incidentally, Aizberg, how many plates of dessert are you planning on packing in?”

“That child is my proxy. I get to eat as many times as he wins.”

“Then save the seventh plate for after he’s finished.”

“He’s practically won already. Does it really matter?”

Stabbing at her agar jelly with her spoon, Fram flapped her feet as she sat in her chair. The seventh battle was already approaching its end; his opponent was splashing sweat like a waterfall, fully focused on dodging and blocking.

In contrast, Yuri swung his black sword, his smile undying.

“Such a simple fake-out—isn’t going to catch me!!”

Reading the enemy’s evasion path and flourishing his sword, Yuri used the momentary lapse he created to crumble his opponent’s defenses and shave away at their energy. It was only a matter of time until he won.

“See? I was right. He’s an interesting child, isn’t he?”

“Perhaps. He fights with no fear, and he never lets his mental strain diminish his ability. If we keep him in this position, he’ll become an even stronger duelist,” Elias assessed, before bringing up something that had been bothering him. “Come to think of it, I never did ask for the details. The boy beat a Silver Ranker, did he?”

“Correct. What’s more, it was a complete and utter victory through death. Yuri defeated a Dragonified opponent with pure technique.”

“I see... That’s something he must have learned from his teacher.”

“Are you talking about that mix-blood?”

“Yeah. As a mix-blood, Reilly didn’t have any tribal traits, instead focusing on using the opponent’s own strength and attacks against them, taking every opportunity to end a battle in one decisive blow.”

Elias watched, nostalgically, overlaying Yuri’s movements with those of his dear friend. He watched the boy choke the grip of his sword, gleefully swinging it as he enjoyed the battle to its fullest. And—all of a sudden, Elias felt something was off.

“Aizberg... Have you ever seen the boy use the skill in his sword?”

“You mean using Armament? Not as far as I’ve seen.”

Fram held her spoon to her mouth, perplexedly tilting her head.

“That’s not particularly strange, is it? Armament’s main strength is the wide breadth of tactics that become possible when in use, but use them too much, and people will start to see how to counter it.”

“Right. And so, some people do hide their skills to use as a trump card later—but that is only among fighters who use multiple Armament gems, and seasoned veterans who are so used to fighting that knowing their abilities and habits would turn the tables on them,” Elias answered, his expression taking a grim turn.

Soon, the flash of bracelets faded, and Yuri held his sword high through the cheers.

“Whooooah! You really are something, rookie!!”

“He won again without even using Armament!!”

“And that’s another death on the pile!”

“How about you show some consideration for me, eh!? The dead don’t just move themselves!”

The surrounding crowd hailed his victory, but Yuri entered his next duel without a moment to spare. Even when he won again, Elias’s expression only darkened.

“Elias?”

“...They’re the same,” he sullenly muttered. “The way the boy fights...is exactly the same as Reilly.”

“They’re master and student. Isn’t it only natural that their sword styles and strategies are reminiscent?”

“They aren’t reminiscent, they’re the same. There isn’t the slightest difference. Using the opponent’s strength to aim for a certain kill—and even down to not using the Armament skill.”

The black sword Yuri fought with... At first, Elias just thought he was using an Armament that looked similar to Reilly’s sword. It stood to reason that the boy would admire his master and choose a weapon that looked similar. That was what he thought.

“I can’t use Armament, so instead, I had them make a weapon that would never break.”

He recalled an old friend laughing while showing off a black sword. The weapon was not equipped with any of its original functions.

“Gem slots? It doesn’t have any. This is a weapon just for me.”

Not for anyone else, a weapon made specifically for a mix-blood fighter. That very same weapon was now being swung by another— “Aizberg. Tell our guests I’m canceling their reservations.”

“Gladly, but...what are you intending to do?”

Ignoring a dubious Fram, Elias returned to the depths of his store. Around the same time, the cheers were rising again.

“Alright! That’s win number eight for the rising rookie!”

“Whoever’s up next! You won’t win if you don’t get serious! Have at him!”

“Anyone think they can do it!? Bring in some higher-ranking duelists, why don’t ya!”

While the spectators exchanged all sorts of words, Athena bounded over to him.

“Mnnn! You really are strong, Yuri! You make your Big Sis proud!”

“Wah!? Th-Thank you!” Yuri bashfully smiled in her embrace. He showed no signs of fatigue, looking as if every fiber of his being was sincerely enjoying his battles. Athena understood the feeling well and returned the same cheery look.

“Now, now! Who’s going to fight my little protégé next!?” she said, throwing her voice to the crowd.

“—I’ll take you on, boy.”

Elias nominated himself as the next duelist, his voice sharp as a knife. With a large, curved sword taller than he was slung across his back, he calmly walked toward Yuri.

“Huh? Eh? Eli?”

“Athena. That’s all for today. We’re closed,” he informed a confused Athena, and the crowd, as he stood before Yuri.

“Boy, do you want to fight me?”

“Fight...you, Mr. Elias?”

“That’s right. No holds barred, show me all you’ve got.”

Elias was clad in a dignified air, but despite his rank and authority, he approached Yuri as a single duelist. As an equal.

Seeing the two combatants, the spectators began to exchange words of unrest.

“Hey... Decapitating Elias is gonna duel.”

“No way. I heard he only accepts duels from folks his own rank.”

“But he’s the one who issued the challenge. This is gonna be interesting.”

The two exchanged looks, as if they couldn’t hear the surrounding clamor. Eventually, Yuri’s expression brightened and he clenched his left fist.

“I’ll do it! I would love to fight you!”

“Very well. I’ll teach you the difference between your little play fights and a real duel.”

“...Play?”

The moment he heard that word, the air around Yuri changed. His expression dimmed as his eyes seethed with fighting spirit.

“I always fight with all my might,” Yuri added quietly while glaring at Elias.

But Elias calmly shook his head. “No...what you’re doing is just a game.”

Immediately after he said this, they both raised their Proofs high. No one needed to initiate, there was no further prompting required. The world melded into sepia tones, shutting out everything apart from the clear colors of the fighters.

“I told you to show me what you’ve got, but—”

The moment Elias opened his mouth to speak, a black line bisected the air in front of him. Yuri had closed in the instant the battle began. Experiencing the boy’s speed first-hand, he indifferently offered his appraisal.

“Immediately aiming at the neck to kill. Your movements are splendid for a human.”

“Well, thanks for that!!”

Not letting up on his offense, Yuri rotated his body and unleashed a kick. However, Elias blocked his blow without so much as a twitch. He unsheathed his sword, and using the back of the blade, he perfectly caught Yuri’s foot.

“Not a bad decision. A duel isn’t just a clash of weapons.”

“...!”

Yuri immediately used Elias’s sword’s body as a foothold, regaining his stance and swinging his own sword again. A single slash at the windpipe. If he could sever it, he could reliably land a lethal strike. Even if the opponent didn’t die immediately, a wound to the neck hindered breathing, and if he could dull the enemy’s movements, his next blow could connect.

That was why Yuri made his choice—

“You’re far too slow.”

—Only to be anticipated as Elias turned the sword’s body to block.

The speed of Yuri’s weapon neared the best the Human Tribe had to offer.

Had he been on level footing, his slash would have reached the realm of master-class.

However—it would not get through to a duelist like Elias.

“You have talent in the sword. You’ve been blessed with a number of boons for a duelist.”

Yuri was indeed gifted with numerous talents. The academic ability to soak up the techniques taught to him. The resourcefulness to apply what he learned in tactics and battle. What’s more, without letting himself be pampered by natural talent, he had heightened his technique with steady diligence.

Just from his swordplay and movement, it was clear that Yuri was overflowing with skill. And that was precisely why— “It hurts to watch.”

Elias had to think this way, strictly because he had once seen a human like Yuri.

Seeing the compassion and pity in Elias’s eyes, Yuri strangled the grip of his weapon.

“You don’t get to decide my strength!”

He swung his black sword with pure brute force, smacking it strongly against the large blade. And yet...Elias’s sword did not move.

“No, that is your full strength...and your limit.”

Silver swayed behind Elias. His tail split into nine. His eyes glowed with the red of blood.

“There is—a wall you will never be able to cross.”

And with a stifled voice, Elias unleashed a sharp kick.

“Kaaah!!”

His foot stabbed into Yuri’s torso and forced all the air from his lungs. Sharp and heavy, a kick with enough force to bring death. Elias could feel the bones break. He could feel the internal organs rupture. And right after he felt these sensations, his expression warped.

“...So you’re similar to your master here too.”

The kick set Yuri's body quivering in agony. Even so, Yuri stood. His shoulders bobbed up and down with each breath, but he kept on his feet.

"...I don't plan on losing to anyone."

Sweat streamed down his brow like a river, but his fighting spirit hadn't shattered. He would not fold no matter who he was up against.

Witness to this pathetic display, Elias gritted his back teeth. "Why...was a human like you chosen?"

Yuri boasted a rare talent for the blade, he carried a strong spirit that would never fold, and he shouldered a will to better himself to the very limit. The same held true for the old friend who had once fought beside Elias.

And that was precisely what made it such a wretched sight to behold.

"You can't do it," he muttered, as he pulled back his sword. Eyes filled with pity, he calmly focused on Yuri's neck.

A bizarre air surrounded him. It carried with it an instinctive fear of impending death.

"You have no future as a duelist."

And with words brimming with deep sadness, Elias took his first swing with his sword. Just one arc, and Yuri's eyes flew wide open. His head floated through the air and thumped as it hit the ground. The same moment his head rolled along the floor, his decapitated body crumpled like a doll.

A single slice honed to the fastest reality would permit. This was the reason Elias was known as the Decapitator. With a slash that had reached the realm of the gods, he would sever the opponent's neck in one fell swoop.

It was his speed that once brought him to chip blades with an Administrator.

"This is...the unvarnished truth."

With Elias's final murmur, the surroundings regained color. The duel was settled, sending both fighters back to reality.

And...right before Elias's eyes, Yuri collapsed to the ground. His severed head was back in place, his body completely unharmed, but— "...Khh...hah...!"

Yuri writhed as he haphazardly took in air. The agony brought by death.

All at once, he was struck with an instinctual fear of a lifeform that had just died of decapitation, as well as the penalty for death: an unbearable pain to his mind and body. He convulsed, his eyes open wide.

Athena was the first to run up.

“Yuri! Yuri, get a grip!!”

She held him up, a little teary as she shook his body. But Yuri did not react. Perhaps knocked out by the pain, he simply hung his head limply in Athena’s arms.



“There was...no need to kill him like *that!*” Athena angrily yelled at Elias. “If you just wanted to see his skill level, you didn’t have to do any of that! To kill him in such a way as if to mock him and show everyone just how weak he is!!”

She held Yuri’s body, shedding tears as she condemned Elias’s actions.

But Elias looked down over the two with cold eyes.

“...I share Athena’s opinion on this one.” Fram, who had taken a back seat, slowly walked up. “You told your opponent to give it his all, only to toy with him and deride him... As a friend, I won’t feel at ease unless you can explain yourself.”

Her red eyes tinted with anger, she glared at Elias.

“...Very well. Then I’ll explain it so you can understand.”

“Do...n’t...” A withered voice caused everyone to turn. A shaking hand, reaching out for Elias.

“Yuri!? You can’t move yet!!”

“You... Why can you move when—”

Disregarding their surprise, Yuri desperately grasped at thin air. Trying to fight against something. Trying to move beyond something.

But Elias spoke his next statement as if to trample over these emotions.

“The boy—is a mix-blood.”

Startled as she was, Athena immediately shook her head. “There’s...there’s no way that’s true! Yuri is strong! He won against Haring yesterday, and today he didn’t lose to any of the other duelists!” Her tears flowed as she shook her head again and again to deny this reality.

“I’m sure the boy can win against the likes of Silver and Bronze. His master Reilly could overcome opponents on that level,” Elias plainly informed his sister.

His dear friend once carried inexhaustible ambition and enthusiasm. Despite being a mix-blood, his friend continued to fight, never conceding to anything.

And yet—even Reilly could never reach beyond that.

“An inability to use Tribe Skills is a fatal defect for a duelist. Similar to the talent one is born with, it can never be filled in with effort or knowledge.”

No matter how talented he was at the sword, no matter how inexhaustible his ambition, even if he worked harder than anyone, the difference of his birth could never be overcome.

“At the very moment he was born a mix-blood, his limits as a duelist were set. No matter how hard he struggles, it will only whittle away at his spirit...until, one day, he leaves the city in pain and despair. Never to return.”

Vexingly gritting his molars, Elias finally spelled it out.

“You...should never have become a duelist.”

Undeterred by those words, Yuri continued to reach out like his life depended on it. Even though he’d collapsed, he made every effort to persevere, to move forward.

However, that hand would not reach Elias—only when he completely lost consciousness did Yuri’s hand powerlessly slump to the ground.



After Yuri’s first experience with death, Athena carried him back to Mirka’s room.

“...Well I’ll be, this is quite the conundrum.”

After the boy was put to bed, and once she had heard the story, Mirka made quite the sour face. No one reacted to her words. Athena crouched on the floor, hugging her knees, while Fram lay down on the sofa.

“But I get where Elias is coming from. He used to compete with Reilly the mix-blood, after all. I’m sure he’s followed the path of a mix-blood duelist closer than anyone.”

“...Mirka, you’ve been in this city for a long time, haven’t you?”

“Yes. Not only longer than you two, I’ve been here a lot longer than a majority of the duelists here.”

“Then...do you know what’s become of the mix-blood duelists so far?” Fram

questioned in a downcast tone.

For a short while, Mirka fell into silence, mulling over whether she should answer or not. Eventually, she quietly nodded.

"Without a single exception, the mix-bloods all end up leaving the duel city. Some lose all their rage without a single win, and some grow sick and tired of their unproductive days, chased around by work and losing more often than not. Some despair at their own powerlessness...and some hit a wall they can never surpass."

And, after such a serious answer, Mirka was back to her usual self.

"When you really get down to it, inherent factors play a large part in strength in a duel, you know. Tribal traits suited for combat, inborn battle sense...they're gaps that can't be closed with knowledge and technique."

There was a divide that couldn't be resolved between the haves and have-nots. A person who started out with talent could just as well acquire knowledge and technique, putting in the same effort, and the gap would simply grow. There was nothing to be done about it.

That was the difference between a mix-blood and a normal duelist.

"...But a mix-blood still has tribal traits, don't they?" Athena sullenly mumbled as she squeezed her knees.

But Mirka shook her head. "As a general rule, the tribal traits of a mix-blood aren't at a level to use in battle. They're only strong enough to be a little convenient in daily life."

"...There could be an Armament even a mix-blood can use."

"That's impossible. The magic circuits of the gemstones that activate skills are too complex. Only pure Human Tribe mana can operate them, and a mix-blood with the mana of other tribes mixed in can't draw anything out."

With each answer from Mirka, Athena's ears drooped lower and she clenched her knees harder.

"...Yuri was having a lot of fun fighting," she quietly muttered as she thought back to his form in battle. "No matter who he was up against...he had the time

of his life. With a look on his face like he loved to fight so much he didn't know what to do with himself, he fought having more fun than anyone."

And yet, Yuri had no future as a duelist. He couldn't climb up, he couldn't reach beyond, he couldn't move forward. He would mull and anguish and eventually despair.

"That's...not fun at all." Little by little, her voice was touched by tears.

Fram breathed a deep sigh. "...Right. When he has more fun fighting than anyone, I can't accept that the child is the only one excluded from the creed, 'Let's All Enjoy our Fights.'"

After endorsing Athena, Fram slowly lifted herself up.

"Mirka, is it really impossible for a mix-blood duelist to climb the ranks?"

"As far as I know, at least. Reilly reached the higher tiers of Silver, and that's the highest any mix-blood has ever gotten."

Reilly Malbork boasted abnormal strength for a mix-blood. Even so, the path would not open up. That simple fact weighed heavier than all else.

"Truth be told, Yuri would be perfect if he wasn't a mix-blood. From what I could tell from his fight with Haring, his skills don't fall short of Reilly's."

But that just meant he would tread the same path as his master. Falling into despair at his own limits, leaving the duel city in regret. That was precisely why Elias had to make it clear. So Yuri wouldn't have to hurt, exhaust, and anguish himself. To make him give up on a duelist's path early.

"...Yuri won't give up on being a duelist, will he?" Athena's shaking voice posed the question to no one in particular. "He's going to keep dueling with that smile on his face, isn't he?" She hung her head as sobs mingled with her words.

It was none other than her own brother who denied him his future. She was the one who brought them together, and these facts made her excessively condemn herself.

Seeing Athena like that, Fram reached out and pulled on her pudgy cheeks.

"...Yow."

“Don’t arbitrarily grow pessimistic. Wipe your tears.”

She tugged at Athena’s tear-drenched face a few more times.

“Whether Yuri quits as a duelist or not, why that’s for him to decide.” Fram remonstrated her with a calm and charming curl of her lips. “So don’t get pessimistic over his circumstances and arbitrarily pity him. That would be an insult, a denial of the work the child has put in.”

Athena finally lifted her face. “...It’s like Fram took the Big Sis role from me.”

“Naturally. I’m four-hundred-something years old.”

Athena roughly rubbed at her eyes. “...Right! Instead of worrying over stupid stuff, let’s find what we can do for Yuri!”

“First, you should blow your nose. You’re dripping snot.”

“Mnn! A Big Sis with a runny nose won’t do!” And after wiping her nose on the tissue Fram held out, Athena energetically stood. “I’m going to tell Yuri we’ll help out!”

“He’s still asleep. It’s his first death.”

“Then I’ll pray for him! My thoughts will reach him, I just know it!”

“How terribly bothersome of you.”

But fed up as she seemed, Fram’s eyes earnestly followed Athena as she took off toward the bedroom.

The fox girl noisily threw the door open with a bang. “Yuri! Your Big Sis will do her best, let’s work hard toge—”

Her yell was cut off part-way through. She looked at the bed where Yuri had been resting a moment ago. A bed which was absent of any Yuri.

Despite looking everywhere, she couldn’t find him. The sight of a swaying curtain sent shivers down Athena’s spine.

“Y-Yuri’s gone...!?”

“...No way.”

“Wh-Wwwwwhat do we do!? Don’t tell me he really left!? He left because Big

Sis was too late to cheer him up!?"

"C-Calm down! The ferry already departed today! He's not going to swim across the ocean!"

It wasn't just Athena, even Fram moved around in a hot panic.

"Mirkaaaaaaa! Yuri's gooone!"

"Oh dear, Athena, your nose is dripping again..." Mirka replied.

"Mirka, you're a staff officer, aren't you!? Can't you use your management Proof to locate him?"

