



影の

The Eminence
in Shadow

実力者

ever since I was a child.
An anime, manga, or movie? No, whatever's fine.
If I could become a man behind the scene,
I didn't care what type I would be.
Not a hero, not an arch enemy,
but the existence intervenes in a story and shows off his power.
I had admired the one like that, what is more,
and hoped to be.
Like a hero everyone wished to be in childhood.
"The Eminence in Shadow" was the one for me.
That's all about it.

逢沢大介 著

東西 **1** イラスト

なりたくて!

To Be a Power in the Shadows!

– Kage no Jitsuryokusha ni Naritakute! –

- Volume 2 -

**-Author-
Akasatana**

[Tenshi Translations]

"The Eminence in Shadow" was the one for me.
That's all about it.

The Eminence in Shadow

ニュー

_Nu

The E
in Sha
Volun

The Eminence

ベータ

_Beta

The E
in Sha
Volun

The Eminence

シャドウ

_Shadow

The E
in Sha
Volun

The Eminence

デルタ

_Delta

The E
in Sha
Volun

The Eminence

ガンマ

_Gamma

The E
in Sha
Volun

The Eminence

アルファ

_Alpha

The E
in Sha
Volun

The Eminence

「我等は
シャドウ
ガート
テン」

狩る者……
陰に潜み、
陰を



ローズ・オリアナ

_Rose Oriana

The Eminence in Shadow Volume 1

The Eminence

「あなたに救われた命……ならば私は心を捧げます」

シェリー・バーネット

_Sherry Barnett

The Eminence in Shadow Volume 1

The Eminence

クレア・カゲノー

_Claire Kagenou

The Eminence in Shadow Volume 1

The Eminence

「生意気な弟……だから、いじめてやるの」

「あの……タツキを焼いてきました」

「いい剣ね……でも、嫌いな剣」

アレクシア・ミドガル

_Alexia Midgar

The Eminence in Shadow Volume 1

The Eminence

Chapter 22

That Which Anyone Would Overlook

Summer is almost here.

Under a sky that at least feels like that, I am energetically swinging my wooden sword. It is now the time period for the afternoon practicals. After having been emancipated from Alexia, I am back in the same group as my 'good' friends Hyoro and Jaga.

Due to Zenon-sensei's scandal, the reputation, and thus number of students, of Royal Capital Bushin Style has taken a sharp nosedive. Thanks to that, the three of us have now been bumped up to Group 7.

"So hey, how did it go with Princess Alexia anyways?"

So asks Hyoro while doing practice swings next to me.

"As I keep repeating, we simply broke up, and that was it."

Almost got killed in the process though.

"What a waste. You didn't even get one kiss in?"

Asks Jaga.

"Nope, not one."

Just like that, we carry on a lackluster conversation while relying on mere momentum to continue our lackluster practice swings. Welcome to Group 7, yea?

It is truly a waste of time, but as such is the Way of the Mob, I have no choice but to quietly play along.

"Oh by the way, it's almost the season for the Festival of the God of War. Have you two already submitted your applications for the Senbatsu Tournament?"

“Who do you think I am? If I show off a bit at the tournament, then bringing two or three girls home would be a piece of cake.”

So says Hyoro. Keep dreaming, cherry.

“*Mufufufu*, handling three at the same time might be a bit tough.”

So says Jaga. Keep dreaming, cherry.

“Sid, you didn’t apply yet, right?”

Festival of the God of War refers to a gigantic tournament that is hosted once every two years. Famous swordsmen from both inside and even outside the country all gather together for it. And in the tournament, there’s a bracket for schools. The Senbatsu Tournament is our school’s way to decide who gets to represent us.

(T/N: ‘Senbatsu’ means ‘selection.’ As in, the best is ‘selected’ from among them. I’m gonna just leave the naming as is, cus AKB <3)

Naturally, being the mob that I am, I have zero intention of joining something like that and gathering attention to myself. It’s absolutely unthinkable.

“I wo-...”

“I helped you submit an application already, so thank m-...!!”

For some reason, Hyoro is suddenly clutching his stomach and fainting away.

“H-, Hyoro-kun! What is wrong all of a sudden!”

It was a extremely fast body blow. The kind that anyone other than me would overlook.

“Oi, oi, Hyoro. Why are you falling over like you just received a left hook that was aimed straight at your stomach?”

So I ask while unclenching my left fist.

“T-, that was strangely specific, Sid-kun.”

“This is no good, he’s completely lost all consciousness. I’m going to carry him to the

infirmary, so lend me a hand. Oh right, do you know if it's possible to cancel my entry to the tournament?"

"No idea. Ah, Hyoro is spewing bubbles."

After reporting to the teacher that Hyoro had fainted due to a sudden fit, we got permission to leave class to go to the infirmary.

Along the way.

"What's that?"

I notice an important-looking group walking around the campus.

"That's... oh hey, that's Princess Iris."

As an aside, I see Alexia too. The moment our eyes meet, she turns her head to the side with a *'fun.'*

I still haven't told anyone yet about her going deranged and turning into an indiscriminate slasher. As long as she doesn't mess with me, I have no intention of telling anyone about that incident on the roof. Mutual non-aggression pact is the word. She can just enjoy slashing random people for all I care. It seems that her skill has been improving as of late, so I suppose it's not a bad idea to polish her techniques on actual people. As long as it's not me.

"Oh right, I remember hearing something about Princess Iris having something she needs Midgar Scholar Academy to investigate for her."

One might not think this when looking at Jaga, but he's actually quite well-informed. Our Midgar Magic Swordsman Academy is ridiculously huge, and we apparently share our campus with the Midgar Scholar Academy. Over there they do science or research or something. I don't really know the details.

"Fu~n."

Right, she did mention the formation of a new squad or something.

Jaga and I watch the group of knights go by, chuck Hyoro into the infirmary, then play hooky for the rest of the class.



Talks are underway in a large reception room with a few people in it.

“I wish to ask you, who is famed throughout the royal capital as the forefront expert in this field, to decipher this artifact.”

The person who says this while holding out a large, pendant-like item is the beautiful red-haired Princess Iris.

“But I am still only a student.”

The person who takes a look at the artifact and then declines is a beautiful pink-haired teenage girl.

“Your research results are well known both inside and outside our country. In this field, there is no one who is ahead of you, Shelly Barnett.”

“But still...”

“This is a good chance. Why not give it a try?”

The person who interrupts Shelly is a middle-aged man.

“Vice Principal Ruslan Barnett...”

“I don’t mind if you call me ‘father’ though.”

Says Ruslan with a laugh.

Shelly only flashes a troubled smile.

“Shelly, you are someone who will eventually fly out into the world as a researcher. This request from Princess Iris could very well be an important stepping stone for your bright future.”

“But someone like me...”

“Shelly, I always say this, do I not? Have more confidence in yourself. This can be done if it’s you. This can be done only by you.”

Ruslan places one hand on Shelly's slender shoulder.

"Alright then..."

Shelly accepts the artifact from Iris.

"I see, language of the ancients. And even written in code."

"It was at one of the facilities of a religious order called the Order of Diabolos. We suspect they were conducting research related to the ancient civilization, but we don't know the details. We also think that the code is also related to the ancient civilization."

"Then this is indeed a request suited for me."

Shelly gazes at the artifact, curiosity already twinkling in her eyes.

"And we also wish to assign some knights to guard the artifact."

" 'Guard'...?"

Ruslan reacts to Iris' words.

"We will be upfront. This artifact is being targeted by the Order of Diabolos even this very moment."

"That sounds quite dangerous."

Ruslan's eyes sharpen.

"This artifact was originally seized from a facility of theirs. Of course, this wasn't the only thing we seized at the time – there was also a large amount of documents and other items. But to our chagrin, the other day, the facility where we had been safekeeping all those things was torched. The only thing left is that artifact."