"Why Fram, you're quite precise even while panicking. I can look into it, but I'll need some time."

"If you find him, get in touch! Athena, he can't have gone far yet, let's hurry and search for him." Fram jumped onto Athena's shoulders and urgently patted her back.

"Aaaah! Fram finally let me carry her!"

"Cry or rejoice, choose one! Now go, go, go!"

Watching the two leave the room with all due haste, Mirka offered a sardonic smirk.

"...Dear me, they sure are kind," she lazily muttered before taking a big stretch. "Now then, let's do a bit of digging... Hm?"

Just when she was about to take her Staff Proof out of her breast pocket, she felt something was off and tilted her head. The vibration of an incoming transmission. But it wasn't coming from the jewel that identified her as a staff member.

It was coming from a bracelet...no different from the ones used by duelists. She took out the Proof and gave it a light tap to connect.

"Hello? Did you need something?"

"Wassup! How ya doin'!?"

Mirka cut the call the moment she heard that bewildering greeting. Another came soon after.

“Why didja hang up!?”

“I heard a pervy middle-aged male voice and just kinda, you know...”

“I ain’t middle aged! I’m immortal, I stopped aging at thirty!”

“Thirty is still pretty middle-aged. So, did you need something?”

“Not really! I’m about to arrive at the duel city, just thought I’d tell you!”

“...Today’s ferry already came and went.”

“Right, about that! I’m swimming full force right now!”

“Thank you for the idiotic report.”

And just as she was about to hang up again, she recalled a certain something.

“Oh, yes, Reilly’s apprentice came to Babel.”

“Really!? You mean the mix-blood brat, right!?”

“Yes, yes. He’s simply adorable...ehehe.”

“Both your opinion and your laugh are creepy.”

“Oh, shut up. Come to think of it, the letter I got from Reilly contained some questionable information. I hear the selection process was left to you.”

“Right you are, Reilly left everything to me!”

She had intended it as criticism, but the man replied as if he’d taken it as a compliment. Mirka sighed deeply.

“...Now listen here, the candidate selection for each race is supposed to be left to us. That’s the rule. If anyone else heard about this, they’d be pretty angry.”

“You think so? What does it matter? Doesn’t change the fact I chose the brat, and doesn’t it get a lot more heated when the final exam is to beat your own master?”

“That’s not what I’m talking about. The problem is that someone apart from you used the Field technology on another continent—no, it’s a pain. Let’s just forget about it.”

No matter what she said, it would be pointless, and thus Mirka opted to give

up.

“So anyway, how’s the brat? If he’s at the duel city, that means he beat Reilly, so he’s gotta be strong, right!?”

“If you’ll let me have my say, he’s as strong as Reilly...but hasn’t taken a step beyond that.”

The man on the other end of the line fell silent for a moment.

“Alright, got it. Send the brat’s location to my Proof! I’ll be there soon, but I’m a bit preoccupied at the moment!”

“Well of course you’re busy, swimming across the ocean.”

“Not that part! I’m working hard smacking down this pack of sharks that keeps following me!”

“Get eaten for all I care.”

“I ain’t gonna get chomped by the likes of sharks! I’m the strongest in the world, I—”

The conversation had become a pain, so Mirka hung up without another word. She gazed out at the evening sun.

“Now then, now then... What sort of duelist is he going to become?” Mirka mused with a beaming smile, eagerly awaiting the fights she had yet to see.



Yuri could vividly remember the day he first came to the duel city. He remembered the day he saw his first-ever duel.

Ten years ago, the last match of the duel city’s Babel Roulette. On one side, the Human Tribe Administrator, Velt Helrik. On the other, the mix-blooded duelist, Iron-blood Reilly Malbork.

Under normal circumstances, this would be where their enthusiasm reached its peak. But—the battle was cruelly one-sided.

“—Sorry I gotta do this to ya, Reilly.”

His scraggly black hair fluttering in the wind, Velt easily lifted a massive sword over his shoulder. Despite being from the Human Tribe, he had tempered his

muscle to the limit, the armor formed by his sheer bulk harder than steel.

In contrast, the human facing him couldn't be any more different.

"...Hahah. I thought I could do a little better than this."

Glossy black hair cut at the shoulders. An orderly, refined face on top of a slender body. But by this point, that body had been notched with countless wounds. Torn clothing revealed pale skin that oozed a deep red, the flow of blood staining black clothes a darker pitch before forming blotches on the ground.

Even so, Reilly stood, never crumbling. Heavily wounded all over, the Iron-blood Duelist never let go of a black sword, glaring at Velt the whole time.

Taking note of this, Velt smiled, satisfied.

"Well I'll be, you may be a brat, but you've got more backbone than most of the opponents I've faced. Most of them lose their nerves just because they're facing me."

"Hahah... Of course they do. They're facing the strongest opponent."

Spitting an unorderly breath, Reilly refused to unhand the sword. The murderous intent and fighting spirit released by every fiber of the duelist's being would never falter .

"That's why...I don't want to let it end yet."

With quivering hands, Reilly remained in fighting position. Even faced with such a tremendous foe, the duelist would never fold.

Fully aware of the weakness of a mix-blood, Reilly continued to fight.

"Because I'm—a duelist."

Hearing those words, Velt made a gentle face. "I can't say I hate that part of you."

"You think so... That's a bit troublesome..."

"Hey, don't be like that. But regardless... It's about time to close the curtains."

He could hear the voices of the spectators. The ear-piercing, angry screams and jeers. Their words clearly displeased Velt, but the show had to go on.

“...I didn’t want to have to end it like this.”

No sooner had he finished his words than the ground began to shake and warp. Born from the distortions, countless swords—a ludicrous number—sprouted from the ground as if to form a mountain. The oversized blades gathered around Velt, waiting upon their king.

“—Since I recognize you as a duelist, I’ll have to go all out.”

The summit of the Human Tribe, Velt, confronted Reilly with the utmost respect.

Yuri didn’t really remember much about how it ended. Velt had used Armament, and Reilly had lost. Young as he was, he could at least understand that much.

However, there was one thing he simply couldn’t comprehend.

“Hey, Papi. Why is everyone shouting that old man’s name?”

Voices boiled over from the hall, each and every one of them singing high praise to the victor, Velt Helrik.

The boy’s question caused his father to tilt his head curiously. “That’s because the person who won is the Administrator, the strongest human in the world.”

“Not at all! The pretty one was stronger, wasn’t he!?”

Seeing Yuri vehemently shake his head, his mother replied with the beautiful, kind look only a mother could give. “I see, Yuri. You like his opponent, the mix-blood person better, do you?”

“Yeah! If he’s mix-blood, that means he’s like me, right!?”

With a gentle smile, his mother showed him her pointed elf-tribe ears. “That’s right. Just like you, he has the blood of another race running through his veins.”

An existence born between the Human Tribe and another. But a mix-blood could also be called a sudden and temporary aberration. Their appearance was no different from the Human Tribe, and their physical abilities weren’t that different either.

His parents hadn’t explained it at the time, but his master would fill him in on

the details afterward. Among the eight greater tribes, the Human Tribe boasted the sole dominant gene. That was why mix-bloods came in Human Tribe form, and should a mix-blood have children with a pure human, the genes of the other tribe would be lost and the bloodline would return to being purely human.

However, Yuri's home... The Eniastar house was stubbornly fixated on remaining mix-bloods. Its precepts regulated marriages with other tribes, and they had been honored for a great many years.

That Yuri Eniastar would be born as a mix-blood was a fact that was determined from the moment the Eniastar House decided to preserve its mix-blood heritage.

His inability to become a duelist had been determined long, long before he was born. But Yuri was still a child, and no one had told him this.

"I'm gonna go meet that person!!"

"Eh? Meet—Hey wait, Yuri!?"

Shaking off his mother's grasp, Yuri sprinted off. There was something he needed to ask Reilly no matter what.

Running through the venue, dodging security guards, Yuri slipped into the hall of waiting rooms for participants. And it was there that he heard a certain conversation.

"—I'm sorry, that's the only way you can continue to fight."

Velt's low, heavy voice came from one of the rooms.

"Reilly, the way you are now, you won't win no matter how hard you struggle. It ain't just me, you won't be able to beat those guys from the other races, and you won't be able to climb any higher."

There was a weight to the words he spoke with pity. But as the Human Tribe Administrator, he informed Reilly of the bitter truth.

"If you keep going the way you are—you won't be able to continue on as a duelist."

"...I see," Reilly finally replied. "I'm thankful to you, Velt. You went out of your

way to waste your time looking into it for someone as flawed as a mix-blood duelist like me.”

“...Don’t say that about yourself.”

“But I’m not wrong, am I?”

Velt found himself met with a powerless smile filled with resignation.

“That method is impossible for us humans. At the very least, I don’t think I can do it.” With a tone that could sink no lower, Reilly unveiled the thoughts that became the culmination of a long and sad journey.

“A mix-blood could never be a duelist, I knew that. But...if I did my best, I thought I’d be able to fight like everyone else.”

Reilly had put in more effort than anyone, never giving in, piling up technique, knowledge and calculations. Working hard enough to earn the name Iron-blood.

That was precisely why—

“—I thought I could fight...!”

Reilly cursed through gritted teeth. Sneered at the sheer gall of embracing such short-lived dreams despite being born as the weakest entity. Every little piece that made up the duelist known as Reilly Malbork crumbled without a sound.

And as feeble sobs permeated the waiting room—Yuri forcefully slammed open the door. Ignoring the startled look on their faces, he cheerfully smiled and raised his voice.

“Hello! Good day! Is Reilly here!?”

“Hah!? Hey, kid, how did you get in here!?”

“I ran away from the scary men!”

“Ran... Hey wait, aren’t you—”

Before Velt could say anything, Reilly walked up to Yuri and stooped down to match his eye level.

“I’m Reilly. What’s your name?”

“I’m Yuri!”

“Then Yuri, were you looking for me?”

“Yeah! There’s something I wanted to ask you!”

“...What would that be?”

With stars in his eyes, Yuri looked straight at Reilly’s quizzically cocked head and posed his question.

“Do you think I can become a duelist like you!?”

Reilly’s eyes opened wide, only to be immediately replaced with a forced calm.

“...Why are you asking *me* that?”

“Papi and all the adults told me, Mister. You’re a mix-blood like me!”

“I see... So you’re like me.”

The moment the words left Yuri’s mouth, Reilly’s eyes turned cold.

“You can’t do it. A mix-blood human can’t become a duelist.”

“...Oi, Reilly, he’s still a kid.”

“That’s precisely why we ought to break it to him fast. Rather than showing him unreachable dreams, he’d be better off giving up from the start,” Reilly replied in a frigid tone.

Even if it destroyed the dreams of a young child, even if it denied everything Reilly had built, if it would prevent someone else from walking the same path, the duelist would speak the plain truth.

“And kid, you can’t try to be a duelist like me.”

“Why not? What’s wrong with being like you?”

“I mean, you wouldn’t want to be so weak and uncool, would you?”

“Yep! I don’t want to be weak and uncool!”

“You’re surprisingly blunt...”

“I mean, no one likes to lose!” Yuri grinned without a care in the world as he

replied. "It's always irritating to lose. But it's really fun when you win! That's why the duelist people all try their very hardest to win!"

Young and oblivious, but pure and straightforward words.

"And Mister, you tried harder than everyone else not to lose! You stood no matter how hurt you were, your drive to win got to me... It was really cool!"

Yuri spoke his thoughts with an innocent laugh. "That's why, Mister, I want to be a duelist like you!"

These were the naive words of a child who didn't know a thing. But the Iron-blood duelist quietly wept.

"...Is that how I looked to you?"

The tears fell, drop by drop. To think someone would actually affirm Reilly's hard-fought life. The dark shadow that had haunted the duelist's face faded.

"...I worked really hard, because it was so fun to win."

"Yeah! Having fun is the best!"

"...But it's not like we can always win, you know."

"Then work hard so you can always win!"

"No matter how hard you work...you'll reach your limit someday."

"Then work hard so you don't lose to the limit!"

Yuri continued to counter, only for Reilly to lock his body in a tight embrace.

"...Mister?"

"You're...going to be a better duelist than me, someday. I'm sure of it."

"Really!? Can I be the strongest duelist!?"

"You'll have to work really hard, or it won't happen."

"That's okay! I'll do anything to get stronger!!"

"I see... How reliable."

After gently stroking Yuri's head, Reilly wiped away the deluge of tears.

"Velt, I think I really am going to resign as a duelist."

“...I see. If that’s your choice, I ain’t gonna stop you.”

“Thank you. But I think I found something I can do.”

And with a pat to Yuri’s head, Reilly turned back to the strongest human alive.

“I want to give it all I’ve got—to grant this kid’s wish.” The words came with a clear smile, as if the devil had departed. “If this kid wants to surpass the wall of mix-blood, I want to lend him a hand.”

The absolute wall a mix-blood could never cross. No one had ever seen what lay beyond it. Not even Reilly.

That was precisely why...the Iron-blood duelist chose to devote their everything to teaching.

“I think I’ll do fine as the kid’s master. I can teach him how a mix-blood fights, and I won’t show any mercy or pity no matter how much he cries or begs.”

“You say some morbid things with that cute face of yours...”

“Why, of course. They don’t call me the Iron-blood for nothing.”

And seeing Reilly’s revived optimism, Velt scratched his head all around. “...Fine. If you’re his master, I’m sure old Eniastar will agree.”

“Eniastar... You mean that mix-blood clan?”

“That’s right. So I’m sure he’ll fulfill your dreams.”

While the two of them carried on their conversation, Yuri’s innocent eyes glimmered.

“Hey, hey! Are you going to teach me how to fight, Mister?”

“I will. So how about you start calling me master?”

“Why? Is Mister no good?”

“Well... In the first place, I’m not really a mister.”

Awkwardly scratching her face, Reilly held a hand out to Yuri. “The name’s Reilly, the mix-blood duelist who’s going to teach you how to fight.”

Yuri gripped the hand back and introduced himself.

“I’m Yuri Eniastar! A mix-blood just like master, and—” Smiling as he imagined

the fun days to come, “—I want to be the strongest duelist!”



Athena and Fram hurried to the location they had received from Mirka. The place was around the eastern edge of the residential district.

“Hey, hey! Is Yuri really in a place like this!?”

“...At the very least, that’s where his Proof says he is. There’s no mistaking that.” Riding on Athena’s back, Fram restlessly took in her surroundings.

A coastline spread out right before their eyes, a forest behind, and nothing else of note.

They had strayed quite far from where the houses ended. With no human presence around, only the crash of the waves and the rustle of the leaves reached their ears.

Athena noisily sniffed around and shifted her ears. “Uuuuurgh... All I can smell and hear is the sea, I just don’t know...!”

“Stop acting like a dog, and start searching seriously.”

“I’m a fox, I shouldn’t be too far off—ah, I picked up Yuri’s scent!”

“...Fine, then dog it is.”

Ignoring Fram’s off-hand remarks, Athena scampered toward the coast. Her eyes soon locked onto Yuri’s form, sitting on the sandy beach, his black hair swaying in the salty sea breeze.

“Yuriiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii!! Found yooooooooooooouuuuuu!!”

“Hm? Athena—wait, waaaaaaaaah!?”

Her sudden lunge pushed him down into the sand. His entire body became covered in grit, and he lightly shook his head to remove some of the sticking sand grains.

“Hac, hac! Wh-What’s gotten into you!?” he cried.

“...That should be my line.” Fram, who had been flung face-first into the beach, spat up sand and glared at Athena before turning back to Yuri. “You suddenly disappeared... We were quite worried.”

“That’s right! We thought you were going to quit as a duelist!”

“Err, why would I have to give up as a duelist?”

“I mean...my brother said terrible things to you.”

Her ears apologetically drooped. However, the mention of Elias only caused Yuri to shoot up.

“Right, Mr. Elias! He was really strong! The Beast Tribe’s Release is strong in its simplicity, just like Master taught me! To actually see it up close was a good experience!”

Seeing Yuri’s eyes sparkle as he sung Elias’s praise, Athena and Fram exchanged a look and tilted their heads.

“Umm... Yuri, weren’t you depressed because you lost?” Fram asked.

“It’s extremely irritating, but I’m feeling motivated now! When I was lying on the bed, I was thinking of nothing but how to beat Elias, and I just couldn’t sit still anymore!!”

“...Then what did you come here to do?”

“I wanted to train and see how my body was holding up.”

He swung around his arms and flexed his biceps.

“Death is pretty amazing, isn’t it!? It hurts like my body is being torn apart, and I’m filled with this sensation like nothing in the world matters, and I just hate everything!”

“Yes, well...when you die, it normally takes three days before you can move again...?”

“Does it really? Don’t tell me there’s an even stronger super-death out there!?”

“I-I don’t think so...?”

As Yuri closed in with glee, Athena pulled back ever so slightly. It didn’t look like he was bluffing. He had lost to Elias, but his will to fight hadn’t been crushed.

“I lost this time...but I’ll definitely beat Mr. Elias in the next duel! No matter

how harsh it is, I'll never give up until I win!" he proudly proclaimed, even having seen the overwhelming gap in strength.

His will would never bend. However, his sentiment only invited a bitter look from Fram.

"...But you're a mix-blood."

Tribe Skills were an absolute power in duels. Without that power on his side, Yuri would surely meet his limit.

"You should understand that better than anyone."

Surely Yuri knew he could never reach beyond it. But Yuri shook his head.

"I understand it, but I don't accept it!"

"...What do you mean?"

"I mean, who's the one who decided a mix-blood can't win?" Yuri asked back with unwavering eyes. "The other duelists? The people who watch them? Don't tell me it's god? Just because they haven't gotten results so far, a mix-blood absolutely has to fall behind all the other duelists?"

Yuri continued to line up infantile words. And yet, his eyes were overflowing with confidence and conviction.

"This is the Duel City Babel—where battle is everything. No matter what others say, no matter how wrong they say I am, I just have to win to set things right."

This was the absolute rule of the duel city. This was why Yuri had obtained his power.

"The physical capabilities of the Beast Tribe; the endurance of the Dragon Tribe; the technique of the Elf Tribe; the technology of the Dwarf Tribe; the resourcefulness of the Demon Tribe; the faith of the Angel Tribe; the magic of the Spirit Tribe... I just have to surpass all of them, and even I can win!"

It was idiotic idealism. So, in order to make that hopeless ideal a reality, he had tried out all sorts of means under his master. He had built up the Human Tribe's feeble body, and put in the effort to exceed his limits.

“Whether I win or not—is up to me to decide!”

His words were simple to no end. But, in their sheer simplicity, they expressed the root of Yuri Eniastar as a human being. It’s fun to win and irritating to lose. That was why he wouldn’t spare any effort to win, and he would carefully study so as not to lose.

Despite understanding the impossibility, he continued moving forward to surpass it. And by this point—it had reached the realm of madness. The pure and utter insanity within Yuri forced his body and soul to move.

“Just knowing how fun it will be to win the next fight, there’s nothing I can’t do!”

And those words were presumably from the heart. Yuri would do anything to win and enjoy a battle. Every part of his being gave off that feeling.

Before either of the girls could respond, a giant pillar of water rose from the sea. The tower of white foam climbed high into the sky, causing the three to turn to face it.

“—Da ha hah! See? There’s no way the strongest is gonna lose to some sharks!!”

The large man who appeared from the pillar approached with a grand laugh. After shaking his head to snap off any excess moisture, his black hair began to sway in the wind.

“It’s been ten years, mix-blood brat.”

He lobbed the giant shark he held under his arm onto the beach and directed his words at Yuri.

There wasn’t a duelist who didn’t know him. A man who had slaughtered countless challengers at the Babel Roulette. The strongest of the Human Tribe — Administrator Velt Helrik gave a toothy grin. “I came all the way out here to meet Reilly’s stupid apprentice!!”

Chapter 3

After the unexpected encounter with Velt at the coast, Yuri, Athena and Fram found themselves back in Mirka's room.

"Kkhaah! A beer after a sea crossing is the best!!" Velt stuffed his cheeks with the food lining the table, washing it down with beer as he laughed grandly.

Mirka let out a tired sigh. "Every word from your mouth reeks of middle-aged man."

"Oh shut it! More importantly, that wasn't nearly enough to eat. Got anything else?"

"There's plenty more in that box."

"The one labeled non-combustible trash!?"

"You worry too much, Velt. Why, I'm sure your stomach is the strongest just like the rest of you. You'll be just fine."

"You really mean it...? Then as the strongest existence, it's time to prove I can digest even non-combustible garbage! Let's do this!"



Athena and Fram dubiously tilted their heads.

“...He’s kinda, how should I put this, not very Administrator-ish?”

“The word you’re looking for is idiotic.”

“I can hear ya, Foxy and Icy! You’ve got good eyes! That’s right, I’m an idiot!” He didn’t seem to mind the insult in the slightest, smiling wide as he chomped into a cut of the shark that had been roasted whole.

Overwhelmed by his utter sublimity, Fram turned to a fed-up Mirka. “...Mirka, I never knew you knew an Administrator.”

“Me? Yeah, I know a few of them. When you work at Babel Tower, you get quite a few opportunities to get to know the Administrators.”

“More than a few, ain’t it? I mean, your sister’s—”

“Yes, yes, I hear you, Velt. You want more meat, right?”

Mirka beamed as she violently chucked another cut of shark at Velt’s face. Though he was the apex of the Human Tribe, for what it was worth, she showed no mercy whatsoever.

Velt took another large bite before turning to Yuri, who had been silent for some time. “Hey, brat, how about you put in a good word! Tell ’em I’m the strongest, eh!”

“...Err, yes. Of course. I do think you’re amazing, Mr. Velt.”

Yuri’s reluctant response caused Athena to stare at him blankly, her eyes open wide.

“What’s wrong, Yuri? You’re making a funny face.”

“Yes, well... Mr. Velt is the sort of person I’m terrible at dealing with.”

“Hah!? What did I ever do to you!?”

“Master was always complaining. Apparently, whenever you came to the human continent, you’d get drunk, bring up my meeting with master, say some condescending nonsense, and run off without paying the bill.”

“He’s the worst...” said Athena.

Fram sighed. "The absolute worst..."

"You really are trash." Mirka delivered the finishing blow.

"Well, sorry for that! Go tell 'er I'll pay up when I feel like it!"

Despite the harsh glares from the women, Velt paid it no mind and continued, "More importantly, brat, if you've become a duelist, does that mean you're gonna participate in the Babel Roulette?"

"Of course! When is it going to begin!?"

"It starts whenever I feel like it. The other Administrators are running late, overseeing their continents and all, so I'm supposed to throw out an arbitrary declaration or two." Velt lifted the corners of his lips. "But...I can tell you it'll be in a week, at most. No reason to put it off, and I wanna fight some strong guys already."

The Administrators were all originally duelists. While their thirst for battle may wane, it would never die out entirely.

This proclamation caused Athena to fly into a panic. "A week... Then we've got no time left!"

"It's somewhat dubious whether Yuri will make it." Fram furrowed her brow.

Seeing as even Fram was concerned, Yuri took a look at his own rate. Having fought several duels at the shop, the number was higher than before. Though he had lost to Elias, being Iron Rank kept the rate loss to a minimum. Despite this, it was becoming increasingly clear that dueling at the pace he was going would not achieve results in time. More than anything— "Brat, are you going to let that bastard Elias walk off with a win?" Velt asked, prompting Yuri to inadvertently lift his head.

"How do you know about that?"

"How do you think? We haven't had a mix-blood duelist since Reilly. And if he's a decently strong one, of course he'll get some attention. Have a look at the city bulletin."

Yuri lightly tapped his own Proof. A look over the Duel City's bulletin board showed it was filled with talk of Yuri and Elias.

“The rookie who beat a Silver was actually the weakest mix-blood!?”

“Rising rookie completely cleaned out by Beheading Elias.”

“We haven’t had a mix-blood duelist in ten years, but Reilly Malbork has already proven a mix-blood can never surpass the pure-blood wall.”

“A little hopeful, but I honestly doubt he can keep it up.”

Both duelists and continental residents arbitrarily evaluated Yuri’s worth. While a portion of the comments seemed supportive, a majority of them were criticism and slander, and the general opinion seemed largely consistent. There was no way a mix-blood could win a duel.

This universal consensus caused Yuri to clench his fist.

“I was always telling Reilly. A mix-blood can’t be a duelist,” Velt added.

It wasn’t just on a technical level. As long as the world saw mix-bloods as the weakest existence, it was impossible to gain popularity as a duelist, and difficult to earn fight money as well. If a duelist was unpopular, not only would they be showered with heartless slander and abuse, but even if they did win, they would be suspected of foul play.

Even now, there were cries that Yuri’s win against Haring was a setup. There was plenty of such calumny to be found.

“Win or lose...you can’t be a duelist. Not in the truest sense.”

Velt imparted the apprentice with words he once handed to the master. But Yuri’s will wouldn’t change.

He cheerfully grinned as he gripped a fist with determination. “Something like that can just be solved with a good smack in the face! As long as I can keep winning, the words of those naysayers are completely worthless. If they’ll believe the words of the losers, then they’re not even worth consideration. And if they still have complaints, they just have to fight me and see for themselves. It’s perfectly simple!” he declared, with unwavering confidence and will.

Such a brazen statement; Velt couldn’t help but amusedly smirk.

“...Reilly, you devil, just how did you raise this kid?”

He sent Yuri an appraising glance before asking once more. “If you trained under Reilly, you should be better than the average duelist in both technique and physique. But you do understand that’s not enough, right?”

“Yeah...you’re right. It’s harsh without a trump card to play.”

For all his enthusiasm, Yuri did have an accurate evaluation of himself. Tribe Skills were a definite boost to duelists and could serve as a trump card. A final blow to reliably take out an opponent. A move to overturn an opponent’s absolute advantage.

If he could not work out one of his own, Yuri had no path to victory. He would never be able to reach the truly strong duelists, Elias included.

“So you’re telling me...you can win as long as you have a trump card. Got it,” Velt exclaimed before forcefully rising to his feet. “Brat, come to the beach tomorrow.”

“The beach? I train there anyway, so I don’t really mind, but...”

“And bring Foxy and Icy with you.”

“Hm? We’re going too?”

“Very well, if there’s really something we can help with...”

Seeing the two of them cock their heads, Velt scratched his hair all over. “You’ll be doing more for him than me. Everyone in the world knows I’m the strongest, but there’s no changing the fact I’m from the Human Tribe. I only have second-hand knowledge of a mix-blood’s tribal traits. But trust me...” Velt informed them with an undaunted smile, “I’m going to teach you all—how a mix-blood can fight.”



The next morning, Yuri, Athena, and Fram walked along the coastline through the pale morning light.

“Kwaaaaah... I’m sleepy...” Athena yawned, stretching out her back and tail.

“You can’t fall asleep, Athena. You’re going to help out Yuri.”

“But Fram, you slept on my back for most of the way here...” Yuri chimed in.

They restlessly trudged down the coast until the light of a bonfire caught their eyes.

“There ya are. Good on ya, let’s get right into training.”

“Sir yes sir! I’m counting on you!”

“Oh, not bad. I like your spirit. Are you really that happy to be tutored by the strongest?”

“I hate you, Mr. Velt, but I’ll put up with it to get stronger!”

“Haha... hah...you’re just as damn ungrateful as your master, I see...!!”

Noticing the heartfelt displeasure on Yuri’s face, Velt violently patted him on the head a few times.

“Yesterday, you told me there was a way for a mix-blood to fight... I’m going to be quite angry if that was a lie,” Yuri said as he brushed away his hand.

“Don’t worry. I looked into it as the Administrator of the Human Tribe. Don’t even compare it to what you can find out on your own. Your parents also certified the possibility.”

“Well, if my parents said so, there shouldn’t be any problems...”

“Hmm? Yuri, are your mom and dad knowledgeable about mix-bloods?”

Athena’s question received a sour look.

“Well... Err, how should I describe them...”

“Out with it, no need to put on airs. We won’t be surprised, no matter what you say at this point.”

“Yeah, yeah! No secrets from Big Sis!”

Broken down by their stares, Yuri let out a reluctant, resigned breath. “My house runs a marriage consultancy.”

“...A what?”

“To be more precise, a marriage consultancy specializing in mix-bloods.”

“Oi, brat, what was your family motto again?”

“Err, it was, ahem, ‘Fluffy ears, dragon tails, elf ears, pointed tails, fluffy

feathers, compact dwarves, loli-shota spirits, what else could you ask for? Join us in lovey-dovey inter-tribal marriage!"

"One more time, would ya?"

"Mr. Velt, I really will punch you."

The sight of Yuri's clenched fist made Velt clear his throat. "Well, the brat's family... The Eniastar House was the first lineage of duelists to attempt inter-tribal breeding. If a Human Tribe member could use other Tribe Skills...they thought they could create the strongest duelist."

But that old dream never came to fruition. Whatever was gained from the other tribe was incredibly weakened, and the child could not even use the Human Tribe's Armament. All that resulted in was the feeblest existence.

"But the Eniastar House continued their inter-tribal marriages, continuing their research on mix-bloods. It's only as a result of their research that mix-bloods have avoided persecution."

Mix-bloods were limited in a duel, but they were skilled in everyday life and normal work. While their tribal abilities were weak, they were abilities the Human Tribe did not have, and by using them in everyday life, mix-bloods had earned a level of status in Human Tribe society.

This was the result of the Eniastar House's unending research, their attempts to approach the problem from various angles. Their achievements were still the subject of great praise in the modern era.

"Well, the long and short of it is that they're a clan with a few screws loose."

"...Why do you look at me when you say that?"

As she looked to Yuri, Athena seemed to come to a sudden realization.

"Hey, if Yuri's house kept being mix-blood for multiple generations, that means he has the blood of multiple races, doesn't it? Specifically how many does he have?"

"Err, the Eniastar House has taken in all of the eight races."

"Hmm... So a mix of all eight races is possible?"

"Yes. As long as a mix-blood marries out of the Human Tribe, the blood of other tribes will be preserved, so the Eniastar House has carefully selected a marriage partner for each generation to preserve their traits."

"Then that means you've got loads of abilities to use!"

"Right. Even if Armament won't work, if you have seven Tribe Skills, there should be something salvageable."

With a sigh and a scratch of the head, Velt cut the girls' remarks short. "If it was that simple, mix-bloods wouldn't be the weakest."

"Eeh... But seven of them sounds really strong," Athena protested.

"Aight, that's a good starting point. Foxy and Icy, let me give you a lesson on mix-bloods," Velt said, before asking Athena, "First, Foxy, what makes a mix-blood the weakest?"

"Umm, they can't use Armament?"

"Right. By using gemstones that only react to a human's mana, Armament can draw out various powers. As a mix-blood has other blood flowing through their veins, they cannot extract any of them. That is why they can't use Armament."

Velt hoisted up his own armament, a rather large sword.

"The weapon used for Armament not only amplifies the skill from the gemstone, it also takes on the burden in place of the body. It's bloody dangerous if you send that power straight into a Human Tribe body."

After finishing his explanation to Athena, he turned to Fram. "Next, Icy. What is the other reason a mix-blood is considered weak?"

"That's... Well, I guess because they can't use the traits of other tribes either."

"To be more precise, it's not that they can't use them. A mix-blood's tribal traits are just unbelievably weak. Brat, show them what you can do."

"Are you sure... Then here I go..."

Terribly reluctant, Yuri lightly lifted up Fram's body.

"Tada, I've lifted up Fram."

"Oh dear, I have been lifted up."

“And that’s all there is to my tribal traits.”

“...Eeh?” Yuri’s words elicited the exact same response from the both of them.

“More specifically, I have a ‘little extra strength.’”

“No way! You really don’t have anything else?”

“Yes, well my other bonuses are ‘sturdy bones,’ ‘can see better at night,’ ‘good with hands,’ ‘easily liked,’ ‘wounds heal easier,’ and ‘sharp intuition.’”

“Oh... Well, I now understand why they’re called weak.” Troubled for words, Fram furrowed her brow and held her head.

Tribal traits were directly linked to a duelist’s strength. Traits suited for battle were all the more advantageous, and even the unsuitable ones could still be put to practical use depending on the user.

However, forget a trump card, the traits Yuri had were so limited it would be difficult to find any use for them whatsoever. The weakness of the inherited traits became the weakness of a mix-blood.

“But it’s not like a mix-blood don’t get any perks at all. While definitely weak compared to a pure-blood of the tribe, they undoubtedly still inherit some traits,” Velt said.

“But they’re barely usable,” Fram replied.

“Thought you’d say that... They’re not even at a noticeable level,” he conceded.

Precisely because Fram and Athena were well-versed in the traits of their own tribes, they could easily comprehend just how low these abilities were.

“Then let me ask you,” he went on, “how exactly do you use your tribe’s traits?”

“I’m not sure how to answer that...”

“Mnnn, mnn... Just kinda happens?”

Neither of them could give a definite reply. Having used them from the moment they were born, they never questioned the inner workings. Just as a

baby learns to walk, they never held any misgivings about the abilities they picked up naturally.

However, there is always a principle and logic behind all things.

“Armament, Release, Dragonification, Secret Art, Hyper Dash, Divine Might, Familiar, Creation...the Tribe Skills are all invoked by some firm fundamental principle. If everyone possesses them equally, then it should be strange there’s no organ that regulates them.”

“But the tribes’ appearances and lifespans are all over the place.”

Not only did the eight tribes have individual traits, the construction of their very bodies vastly differed. There were members of the Beast Tribe with multiple stomachs, and it wasn’t strange for a member of the Dragon Tribe to have a second or third heart. Some Spirit Tribe members lacked any digestive organs at all. In both outer and inner appearance, being humanoid was the only common point they shared.

But Velt spoke with conviction. “No...this right here is one thing we all share.”

Tap, tap, he beat his fingertip against his head.

“Tribe Skills...have to be regulated and invoked by some part of the brain.”

The sole organ that all eight races held in common without any clear difference. This notion caused Fram to tilt her head.

“If that’s what’s doing it, then why does the Human Tribe alone have to use an intermediary?”

“That’s a simple one. All you other tribes have adapted bodies that don’t have any issues using your powerful Tribe Skills.”

From the point of view of the Human Tribe, the other races were superior on various fronts. Bewildering physical capabilities, absurdly sturdy bodies, sharply honed senses, a grasp of space and construction, inhuman wisdom, nearly endless mana, among many other things...and each tribe carried a body most suited to their gifts.

“A Human Tribe physique is feeble, no matter who you compare it to. We’re so weak our bodies will self-destruct if our brains don’t put a limiter on our

abilities. That's why we need an Armament to take on the burden for us, to allow us to use those gemstones as our Tribe Skill."

Athena's head remained blankly tilted, but Fram raised her face as if she had realized something.

"Don't tell me...a mix-blood's traits are..."

"That's right. A mix-blood's abysmal abilities are most likely a result of the limiters placed by the Human Tribe brain. Even if they aren't pure-blood, there's no reason their abilities should fall that far short."

"Right... In my tribe, there are in rare cases those who inherit the abilities of both their parents, but I've never heard anything about their overall strength suffering for it."

Fram's mutter brought sparkles to Athena's wide eyes.

"Then if those limiters are removed, even a mix-blood can start using Tribe Skills!?"

"That's right. I checked with the brat's parents, and they said it's theoretically possible. But this ain't no proper way to fight. It's wrong, not just for a human, but for any living being."

Velt's grim expression posed a complete contrast to Athena's optimism.

"Foxy, right here, right now. Can you break your own arm of your own volition?"

"M-My own arm?"

"It doesn't have to be an arm. A leg, a finger, can you break it yourself?"

Slowly, Athena was pressured into a reluctant silence. Velt had expected this response, and he let out a faint sigh.

"The reason it's limited at all is because we don't got the right bodies to do it. Removing the limiter will mean using powers beyond what the body is capable of, and we of the Human Tribe won't be able to handle it. Meaning...if the brat wants to use anything, he's gonna have to break something."

Athena and Fram gulped, having finally understood what he really meant. The

reason he said it would be impossible for any proper human. Their brain would prevent their body from breaking itself by using powers beyond its means.

“Even if it works, the brat will go through extreme agony every time he uses a Tribe Skill. He’ll have to endure it tens, hundreds, thousands of times, all while breaking his body of his own will.”

And physical death never came for duelists. Every duel, he would have to personally choose the pain.

“Removing the Human Tribe’s limiter is already difficult in and of itself. No decent guy can break his own arm. Even if he could, he couldn’t fight properly after that. And let’s say he could fight, do that too many times, and you lose your mind... It’s a method of impossibility over impossibility.”

In the midst of Velt’s explanation, the two girls had lost their words. What was there left to say? To hurt oneself, chip away at their spirit, and endure the unending pain and suffering. Who in their right mind would choose a living hell just to be a duelist? Even if such a person existed— “So you’re saying I can do it!”

Snap—the sound of something hard breaking.

“If this is my means to win...I’ll do whatever it takes!”