"Ahh, that fire incident. Speaking of which, it was after that incident that Princess Iris established a new knight order, wasn't it?"

"Indeed. Though it is still quite small in size."

"If I remember correctly, the name is The Crimson Order? So you are here today under

that identity?”

“Yes, I am...”

“That’s how much you can’t trust the existent Knight Order?”

Iris does not answer Ruslan’s sharp-witted question.

She only looks straight at Ruslan without a single change in her expression.

“*Fumu*, very well. I will grant permission. But for only two.”

“Two... The safest would be for me to take on the position myself, but...”

Iris displays a conflicted expression on her face.

“If Iris-sama is always out in the field, then there’d be no progress at all with our other work as a knight order.”

The person who says this is the knight with a large build sitting at Iris’ right. Hair like the mane of a lion, and a well-trained body. There’s even a large scar on his face.

“That’s true too, I suppose. Alright then, Glen, this will be your new assignment from now on.”

“Yes ma’am! I shall do my utmost.”

Glen lowers his head.

“Nee-sama, allow me to help out with this.”

So says Alexia from Iris’ left.

“The more people you assign here would mean the fewer people you have investigating the Jet Black Incident.”

Iris remains silent.

“The Crimson Order is still far too short-handed. On top of which, I’ve met him before. There’s no one more suited to this role than me.”

“However, Alexia, you are still...”

“A student? But what does that matter since I have the strength? It was you who said those words, Nee-sama.”

“I said no such thing.”

“You said something similar to it to Shelly-san just now.”

Iris sulks, as Alexia grins with composure.

“You used to be so cute too...”

So grumbles Iris in a small voice.

“I heard that. Nee-sama, I really want to know. What their aim is. And... whether they are our enemies or not.”

“But it’s dangerous!”

“I am aware.”

Iris and Alexia gaze at each other for a while.

“Very well. But only to the degree where it does not negatively affect your studies, and only on missions with low chance of danger.”

“Thank you very much.”

Alexia smiles while lowering her head.

“About the artifact, we will leave it in your hands then.”

So says Iris to Shelly with a sigh.

Chapter 23

Otherworld General Trading Company

Mitsugoshi Co.

In the late afternoon, I went to cancel my entry in the Senbatsu Tournament.

“Thank you for your time.”

After offering the perfunctory word of thanks, I am now leaving the Student Affairs Office.

“So, how’d it go?”

Hyoro and Jaga, who were waiting outside, gather to me.

“Apparently the tournament pairings have already been decided, so they couldn’t do it.”

I sigh heavily.

“Well, cheer up. Just think of how popular you could get if you do well!”

“That’s right. ‘Troubles are just opportunities in disguise.’ That’s what they say, right?”

I shake my head.

“It’s not about winning or losing. I simply don’t want to enter at all.”

“Haah, there’s no helping it then. I’ll introduce you to a good shop, how about that?”

“G-, good shop?”

Jaga reacts with wide eyes.

“Not THAT kind of shop! It’s that store that everybody’s talking about nowadays, Mitsugoshi Co. I hear that they sell amazing products that nobody’s ever seen before.

For example, there's a confectionery called 'chocolate' that's supposedly sweet and tastes absolutely delicious."

"A sweet confectionery? Sounds good..."

"Stu~pid. What's the point if you eat it yourself?"

Hyoro smacks Jaga's head.

"You're supposed to give it to a girl as a present. Let me teach you something good. As long as you give girls something sweet, they fall right into your hands."

"I, I see. As expected of Hyoro-kun! I've learned something new today."

"I know, right?"

So says Hyoro proudly.

"So with that, let's go, Sid!"

"Let's go, Sid-kun."

Both of their eyes are glittering.

"Fine, let's go."

With a sigh, I agree to go along.

I wonder what this world's so-called 'chocolate' is like?



Led by Hyoro, we proceed down the royal capital's main avenue. In the early evening, the crowds are huge, and all the stores in prime locations are filled to bursting. The one with the most bustle out of even all of them turns out to be the rumored Mitsugoshi Co.

"Uwaaahh, how impressive."

A gorgeous, brand-new building that towers over all its neighbors. Furthermore, it

seems very tasteful – even a bit modern, perhaps. How do I put this, this is a place that makes me feel every bit as out of place as I did in those brand name stores back in my previous life.

And the line at the entrance. Every single person lining up is either a noble or someone clearly connected to a noble. A single look is all that's needed to see that they are high class customers. At the end of the line, there is a lady in a uniform holding a placard. According to that, it seems that we'll have to wait 80 minutes.

“It says that we'll have to wait 80 minutes.”

That was me.

“Which means we have exactly enough time to get back to the dorms before curfew.”

That was Jaga.

“We've already gotten here. Let's just line up.”

And that was Hyoro.

“But there's a rumor that lately there's a slasher around. Going back too late...”

“Stupid, we are three magic swordsmen together. Even if he attacks us, we'll beat him at his own game.”

Hyoro pats the sword on his hip with a *'pon pon.'*

“I, I suppose.”

“Hey, what's this about a slasher?”

I interrupt their exchange to ask.

“Apparently, there's someone going around the royal capital at night and killing random people. He's supposedly quite skilled, and there've even been knights who fell victim...”

So explains Jaga in a softer voice.

“Heeh, that sounds scary. Guess I won’t be going out during the night anytime soon, then.”

A slasher incident?! That sounds fun as heck! I definitely must take part.

“Ooii, let’s line up already. Else we’ll miss our curfew.”

Hurried by Hyoro, all three of us join the end of the line.

“H-, hey, l-, lady. You’re p-, pretty. W-, w-, what’s your h-, hobby?”

Hyoro immediately tries to talk up the lady holding the placard, but his advance is effortlessly handled by a business smile clearly polished over a hundred battlefields.

But then for some reason, the lady gives me an actual smile.

“Dear customer, would you be willing to lend us a bit of your time?”

With dark brown hair and eyes of the same color, she is a beauty with a calm vibe and an elegant face.

She is wearing a simple deep blue mini-one piece adorned with the company’s logo. It somehow makes me think of the cabin attendants of my previous life.

“Eh, me?”

I ask while pointing at myself.

“Yes. It’ll only take a short while, we only need you to help fill out a questionnaire.”

‘Questionnaire’? I think this is the first time I’ve even heard of this concept in this world.

“I don’t mind, but...”

“Thank you very much.”

“I, I, I’ll also help!”

“M-, me too!”

Hyoro and Jaga, appealing with all their might.

“Only 1 person is needed.”

The lady links her arms with mine, then walks me to the head of the line and straight into the store.

When I take one last glance behind, I see Hyoro and Jaga staring at me with pure despair on their faces.



Following behind the lady, I enter the extremely well-decorated store.

The showiness is toned down on the more obvious spots, while careful attention has been paid to even the smallest corner. Overall it generates a calm and sublime feeling. Even I, as a complete amateur in such matters, can see that it's been done with incredible taste. And as I'd expected from the outside, the style of the interior is indeed a bit modern.

I am guided straight through the sales floor to the backdoor for employees, but the products that I caught glimpses of were... oh, man.

The popular chocolate is a given, but there is also coffee and cosmetics and soap and a variety of things that I'd never seen before in this world. There are also clothes and accessories and shoes and even underwear with tasteful designs that look both novel and beautiful. It's basically a complete lineup of everything that even I can tell would sell like crazy in this world.

Whichever way I think about it, this is... oh, man.

In the very near future, this company will become a hegemony. This I can guarantee.

Passing through the door for employees, we proceed down a hallway; up an amazing staircase like the one in that movie about a lavishly decorated passenger liner; down a wide, well-lit hallway with a red carpet running down it; before finally coming to a gigantic door with refined engravings all over it and polished to the point of glowing.