Despite breaking his own arm, his smile remained intact. Yuri’s mind and body weren’t feeble enough to fold to such a low hurdle.

“Hah... Even Reilly gave up on it, and you didn’t even hesitate.”

“Bad Yuri! You’re not in the field! You can’t just go and break your arm!”

“You seem pretty calm about this, but doesn’t that hurt...?”

“It hurts like crazy!”

“...If you want to train, make sure you heal up first.”

“Here, I have a healing charm, use it quick!”

Despite their panic, Athena and Fram promptly pressed a healing charm against Yuri’s broken arm.

After a look over the three of them, Velt gave a large yawn. “Well then, Foxy,

Icy, he's all yours. Have a few duels, and get him to the point where a few skills won't break him too badly."

"Very well. What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to have a nap before finishing up some business. We Administrators are pretty busy, I can't just hang around with you people forever," Velt said as he took his leave with a dismissive wave of his hand.

Once Yuri's left arm was back in shape, Athena lifted her fist in high spirits.

"Aight! Let's work hard to make Yuri stronger!"

"Before we do that," interrupted Fram, "you two should turn off the broadcast feature on your Proofs."

"Eh? But if you turn off the broadcast, you can't review it later, right?" Yuri asked.

"True, but the broadcast is also used as evidence of a match. If both sides turn off the feature, wins and losses aren't added to the record, and your rate won't change either."

"In short, we can fight all we want for training purposes!" said Athena in summation. Yuri didn't need any further prompting to tap his Proof and sever its connection.

When all preparations were done, Athena enthusiastically brandished her straight sword.

"Then I'm first, let your Big Sis teach you all about it! Come at me!"

"Thank you! I'm counting on you!"

Yuri respectfully bowed his head to Athena before they both raised their Proofs high. The surroundings colors drained away while they held up their weapons and confronted one another.

"Now then, what should we start with?"

"Right... Even if you tell me to remove my limiter, that's quite vague."

And as the two of them groaned, Fram, who had merged with the background, called over.

“For starters, Athena, how do you usually use your Tribe Skill?”

“Mnn... I tell my ancestors, ‘Hey, I’m gonna borrow some power?’”

“So it’s pretty ill-defined.”

“The ancestor’s role, or purpose, is also pretty important, I guess. Like, with my Solar Fox, I form a strong image of sweeping away evil with flame.”

“Yuri, do you know the details of the tribes you take after?”

“Yes, when I was born, my parents compared past records. According to them...for the Beast Tribe, my power apparently stems from the bull Asterios.”

“A bull, huh. Then with your sword, it should help boost lunges and thrusts. If you’re empty-handed, then punches and palm strikes. Also charging and trampling, that sort of thing. Maybe you can draw it out if you imagine those movements?”

“Thrust and charge... I see...” he readily nodded along to her explanation.

“The next step would be how to remove that limiter thing—”

“Should I break my arm again, and see where that gets me?”

“You shouldn’t be so casual about breaking bones!”

“But maybe he’ll grasp some sensation from hurting himself. If he gets used to it, he might be able to draw out Tribe Skills without too much difficulty.”

“So practice makes perfect!” Yuri responded, bracing his fists and giving his left one a strong clench. The sensation of breaking his left arm a moment ago... He strengthened his will and resolve, strongly convincing himself it was a necessity. He pictured himself casting aside his hesitation and fear.

“—Here I go!”

With a firm image in his head, Yuri forced his foot into the ground. And just as he made his left hand snap ominously—Athena’s body was shot backwards.

“—Khh!” she grimaced as she took on a heavy blow with her sword. She braced her legs so as not to lose to the impact, gouging out and leaving trails in the beach sand. It was only in the midst of her trajectory that she got a good look at Yuri.

Yuri had his right fist thrust straight out. An explosive imprint remained where he had been before, the sand grains stirred up by the impact dimly glimmering in the morning sun.

That blow had far exceeded the physical capabilities of the Human Tribe. Not only was the Beast Tribe's Athena pushed back, a faster charge than she had anticipated had taken her by complete surprise, and she just kept sliding, unable to fully kill her momentum.

A mix-blood had unleashed such a devastating blow.

"...! Yuri, you did it! You really—"

Seeing Yuri's exceptionally elevated abilities, Athena's expression brightened with glee, but she cut her own words short.

"Ah, hahah... Perhaps I aimed a little too high."

Beads of sweat oozing down his forehead, Yuri's knees fell to the sand. One of his left fingers was broken, his right arm turned in the wrong direction. The left leg he used to step in with was pulverized from the knee down, while the immense amount of blood he shed from his limbs soaked the white sand red.

Such a catastrophe, such a horrid scene to behold. Athena couldn't contain herself from racing up in panic.

"Y-Yuri!? Are you okay—no, I can tell you're not!!"

"Yes, right... I can't say I'm very okay."

"Good, then let's pause for now! Dispel the field and—"

"No, please continue."

With his broken left hand, Yuri grasped the arm Athena was holding him up with.

"At the very least...we now know I can use Tribe Skills. But the opening made with the initiation and recoil is too great; I have to get used to the pain..."

He continued to grip Athena's arm with his quivering hand, so as to never let the means he had finally found ever leave his sights. To grasp out at his own possibilities.

“So...please, one more time!”

After such willpower and resolve, Athena could naught but tighten her expression and ready her sword once more.

“...Okay, I’ll do whatever I can. Just leave it to Big Sis!!”

Athena gave her chest a hard thump, returning Yuri’s feelings.

That exchange repeated several more times, and just as the seventh one was upon her—

“...Frammmmm... I can’t bear to watch anymore...” Athena sobbed profusely and gave up. “Yuri’s already in tatters... He’s a red, wrung-out rag...”

“...You look like you could go a few more rounds.”

“Even if I can, Yuri can’t...!”

She whined and whimpered as she pointed at Yuri, collapsed on the ground. As if his left fingers weren’t enough, the arm connected to it was curved into complex contours. His right hand no longer maintained its original shape, white bone poking here and there through his bloody flesh.

It wasn’t long before Athena’s wails caused his motionless body to twitch.

“Erk... Ah, sorry... I passed out for a second there...!”

“It’s fine, perfectly fine! Rather, you could just stay unconscious!!”

“No...I think I have one more in me...!”

“No way, no way, no way! You’re becoming like one of those zombies the Demon Tribes use! Let’s reset once, alright? If you keep at it in your condition, you’ll make your Big Sis cry!”

“You think...so...? Maybe you’re right...I shouldn’t push myself too far from the get-go.” Yuri finally conceded in his feeble, cracked voice, and Athena patted her chest in relief.

“And so, Athena...would you kindly finish me off?”

“...Eh? Finish?”

“Fighting Mr. Elias, I learned that a duelist’s death is quite unique. I need to get used to that too, so instead of ending with surrender, please kill me.”

“You want me to kill someone who could do with a mosaic placed over his whole body!?”

“Yes... Additionally, I need to know how severe the wounds have to be, and how much blood I have to lose to be considered dead, so I would very much appreciate it if you could kill me as slowly as possible...!”

No sanity left in his smile, a bloodstained Yuri slowly drew his wounded body closer and closer.

“It’s fine. I’ll be fine, so...!!”

Seeing the madness seep into his appearance, his speech and his actions, Athena trembled all over— “This... I’m the one who won’t be able to stand it!!”

She forcefully lowered her straight sword at Yuri. Reluctantly, she honored his wishes to avoid all his vitals, one slash at a time... And for the time that followed, Athena sobbed and muttered, “Yuri is scary...” to herself.



Early afternoon that same day...

With the lunch rush over, the duel city’s sightseeing district had somewhat calmed down, and Café Argent was no exception. As the shop cleared out, the only customers remaining were the ones kicking back for a slow afternoon.

After a look over the store, Elias called out to the kitchen. “Frevo. I’m going out for a breath of fresh air. Can you take care of things?”

“Aye sir. We can clean up after ourselves, don’t worry about it.” The young demon man Frevo popped his head out from the kitchen depths. “Ah, that’s right, boss. We got word from Fram, she’s got stuff to do today, so she can’t work dinner hours.”

“I see. Then my condolences to Athena, but she’s going to have to work two days in a row.”

“No, it seems Athena’s gonna tag along with her business. She told us not to put her on any shifts for a while.”

“...Her too?” Elias frowned. “...Well, so be it. I’m sure she’s just sulking about what happened yesterday. She presumably doesn’t want to see my face.”

“Ah, right, they were really pissed when you beat up that mix-blood kid. You think he’s really gonna give up on being a duelist from that?”

“That’s not our problem. Rather, if he’s a mix-blood, giving up quick is to his own benefit.” A curt response, and Elias was out the back door.

He let a salty wind from the nearby coast envelop him as he leaned his back against the husk of a great tree.

“If he gives up now...he’ll save himself from more than he knows.”

He stared at his hand, the figure of an old friend vivid in his mind. A duelist great enough to earn Elias’s respect. A mix-blood friend who had fought and studied with him in the duel city.

But her final moments were too short, too pathetic, too anticlimactic. The form of a friend crawling on the ground after losing a duel. She neither shed tears nor showed any irritation at her loss. Simply powerless, a feeble smile on her face like she had gone completely hollow.

The sight of that friend would never leave his head. They had walked the same path so long, he could feel her deep despair and helplessness. That was why—Elias granted her final wish.

“—Yo! You look like you’re in a rut!!”

Elias slowly lifted his face to a rather thoughtless voice. The one there...a detestably cheerful Velt.

“And what ’ave we here! I guess it takes more than ten years to change a member of the Beast Tribe!!”

“...The same could be said for you. You’re supposed to be a human, but you don’t look the slightest bit different.”

“You’re turned immortal the moment you become an Administrator! While they were at it, I’d have loved to have been frozen at my younger heyday!”

“You’re already a monster. I can’t believe you had a heyday.”

“I was amazing in my golden age! They used to call me a hero, you know!”

“I know. But there is a saying that goes, only old men tell old tales.”

A few more loveless words, and Elias finally posed the question. “So what does an Administrator want with me?”

“Right, that’s the thing! I’ve got a job for you—”

“I refuse.”

“I knew you’d say that!!”

“I can’t stand someone who’s always laughing like a fool.”

“What’s wrong with that! A human’s living life best when he’s laughing!”

“I’m a beastman. And...there’s no guarantee everyone can laugh.”

Yes, there was no guarantee that everyone could laugh. Velt understood who he was referring to, and so he uneventfully abandoned his peevish smile.

“...You really haven’t changed a bit in ten years.”

“I doubt I’m going to change until I beat you, Administrator.”

“I see. In that case—you’re not worthy to face me.” Velt declared right to his face, “Ten years ago, you were strong. But...right now, you’re so weak, I don’t even feel you would be worth the effort.”

The moment he finished his cheap provocation, the leaf wafting right in front of his face split clean down the middle.

“—Would you like to put that theory to the test?”

He drew his curved blade and let it soar in a bee-line straight for Velt’s neck. A movement of ungodly speed, unleashed by the Beast Tribe’s superior physical capabilities. His Tribe Skill called Release imparted his fluid draw with unparalleled strength.

Through no more than pure strength and technique, Elias had butchered many a duelist. However, Velt simply pinched the blade between his fingers as he continued his small talk.

“Whoa, you’re pretty fast. If I was anyone other than me—the strongest, of

course—it would be hard to even follow that sword with my eyes. In skill alone, it would be an insult to compare you to the other duelists.”

“Yeah. I’ve done my share of training, these past years...all to defeat you.”

Elias was definitely far stronger than he once was. He had piled up battles with countless duelists until he was finally feared as an Adamant Rank. His technique was great enough for even fellow Adamants to keep him at arm’s length. And yet Velt Helrick’s take on the man didn’t change.

“You still don’t get it. Over the course of ten years, all you’ve done is win duels, it’s as if you don’t understand what it really means to fight. You’ve been standing still the whole time.”

As an Administrator, one who had reached the very summit of battle, his attitude remained firm. He would look straight at Elias and call him weak.

“...If that’s what you think, I simply have to last to the end of the Roulette and prove otherwise.”

“Don’t think it’ll be that easy. There’s an interesting one taking part this year.”

“...Oh really? A duelist great enough for you to endorse them?”

At the first glimpse of interest from Elias, Velt flashed his teeth in a laugh. “Don’t act like you don’t know him too. It’s Yuri Eniastar.”

“...Reilly’s apprentice?”

Elias’s thoughts went to the sight of Yuri after he had been thoroughly overwhelmed and crushed the other day. His expression quite blatantly took an unpleasant turn.

“That boy is a mix-blood. Did you know that when you placed your expectations?”

“It’s not expectation, it’s conviction.” He spoke to deny each of Elias’s words. “You won’t be able to win against Yuri Eniastar.”

A stark contrast to Velt’s jolly confidence, Elias openly grimaced. “I’m going to lose to a mix-blood? You’re asking for quite a lot.”

“You’ll know if I’m crazy or not if you take up my little favor,” he prefaced,

before explaining the details Elias had so rudely cut off before. “One week from now, I’m going to kick off the Babel Roulette. I thought I’d have you and the brat duke it out in front of Babel Tower as the opening act.”

“...Are you serious?”

“Course I’m serious. It only happens once a decade, so shouldn’t we start off with a bang?”

“Have you...forgotten what happened last time...!?”

The shades of rage surfaced in Elias’s turquoise eyes. He recalled a scene of spectators jeering at Reilly and vilifying her to no end. To Elias, the scene was nothing but pure evil, the embodiment of everything wrong with the world. He detested those pedestrians who arbitrarily spat rash remarks, not knowing the first thing about how Reilly felt, or how much effort she put in as she faced the Administrator.

That was precisely why Elias couldn’t stand without questioning the Human Tribe Administrator.

“Why...do you back the boy to such a degree? A mix-blood duelist has no future. As the Human Tribe Administrator, you should know that better than any—”

“A mix-blood is the only one who can’t fight? That’s no fun at all.” With those words, he formed a smile just as innocent as the boy’s. “When the duel city’s creed is ‘Let’s All Enjoy our Fights,’ the mix-bloods are the only ones left out of the group. It hit me hard with Reilly...and I knew I had to do something about it.”

In a rare display, Velt bashfully scratched at his cheek. “I may be an idiot, but I’m still their Administrator.”

Surely, there was no deception in his words. As the one who ruled the Human Tribe, and as a duelist who loved battle, Velt had acted to extend a hand to the mix-bloods. Now that he understood the man’s sincerity, Elias closed his eyes and let out a slight sigh.

“...I might find some entertainment in destroying your delusions before the Roulette begins.”

“So you’re givin’ me the okay, did I hear that right!?”

“I don’t mind. It will just be another win for me.”

“Well look who’s talkin’! Just to let you know, the boy’s currently doing some secret training!”

“Then it’s not a secret anymore.”

“He’s already got two people helping out, so it wasn’t much of a secret to begin with!!” With a hearty laugh, Velt turned his back to Elias. “Glad to hear you’re up for it... One week, okay? Give it a good show, Elias.” Leaving those words behind, he dismissively flapped his hand and made his way off.

After watching his broad back shrink into the distance, Elias lowered his eyes to his own hands. “A mix-blood is going to beat me...?”

He shook his head, shaking away stirred-up memories. Feeling irritated at Velt, the one who irksomely roused them, Elias slowly got back on his feet. It was only then that he suddenly paused to think over what he’d been told.

Two people were helping Yuri train. Two familiar faces crossed his mind.

“...It couldn’t be.”

He left that thought in a corner of his mind before returning to the shop.



Three days had passed since Yuri began his training. They would head to the deserted beach first thing in the morning and continue their duels late into the night. As a result— “I won’t eat meat ever again...only veggies for me...” Athena was crouched and cowering on the sand.

“Good for you,” Fram sighed, “you’ll be the Beast Tribe’s first-ever vegetarian.”

“You can only say that because you didn’t see it up close! The blood went skadoosh! The flesh went kersplat, and the bones went kerchunk!”

“I’m sorry... I tend to go too far when my switch is flipped...” Yuri apologized, only for Athena to sullenly turn her head the other way.

“No, no, no! Your Big Sis won’t forgive you!”

“Err... Then I won’t protest when you suddenly jump on me.”

“Okay, Big Sis always forgives! Let’s have some meat today!”

“She’s so easy I’m growing worried for her future.”

“I have to agree...”

“Yay! I can hug Yuri now!”

With Athena’s mood recovered, Fram clapped her hands together to change the subject.

“So Yuri, do you think you understand the Beast Tribe’s Tribe Skill now?”

“Tentatively, I’d say. At the very least, I’m now able to hold back the output, and I think I’ve grasped the knack well enough that it just barely won’t destroy my body.”

“I think so too. Yesterday, he used it without too much damage, and he didn’t have to hurt himself to invoke it anymore!”

“Good. Just using Tribe Skills is already an excess burden on your body. If you have to hurt yourself every time just to activate them, you’ll only be able to fight short-term battles.” After summing up the results of the past three days, Fram turned back to him. “Then next, let me teach you the Spirit Tribe’s skill.”

“Thank you! I’m counting on you!” As per usual, Yuri took his cue to hold up his Proof.

“Now then, the spirit subspecies you take after is the moon spirits, correct?” Fram indifferently confirmed in the midst of the world’s color shift.

“Yes. But, when I tried to look into them, I couldn’t find any information.”

“I wouldn’t doubt it. Moon spirits are so rare I have never seen one myself.”

“So even you’ve never encountered one?”

“To be quite blunt, they’re on the verge of extinction. The fact that the Eniastar house managed not only to form connections with them, but to bang one to preserve their mix-blood lineage, strikes me with fear and awe.”

“Fram, as a young woman, how about you choose your words...”

"Hey, hey, Fram, what does bang mean?" Athena asked from the outfield.

"When a man and woman do this and that and all sorts of things to make a baby."

"Hey, how about we put a wrap on that topic!"

After covering Fram's mouth with both hands, Yuri got the conversation back on track.

"The Eniastar House has been around since the founding of the duel city. Our family tree stretches way back, and we've taken in various members over the years."

"If you're that old, it's possible you exchanged a contract with a moon spirit back when they were still numerous. I heard your house researches mix-bloods, but do you also do research on other tribes?"

"Yes. I read many of my father's books to work out countermeasures while I was training...but the documents on my own traits are too old and vague, and everything apart from the elf traits I got from my mother are an unknown to me."

"In that case...I should start by explaining about moon spirits," Fram said, as she flopped down on the spot and began her lesson.

"Moon spirits are a race of spirits that govern life and sanity. Their Creation allows them to place status conditions on enemies, to influence the body through means of the mind. Or so I've heard."

"That's...umm, what exactly does that mean?"