There are two beautiful ladies standing in front of that door. The two of them give me a bow, then slowly open the door.

Beyond is an enormous space.

There are rows of pillars like in those Greek temples, and the marble floor is absolutely sparkling.

And on either side of the red carpet that continues into the depths of the room stand two rows of more beautiful women.

“Eh?”

The moment I step into the room, all of them kneel simultaneously.

“Umm, the questionnaire...?”

At the far end of the room, there is a huge chair.

The chair almost looks like a piece of art, what with the highly detailed engravings all over it, as well as being lit up in a madder red color from the twilight sunlight shining through a skylight.

It is currently unoccupied.

But next to that chair, there is a beautiful elf with blue hair. With a style like a model's, and wearing a voluptuous black dress, she is giving off a polished and refined air.

I know that face.

“Apologies for the very long wait, my lord.”

She kneels as if she is an actress.

“Gamma...”

After Alpha and Beta, Gamma was my third practice partner.

With her wise-looking face and intelligent blue eyes, anyone can tell with a single glance that this girl definitely has a sharp mind. And she is none other than the brains behind Shadow Garden.



Chapter 24

7 Girls and 1 Guy.

Obviously Someone's Going to Be Left Out

Gamma is smart. She really is smart, but she also possesses an enormous weakness.

Her nickname is Gamma the Weakest.

Indeed. Within the Seven Shadows, despite her seniority, her battle strength is at the very bottom. Oh, and Seven Shadows refers to the first 7 who joined Shadow Garden. It sounds cool, so that's why I named them so.

Among them, Gamma is the only one who possesses a fatal lack of hand-eye coordination and battle sense.

If it is said that Delta is the one with the highest sense, then Gamma is the one with the lowest. But in my personal opinion, these two are the same. If I say this out loud, Delta would be super happy, and Gamma would give me a very wronged look, but these two are undoubtedly the same.

While teaching Gamma and Delta the sword, I learned two things.

One: Regardless of how high someone's sense is, if they are an idiot, then saying anything would be a mere waste of time.

Two: Regardless of how smart someone is, if they have no sense, then saying anything would be a mere waste of time.

So that's why I ended up telling the two of them the same thing.

“Just pump yourself up with magic and cut your opponent.”

I ask no more of them. It is the dope up, rely-purely-on-stats fighting style that I detest the most.

Exactly. My conviction had met sound defeat the moment I met these two. Even now, whenever I think of that day, I get a headache. No, that's enough. Let's wipe it from my memories.

I shake my head.

"It has been a long while, my lord."

Gamma walks towards me in an elegant model's walk.

Swinging her hips seductively, with her high heels clacking with a crisp sound with every step.

But.

"*Pegyah!*"

She trips over literally empty air.

"T-, these heels are pretty high, aren't they?"

Then she blames it on the heels.

The moment she gets up while rubbing her nose, a nearby lady rushes right in with a '*shubababa*' and changes her shoes into low-heeled pumps in the blink of an eye.

"W-, well then, my lord."

So says Gamma as if nothing had happened.

That's fine with me. After seeing a lady's embarrassment, there are really only two choices: to pretend like you didn't see it, or to tease her about it. And I belong to the former faction.

However, even so, there are things that need to be said.

"You have a nosebleed."

In a blink, another lady rushes in with '*shubababa*' and wipes her nose.

“P-, please take your seat.”

Seeing the blushing Gamma, I had a thought.

It's as if she'd never grown up.

Allowing myself to be led by Gamma, I end up sitting in the large chair.

The view from here... is great.

This is really great.

Large, spacious hall, with the madder red sunlight shining through the skylight, and the rows of kneeling beauties on either side of the red carpet.

It's as if I've become the king of the world of shadows.

What a truly wonderful job Gamma has done, preparing such an expensive set.

I am deeply touched, my very heart quivering with delight. Thus I cross my legs, prop my chin with my right hand, and raise my left hand. Then I gather violet-colored magic into my left hand, and release it into the air.

“Receive your reward...”

The magic explodes into a rain of light.

When the rain touches the kneeling women, their bodies flash violet for a brief moment.

Well, to be honest, the effects of this light is merely something like alleviating fatigue, improving magic flow, healing very minor injuries, things to that level only.

“This day shall be my lifelong treasure.”

So says Gamma in a quivering voice while kneeling beside me.

Nice acting.

But thing is, Gamma is not the only one quivering. The beauties kneeling on either side of the carpet are all quivering, with some even shedding tears. The lady who guided

me here is also sniffing.

It seems that Gamma also has quite the talent as a director.

“Well done, Gamma. So, now I have a few questions regarding this trading firm.”

Seriously, this company. Chocolate, and all those products I saw while passing through the sales floor, and even this building’s design. None of it is stuff from this world.

“Please ask me whatever you wish.”

“Could it be that the products of Mitsugoshi Co are the things I talked about previously?”

Ever since long ago, for some reason Gamma has been extremely curious in regards to my knowledge. Every time after getting beaten up by Delta, she would come to me with a half crying face to badger me to tell her more. During those moments, I would just tell her about random things in Japan in a dramatic manner and wrap it all up as ‘Wisdom of the Shadows.’

“Yes, my lord. Despite my meager means, I have attempted to realize a fraction of the heavenly knowledge that my lord had bestowed upon me.”

“I, I see.”

I mean, all I told you was merely on the level of ‘there’s something sweet called chocolate that’s made of bitter beans and a ton of sugar hardened together.’ How on earth did you reproduce it from that? Is this intelligence? Is it that I merely lack the intelligence to do so?!

But well, fine. Let’s just let that go.

In all worlds, there are geniuses, and there are idiots. That’s all there is to that.

But there is something that I really must ask.

“Do Alpha and the others know about this company?”

“Yes, of course.”

Which means, this is that.

The pattern where I'm the only one to be left out.

I get it, I really do. I'm the only guy, so it's probably hard to include me in their girl circle.

"A-, and are you profiting quite a bit?"

"Currently we are setting up branches in the main cities in this and the surrounding countries. The expansion is going smoothly. But of course, the more important point is how deep we can plant our roots through the company."

Nobody needs that forced tie-in to the shadow world.

In other words.

The girls left me out, used my ideas, and are raking it in.

If they had given me even a tiny cut, I wouldn't have had to crawl on the ground picking up gold coins, nor would I have had to pretend to be a dog and chase after gold coins.

But it's fine, they did prepare such a large-scaled set for me. Let's be satisfied with this.

But.

Just a little bit?

"Umm, I'm just asking, but could I borrow a few gold coins?"

I'll eventually return them. Maybe.

"Yes my lord, at once."

After giving me an immediate reply, Gamma signals the lady who had guided me in.

In a short while, a cart laden with gold coins is pushed in.

A whole mountain of it.

There is more than I've seen in my entire life, just glittering away on that cart.

This is easily more than a hundred billion Zeny.

“This... is a bit...”

Even I’m not shameless enough to borrow this much without paying it back.

“!? Is it too little? I’ll immediately have them bring more...”

“No, it’s fine.”

I interrupt Gamma and reach towards the gold coins.

With an exaggerated motion, I stab my left arm into the pile of coins.

The coins clink noisily.

The point here is to gather all their attention on my left hand.

I concentrate with every last one of my nerves.

And then.

“Hmph.”

I grab about 15 coins with my left hand, then make a show of putting it into my left pocket.

That is 1.5 million Zeny.

The moment they had all focused on my left hand, I had exercised the very limit of my right hand’s hand speed to also grab some coins and pocket them without anyone noticing.

Alpha and Delta would be one thing. There’s no way Gamma would have caught that.

“A-, are you fine with only that little? You can actually take it all...”

So says Gamma, but I am secretly laughing at her.

She thinks that I’ve only borrowed 1.5 million Zeny.

But actually, I’ve gotten twice that amount: 3 million Zeny!