"To put it simply, it is a strong suggestion," Fram said, pointing at her own eyes. "For example, if you place a mental suggestion, 'your eyes cannot see,' the enemy really will become unable to see. To take it a step further, if you suggest, 'your lungs cannot breathe,' the enemy will stop breathing and die."

"...Isn't that a little too strong?"

"It's strong, but it highly depends on the enemy's mental state, which makes it rather impractical and unreliable. They're also good at healing magic, and honestly, they aren't too suited as duelists, but..."

After she said that much, Fram put a hand to her chin and thought. “It might be the perfect tribe trait for a mix-blood like you.”

“For me?”

“Yes. You hurt yourself whenever you use Tribe Skills, but a moon spirit’s Creation might be able to heal some of your wounds and let you reuse them. Similarly, you’ll be able to use self-suggestion to strengthen your body.”

Fram paused, did some more thinking, then continued, “The Spirit Tribe fundamentally can’t fight in close quarters, so physical strengthening is usually pointless, but...if a mix-blood’s physical makeup is the same as the Human Tribe, body strengthening and healing magic should be perfectly applicable.”

“What happens if Yuri uses magic in the first place?” Athena asked from outside. “The Beast Tribe’s Release has a terrible effect on his body, but will magic be fine?”

“Hmm... I actually studied up a bit on magic, but I gave up on it when I figured out I didn’t have an output high enough for offense.”

“The Human Tribe’s mana capacity is pitifully average, a little support and healing will be the limit. For now, we can just try it out and see what happens.”

“Is it just me, or are you getting rougher with your treatment of me...”

“Does it really matter if a human who laughs as his body is converted into a lump of meat is treated somewhat roughly?”

A smirk on her lips, Fram lightly patted the sand off her clothes as she stood.

“If you learned magic, you should already know how to do it. Show me.”

“Yes! Under—”

His spirited reply was cut short as an impact raced through his chest; a sharp pillar of ice stuck straight through his heart.

“There. You’ll die if you don’t heal yourself fast enough. Ready, set, go.”

“Fram’s a demon!?”

“There’s no telling when you’ll bear a fatal wound in real combat. We’re better off learning how fast he can heal himself, and whether or not he can

evade death."

"Even so, that's way too little mercy! Your Big Sis doesn't approve of this!"

While Athena was making a ruckus outside the Field, Yuri stared at the hole in his chest. He concentrated all his attention toward it. Imagining the mana within him as the flow of his blood, he tried desperately to grasp its sensation as a bodily sense.

"—Creation."

Came his panicked cry, and the change soon graced his body. The large hole in his chest closed up in the blink of an eye, the wound repaired.

The scene caused Fram's eyes to widen in admiration. "I'm shocked... Even if the moon spirits excel at healing, to instantly close even a fatal wound..."

"Fram! Yuri's acting strange! Hurry and look at him!"

Immediately after Athena's scream, Yuri slowly collapsed to the ground.

He firmly clutched his chest to contain the absurd beat of his heart, but contrary to his own will, it continued to pulsate wildly as an off-sensation raced all across his body.

"...An excessive use of magic is causing acute manaloss syndrome. Mana is circulated in the bloodstream, so a sudden loss will cause the body to overcompensate, sending his heart into overdrive."

"Err, umm... What does that mean!?"

"To put it simply, his body is in a frenzy. Far too much oxygen is being sent to his brain, his consciousness is going berserk, his field of vision is contracting...perhaps he has other symptoms as well."

"Stop calmly analyzing and do something about it!!"

"Quiet down. The Spirit Tribe reacts the same way the first time they use magic," she sharply replied, before taking a seat next to Yuri. She held up his head in her arms and pressed it against her own chest.

"Yuri, listen to the sound of my heart." She cradled him and spoke in a soft, gentle tone. "Remember how your heart is supposed to move, imagine the

mana leaving your body with each breath. Calm down...release the excess and your body will be at ease.”

Fram combed Yuri’s hair as she would to soothe a child, patting his back at a set rhythm. After she had repeated that for a while—Yuri took in a conspicuously deep breath. He burst into a coughing fit, all the while shaking his head to clear away his hazy consciousness.

“*Hac, hac*—this...is a lot harsher than simple pain...”

“I wouldn’t doubt it. You can put up with pain, but not being able to do anything about the changes in your body is scarier than you could imagine. If you were anyone else, I would not have done that.”

“Even if you were going to do it, I’d have liked a word of warning...!”

“If you don’t learn it firsthand, you’ll do something reckless again. Magic is powerful and convenient, but it is an art that comes with danger. I thought you should learn that before doing anything else.”

She rested Yuri’s head on her lap, slowly stroking his head to drive in her cautionary words. “After a short break, we’ll break in your body to the sensation of mana and expand the scope of your healing.”



“Yes... Thank you...”

Resting on Fram’s lap pillow, Yuri repeated a rhythm of deep breaths.

The sight had Athena’s discolored body shaking. “I feel incredible Big Sis Power coming from Fram...!”

“The peanut gallery sure is noisy today.”

“Alright, that’s a wrap! Duel over! Let me hold and pet Yuri too!”

“No one can interfere with a duel. We’ll be alone for a while. Now either stay on my lap, or end the duel and let Athena hold you. I’ll leave the choice to you, Yuri.”

“When I’m in this state, please don’t present two options that will definitely have repercussions...!”

“Right. Maybe that was a little mean.” Fram broke into a giggle, “In exchange, you have to end our duel with surrender.”

“...Fram, could it be you’re not too good with blood?”

“That’s not true at all.”

“But in the duel I saw last time, you fought in a way to pressure your opponent into surrender.”

“If they surrender, I don’t have to needlessly tire myself out.”

“But when I was training with Athena, you covered your eyes quite frequently.”

“...I’m not fond of overly perceptive children.” Fram flicked him on the forehead, a sullen look on her face.

With a bitter smile, Yuri ambivalently nodded. “Very well. Then—I give up.”

The simple declaration shifted the sepia-toned scenery back to its original array of vibrant hues. As the Field was dispelled, Athena rushed in with her tail swinging to and fro.

“What’s this, what’s this? You want your Big Sis to hold you!?”

“Unfortunately, I’ve taken your little brother.”

“My little sister made off with my little brother!?”

“Pardon me...I have a headache, so if you could please quiet down...”

“You heard him, now off with the noisy Big Sis.”

“Never! I’m going to hold Yuri, you hear!!”

Half in tears, Athena jumped at the two of them. As he watched the boisterous girls, Yuri inadvertently laughed aloud.

“Haha. How should I put it... It’s kinda fun, doing things with the three of us.”

“Yuri found enjoyment in something normal...!?”

“I was sure he was a masochist who only delighted when being tormented.”

“Why, I never!” he snapped back jokingly, finding joy in even something that small. “Up to now, my training was always done alone. There’s no point even if a mix-blood does his best. All sorts of people, even my master would tell me that.”

Yuri’s master Reilly taught him all manner of techniques. But the words from her mouth were never encouraging. Having fought as a mix-blood duelist and fallen into a deep despair as one, Reilly understood Yuri’s path better than anyone.

By purposely refuting him, she had tempered his heart for what was to come. She had reared an indomitable spirit that would not fold to any vilification.

Despite this constant discouragement, Yuri chose to be a duelist. He had made the trek longing for the fun days that awaited him.

“Ever since I came to the city, and met you two...every day has been a blast!” Yuri said, his voice full of spirit, an innocent laugh on his face. As if infected by his energy, the two of them returned the same smile.

“Yeah, yeah! While we’re at it, how about we all join the Babel Roulette on the same team!” Athena proclaimed to the world.

“But if you want to win, wouldn’t someone else be—”

“It’s a festival, so rather than winning, it’s more important to enjoy it. That’s what this city was built for.” Fram had no objections.

Despite knowing he was a mix-blood, the two of them held out their hands to him as friends. As Yuri slowly reached out to take them— “What are you doing here?”

His hand was intercepted part-way by a sharp call. The three of them reflexively turned to see a figure walking boldly from the direction of the voice. Elias’s face became bitter as he slowly approached.

“Just when I was wondering why you weren’t showing up at the shop... To think you really were helping the boy out.” Disappointment and sorrow mingled with each word.

The moment she saw him, Athena jumped out to cover Yuri.

“What’s wrong with us helping Yuri!?”

“Athena’s right. We’re free to do whatever we want.”

Even with Fram’s support, Elias’s expression didn’t change. He gazed straight at Yuri behind them.

“Boy...leave the Duel City this instant,” Elias forced out in a thin voice. No longer was it only a vague negative emotion, now rage swirled in the air around him. “You don’t understand...to continue as a mix-blood will bring misfortune, not only to yourself, but to everyone around you.”

“Eli! You’re going too—”

“You shut up!!”

Athena cowered under her brother’s angry yell, and even Fram inadvertently froze in place. Not lending an eye to either of them, Elias walked right up to Yuri.

“None of you understand.”

In his anger, his pitch-black emotions oozed for all to see. “What you’re trying to do...is the same as what we once did ourselves. All for Reilly, our members all helped one another, discussed technique and strategy, supported her so she could carry on as a duelist.”

The members of their team all supported Reilly, stacking up victories by implementing the tactics Reilly proposed. But Reilly herself could only stand and

watch.

“While Reilly continued to lose, the rest of the team gradually came out victorious...and none of us ever noticed just how much agony she shouldered because of it.”

It was her own team and yet Reilly Malbork could only remain outside of it. Elias and the others never noticed up to the very end. And after the Babel Roulette, Reilly died as a duelist.

“Yuri Eniastar...do you know the last moments of Reilly the duelist?”

He clenched his large sword, grinding his back teeth with pain and regret.

“Despairing at the reality of being a mix-blood, despairing at her own weakness...at the end, she came to me and pleaded.”

At the very end, Reilly wished for death.

“I, with these very hands—killed Reilly Malbork.”

Death did not truly exist in a duel. However...the death of a duelist was very clear. After repeated defeat and losing every last point of rate, the life of a duelist was over.

And Elias had killed his dear friend with his own hand.

“The very last time we fought...she didn’t even reach my ankles. Her strength was nothing to me.”

The friend he had admired, and dreamed of chasing forever. And yet, it was Elias himself who said her last prayer.

“No matter how much effort you put in...the conclusion that awaits you won’t change. Eventually, the losses will stack up, the walls will close in, and in the end, you will tread the same path as your master.”

“—You’re wrong! The reason my master wanted to—”

“Silence. You don’t understand, you never could.”

Cutting Yuri off, Elias turned to Fram and Athena. “Do the two of you have the resolve? To help the boy on a momentary whim, to get closer to him as comrades in arms, only to do the worst thing possible to him at his darkest

moment?"

Athena and Fram looked down in silence.

"Boy...do you intend to beg those who supported you to put you out of your misery?"

Elias's solemn tone seemed to probe into Yuri's resolve. Yuri replied resolutely.

"I don't intend to lose to anyone. Not even myself. No matter who tells me it's impossible, I will not give up on being a duelist."

The moment he heard these words, Elias grit his teeth and clenched his fist.

"Once upon a time...Reilly said those very same words." He let off a murderous air, as his hand went to his sword. "And even so—she chose death in the end!!"

The instant Elias raised a bitter cry, Athena jumped in from the side. "You can't...you can't, Eli!!" Shedding beads of tears, she pleaded with her brother. "Yuri...really is working hard! Getting all beaten up, all torn apart, he still keeps pressing forward!!"

Despite Athena's desperate attempts to stop him, Elias turned his cold eyes. "If that could change the outcome, she never would have left the city."

His directionless anger clouded his eyes from the sight of a crying girl.

"Do you honestly think—that's enough to change it!!?"

Right after the brunt of his rage shifted to Athena, after he lowered his fist, he heard the dull sound of metal striking flesh and bone.

"I finally get it."

Blood fell, drip by drip, from his sliced forehead. Yuri had forced his way through and grabbed Elias's arm.

"I...think I hate you."

He put more and more strength into his grasp until he heard a grating sound.

"To be more precise, you really irritate me. Your eyes are always on where I come from, and who my master is. It's as if you can't see me at all. On top of

that, I consider you a complete stranger, yet you just go off and arbitrarily decide my future as if you know everything there is to know about me.”

Yuri glared at Elias as he introduced himself.

“My name...is Yuri Eniastar. I’m not just any mix-blood duelist, and I’m not Reilly Malbork. If you can’t even understand that—”

Yuri recalled the form of a duelist he had admired a decade ago. His master had taught him not only technique and tactics, she imparted to him something far more important: the Iron-blood spirit to never give up.

“—Then I’ll defeat you, and make you understand.”

His hostility and fighting spirit laid bare, he made his war proclamation.

Elias furrowed his brow, ever so slightly. “...Then we’ll have things your way.”

Shaking off Yuri’s hand, he looked at the Proof glimmering on his own left arm. A definitive proof of his strength—the purple glow of Adamant.

“Three days from now...we will duel to kick off the Babel Roulette. This is the duel city...if your will is unshaken, it only makes sense to settle the matter through a duel.”

It would be a format different from a standard duel. Far different from the ones carried out on a daily basis. A battle where convictions, pride, principle, even existence itself could be placed on the line.

“I challenge you to a contractual duel.”

Thrusting out his Proof, Elias firmly glared at Yuri.

“The consequence for losing will be ‘That Yuri Eniastar shall henceforth never set foot in the duel city.’ I won’t let you walk a duelist’s path ever again.”

In the midst of both sides glaring at one another, Athena burst out with a shaking voice.

“You can’t...absolutely not, Yuri!” She grabbed Yuri’s shoulder and frantically attempted to dissuade him. “If you lose the contracted duel...you really will never be able to fight here again! You won’t be able to do what you love most in the world!”

Fram calmly stared at a motionless Elias. “Elias...you’re taking this way too far for a joke.”

“There’s no way I would present a contractual duel as a joke. It’s up to the boy whether he accepts or not, and I will allow him to offer any consequence he wants. I am undertaking considerable risk myself. We are on even footing.”

A contractual duel was a match where the consequences of the outcome were decided beforehand. They would go into effect no matter what, and once accepted could never be overturned. The details of the contract would be carved into the Proof, and the defeated party couldn’t take any action against them.

If Yuri lost—he really wouldn’t be able to set foot in Babel again. It would spell the end of him as a duelist.

“If you really wish to continue on as a mix-blood duelist—show me your resolve,” said Elias as he stared straight at Yuri.

“Ah...you finally looked at me!” Yuri smiled and held his left hand high.

A dull-blue Iron Proof. The Proof he needed to continue to walk and live as a duelist. That was the very reason why he couldn’t run away. If he held beliefs he could never abandon, he had to fight and settle the matter with a duel.

“Yuri Eniastar accepts the contractual duel.” He turned his Proof to Elias with a firm resolve.

Upon seeing that, Elias peacefully closed his eyes. “Very well. Then state your terms—”

“No, I don’t need any terms on my side; or rather, I really don’t care.”

“...What?”

“If I had to say—please don’t run from our fight.”

Elias was lost for words, so Yuri thrust up his fist.

“I’ll fight with all my might, and I’ll defeat you!”

Yuri had no doubt in his own victory. Not for a second did he think he would ever be defeated. Therefore, he didn’t have to worry about leaving the duel

city. The only thought he had toward Elias was that he would definitely defeat him.

One look at his face, and Elias turned his back.

“...Then I’ll use all my might to kill you,” he concluded, before slowly disappearing into the forest beyond the beach.

For a while, no one said a word. Only the rustle of the leaves broke the silence. And...eventually, after a deep sigh, Athena wiped her eyes.

“Yuri, you really are an idiot...” But there was no bitterness to be found on her face. “And that’s why Big Sis wants to do everything to support you!”

With the remnants of tears still on her cheeks, Athena made a clear, cheerful smile.

“Good grief...if it’s three days, we’ll have to work even harder than before.” Fram sighed.

“Then I’ll work harder than anyone!”

“Of course you will. More importantly...Elias is a high-ranking Adamant. Duelists on that tier are on a different level, and he’s strong enough to garner attention even within his own rank.”

Fram spoke the plain truth, simply because she knew it to be a fact. Ten years ago, Elias had come out victorious against a great many opponents in the Babel Roulette. He had continued to fight after that, only growing stronger in the process.

“Can you still say you’re going to win?”

“Yes, I’ll definitely win,” Yuri answered, brimming with confidence. “What’s more...I just thought of one way I might be able to surpass Mr. Elias.”

“...Is there really a way?”

“It’s a way the two of you will be completely against. But—” He gripped a fist as he lifted the corners of his mouth. “—As long as there’s a possibility, I don’t mind what means I use.”

There was no falsehood to his words. To that point, Yuri had adopted all

manner of methods for victory. To catch up to his master Reilly, he had efficiently picked up technique in a short period of time, and built his body from the ground up to surpass not only his master, but the other races as well.

“The most efficient learning tool...is pain. Stimulating events that come with pain and suffering are naturally burned into the brain. That’s why they’re several times more valuable than normal experience.”

Yuri himself knew better than anyone that there was no proper way to go about it. Not only had he heard it time and again from his master, he had experienced his own weakness first-hand. That was why...Yuri cast aside any proper thoughts. By throwing away all conventional methods, he had found the one talent that only he possessed.

“If it’s to win—I’ll do anything.”

For in the talent of madness, no one could surpass Yuri Eniastar.

Chapter 4

News of the opening of the Babel Roulette was broadcast across all the continents three days before the event. The proclamation to kick it off would be held in front of the duel city's symbol, Babel Tower, and two duelists would hold an exhibition match as the opening act.

It was understandable that one of the duelists graced with this honor was Elias Crossford. The name of his challenger, however, was unexpectedly Yuri Eniastar.

Three days was more than enough for this information to spread and garner great attention. One duelist's name resounded far and wide as a skilled fighter who had persisted to the end of the last Roulette. Nonetheless, the peculiar nature of his challenger gathered interest in certain circles.

"Hey, I hear Beheading Elias's opponent is a mix-blood."

"Hah? What sort of matchup is that? He'll have his head off in an instant."

"Thing is, they say this mix-blood beat a Silver in his first match. He may be inexperienced, but maybe his skills are the real deal?"

"Oh come on, that has to have been a set-up. I read all about it on the city bulletin."

"Right, right. Just think about it, there's no way a weak mix-blood can win."

"Let's not forget, everyone Adamant and above is on another dimension than us plebs. I wouldn't expect a good fight even if he was a pure blood."

At the circular fighting ring in front of Babel Tower, the gathered spectators loudly disputed their predictions. The majority were critical of Yuri. The weakest mix-blood challenging an Adamant Rank. Any duelist worth their salt understood just how reckless this was.

Rank served as a definite display of a duelist's strength. Among them, the higher ranks—Adamant and above—boasted extraordinary capabilities. They

stood at the top, not only in win rate, but in technique and perseverance as well. After taking on many fierce warriors, passing through more hellscapes than anyone, they secured their victory.

That was precisely why no one seemed worried about the outcome of the match. The winner would be Elias Crossford, that much was a given. The spectators had come to watch for nothing more than morbid curiosity.

“Tsk...not a decent duelist among them.”

On an upper floor of Babel Tower, where only a select few were permitted entry, Velt gazed out the window at the arena plaza, irksomely clicking his tongue.

“Each and every one of them...makin’ a face like ooh, I’m so smart, I know exactly how this match will go down.”

His toxic tone elicited a sluggish response from the demon beside him.

“You’re an Administrator, Velt. You shouldn’t be saying such things.”

“Oh shut it. Wait, Mirka, why are you wearing a uniform of all things?”

“Why, I’m an employee of Babel Tower, don’tcha know? I’m technically here to provide hospitality for one ill-tempered Administrator.”

“Then get me a tea or something.”

“I’ll slaughter you, you smelly middle-aged man.”

“Where did all the hospitality go!?”

“The tea’s been brewed just fine. I’m offering you the freedom to pour it yourself,” Mirka said as she poured the gurgling liquid into her own cup. “But, well, I do feel the same way. We haven’t had any duelists with real backbone these past hundred years. You can’t imagine how boring it’s been.”

“You said it. Good grief, I thought that Elias bastard might be able to cross the line, but he stopped in his tracks ever since that incident with Reilly.”

“I see. So that’s why you sent Yuri at him,” Mirka said, before narrowing her eyes. “But...will Yuri really be able to cross it? Even if he is a candidate chosen by an Administrator, a mix-blood’s shackles are a heavy weight to drag along.”

“What, you think the brat’s gonna lose?”

“Going off statistics alone, the odds would have to be in Elias’s favor. You could look into past records all you want, but at the moment, no mix-blood has ever defeated an Adamant Rank duelist.”

Among the mix-bloods Mirka had seen so far, Reilly Malbork was an aberration that the rest could never hope to reach. Even so, she had never achieved victory against any duelist Adamant or higher. She only ever won against Elias when they were both young and inexperienced. But Elias had grown even stronger these past few years. It was rather self-evident to think it impossible to win against such an opponent.

However—those who had crossed the line saw it differently.

“But...I’m pretty sure Yuri will win.”

“Aah!? So which is it!?”

“Taking only ability into account, Elias will win. However, precisely because Yuri was born a mix-blood, his thought process and experience are different from the other duelists.”

History proved that effort and spirit were not enough to bridge the gap. But it was possible for battles to exceed expectations. A miracle no one could expect. Those at the top understood them as not a coincidence but something one had to grasp for oneself.

“Now, as for how he’s going to seize victory...that’s the interesting part.” Her red eyes turned to the world below, Mirka joyously swirled the tea in her cup. “How about you, Velt? Why do you think Yuri is going to win?”

“I got a gut feeling!!”

“You really are an idiot.”

“That’s the best part about me! No need for all those unnecessary thoughts in battle!!”

“Battle aside, you do have an obligation as an Administrator to select promising people, so we would all very much appreciate if you learned how to explain your reasoning...” Seeing him laugh without a care in the world, Mirka

let out a tired sigh, “But I can see where you’re coming from. You and Yuri are pretty similar in that regard.”

“The brat and me? We’re completely different. He’s a natural-born duelist.”

“...What do you mean?”

As Mirka tilted her head, Velt planted an elbow down on the windowsill. “You know a bit about the Eniastar House, don’t you?”

“Of course I do. They were the first people to ever research mix-bloods, and they accomplished great deeds to ensure mix-bloods were welcomed into Human Tribe society.”

The Eniastars’ achievements could never be understated. They researched how a mix-blood could use their powers, and how these powers could then be put to use in everyday life. Apart from that, they also consulted for and mediated marriage between tribes.

Thanks to their continuous efforts, while it was still well-known that mix-bloods were at a disadvantage in a duel, they were generally regarded as having beneficial abilities and commanded the same rights and respect as everyone else.

Mirka continued, “While their initial plan of creating the strongest duelist failed, they continued preserving their mix-blood and contributing to the world. I see them as a splendid lineage.”

“But they’re maniacs who, in their goal to be the strongest, couldn’t keep it to themselves, dragging all the other tribes into the mix. You think they’re the sort of people who’d suddenly stop trying and start working for the good of the world just because it failed once?”

“But it was a failure, wasn’t it? You can’t really get around that fact.”

“Right. And that’s why—they keep up their research to this very day.”

A duelist who carried multiple Tribe Skills, worthy of the title of strongest. The actual result was a mix-blood, the weakest duelist, and yet...their goal would continue for over a thousand years, never once twisting off its tracks.

“Mirka, do you know who the brat’s mother was?”

“Umm... If the documents are to be trusted, she was a lovely elven woman.”

“I asked her personally. She’s more precisely a dark elf.”

“Dark elf... Aren’t they a belligerent breed with high combat capabilities who can manipulate shadows?”

“That’s right. An aggressive bunch hostile not only toward the other tribes, but even their brethren.”

If it was just his mother, it could be a coincidence. However—coincidence was broken through repetition.

“It’s not just his mother. His Beast Tribe blood harkens back to the vicious minotaur Asterios, and his Spirit Tribe blood comes from the moon spirits who control the mysterious sixth element. The rest of his blood, all of it, comes from subspecies who excel in combat.”

From the moment they set their sights on the top, the Eniastar House never let the mix-blood flame die out. If that wasn’t enough—they continued to mingle with certain exceptional races. Beast, dragon, dwarf, elf, angel, demon, spirit...Yuri had strongly inherited the blood of only those overflowing with fighting spirit and boasting the highest combat capabilities.

In order to prove that their idea of creating a mix-blood was no mistake, the Eniastar House had preserved their lineage for several thousand years, each generation carving in new fighting spirit so the dream would never die. That was what the boy known as Yuri Eniastar had inherited.

“The reason the brat longs to fight isn’t just his innate disposition. The blood flowing through his veins is crying out. That’s why...I, the Human Tribe Administrator, had to select him.”

No sooner had Velt finished his sentence than an ear-rending cry erupted from below. The challenger had appeared...

Yuri walked toward the center of the ring. Not a sliver of tension or fear could be seen on his face. His expression glimmered as his thoughts bounded toward the battle to come.

“Right now, I’m sure his blood is on fire.” Velt chuckled.



A great clamor rose from the fighting ring in front of Babel Tower. It happened as the crowd noticed a certain Elias Crossford leisurely walking toward it. But Elias made no attempts to answer the cheers. He proceeded to the center looking all too disappointed.

Noticing him, Yuri energetically waved his hand and jogged up. "So you've come, Mr. Elias! I'm counting on you today!"

Seeing Yuri respectfully bow his head, Elias narrowed his eyes. "...I should say you did well to not run away, but personally, I would have preferred if you ran and left the duel city behind."

"In that case, I'll say it instead! You did well to not run away!"

Yuri riled him up with a wide smile, sending waves of unrest across the spectators. Their confusion only swelled as both parties took out their Proofs, held them up—and touched them together.

This was the procedure for a contractual duel. To lock Proofs and vow to fight to the last breath.

"Hey...hey, hey, hey! That rookie wants to fight a contractual duel with Elias!"

"Adamant and Iron, for god's sakes! He's got no chance!"

"The terms of the contract are... 'Yuri Eniastar is henceforth forbidden from setting foot in the duel city'...meaning no matter what his rate is, if he loses, the rookie resigns as a duelist!"

"He can't be sane! Why did he accept such an idiotic contract!?"

The words raced like lightning from the mouths of those watching, making their rounds until they had formed a deafening ruckus. Even in the midst of this, the two fighters quietly glared at one another.

"It's getting pretty noisy."

"I've never been one to pay attention to my surroundings. More importantly, there is one thing I need to know." Elias asked through a slight frown, "Why...did you accept this duel?"

Yuri had every right to refuse not only the contract but the duel itself. Admittedly, refusing the duel might shame him as a coward—or at least, that was the norm nowadays—but no one would blame him for refusing the contract. A loss would mean losing something precious. To run to protect what is dear was nothing to be ashamed of.

Despite that, Yuri accepted Elias's contract. His reason for doing so was spelled out with the most joyous of faces.

“Why, because you piss me off.”

“...What?”

“I mean, you always talk about mix-blood this, and mix-blood that, and how it's because my master was a mix-blood or something or another... While you supposedly respect the mix-blooded duelist Reilly, you look down on and despise mix-bloods more than anyone else.” Yuri continued with his same amicable smile, “You say you respect Reilly Malbork, but the truth is you despise mix-bloods. Not only do you try to resolve this discrepancy with selfish, self-serving sophistry, you say some nonsense about it being for my sake and try to steal my future away from me—I just thought I didn't want to lose to someone so mistaken and misguided.”

Elias's expression warped. “You'll wish you never said that, whelp.” His canines bared, Elias's sharp glare emanated alongside a murderous aura. “I thought I would kill you in one blow to spare you the pain, but...I've changed my mind.”

Elias grasped the hilt of his sword as he took his stance as a duelist.

“I'll torture you to death—slowly and painfully.”

A bizarre malice exuded from every pore on his body. An intensity great enough to bend any foe to his will. Taking in all these new sensations, Yuri's eyes widened and sparkled.

“Wonderful, so this is the real Mr. Elias!!”

A formidable foe before him, he quickly and energetically drew his black sword. He showed no fear or apprehensions.

“Then let’s both fight to our fullest!”

His confident proclamation opened the curtain on the match as both sides lifted their Proofs.

Yuri took a strong step in even before his surroundings were completely sepia. A swift surprise attack making full use of his small build. Straightforward, an upfront thrust that could be taken as foolish.

“Fool. You think you can take the Beast Tribe head-on with a Human Tribe’s physical capabilities—”

Elias shifted his large curved sword in accordance with Yuri’s movements. He simply had to hold it out to catch the blade, his stance ready to snap it right out of the boy’s hands with the next motion. Or so it should have been.

“—I thought you’d start with a block!!”

The moment Yuri slipped into his midst and forcefully thrust his black sword—Elias’s curved blade was shot backward. The black sword, turned off its original trajectory, carved a shallow gash into Elias’s side.

The cut was inconsequential, but there was something else that brought shock to Elias’s face. Even if it was only for an instant, a beastman’s physical might lost to a human.

“Now what was that...about a Human Tribe’s physical capabilities?”

The moment he saw Yuri’s smile right below his head, Elias half-instinctively shot out a knee.

“Don’t let...it get to your head!!”

Elias’s knee caught Yuri in the pit of his stomach, blowing his petite body a considerable ways back. Yet, once again, Elias furrowed his brow. The sensation was off. It felt more like kicking steel than it did bone.

Unable to leave this off-feeling be, he carefully inspected Yuri. “Some sort of protector...no. I definitely felt the texture of skin.”

Yuri gave him no answers. There was no visible armor on his torso, and the lack of any contour over his slender chest made the possibility of plating under his clothing exceptionally low. Elias weighed this sensation against his past

experiences, in an attempt to identify it.

“...I see. The Dragon Tribe’s steel bones.”

Given his wealth of experience, the conclusion was simple enough to reach. With a basis in that theory, he began systematically inferring the other abilities Yuri had exhibited.

“Then...that power and speed must be the skill of the Beast Tribe.”

Normally, he should be shocked just seeing a mix-blood actually using a Tribe Skill. However, Elias showed no unrest. He would not make such a blunder in the midst of battle. By comparing his opponent to his own experiences, he calmly discerned their weakness.

“You have my admiration, to be able to use the skill of another tribe with your body...but, from what I can see, you’re not using it through proper means.”

Once again, Yuri offered no response. However—orbs of sweat oozed from his forehead. Elias could tell that Yuri didn’t have much difficulty pushing him back, but he could hear the intense, hastened beat of the boy’s heart go off like an alarm bell. The human body was crying out due to movements beyond human capacity.

Athena’s training allowed Yuri to use the Tribe Skill without first damaging his own body. However...that didn’t erase the damage done by the skill itself.

His overexerted bones and muscles jarred and creaked; blood raced around his body at such high temperatures it felt as though it would burst out of him. If he lost focus for only a moment, he could see his body falling apart.

Even so, Yuri’s smile thrived.

“Well no matter what happens...I can’t quite lose to you.” It was a power a Human Tribe body could not endure, but that was not enough to sway the human known as Yuri Eniastar. That was not enough to sway the Iron-blood spirit passed down by his master. “So rather than me...how about you worry about yourself!?”

He moved his screaming body, the ground below him crumbling underneath his powerful steps. The Beast Tribe’s physical abilities: arms and legs greater

than any of the other tribes. Once again, he slipped into Elias's midst, his sword flying diagonally upward.

“—What idiocy.”

With those cold words, the black blade was this time properly caught by the edge of Elias's sword. The next instant, a blinding silver unraveled right before Yuri's eyes.

“Even if you can use Tribe Skills, yours are no more than a sham. Surely you realize they are clearly inferior to the true Tribe Skills we possess...and your power could never hope to surpass us.”

Nine silver tails spread far and wide from his back. Crimson eyes embodied his rage.

“—Release.”

Immediately after a quiet murmur—Yuri took a blunt-force blow to the flank. This wasn't a swipe from the sword...it was executed with the massive sheath that had been on Elias's back. Without any chance to react, Yuri took the full force of the blow, forcing his body into an L-shape.

“.....!!”

Enduring the dull pain, he used the momentum of the strike to leap back, correcting his posture before he hit the ground. Thanks to a perk of the Dragon Tribe, every bone in his body was covered in a sturdy, bony tissue. As the name literally implied, steel bones gave his bones the hardness of steel, making it so no slash could slice all the way through. This made it impossible to sever him in one swipe.

For this reason, Elias chose not a slash but a battering with his scabbard to inflict internal damage to the organs beyond the bones.

“...You really are strong, Mr. Elias...!!” Yuri said, as he analyzed the damage inflicted on him. He quietly took in a deep breath to get his respiratory system back in the right rhythm.

The wariness in Elias's eyes grew thick. “...The fact that the damage was lighter than I anticipated means you're still hiding something.”

“Who can say... Care to find out?”

His movements no different from before, Yuri closed the distance between them. For a fighter on Elias’s level, if he knew slashes wouldn’t work, he would immediately have a backup plan. Fully expecting this, Yuri prepared his own follow-up.

The moon spirit magic he had created in his training with Fram—Lunar Cycle. It was a magic that gradually restored his injuries to their previous state, and as long as he didn’t suffer a lethal blow, Yuri could slowly but surely restore himself without a burden on his psyche.

“Even if they each fall short individually...put them all together, and you have something strong.”

With the Release Skill of the Beast Tribe, he could weave blows that exceeded his capabilities in with his normal attacks. With the steel bones of the Dragon Tribe, he could restrict his foe’s slashes and greatly cut down the damage received. And with his damage kept to a minimum, injuries would be automatically healed, allowing Yuri to stand as many times as needed.

“I’m not going to fall—until I defeat you.”

In exchange, a sharp pain jolted through his entirety, but Yuri would never fold to it. His fighting spirit kept his body in motion.

But...as Elias looked at him, the emotion that seeped into his expression was disappointment. Nothing more, nothing less.

“You seem to be misunderstanding something.” His words were ever so calm and quiet.

Elias was right in front of Yuri the same moment the waves of his voice reached him. Yuri could hardly be expected to react on sight. He didn’t even feel a hint of him preparing to move, his legs so fast they left everything back in the dust.

“I told you I would torment you to death.”

The tip of the scabbard stabbed into his solar plexus, and forcefully smacked Yuri into the ground.

“Kaah...!?”

He spat up the contents of his lungs as he tried to roll to avoid the next blow. However, with the scabbard pinning him down, he was unable to move an inch. If that wasn’t bad enough, Yuri began to pick up the changes happening in his body. His heart pulsed like crazy, and his freedom left him as if he had been paralyzed.

“I once fought a duelist who could restore any injury taken. It looks like this will work on you too.”

The impact sent his heart into a frenzy, rendering him unable to move. Yuri had once used a similar method to deliver an impact to Haring’s heart and forcefully bring it to a stop. In contrast, Elias used a shock to reliably seal his movement and abilities.

Yuri never revealed what exactly he was working with. He was using skills unknown to Elias, multiple ones at that, and yet, by comparing past experiences, Elias could discern the proper ways to counter.

“Perhaps you have multiple abilities to use, but if I look at each of them individually, they are merely degraded versions of abilities I’ve seen before. In which case...I should simply crush them one at a time.”

As if to enact precisely what he had stated, Elias planted a firm stomp into Yuri’s chest. The pressure on his lungs prevented him from even breathing satisfactorily.

“To struggle as a mix-blood with such paltry powers...how conceited can you get?”

Elias’s words resembled a curse. He next lowered the sole of his boot at Yuri’s face. The dull sound of the impact resonated with the sharp snap of the bones in his nose.

“If that’s all you needed, she would have surmounted it. She was far more worthy than you.”

His heel slammed into Yuri’s face again and again, treading over his will. He recalled the despair from when he watched that figure leaving the duel city, slamming in all his regrets.

“A wall she could never cross—then you never stood a chance.”

As his field of vision turned red with blood, Yuri watched Elias’s bitterly twisted face. Grief, respect, regret, remembrance, longing, guilt—an expression of various emotions at war.

Though Yuri had stopped moving, Elias’s foot had not. He stomped on Yuri’s palms, shattered his kneecaps with his heel, crushed his abdomen, slammed down on his throat, and kicked his head. Again and again. Over and over. The sound of flesh smacking and bones shattering resounded through the plaza. Such gruesomeness had the spectators at a loss for words.

Normally, the act of needlessly tormenting an opponent in a duel was looked down upon, but the spectators couldn’t even raise any cries of criticism. Overwhelmed by the ghastly look that crossed Elias’s face—not a single one spoke.

And...his shoulders rising and falling with each breath, Elias finally pulled his foot back.

“It’s the end of the line...Yuri Eniastar.”

Through his hazy eyes, Yuri looked at the object above his head. The white blade of a sword glimmering as it caught the light of the sun.

“You were unable to surpass the walls of a mix-blood.”

His voice waxed over with pity, Elias stabbed the blade at Yuri’s heart.



Yuri silently drifted through the endless darkness. Neither his consciousness nor his senses seemed distinct enough to be real. And, bit by bit—a familiar scene surfaced.