“This is fine. It’s sufficient.”

So I say while pushing down the laughter that’s threatening to bubble up.

“Yes my lord. Then we shall put these back away.”

Gamma claps, and several ladies come over to take away the cart.

Then Gamma kneels before me.

“We are fully aware of the reason for our lord’s visit today. Undoubtedly it is in regards to that issue.”

“Mmm.”

I nod sagely. What does she mean by ‘that issue’?

“We are truly sorry. Currently we are continuing our investigation, but still have yet to identify the offending party. Please give us a bit more time. That fool who wears black and call himself Shadow Garden while indiscriminately cutting the citizens of the royal capital – I, Gamma, swear to bring him down without fail.”

“*Fumu...*”

This is literally the first time I’m hearing about this.

Chapter 25

Respite in an Alleyway

“Fumu...”

Gamma watches as, after saying just that, Shadow falls silent in thought. There is a slight quiver of unease in her blue eyes.

Abruptly, a single tear spills out from the corner of her eye. Seeing that nostalgic violet magic had made her remember the past.

That violet light had been the start of Gamma’s life.

If he hadn’t been there, Gamma would have died off as a mere rotting pile of flesh. Cast away by her family, chased by her country, having lost everything, trapped inside a mire of pain and fear and despair. It was that young man who gave off that violet light who had saved her from all that. Gamma would never forget that violet light for the rest of her life. For Gamma, that is the light of life.

Life is imbued within that violet light. Previously, Alpha had told her so.

Gamma herself thinks so too – not because of any logical reason, but instinctively she knows that it is so.

That light is definitely not something that only heals surface wounds. It is something that reaches much deeper, something that heals the recipient’s very life.

The moment Gamma was touched by that light, she experienced the feeling of something shackled inside her becoming free. Something important and precious that had been repressed was finally given freedom, and she had returned, in full, to who she truly was.

That day, Gamma was born again.

When she was given the name ‘Gamma,’ she resolved to dedicate her new life to Him.

But in contrast to her resolve, she turned out to be the weakest among the Seven Shadows. She was overtaken by those who came after her, lost innumerable times, crawled on the ground in defeat, and tasted humiliation again and again. Eventually, Gamma realized that no matter how much effort she put in, she would always remain the weakest.

So Gamma became depressed. What is the meaning of her existence? If the only thing she can do is get in everyone's way and look unsightly, then perhaps it would be better for her to just disappear.

But the day that she decided on this, for some reason He called her over. And then He began to talk of the 'Wisdom of the Shadows.'

A path different from the martial. A path of intellect.

Gamma clutched at the Wisdom of the Shadows with all she had.

Knowing that this is her only way to live, she single-mindedly poured her life into reproducing the Wisdom.

With hindsight, she realizes that he had seen through everything. Gamma's internal struggle as well as her rightful path, it is because he knew it all that he bestowed the Wisdom upon her.

What Gamma felt at the moment of realization was heart-rending pain.

It tore her heart as she thought of how lonely He must feel, being in a place so high up as to be unreachable.

Is the existence of Gamma even necessary to Him?

The moment she thought about it, tears welled up from Gamma's eyes.

But this is why she will wipe her tears and work harder.

She will make Shadow Garden bigger and stronger, she will nurture it into an organization truly worthy of His name. And when she does, then surely... this is the thought that fills her.

"I see, so that's what it is."

His voice draws Gamma back to reality.

“I have a lead. I’ll look into it on my side.”

Upon hearing that sagacious voice that seems to know everything, Gamma’s chest tightens.

Would she again be of no help at all this time?

He is always able to arrive at the answer with only a tiny bit of information. How easily he grasped a lead that even she, after mobilising all her subordinates, could not.

However, Gamma does not give up.

Some day... to be recognized by Him some day, she had decided to never give up.

“Nyu, come.”

She calls over the subordinate with dark brown hair who had guided Him in today.

“This is Nyu. Number 13 of the Numbers.”

“Mmm?”

He looks at Nyu with narrowed eyes. In those sharp pupils of His, probably every aspect of Nyu’s strength has already been analyzed and seen through.

“Though it has not been long since she’s joined us, she possesses strength that is recognized by even Alpha-sama. Please use her freely for miscellaneous tasks or for communication or anything else.”

“My name is Nyu. It will be my honor to serve.”

Nyu’s voice is slightly shaking with nerves.

“I’ll call you if the need arises.”

“Yes, my lord.”

Nyu backs away with lowered head.

“Well then, it’s about time for me to go back.”

So saying, He stands up.

“Oh, right. I want to buy some chocolates. It would be great if I can have the cheapest one at a friend discount and marked even cheaper.”

“We shall prepare the the highest quality item immediately.”

“Umm... how much would that be then?”

“Friend discount is 100% discount.”

“100% discount... you mean it’s free? Lucky me! Ah, then please give me 3 portions.”

“As you wish.”

When He puts in effort to be a common person as Sid Kagenou, Gamma finds even that to be charming.



“This is bad, we won’t make it in time for curfew!”

“It’s because Sid-kun was late!”

“I already said sorry! I got you guys the chocolates, didn’t I?”

The three of us are running through the royal capital after the sun has already set.

Though I did indeed come out a bit late, Hyoro and Jaga were also very insistently questioning me about the placard lady. Nyuu, was it? Well anyways, I somehow gave them the slip with random vague answers.

But still.

I didn’t expect Alexia to really become an indiscriminate slasher. If it’s not Delta, then she’s the only other person that I can think of. The moment I heard the details from Gamma, I realized that she’s finally gone and done it.

Despite her blessed lot in life as a princess, what is it that would drive her this far...

The female heart is a mystery.

But well, I don't think that being an indiscriminate slasher is that bad a life. Isn't it fine that some people are simply like that?

But it's an altogether different story to use the name of our Shadow Garden.

Unfortunately, that is something that I cannot forgive.

Suddenly.

"Hey, did you guys hear that?"

"No, what was it?"

So discusses Hyoro and Jaga while running ahead.

It seems the two of them did not hear it clearly, but I caught it nice and clear.

It is the sound of sword against sword.

Far away, a fight is taking place.

I stop.

"Oi, what's the matter?"

"They're going to close the gate!"

After a brief while, Hyoro and Jaga notices and also stops.

I point at an alleyway.

"I gotta take a dump."

Hyoro and Jaga both have a "is this guy for real?" face on.

"If I don't do it here now, I'm going to leak while running."

“That... does sound pretty serious.”

“So it’s a question of curfew or dignity.”

Their faces turn serious.

“Leave me behind and go on ahead. I don’t want to be seen by anyone...”

“!! Got it, we’ll never tell anyone that you became late because of shitting outdoors!”

“No matter what anyone says, Sid-kun’s choice was the right one... I truly believe so!”

“Can’t hold on any longer... quick, go!”

“Sid... we will never forget you!”

“Sid-kun... despite the outdoor shitting, we’ll always be friends!”

“Go, you must gooooo!!!”

The two of them turn their heels and run off.

After seeing them off, I enter the alleyway, then make my way towards the sound of fighting.

Chapter 26

Ugh, My Head...

The place of fighting turns out to be deep within a dark alleyway.

There are two magic swordsmen fighting.

One is wearing a familiar-looking uniform and short skirt – it is undoubtedly Alexia.

However, the other is a man wearing all black and a mask.

What is this strange situation? I would understand if Alexia is the one wearing black and pretending to be Shadow Garden, but their positions are reversed.

I climb to the rooftop of a nearby building, erase my presence, and watch their fight.

“Give up already. You cannot win against me.”

The fight is proceeding in Alexia’s favor. The man in black is not weak, but he is no match for Alexia, after her recent huge growth in strength.

The black outfit is gradually being cut to tatters, and blood stains the stone pavement.

With just one more push, the fight will soon be over.