“—How about we have a duel, Yuri?” Reilly’s familiar voice echoed in his ears. “We’ve held plenty of mock battles, but this will be your first real duel, won’t it?”

It was finally the day Yuri greeted the Human Tribe’s age of adulthood. For someone to become a duelist, they would first have to reach their designated age of maturity.

Indeed, Yuri could now set forth on the path of his dreams—if only Reilly hadn't added on an additional condition.

"I'm sorry, but I can't just send you off to the duel city. Now that Velt's entrusted you to me, I need to do one last test of your capabilities," she said as she thrust her beloved black sword out at him. "If you want to go to the duel city so badly, you'll have to defeat me first."

Their conversation happened that morning, but now the sun was already beginning its dip beyond the horizon, casting the madder sky in ultramarine.

"...You really don't know when to give up, Yuri!" Reilly's impatient voice rose through the sounds of clashing blades.

"Then I got that from you, Master...!" Yuri choked out as his wounds accumulated. His left elbow was bent the wrong direction; his left leg was a bluish purple from a blunt strike. The puncture wound in his abdomen wouldn't stop bleeding.

Even in such a state, Yuri wouldn't let the battle end.

"And if I beat you...I get to go to the duel city!! How could I possibly lose!?"

A step in the direction of his dreams. He couldn't let himself be held back here.

"But...it's still too soon for you. If you go the way you are, you won't win against the others. You understand that, don't you?"

Her persuasive words were overlaid with an even more persuasive kick to the face. But still, Yuri did not go down. He fought tooth and nail against his fading consciousness, concentrating all his might on bracing his feet and keeping them on the earth.

"I don't want to understand that...!"

He immediately swung his sword at her eyes, but Reilly simply took a step back, and the tip fruitlessly flourished through thin air.

If it was any consolation, the distance of his blade to her was much shorter than the last time he attempted this. The fight simply drew on and on, and Yuri stood no matter what damage he took, forcing Reilly close to the limit of her

own stamina as well.

“No one knows who’s gonna win, and who’s gonna lose!”

He stepped in after her, unleashing the strongest thrust he could muster. His resolute display was immediately followed by a shrill clang. A sword was sent flying high into the air.

Reilly leaned down to match his eye level. “But that—makes it your loss.”

In the midst of her proclamation, her sword pierced through Yuri’s heart. The cold sensation of metal was gradually erased by the gush of his blood.

Reilly’s soft words reached his ear. “The stronger one wins, that’s how battle works.”

And...

He forcefully chomped into her unguarded windpipe.

“.....Hah?” A short exclamation before a dark-red liquid overflowed from her mouth.

“If the stronger one wins—you would have never won at all, Master.”

His face was splattered red with Reilly’s blood as he spat out the chunk of flesh he had torn away.

The faded world reverted the moment Reilly’s body slowly hit the ground. Now that the duel was over, Yuri was soon to join her.

“Dear God...winning your first duel by biting out my throat... You’re not a dog, you know...”

“Ahahah! I’ll do anything to win!”

Led along by Yuri’s jolly laugh, Reilly gave a wry smile of her own.

“But hey, that’s why I took you as my apprentice.” She reached out her hand, gently stroking his head. “We mix-bloods are the weakest. We must always fight foes far superior to ourselves. That’s precisely why you must never give up on victory. That feeling is the one thing that can never lose to anyone else.”

Reilly had forged on with that will as a mix-blooded duelist. Starving for victory more than anyone, she had stolen a win from a great many combatants.

“You must never forget that feeling.”

With a soft chuckle, she wrapped Yuri’s fingers around the hilt of her black sword. The sword embedded with her hopes and dreams. Yuri firmly clenched it to carry them on.

“So, Yuri, how did it feel to beat someone stronger than you?” Reilly asked, as one who had stood before him as the barrier going by the name of ‘master.’

“It was...really fun!!” Yuri once again confirmed there was no greater joy in life.



The plaza was silent.

Elias’s sword had pierced Yuri’s heart, and everyone waited for the moment the duel would end.

The emotion this scene brought to the spectators was relief. Such ghastly deeds had met their end; the match was settled with a decisive blow to the heart. Elias himself knew that one blow was the last.

“...That’s right.” The clipped words escaped from Yuri’s throat. “I’m going to lose...? Why do you get to decide that?”

A fearsome volume of blood pouring from his chest, Yuri grabbed Elias’s sword edge with his right hand and lifted himself up. His defeat was already certain, and yet his will to fight had not crumbled.

“Your spirit is commendable, but...it’s over.”

Even if he could stand, there was little he could do to stave off death with a pierced heart. Soon the Field would dispel and the world would regain its color.

It was only then that Elias realized something was off. Sure, it took a little time to die from a pierced heart, but even so, this was far too long.

“I can’t miss like this,” Yuri said with another step forward. He pressed his body down the length of the blade stuck through his chest. “If you can’t stand someone, give them a good whack!!”

His fist viciously jut out into Elias’s body.

“.....Kah!?”

Spitting up blood, Elias crashed into the ground, unable to make any attempts to recover his footing. Though his brain was jolted by the impact, he frantically kicked it into gear to search out an answer. Nothing came up.

There was no possible way Yuri in his current state could fire off an attack great enough to force a beastman under Release to yield.

“Aah...that was refreshing.” Yuri smiled and stood, watching Elias writhe on the ground. “A mix-blood’s the weakest? The battle’s over before it began? ...To hell with that, why does everyone else get to decide that?”

Unsteady as he was, Yuri never fell to his knees.

“The only one who can decide my battles—that’s me.”

He stood calm and composed, as if to embody those very words. The entirety of his existence was on display, proving they were no fabrications. And, with all to see, Elias finally understood the mechanism that allowed Yuri to exhibit power greater than his caliber.



“You...used your own body...as an Armament...!?”

The Human Tribe Skill Armament allowed a weapon to take the burden of the body, granting its users the abilities stored in the gemstones embedded in them. But perhaps the opposite was possible as well. By taking the brunt of the load directly, using his body as an Armament, he had amplified the effect of the Tribe Skills he was born with.

An ability without a name. If he had to call it something, perhaps Tribal Armament. A power granted only to mix-bloods.

“But if it cost you an arm...you should have used it to take me out.”

That previous punch was a telling blow; it had inflicted terribly severe damage. But it wasn’t nearly enough to bring Elias down. His will wasn’t fragile enough to crumble from one hit.

“You were close...whelp.”

Yuri was already at his limit. Not only had he sacrificed his left arm, he had been perpetually using his passive healing magic to close his wounds while the blade was in his heart. He didn’t have the strength left to fight. It would be over the moment his healing didn’t make it in time. If his head left his body, he would undoubtedly die.

“You won’t get another shot!”

With those words, Elias kicked at the ground with a dash of ungodly speed the eye could never hope to follow. Yuri wouldn’t be able to avoid it. The horrid remains of his left arm wouldn’t be able to block.

Knowing that, Elias took a confident swipe from the left—his sword came to a complete stop with a shrill, metallic pang.

“—If once doesn’t work, I’ll hit you as many times as it takes.”

Elias’s thoughts ceased upon witnessing something as absurd as his slash being blocked by the sturdy, pure-white exposed bone jutting out from Yuri’s elbow.

“Release Armament.” With a quiet murmur, Yuri gathered strength in his nonexistent left hand. His arm slid the length of the blade as he lurched down

like a spring storing power.

“Hardened Hoof!!”

Yuri swung his left arm with an ear-rending scream. The sharp, exposed bone stabbed into Elias’s flank. A piercing blow that tore through flesh, the momentum of it sent Elias’s body flying in the air with a trail of red.

Inconceivable. This was the only word to cross Elias’s mind.

Yuri’s body was already at its limit. But even in his current state, he had used his left hand again.

“Hahah... Looks like I really can’t use my arm after the second shot.” Yuri laughed dryly as he gazed at his now-absent shoulder.

This was madness. Using an injured arm to fire an all-or-nothing attack would bring unimaginable pain. This much was self-evident, and yet Yuri didn’t hesitate. He completely disregarded the damage received, making aberrant choices simply because it seemed effective at the time.

“You’re...you’re mental...!!”

“What are you talking about? Crazy or not, the one who wins is right. That’s the law here.”

Missing an arm, swaying like a vengeful ghost, Yuri kept on going. Without pause, he faced his foe to seize his victory.

“Our battle...isn’t over yet.” His smile never fading, he readily threw himself back into the fight. “Just try and kill me, Elias Crossford.”

Elias’s body froze over the moment he heard those words. He remembered this sensation. Long ago, when he fought Reilly for the first time, Elias experienced true fear for the first time in his life. Faced with her iron will that would never fold to anything he could muster.

“.....Hah.”

And, the moment he realized this, he couldn’t help but chuckle. Blood streamed down the edge of his mouth as he faced the lunatic before his eyes.

“Then how about you try and kill me, Yuri Eniastar!” Elias shouted, snapping

himself out of his daze. He readied his curved sword and closed the distance. His ungodly slash flew to sever Yuri's neck.

Yuri didn't fall.

"Ga...aaaaaaaaaaah!!" With a beastly roar, he forcefully parried the blade with the black sword strangled in his right hand.

Elias immediately reacted. He let his sword, sealed by the black blade, leave his hand, allowing him to slip through Yuri's guard and deliver a powerful kick to his torso.

An impact elevated to its very limit through Release. It had unmistakably captured its mark, shattering the steel bones protecting the boy's body.

Yuri didn't fall.

"It's...not over yet!"

After a bit of self-encouragement, Yuri clenched his right hand around the black sword that one might call the proof of a mix-blood. The sword passed down by his master. The sword that had never left his hand in this fight.

Planting a powerful foot into the ground, Yuri looked straight ahead. All his master taught him, and all he believed in. As if to smash it all into his foe, Yuri thrust the sword, honest and straightforward to an idiotic degree.

"Hardened Hoof!" A thrust with everything on the line. A strike to pierce through the wall that stood before him.

The impact from the attack caused a dust cloud to scatter far and wide. The air shook, fearfully cowering behind the dust to guard its sight from whatever bleak reality lay beyond it.

The crowd watched with a unanimous gulp. Not a single soul would taint it with words as they anxiously waited with tightly clenched fists. What was the result—and what would come after that?

A long time passed. The dust cloud was in no hurry to clear, but eventually, two shadows could be made out standing at the center. The figures were still, one slumped down, the other standing tall. Finally, the dust settled.

On one side was Yuri, both his legs pulverized, now his right arm gone as well.

And on the other side stood Elias, a large hole opened clean through his chest.

“...Hah... To think you’re still alive in that state... You’re a real monster, you know that?” Elias felt his pulse weaken as he looked down at Yuri, now no more than a torso.

After essentially being torn to pieces, Yuri Eniastar was still moving. He glared at Elias, shifting his head in an attempt to rock himself closer. It was as if his body wouldn’t stop advancing until the fight was over.

“You resemble your master in the strangest ways...but the way you fight is the complete opposite.” Elias closed his eyes to clear away the shadow of an old friend he saw over the boy.

For a brief instant, the power of his Hardened Hoof let him surpass Elias physically. By using that power on his legs, he had exceeded Elias’s speed, and by using his sword this time instead of his fist, he had eliminated the option of blocking with a blade or scabbard.

It was a desperate blow with everything on the line. Had he missed, Yuri wouldn’t be left with the means to fight. It was quite literally an all-or-nothing gamble. And that was precisely...what allowed Yuri to break the wall. He continued pressing forward without ever folding.

“It’s your win, Yuri Eniastar.”

And by the time he spoke the last syllable, Elias’s pulse had stopped entirely.

A prismatic brush colored the sepia world. Now that a victor was decided, their two injured bodies reverted back to how they were before the battle began.

Elias remained on his knees, unmoving, in the center of the ring. And...while he was breathing heavily, Yuri’s two feet were back on the ground.

“...It reached...”

Yuri stared at the sky above, reaching his hand out at the all-encompassing blue. Only the sensation of victory remained in his hazy consciousness.

“I...I won...”

This was the spectacle that awaited a duelist who fought with his all to the

very end. The scenery that awaited the duelist he had envisioned himself out to be. Eyes narrowed at the blinding sight, Yuri burst into a cheerful smile.

“That means...I wasn’t wrong!”

At his last word, Yuri collapsed onto the ground.



The duel was over, yet the spectators maintained their silence. No one found the right words to say. A mix-blood duelist had defeated an Adamant rank. This much was clear, but how exactly were they supposed to react?

One duelist had surpassed his limits. That moment when he showed them a world they could have never anticipated still sent shivers down their spines.

“Yuri...won...”

Athena’s befuddled voice was followed by a torrent of tears.

“Yuri won!! He won, did you see, Fram!? He won!”

She needed to make sure she wasn’t dreaming. She embraced Fram beside her, who softly patted her head and nodded along.

“Why, of course he won. That child...worked hard for this.”

A soft look on her face, Fram gazed over Yuri’s collapsed form. Yuri had tried out whatever he could this past week. To what extent he could draw out his traits, how many attacks he could fire from the same body part, how far he could push his maximum output, how long he could keep up his enhancements, how long it took to heal his injuries, how well he could move while injured—

He chipped away at his body and soul to tackle each barrier one at a time. Through a mix of them all, he had surpassed the wall of mix-blood.

“Yeah...he worked really hard...!!”

Seeing Athena burst into tears like a child, Fram continued patting her on the head. “After all that, I’m sure he’s simply exuberant.”

Yuri had passed out in the center of the ring. Even now, his left arm jutted straight out from his body. To erase any doubt that he was the victor, his smile refused to die from where he lay.

And while those in the plaza watched him curiously—

“Heya! Did you get an eyeful of that, duelists!!?”

A voice through a megaphone resounded across the silent ring. The voice caused them to unanimously look up. To the top floor of Babel Tower...to the Administrator Velt.

“It ain’t just everyone gathered here; you lot watching the broadcast, you listen up too,” Velt prefaced before addressing every continent of the world. “Right now, you’re all far too weak. You don’t fight because you can’t win, because you don’t have enough rage, because you think you’re not going to rise in the ranks anyway. For such petty reasons, you fight only safe duels. Such boring duels... Haven’t you grown tired of them yet?”

In a low voice, Velt spoke to chastise his charges. And yet, this elicited no audible objections. Those who saw the fight quietly lent their ears.

“Listen up, the limit’s such a boring word to restrict yourself by. No need to imagine the likes of what’ll happen if you lose...just keep your eyes on victory, and fight!!”

His words resonated strongly in an attempt to rouse every duelist.

“The Creator of all people prepared such a damn fun place for all of us! Then why not put on a show for ‘em? Fight with all you got!!”

As his words continued to turn, his face shifted to a smile as innocent as the boy’s.

“Aim for the top—try and beat us Administrators!!”

These words caused the excitement of those in the plaza to boil over. The gruff cries of duelists spread across the duel city in its entirety. The broadcasts propagated this fervor to the eight continents of the eight tribes.

As duelists, as those who came and longed for battle, they were the ones who found joy in fighting with the title of strongest on the line.

“With the power vested in me as an Administrator—I hereby open the Babel Roulette!!”

On Velt’s call, the enthusiasm spread like an explosion. And...the battle to

determine the strongest had begun.

Final Chapter

The absolute summit of one of the Eight Tribes, Administrator Velt, declared the opening of the Babel Roulette. It wasn't only the duel city; this would surely be a hot topic all over the world. At the same time, another spicy tidbit spread across the continents: The mix-blooded duelist, Yuri Eniastar.

While a mix-blood, he had reached a point where he could use Tribe Skills. While a mix-blood, he triumphed over the Adamant, the Beheading Elias. Their duel broadcast racked up ludicrous viewership, and even now the archived footage continued to be replayed incessantly.

A fire had been lit in the hearts of many a duelist. Seeing Yuri exceed his limit and fight on, these duelists were roused to polish themselves, and resolved to participate in the Roulette for a chance at being the top dog.

An unprecedented number of people registered for the event, while new duelists continued to flood into the city. And, as the curtain opened on a new battle—the boy at the eye of the hurricane, Yuri, was tied up on a bed.

“Erk... If you could be so very kind... I’m fine already...”

What’s more, he was weeping with a futon wrapped tightly around his body.

“Definitely not! You can’t get up until your Big Sis says it’s okay!”

“...I never thought it would come to this.”

Athena rebuked him with crooked eyebrows, while Fram let out a tired sigh. His wounds from the duel were reverted the moment the Field came undone. This was a little different from healing, *per se*; rather than injuries being healed, they were just set to however bad they were before the duel began.

However, the circumstances were quite different when it came to Yuri. By incessantly breaking his brain’s limiter against Elias, he had forced his body to exhibit strength beyond its physical bounds. As a result, his uninhibited state would now break out in daily life as well.

“The door, the table, the cutlery, the floor, the walls...what else was there?”

“Don’t forget what he did to the bed and bath too!”

Hole-ridden floors, cracks running down the walls, crushed window sills—the various fragments scattered along the floor, and countless other travesties to behold.

“Hah... My house is on the road to ruin...”

“I’m really sorry, Ms. Mirka...”

“At this point, your only real option is to take responsibility and become my bride...”

“Wait, I’m a boy, you know!”

“Oh, you’re cute. You can probably go either way!”

Mirka drooled liberally as she stuck up her thumb. Fram, meanwhile, ignored her, and slapped a hand against Yuri’s forehead.

“Anyhow, stay put until your brain learns how to work properly again.”

“Urgh... I want to duel...”

“You have to stay still! It’s important to rest your body!”

“Oh, Athena said something decent for once.”

“I’m always decent!”

“Well, there’s two months until the Roulette starts for real. We’re given ample time to register teams and gather members, so there’s no need to hurry for now,” Fram said as she pointed at the Proof by his pillow.

A Proof that glimmered...the green of Beryl.

By defeating Elias, Yuri’s rate increased by a large margin. He rose from Iron to Beryl as his position in the duelist rankings shot up drastically. According to Mirka, he had apparently set a historic record with the speed at which he climbed the ranks.

“For the time being, Yuri’s become a recognizable duelist. The footage of his duel with Elias is gaining popularity, so I’m sure he’ll get a considerable payout

of fight money.”

“Ah, you’re right! Then, I can’t intrude on Ms. Mirka forever, so how about I go look for a room to—”

“Definitely not! Big Sis gets the feeling you’re just saying that to go out and pick fights!”

“Rather, the way you are, you’re just going to be kicked out of any room you find.”

“With Yuri, I just might end up forgiving everything...”

“.....I see.”

Yuri let his head fall into the pillow out of resignation.

“Aight! Now that that’s settled, I’ll go and buy dinner!”

“Then perhaps I should tag along. What are you going to do, Mirka?”