“Why do you kill innocent people? Is this what you people do?”

“We are Shadow Garden...”

Shadow Garden.

The man in black definitely said that.

“That’s the only thing you’ve been saying the entire time. Is this the will of the man called Shadow?”

“We are Shadow Garden...”

So repeats the man in black.

There is no mistaking it anymore.

This man in black is the criminal who’s been pretending to be Shadow Garden.

I’m sorry, Alexia. Turns out you are innocent. I’ve now apologized to you inside my heart.

In that case, then why is this man pretending to be Shadow Garden?

This is a natural question, but of course I already have an answer.

Because I am me, I can tell at a glance.

This... is yearning.

He is someone who adores and yearns for Shadow Garden... for powers in shadows.

I cannot deny that feeling of his.

Because this yearning had also been the beginning of everything for me. Yearning after those powers in shadows in movies and anime and manga, and then trying to copy it all. That was my beginning.

He is also treading that path, and the target of his yearning is Shadow Garden.

Indeed, he is this world’s very first Shadow Garden follower.

A hot feeling rises up in my chest. I am so happy to see the path I am treading being acknowledged by someone else.

Add oil!

I find myself cheering for him.

But still, I cannot forgive him. Why? Because I, too, am a power in the shadows. If I forgive someone who is taking my organization’s name in vain, then I would no longer

be a power in the shadows.

Just as he is a power in the shadows, I too am a power in the shadows.

There is no room there for mercy nor compromise.

I harden my heart and continue watching the two of them fight.

“This is the end.”

With that, Alexia’s sword causes the man’s sword to fly off into the distance. But at that moment, I sense new presences rapidly approaching.



“This is the end.”

Alexia sends her opponent’s sword flying.

With a *‘garan,’* it clatters onto the stone pavement a long ways off.

But at that moment.

“...!”

The sudden cutting attack from the back forces Alexia to roll away in evasion.

She blocks the follow up attack, then kicks her new opponent’s torso to take a distance.

While settling her slightly disarranged breathing, Alexia sizes up the interlopers.

Two more magic swordsmen have joined the fight. And both of them are also wearing full black.

Seeing the first man pick his sword back up, Alexia clicks her tongue.

So now there are three of them.

And none of them seem weak.

If it's only one, she can win.

If it's two, she won't lose.

But if it's three...

"To gang up on a frail lady with three big men, how horrible."

Please let them be willing to pick up the conversation.

"Oh, I have a good idea. How about let's have a one-on-one three times? Sound good?"

They are slowly circling around to encircle her.

Alexia continues to readjust her positioning while making sure that her back isn't taken.

"Oh, the moon is just so pretty tonight. Take a look behind you!"

She attempts to restrain the enemies trying to circle around with her eyes alone.

With minute movements of the sword, both sides attempt to probe the other.

"Come on, you won't look? But I think it'd be better if you did look."

Alexia smiles.

Beneath the moonlight, her red eyes are sparkling.

"Because Nee-sama is behind you."

"...!"

They fell for it.

Immediately, Alexia moves.

Her white blade flashes towards the enemy's now unguarded back.

"Die."

So whispers Alexia without actually saying it out loud.

The black clothing is cut through, and fresh blood dances in the air.

But it was too shallow.

One more strike, and she can fini-...

That instant, a shock pierces through Alexia's abdomen.

"aGUHhh...!"

A black boot has been buried into her stomach.

The *'baki baki'* sound of several of her ribs cracking ring out clearly.

Even while spewing blood, Alexia plunges her sword into the black boot.

But the boot is withdrawn at the last possible second, and her sword merely strikes the stone pavement.

He is no longer in her maai.

Alexia spits out the blood in my mouth with a *'peh,'* then wipes her mouth.

Her hand is now dyed in red.

That moment, two of the men had fallen for her bluff, but one person had not. It was he who had kicked her in the abdomen and gotten in the way of her delivering the killing strike.

Alexia glares at the three of them with enmity in her eyes.

3 vs 1. The numbers are still unchanged.

But the situation has worsened. Two of the enemy are uninjured, one is heavily injured but still capable of swinging his sword. None of them can be ignored.

In contrast, she now has a few broken ribs, at least one of which has pierced a lung.

'I'm going to be killed,' thinks Alexia.

Which is why there's no helping it.

Alexia takes out a red lozenge from the chest pocket of her uniform. It is a drug that she had secretly pocketed even before the arson incident.

It is against her will to brandish such a terrible sword, but it's still better than dying.

She brings the drug to her lips.

While reassuring herself by telling herself 'I'm the type that does well even without prior practice,' she makes to swallow the drug.

But at that moment.

Jet black descends from the skies.

Without a single sound, as if like a crow that flies through the night.

In the same motion, a jet black blade bisects one of the men, causing a vivid red flower to bloom in the night.

A cloying scent of blood fills the alleyway.

The man in jet black... Shadow swings his sword to get the blood off. With a splash, a horizontal red line is drawn onto a nearby wall.

"You fools who take the name of Shadow Garden in vain..."

Shadow.

The most powerful existence that Alexia can never forget, he who had showed her the perfected form of her sword.

He is enemies with these men...?

It seems that he is *not* allied with these men in black.

"That sin... shall demand your lives as recompense."

The moment Shadow speaks, the remaining men in black move.

It was a split second decision.

They kick the stone pavement, kick the walls, and ascend to the roofs, aiming to get away.

But.

“How foolish...”

Shadow chases them.

“W-, wait a moment...!”

Alexia’s voice causes Shadow to stop.

He slowly turns around, then looks at Alexia.

Her sword is clattering audibly.

That what she is doing is sheer folly... this Alexia is well aware.

“My name is Alexia Midgar. I’m a princess of this country.”

Shadow merely silently continues to look at Alexia.

If he feels like it, he could reap Alexia’s life before she even knows that it happened.

“Tell me what your aim is. For what do you wield your strength, what are you fighting against, and... do you intend to bare your fangs against this country?”

Shadow turns around.

“Don’t get involved. It’s better for you to not know.”

“...! Wait! If you truly are an enemy of ours...!”

“What would you do if I am?”

His killing intent slams into Alexia.

She instinctively shrinks back in the face of this existence that she knows she definitely cannot win against.

However, to fight against one's instincts is what it means to be human.

"I will fight. You will definitely kill my Nee-sama. And I cannot allow that to happen."

The only sound from Shadow is the flutter of his coat.

"I, I understand your sword. Even if it's not possible now, some day, I..."

"You will kill me?"

Leaving that question hanging in mid-air, Shadow disappears into the shadows.

Alexia whispers to the empty darkness.

"Yes, I will..."

Silence has returned to the night.

Now alone by herself, Alexia falls to her knees while clutching her abdomen.

Her sword falls from her shaking hands.

She has done a foolish thing. She knows this full well.

However, Alexia has recently finally understood. Why she swings her sword, what is precious to her, what is that which she truly wishes to protect.

It is for that one person who is her sister, and for that one person who is her friend.

Alexia had resolved to protect only those two.

"This... is pretty bad..."

Her consciousness is fading.

If she faints in an alleyway like this, Alexia knows that nothing good is going to happen to her.

Somehow, she manages to rely on the wall to stand up.

At that moment.

“...Alexia... Alexia!”

She hears her name being called from far away.

“Ne-, Nee-sama... Nee-sama, here!”

“Alexia...!!”

Footsteps approach rapidly.

Something soft envelops and holds up Alexia’s crumpling body.

“Alexia, why did you go off on your own...!”

“Nee-sama...”

Alexia buries her head in her sister’s chest.

“Later on, I will have you tell me in detail what happened. Prepare yourself.”

“...Alright.”

“And also, you will also tell me what this is about.”

“Eh...?”

With a glance, she notices red lozenges scattered over the stone pavement. Dropped there by someone.

“Ne-, Nee-sama, I know nothing ab-...”

“Be quiet.”

“Really, I really don’t kn-...”

“I will not forgive you.”

“Ugh, my head...”

Alexia chooses to let herself faint away.

Chapter 27

High Heels & One Piece & White Legs

Two figures are dashing through the royal capital in the night.

Clad in black from head to toe, they keep glancing behind while stopping in a narrow alleyway.

They must have been rushing quite a lot. They are leaning against a wall, completely out of breath.

For a while, the only sound echoing in the alleyway is that of their breathing.

But suddenly.

Katsu.

A new sound rings out from the depths of the alleyway.

The two men swiftly turn around, trying to peer into the depths of the shadows.

Within the darkness, something is drawing near.

Katsu. Katsu.

That is the sound of boots on the stone pavement.

The two men in black bring up their guard and ready their swords. But in that instant.

A jet black sword sprouts from one of the men's head.

Without any herald, in complete suddenness, the man was pierced through.

"Ah, h-... agah...!"

The jet black sword is withdrawn, leaving the man to writhe on the ground spraying

bodily fluids while releasing a death rattle.

“...!”

When the remaining man quickly backs off in a fluster, the figure of a man materializes from the shadows.

That man is wearing a jet black coat, holding a jet black blade, and has his face covered in a magician’s mask.

“Did I make you wait?”

It is a deep voice that seems to reverberate from the depths of the earth.

“Hii...”

Finding himself struck dumb with fear, the man in black can only continue to back up.

“Why so serious?”

So *he* says.

“Could it be that... you actually thought you can escape?”

The man in black turns around and dashes off.

However.

“Wha-?!”

“As expected of Shadow-sama.”

Before him is a single girl. Wearing a mini one piece, she seems like a very classy woman.

“To think that you could apprehend him this quickly, as expected indeed.”

“Nyu, is it?”

“Yes, my lord.”

The two of them are talking over the man's head.

The man has his back against the wall and is beginning to hyperventilate.

"Please leave the rest to us. We will draw the information out of him."

He puts away his sword.

"...I want no mistakes."

"Yes, my lord."

With that, he turns on his heels and disappears into the darkness.

The woman sees him off with her head lowered.

Then only the man in black and the woman are left in the narrow alleyway.

Whereas the man is wearing full body gear, the woman is wearing a one piece and high heels, with not a weapon on her.

The man's decision is swift.

With a very fast mowing attack, he kills the empty-handed woman.

Or so he intended.

The hem of her one piece flutters, and her white, shapely leg slices through the darkness.

Karan.

The man's sword falls to the ground.

Belatedly, 8 of the man's fingers fall alongside his sword.

"Ah, AHHHH...!"

Is it his fingers that he is trying to pick up, or his sword?

He reaches out with a hand that only has a thumb left.

However, that hand is stepped on by the stiletto of a high heel.

“Igi...”

At the tip of the heels is a jet black blade.

The blood flowing from the stumps of the man’s fingers pool on the ground.

“I am not as merciful as Shadow-sama.”

Her chilly voice descends from above.

When he looks up, he sees sharp, freezing eyes staring down at him.

“Do not think that you can die an easy death.”

The hem of her skirt flutters again, and her knee smashes into the man’s jaw.



The next morning, a gruesome corpse is strung up above one of the royal capital’s main avenues. There is a message written out in blood on the corpse’s abdomen.

“The End of a Fool”

The corpse’s face is frozen in agony and terror.

Chapter 28

Otherworld-Style Valentine's Day

Alexia is lying in a clean bed, looking up at her older sister's very serious face.

"I understand."

So says Iris from her position beside the bed.

"So the slasher incident was not actually Shadow Garden, but some other group that was using their name."

"That's what Shadow said."

" 'Shadow'... In the end, we are still no closer to their true identity."

Iris ponders a bit while looking down.

"During that previous royal capital incident, I also came across a very powerful swordswoman who also seemed to be a member of Shadow Garden."

"You said that she named herself Alpha, right?"

Iris nods.

"Judging from various other reports, we know that the organization called Shadow Garden possesses extremely high fighting strength. Then from your report, we also know of the man called Shadow, and the name of their organization. But those are literally the only facts we know. Everything else is wrapped in a mystery, including the aim of the organization."

"I saw that Shadow is hostile against the Order of Diabolos. Perhaps the their aim lies with the Order?"

"So the lead lies with the Order..."

Iris heaves a sigh.

“Nee-sama...?”

“I had thought them to be a mere gathering of eccentrics who worship the demon Diabolos, but their roots seem to be much deeper than expected.”

“You’re talking about the arson case?”

“The arson too, but actually the budget for the Crimson Order is not being approved. I’m going to have to shoulder our expenses out of my own pocket for a while.”

Alexia frowns.

“So they have infiltrated not only the existent Knight Order, but also the civil officials?”

“I do not know. Maybe it’s people from the Order, or maybe they’re merely being controlled by money... The establishment of our knight order was also a bit forced, so I can’t insist too vehemently either.”

“I can also help you with the expenses.”

“Thank you, but the thought is enough. You know how many people we have in the Crimson Order, right?”

“Eight people.”

“Exactly, we only have eight people. My personal assets can easily last us more than a decade.”

“But in this state, we cannot expand the knight order.”

“At the moment, there’s no point in us expanding. We still don’t know who else we can trust.”

“Nee-sama, um...”

Alexia looks up at her sister, clearly having difficulty getting out her next words.

“Who is our Crimson Order enemies with – Shadow Garden or the Order of Diabolos?”

Iris smiles while answering.

“Both. As long as they are within our borders, I will not allow them to do as they please.”

“Nee-sama... we must not fight against Shadow.”

Alexia grabs her sheets tightly.

“Alexia, there you go again about that...”

“It is only because Nee-sama has not yet met Shadow that you can say that. Didn’t you also see that attack that colored up the royal capital’s sky?!”

“It has been determined that that was an artifact going berserk.”

“I clearly saw Shadow release that attack! With my own two eyes!”

Iris draws closer to the bed and looks into Alexia’s red eyes.

“It is physically impossible for a human to control that much power. Either your memory is muddled due to your long period of captivity, or else you were hallucinating due to being drugged. I know you’re not lying, but you were indeed very tired at that time.”

“Nee-sama!”

Iris wraps Alexia hand with both of her hands.

“Even if it was indeed an attack released by that man called Shadow, I still cannot run away. If I run away, who will protect our country?”

“Nee-sama...”

Iris pats Alexia’s head, then stands up.

“Rest up and get well soon.”

“...Once I recover, I’ll come back to help.”

“There will be no need for that.”

“Eh?”

“I forgot to tell you, but you’re under house arrest for a while.”

“EHHHH?!”

“Theft of evidence.”

Iris takes out a red lozenge, causing Alexia to be struck dumb.

“Properly reflect on your actions.”

The door shuts with a *‘patan.’*



I’m being stared at.

The moment I step into the classroom, I feel stares boring into me from every which direction.

Everyone is looking my way and whispering up a storm.

“It’s him, it’s him...”

“Leaking shit while running...”

“I heard that he did it right there on the road...”

I glare at Hyoro and Jaga, whose eyes start swimming all over the place.

“H-, hey there, quite the misfortune yesterday eh?”

“G-, good morning. Bad day yesterday, wasn’t it?”

“Good morning indeed. I wonder why I feel like today is going to be even more of an ordeal.”

The smiles on their faces are so stiff.

I heave a huge sigh.

“S-, so, did you all bring your chocolates from yesterday?”

So says Hyoro while taking out his package of wrapped chocolate.

“Yes I did.”

Says Jaga.

“So far as it goes, I did too, I guess.”

Say I.

“Alright, then let’s all give it out during lunch break!”

“*Mufufu*, isn’t it so exciting?”

“...Yea.”