“I need to drop by an acquaintance’s to get the room fixed up. Maybe I should put in an order for sturdy materials he won’t break too easily.”

“Alright, then Yuri. You stay here, and stay low.”

“Yes...understood.”

The three of them removed the door—split in two—from its hinges as they made their way out.

Yuri was left alone, and he found himself muttering to himself for no reason in particular.

“I really have...become a duelist.”

He had always dreamed of becoming one. He set out to be the strongest duelist, one that would never lose to anyone. And...his hand had finally reached the first rung of the ladder. He gripped his fist as the feeling of accomplishment washed over him yet again—his thoughts were interrupted as a light knocking came from the doorway.

“My apologies. Is Yuri Eniastar... What are you doing?”

“...Beg your pardon. If you could please get me out of this.”

“I see. It must have been Athena.”

“I guess you’re not her brother for nothing.”

Elias shook his head upon seeing the futon wrapped around Yuri. Once his binding was undone, the two of them ceremoniously sat on the floor, across from one another.

“How are you feeling now? It does appear that the room is a mess.”

“Ahahah... It seems I can’t quite control my strength anymore.”

“Hmm. You mean to say, you can no longer turn off your tribal traits.”

“You’re quick on the uptake...”

“It is important for a duelist to make deductions based on the situation,” he indifferently answered, before lowering his head.

“I must apologize to you, Yuri Eniastar.” He spoke pensively, as if thinking aloud would help him sort through his emotions. “Somewhere in my heart...I definitely looked down on the existence that is a mix-blood.”

The reason his friend had left the city, in lament, despair, and disappointment... Surely it was because when she was at the end of the rope, she could no longer defeat Elias by virtue of being a mix-blood. As a friend who respected her, Elias had no choice but to see it this way. He didn’t want to believe by any means that she lacked the resolve or the effort.

“Even now, I don’t think Reilly lacked drive. I refuse to believe she didn’t push herself hard enough. However...to equate the two of you would be an insult to you both.”

He hadn’t seen Yuri Eniastar as a duelist in his own right.

“Once again, allow me to apologize for this courtesy.”

“O-Oh, no, don’t worry about it! I said all sorts of rude things before the duel as well.”

He shook his head from side to side before hurriedly turning back to Elias.

“Also...there’s something I have to tell you about my master.”

“...About Reilly?”

"Yes. My master did not desire death as a duelist out of despair."

The Reilly Malbork Yuri knew had not left the city stained in disappointment and despair. She had chosen to step back from active duty to raise a disciple. But there was a different reason Reilly sought out death.

"My master often spoke of you, Mr. Elias. 'He's always got this grumpy look on his face, but truth be told, he's a delicate guy who always looks out for me,' she said."

A friend who had studied and fought alongside him. Precisely because she understood him better than anyone, Reilly knew that her leaving the duel city would weigh heavily on Elias's mind.

That was why Reilly chose death and left without a word.

"I want him to just forget about me and start thinking about himself," is what she said."

Elias included, her teammates had done so much to support her. She knew all too well that she had become a burden to them. For this reason, Reilly had to choose death. Indeed, if she was no longer a duelist, she would become a loser —a worthless existence destined to be forgotten.

In order for her comrades to forget about her and fight freely, Reilly Malbork had died as a duelist. That was the best way to part with her friends, the most she could do for them. At least, that's how it was in the mind of one terribly awkward fighter.

"When I heard that, I told her, 'You really are awkward, aren't you, Master,' and, 'We got so close in the duels, and yet, it was way too embarrassing to face them straight and say goodbye,' she said. And so—"

Though he was about to go on about Reilly, Yuri suddenly stopped himself.

"Yeah...when she was so resourceful in a duel, I often wondered how she was always stumbling through everything else," Elias said, hanging his head. "There's no way someone like that could have understood how we felt." With every word that came out of him, a thin tear uneventfully rolled down his cheek. "There was no way we could ever forget about Reilly."

They had fought together, chasing one another's back. The fun days of battle they spent, those memories would never disappear as long as he lived.

"She's an idiot—it's as if I never understood that."

And Elias laughed as if the devil had left him. He smiled without a care in the world, like the spikes stretching him thin had vanished. After quietly wiping away his tears, Elias took on a more serious expression.

"Eniastar, can I count on you to pass on a message next time you see Reilly?"

"Err, a message?"

"Quit trying to act cool, dumbass. I demand an apology for leaving without a word."

"Ahahah...got it. I'll give it word for word."

Entrusted with a message ten years in the making, Yuri gave a wry smile and nodded. The two of them shared a laugh when— "Aah! Eli! What are you doing to Yuri!?" Athena, back with Fram, marched up in a huff. "Let me guess, you're making fun of him again!"

"No, I was just—"

"And you even took off his restraints!"

"I'm more worried about my little sister's thought process that led her to restrain someone with a futon."

"Ah, God, I hate you, Eli! I'm not talking to you until tomorrow!"

"I see, a very lenient time period."

While the two of them broke into an incoherent exchange, Fram cautiously tugged on Elias's sleeve.

"Elias. If you came to apologize, you must have brought a dessert or two."

"I see you never change, Aizberg."

"If you didn't come bearing gifts, offer up some advice about the Babel Roulette. Then we'll call it even," Fram said with a shrug, prompting Elias to remember why he was there in the first place.

“That’s right, Eniastar. You should make a team with yourself as the leader.”

“I-I’m the leader!?”

“Correct. The fame and strength of the team leader directly influences how willing people will be to join you. While Athena and Aizberg are both popular, at the moment you are a duelist known across the continents.”

“You do have a point, but...”

While Yuri crossed his arms and mulled, Athena’s face went into full bloom.

“Nice, I like the sound of that! A team made by Yuri sounds fun!”

“If we leave it to Athena, I get the feeling she’ll just pick up anyone who asks, and I find socialization to be a right pain. Yuri’s probably our best bet.”

“Err, Fram, aren’t you just shoving your trouble onto me...”

“I never said that.” She sullenly turned to face the other way, but it was certainly difficult to imagine her assertively trying to recruit people.

Eventually, at the end of his mulling...Yuri energetically lifted his head.
“...Understood! I’ll do it!”

“Hooray! Let’s all join the Babel Roulette together!”

“I’m somewhat counting on you, leader.”

“Hey, make sure the two of you pull your weight as well!”

“Aye, sir! Big Sis will give it her all!”

“Not too much, I hope. You’ll tire everyone out.”

The three made a ruckus, discussing the birth of a new team. After reflecting a bit on this familiar sight, Elias chose the right time to cut in.

“If you’re forming a team, make sure you think up a name before you register. I grew so attached to my team’s name I used it as the name of my shop.”

“Hmm... Then, what does the word Argent mean?”

“It was cobbled together from the words for ‘Silver’ in various tribal languages. Reilly thought it up when she saw me acting as team leader.”

“I see... Since we’re here, Athena, Fram, do you have any ideas?”

“Ultra-Hyper-Yuri Team!”

“Eniastar Team.”

“Rejected out of sheer lameness!”

“Say what!? That was my greatest masterpiece!”

“...Was mine really that lame?”

Bluntly rejecting their proposals, Yuri stood brimming with energy. “Then while we’re at it, how about we decide with a duel!”

This was Duel City Babel, the last fighting arena left in the world. Where strength was everything, and everyone aimed to stand at the top. It was not a fair world, nor was it a just one, but Yuri Eniastar continued to smile. He had been born to the weakest lineage, yet all he could imagine was spending fun duelist days with his comrades in arms.



Afterword

Washiro flew into a passion.

He left his body to the impulse birthed within his diseased head: “Like, man, I really want a shota protagonist...” and resolved himself to write all manner of scenes concerning our dashing lad surrounded by caring big sister heroines.

But Washiro knew not the first thing about writing a romantic comedy. He spent his waking hours writing fantasy, essentially. Therefore, he went to a rom-com author he knew and clung to him in tears like dear NXbXtX from a certain country’s national anime. “Hey, I’m beggin’ ya here! Teach me how to write a rom-com, would ya?” he did plead. Yet, when the time came for pen to hit paper, he found himself in despair at the impossibility of the task.

“What now?” you might ask, but he was not one to be beaten. Washiro’s sensibilities toward onene-shota material are a cut above the rest.

“I know! I’ll just write a battle fantasy where the shota protagonist gets tormented a lot!”

Evidently, his inclinations took a turn for the worse.

Alright, jokes over. This is Washiro Fujiki. That was (probably) the story behind the work you’re currently reading, *The Underdog of the Eight Greater Tribes*.

Being real here, those people who can write a whole volume of rom-com are seriously incredible. A short story is one thing, but a long, continuous book? That’s crazy. I’ll never be able to do it, short of being reborn, or having a new brain shoved in my skull.

If that wasn’t bad enough, when I tried playing around with my literary structure for practice, I started making grammar mistakes. No matter how many revisions I did, it would always come out sounding strange, and my editor would give me an earful.

Really, sorry about that.

This work is heavily focused on battle. While the works I've written before have included battle scenes, this is the first time battle has been a central theme. It's terribly stressful, I'm losing hair over this.

When the next volume comes out, I'm pretty sure I'll be screaming, "Let's make the heroines cuter and write some flirty-fun scenarios!" as I pen some daily-life parts.

That out of the way, it's about time for me to show my gratitude.

To my editor. I know I said it already, but really sorry about everything. Sure, I'm sorry, but I think I'll still have mistakes next time around.

To my illustrator, Kodama Yu. I can't raise my head to you anymore, you perfectly fulfilled such a difficult order. Thank you so much for the wonderful illustrations!

And my greatest thanks to everyone who took part in this publication, and to you, my dear reader!

Washiro Fujiki

Bonus Short Stories

The First Girls' Night Out for the Fox, Spirit and Bat

It happened one day that Mirka issued an urgent, emergency summons to the girls.

“Now that everyone’s here, let’s get this girls’ night out started!”

Once they had gathered in Mirka’s room, both Athena and Fram tilted their heads in unison.

“Hey, hey, what do you do for a girls’ night out?”

“At four hundred-something, I would hardly even consider myself a girl anymore.”

“Why Fram, you hardly look a day out of primary school— Aah, wait, please don’t leave!”

Mirka had firmly wrapped herself around her, so Fram quite reluctantly returned to her original seat.

“Urgh...you see, at work, I hear about ‘girls’ night out’ being held on a regular basis, but for some reason, I’m the only one who never gets invited... I just want to know what it feels like, you know...”

“Before all this party talk, why not take a good look at yourself and ask why you’re never invited?” Fram suggested.

“You do tend to be a real pain from time to time, Mirka.”

“Could you please not gang up on me!? Alright, alright, let’s just get to it. Ready, set, go!!”

Mirka lightly clapped her hands, forcefully kicking the get-together into gear.

“Mnnn, for now, we should start by talking about something, right?” Athena prodded.

“Yes, yes. I figure the standard would be to talk about romance.”

“Hmm! Who’s Roman!?”

“I’m not really interested to begin with. What about you, Mirka? Did anything relevant happen to you?”

“No, no, no, of course not. Who do you think I am?”

.....

.....

“Alright, let’s move on to the next topic!” Mirka advised in a sudden panic.

“You’ve clearly picked the wrong people here.”

“Hey, who’s Roman!?”

“Athena, deary, how about I tell you another time... For now, let’s talk about which restaurants have good food or something!”

“Oh, if you wanna talk about food, just leave it to me!”

“Certainly, that does seem more up Athena’s alley.”

With a slight laugh, Athena stuck out her chest triumphantly and delved into her extensive pool of knowledge. “To start off... Reptem’s place doesn’t give you nearly enough meat!”

“Mirka, move on to the next topic.”

“Why are you cutting me off just when I was getting into it?”

“From the start, I could tell it would devolve into an endless ramble about meat.”

“What’s wrong with meat!? Girls all love meat, right!?”

“Well, I’m sure not too many hate it, but...”

In order to sooth a sullen Athena, Mirka had no choice but to move on to the next topic. “Then has anyone gone anywhere fashionable?”

“Oh, I might be able to contribute to that one.”

“Really? Well I guess I can count on you, Fram! So what sort of place was it?”

“I would best describe it as a jewelry store. It sold accessories embedded with magic.”

“Great! Now that’s just the sort of talk I was hoping for!” Mirka’s wings began to flap with glee as Fram continued on.

“They put some work into making the storefront appealing, and the accessories were designed quite well. I’m sure that’s why it was very popular with the women who came for sightseeing.”

“I see, I see, maybe I should take a peek one of these—”

“The store’s already gone under.”

The moment after Fram said that, Mirka’s expression stiffened.

“Admittedly, some effort was put into the appearance of the store and the design of their products, but the magic I could sense from the gemstones was feeble at best. The metal used in the ring mounting and banding was all cheap material with a bit of gold veneer. I went in to ask the store-owner if they felt embarrassed, tricking tourists like that, and they kept playing it off, so we ended up dueling.”

“Oh...alright. So what happened after that?”

“When I won and made them admit they were selling fourth-rate fakes, the customers stopped coming and the store had to close its doors.”

“What happened to talking about fashionable places?” asked Mirka.

“It was a fashionable place that just so happened to sell knock-off goods.”

“That’s not... This definitely is not what I was looking for...” Mirka groaned as she slumped down, tapping her hands irksomely against the table.

“You know, I really think you’ve got the wrong people here.”

“Yes, I really have!”

And in the end, Mirka never got the girls’ night out she was longing for.

A Spirit’s Necessities

“—You’re no fair, Fram!” Athena suddenly blurted out as they were eating lunch at a shop arbitrarily chosen along the way. The abrupt words caused Fram to remove her mouth from the straw connecting her to her juice.

“What are you on about?”

“I mean, you’re always eating nothing but sweets and juice!”

“And you’re always eating meat. Be a good girl and eat your veggies.”

“I’m the sorta girl who’ll eat them at the end!”

“That’s what you always say, but you do tend to forget about them, from time to time.”

“I can eat them, I can!”

As she saw the girl’s cheeks puff out, Fram let out a very deep sigh. “As I’ve already told you, the body of us Spirit Tribe folk mainly consists of mana: magical energy. Our bodies generate mana from pure calories and sugar, so sweets and juice are our staple food.”

“Eeh...but sweets and juice won’t fill your belly.”

“It’s better that way. On a full stomach, simply digesting the food will deplete our stamina. Rather than eating a large amount of food at once, it’s best to periodically take in smaller snacks with high sugar content.”

“But, but...it’s still no fair!”

“Oh my, living off pure sweets isn’t all sunshine and rainbows, you know?” Fram picked up a fork and began prodding at the vegetables remaining on Athena’s otherwise-diminishing plate. “Sweets are all, generally, well, they’re sweet. There’s fruit, chocolate, vanilla, a few variations on sweetness to be sure, but in the end, that’s all there is, isn’t there?”

“Err...I guess so?”

“I do want to try other foods, but chewing will needlessly use up what little energy I have, and digestion will constantly drain it over a drearily long period of time. Despite how it looks, it is rather inconvenient.” She punctuated her explanation with a few loud sips from her drink, each causing Athena’s ears to glumly droop.

“...But, how should I put it, like this, it never really feels like we’re eating together.” Lonesomely hanging her head, Athena sullenly stuffed her cheeks full of steak.

Fram stared long and hard at her before turning to the waiter and lightly raising her hand. “I’ll have whatever she’s having. The smallest serving you have,” she listlessly declared.

“You can’t! If you eat meat, you’ll die!”

“No, I’m not going to die. The Spirit Tribe isn’t *that* weak.” Sighing at Athena’s genuine concern, Fram rested her chin on her hands and awaited her meal. “It’s not like I can’t eat a normal meal...just for one day.”

She turned her head away, and Athena’s expression immediately lit up. “Yay! I get to eat with Fram!” she shouted.

“Yeah, yeah. Good for you.”

Fram watched her frolic with a bitter smile before rummaging around in her bag.

“Athena, please clear some space on the table.”

“Hm? There’s enough space for food.”

“Not that, I need to set this down.” It wasn’t long before she had set up the contents of the bag.

“.....What’s this?”

“A mana-operated food pulverizer. Some might call it a blender.”

“...What are you going to do with it?”

“I will break the food down into paste to make it easier to digest.”

In the time it took Athena to recover from her daze, Fram’s food arrived, and she immediately shoved it into the blender. With a hand pressed against her lower back, Fram curiously yet confidently took a sip from her cup of mash.

“Mnn, the taste of meat pairs perfectly with the sharp acidity of the sauce. Delicious.”

As Fram glugged the off-colored concoction down, Athena trembled and

stood. "This... This isn't eating together at all!"

She smacked at the table again and again, as if to say she simply couldn't accept it.

Your Big Sis Wants You to Eat Meat

"Waaaaah! Meat really is the best!" Athena cried out in delight as she saw the heaping plate set out before her.

As he looked at her, Yuri couldn't help but ask, "I always had that image, but do the people of the Beast Tribe tend to prefer meat?"

"Nah, not really. There are some kids that like veggies too. We get all sorts. There are people like me who can eat both and just prefer meat, but generally I'd say they tend to lean more strongly one way or the other."

Athena had explained all this while stuffing her cheeks. Sure enough, while the meat ratio was abnormal, comparatively speaking, she did occasionally sneak in a bite from the vegetable side dish as well.

"I see... But you definitely do feel healthy after a nice serving of meat!" exclaimed Yuri.

"Right, right! The protein fills you with strength!"

"I totally understand! Animal protein is necessary for good mobility!"

In the midst of this back and forth, Yuri began fishing through his bag as if he had only just recalled something.

"Speaking of protein, I know a really efficient source!"

"Oh, what's up? Your Big Sis will love anything you want to give her!" Her tail wagged and her eyes sparkled as she waited expectantly.

"—Here it is! This is some high quality protein!"

One look at the caterpillar wriggling in the bottle and Athena's expression froze over. "Aaah, haha... I hope you find that delicious ingredient soon."

"What are you talking about!? This is the larva of a raize moth!"

“Why are you getting worked up!?”

“The taste of a raize moth larva is mellow and creamy! Back when my master ordered me to go out and survive, I was eating them almost every day as a snack!!”

There was a wide, innocent smile on Yuri’s face as he produced the writhing larva from its case and tossed it into his mouth whole. The morbid crunching sounds that came as his teeth crushed the morsel between them caused Athena’s expression to sober up entirely.

“Yuri... Please, take all of Big Sis’s meat...”

“Eh? T-Thank you?”

It was at that moment that Athena was filled with the overwhelming desire to feed this boy a proper meal.



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The Underdog of the Eight Greater Tribes: Volume 1

by Washiro Fujiki

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