Thus, lunch break.

Hyoro claimed to ‘show us how it’s done,’ so at the moment Jaga and I are just going along with him.

We are currently near the second years’ classroom. Hyoro is on standby around the corner.

The two of us are watching on from a bit farther away.

“An upperclassman. As expected of Hyoro-kun!”

“...Yea.”

After a short wait, a cute girl comes out.

“Um, p-, please accept this.”

Hyoro holds his chocolate out to her. But in that instant.

“Oi, what business do you have with my fiancée?”

A hand lands heavily on his shoulder.

Behind Hyoro is a macho-looking upperclassman with bulging muscles.

“Ah, no, that is...”

“Let’s have a talk right over there, shall we?”

Hyoro sends us an SOS with his eyes, but we pretend to not see it and turn around.

“Let’s go.”

“Yep.”

Hyoro’s wail reverberates behind us.



Jaga’s battlefield is apparently the library. As this library is also shared with the Scholar Academy, it’s quite large.

And of course, the musclebrains of the Magic Sword Academy almost never come here. Which includes me, of course.

“So your opponent is a student of the Scholar Academy?”

“Yes. I will not make the same mistake as Hyoro-kun. I’ve already researched my target thoroughly. I know everyone she associates with and her relationship with every one of them, I know her favorite foods, her dorm room number, the toilet she frequents, the size and smell of her shoes, the color of all the underwear she owns, her three sizes, and from a cup that she used I...”

“That’s enough. Go.”

I push Jaga into the library, then immediately turn around and leave.

“KYAAAAAHHHH!! THIS PERSON IS A STALKER!”

A high-pitched scream reverberates behind me.

I walk around randomly while dangling my packet of chocolates. I rarely come to this area, so everything seems quite fresh.

Then I call out to the first female student I pass by.

“Here you go, it’s chocolate.”

“Eh?”

It turns out to be a cute girl with pink-colored hair.

After pushing the chocolates onto her, I quickly stride away.

“Eh?? Eh??”

I hear a perplexed voice from behind.

I feel like I’ve seen her face somewhere before. But I can’t recall it, so meh, who cares.

Chapter 29

A Mob Can Tell

“What is this?”

A teenage girl is talking to herself in a research lab.

She is a cute girl with pink-colored hair. What her cool eyes are currently fixed on is a box of brown-colored objects.

Even when she lifts it up and smells the sweet smell wafting from it, she doesn't know what it is.

If she remembers correctly, the boy who handed these to her had called it 'chocolate'?

“Sherry, what is the matter?”

The person who calls out to her is a middle-aged man.

He has salt and pepper hair in a swept back style.

“Vice Principal Ruslan...”

“You promised to call me father when we are alone.”

“Step-father.”

Sherry gives an embarrassed laugh.

“So then, what is up with those chocolates?”

“Chocolate? A boy from the Magic Swordsman Academy gave these to me.”

“Heh~”

Ruslan strokes his moustache.

“That is an expensive confectionery that’s all the rage among girls nowadays. I’m sure it’s a present for you.”

“Eh? But I didn’t know him.”

“Then it must have been what they call ‘love at first sight.’ The one you have there is supposedly a phantom product that even lining up from the break of dawn might not even guarantee you the opportunity to buy it. It seems that that boy has gone to quite the lengths for your sake.”

“L-, love at first sight...”

So Sherry whispers, her cheeks slightly dyed.

“What reply will you give him?”

“Reply...?”

“He must be waiting for your reply.”

“B-, but I’m...”

Sherry’s cheeks are now fully red, and her eyes are swimming.



“It would be good for you to also learn how to get along with other humans, rather than focusing only on your research. This is also what a school is for, after all.”

“...I understand.”

Ruslan smiles gently as Sherry hangs her head down.

“So, how’s progress on the artifact?”

“There’s not much, I’m afraid. I’ve only just started, after all.”

With her cheeks still red, Sherry gives a troubled smile.

“That’s true, I suppose.”

“But there is one thing that I’ve determined so far. The text on that artifact is using a very unique code.”

“A unique code?”

Sherry begins spreading documents before Ruslan.

“I think it’s a code used by a specific ancient country or organization. And also... I think it bears strong resemblance to the code that my mother was working on.”

“I see, Luclaire’s... she was also a very exemplary researcher.”

Ruslan closes his eyes, as if he’s remembering the past.

“The meaning of the cipher that my mother was deciphering before her death, I want to know.”

At the moment, Sherry’s side profile is exact that of a researcher’s, from head to toe.

“This is a good job that you’ve accepted, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is.”

Ruslan pats her head, and she smiles bashfully.

“So, where is the artifact right now?”

“Oh, the knights in the other room are holding onto it.”

“You don’t need to have it in hand?”

“Only at times. Since I need to spend time thinking, and I get a bit nervous when I’m with the knights.”

“I se- cough, cough, s-, sorry about that...”

Ruslan turns around and coughs.

“Step-father! Are you alright?”

Sherry hurriedly rubs Ruslan’s back.

Ruslan’s body is thin, and his cheeks are hollow.

“I, I’m fine, I’m fine.”

Ruslan slowly gets his breath back.

“I even seemed to be doing a bit better nowadays though. I guess that’s just how sicknesses are.”

“Step-father...”

“Don’t make that worried face. Rather than that, that study abroad offer from Academy City has come again.”

“Academy City Rawagas...”

“The world’s top brains have already acknowledged your research results. If you go to Rawagas, you can grow a lot more, learn a lot more. I think it’s a great idea to go.”

Sherry shakes her head.

“You’re still sick, there’s no way I can go.”

“Sherry, you don’t have to worry about me, really.”

“After my mother died, if you hadn’t adopt me, I would definitely have died somewhere. I... I want to help you, just as you helped me.”

Sherry’s eyes are tearing up.

“Sherry... I have such a good daughter indeed.”

Ruslan smiles gently.

“Do well with your research then. Also, make sure to eat those chocolates.”

“...Yes, I will.”

Ruslan exits the research lab.

Left alone, Sherry reaches out for a piece of chocolate, her cheeks blushing.

“So sweet... so delicious...”

And then she reaches for a second piece.



I am enjoying a perfectly peaceful day absent of Hyoro and Jaga and Alexia, just walking back to my dorm.

After I leave the garden that is currently dyed by the setting sun and the number of students near me drops, a female student suddenly approaches me.

She is wearing a second-year’s uniform, has dark brown hair down up in buns, and is wearing lame-looking glasses over her similarly colored eyes.

But I can tell, with my long history as a mob.

That is actually a beautiful person who is only pretending to be a mob to not stand out.

“Hey there, do you have some time?”

I recognize that voice.

“Nyu, huh.”

So I say in a low voice. She nods.

To think that a classy lady can change this much with glasses and cosmetics and a different hairstyle.

We continue talking in low voices.

“You attend this academy?”

“No, this uniform is borrowed. So I can blend in.”

“I see.”

The academy is so large that the faces you know would be far less than the faces you don't. As long as the other person is wearing a uniform, then why would you give them a second look?

“Where shall we talk?”

“How about that bench over there?”

There is currently no one near that bench that has an unbroken view of the beautiful garden.

At that place where the setting sun is a bit blinding, the two of us sit next to each other.

Chapter 30

_____ Bastard

Looking down at the academy garden, Nyuu's eyes narrow behind her glasses.

Originally, she is supposed to be attending this school as an actual second-year student. Up until that day when she had been discarded due to demon possession, she had not doubted even for a second that her future would be smooth and peaceful.

But in the end, all of it turned out to be mere fantasy.

Everything that Nyuu had believed in and taken for granted, be it family, friends, or peace, turned out to be a tower built upon a very, very thin sheet of ice. Not knowing what lay beneath the ice, she had been merely frolicking around as an ignorant child.

She gazes at the students in the garden with both envy and pity mixed in her eyes.

Down there is a face that she recognizes.

Nyuu used to be the daughter of a marquis family, and she had been quite well known in the social circle.

Those days had been glittering.

But even that is merely in the past now.

She was erased from her family genealogy, turned into someone who never existed.

How many of those people who had been her close friends actually still remember her?

Oh right, there was that person, wasn't there? Like that.

Probably rather than nostalgia, only disgust would be involved if she comes up in a conversation now. That's what demon possession is.

It was not necessary for her to go to the trouble of coming to the academy in the daytime to meet Shadow.

However, it's just that she has a tiny fragment of hope that she has never been able to completely discard.

In some corner of this peaceful academy, there is still a place for her. She merely wanted to see that foolish dream for a brief moment.

Nyuu laughs.

Even though she might no longer have a place in the world of light, she now has comrades who share her will.

And... beside her is her beloved and respected lord.

He had started the fight all by himself.

And he would probably continue fighting to the very end, even if he becomes the only person left.

His existence is what props up Shadow Garden.

Humans are weak, every single one, so they all want to rely on an absolute entity.

If for the world, God is that absolute entity, then for Shadow Garden, *he* is that absolute entity.

But he's so much better than God.

When she opens her eyes, he is there. If she reaches out, she can touch him.

"Nn, what's the matter?"

"There was something on you."

She brushes away the lint on his shoulder.

Then she looks at his face in profile.

“Please keep this a secret from Gamma-sama. If she knows that I infiltrated into the academy in the daytime, she’d get really angry at me.”

“Sure. But I’m surprised, to think that you can look so different with cosmetics.”

“My facial structure is actually quite bland, so it’s easy to change its impression. I guess you can sort of say that it was one of the things that I was good at in the past.”

“*Heeh*, so that time at Mitsugoshi Co. also?”

“Yes, at that time I was trying to look older than I am.”

“I see. Incidentally, how old *are* you?”

“That’s a secret.”

Nyuu smiles bewitchingly.

“I came to report about the black-clothed man from yesterday.”

“*Fumu.*”

“We interrogated him, but was not able to draw out any information. His mind was already broken by what seems to be very powerful brainwashing. Based on that and a few other traits, we identified him to be a Children 3rd of the Order of Diabolos.”

“*Fumu?*”

Diabolos Children.

The Order of Diabolos combs through orphans and children of poor families, and kidnaps any one of them that displays even the slightest affinity for magic, then raises them in specialized facilities. Due to the repeated application of severe training menus, brainwashing programs, and drug administration in those facilities, those who successfully graduate are less than 1% of the number that go in. Children 3rd is considered the failures of the graduates, pawns to be used and thrown away. Because their minds are already broken, they can’t leak any information, but their fighting prowess greatly overshadows any average knight.

2nd are those whose minds are stable. The very few 1st are those who possess very

significant power by world standards.

Of course, there's no need for Nyuu to explain all this information to him, so she leaves it out.

"It is clear that the Order is involved with a series of recent events. We think they are most likely trying to lure us out."

"Fumu."

"However, that is not their only aim. The other day, we confirmed that a Named Children 1st has come to the royal capital. It is Lex the Treacherous Player. We believe they have a more specific goal for which they are gathering their strength, but we lost sight of Lex and are currently investigating."

"Fumu?"

Named Children.

Those among the Diabolos Children who have provided exceptional contribution to the Order are granted a name. Most Named are 1st, but named 2nds are not entirely unheard of either.

Furthermore, there are Named who have climbed into the ranks of the Knights of Rounds. More like, within the organization, being Named is almost considered a requirement to be considered for a position in the Rounds.

And actually.

There is a former Named Children 1st in Shadow Garden.

All the information that we have was provided by her.

Of course, there's no need for Nyuu to explain all this information either, so she leaves it out.

"Please stay on your guard. The Order is plotting something. We will continue investigating, and will report to you as soon as we find anything out."

"Fumu."

The sun dips below the far horizon.

The afterglow stains the clouds madder red.

Fanning the slightly sweaty nape of her neck, Nyuu stands up.

He yawns, then also stands up beside her.

Perhaps in a parallel world, there exists a different version of the two of them who can talk with the other like lovers, enjoying their school life.

Nyuu laughs at her regretful self.

But now, for just a short while.

“Now look here, aren’t you supposed to escort a lady?”

“Escort? Like this?”

Nyuu links her arm with his proffered arm.

They begin walking together.

Surely such a future exists somewhere, thinks Nyuu to herself with a laugh.

A male student from far off shouts something.

“It’s the poop bastard!!”

Nyuu clicks her tongue.

She has recollection of that male student who had utterly ruined the mood. He is a piece of trash who had insistently approached Nyuu back when she had been in the social circle. She decides to thoroughly thrash him up later.

For some reason, the boy beside her is shifting his eyes.

Nyuu merely hugs his arm even tighter.

Chapter 31

Can You Keep Up With Me?

If someone asks who is the strongest in the academy, a year ago, the unanimous answer would have been Iris Midgar.

But after she graduated, the seat of the ruler of the academy became empty.

Or so everyone had thought.

But the next ruler appeared out of the blue.

In a way that no one expected, a person that no one had expected came to reign over the entire Midgar Magic Swordsman Academy from the very top as the absolute ruler.

Her name is Rose Oriana.

She is an exchange student from Oriana Kingdom, the 'country of art.' She is also the daughter of Raffaello Oriana, king of said country.

Oriana Kingdom is allied with Midgar Kingdom, and her study abroad had been planned for a long time. But it's just that no one had imagined a princess of the country of arts to become the top ruler in the Midgar Magic Swordsman Academy.

Well, frankly speaking, whether it was expected or not means absolutely nothing to me.

The problem is that my opponent for the first round of the Senbatsu Tournament is exactly that Rose Oriana.

There is of course the option to just withdraw.

Hgoro is bedridden after the 'talk' with that upperclassman.

Jaga is under house arrest after being caught trespassing into the girls' dorm.

In other words, there's no one to stop me from finding a random excuse to not participate in the tournament.

But when I thought about it more, I realized one thing: to lose in an unsightly manner to the school's absolute ruler in the first round of a tournament, doesn't that seem really mob-like?

Yep, it's definitely mob-like!

Perish the very thought of withdrawing!

As a mob, I have the duty to show the world how a mob loses in a mob-like way.

And so, here I am, drawing my sword in front of the huge audience.

Standing before me is Rose Oriana.

With her elegant honey-colored rolls, her fashionable battle clothes, and her thin sword.

She has a soft-looking face, and first class style, and is anyways very chic.

As expected of the country of art.

Furthermore, on top of being an exchange student and a second-year, she is also the current Student Council President.

Due to her looks, her strength, and her popularity, the cheering in the venue has already reached incredible levels.

Not a single person is shouting my name.

A small part of me thinks "support your home country's side!" but eh, whatever.

This is exactly the stage of a mob.

It is the best.

My sword is clattering audibly.

Have I ever been this nervous in a fight?

What is requested here is not a simple ending where victory, murder, and even dust is evaporated into a cloud.

What is requested here is my mob-like defeat.

What does it mean to be mob-like?

This question steps into the realm of philosophy.

But there is no need for worry.

For the sake of this day, I have perfected the 'Forty-Eight Mob-Style Secret Techniques.'

"Rose Oriana versus Sid Kagenou!!"

The referee announces our names.

Rose's ice-blue eyes and my mob-like eyes clash in a shower of sparks.

Oh, Rose Oriana.

Can you keep up with me?

In this battle against... a mob who has reached the utmost limits!

"Fight!!"

The instant the fight starts, Rose's thin sword dances.

It draws a sharp, beautiful arc headed straight for my chest.

A normal mob would not even be able to see this attack.

I can see it.

I can, but... I choose not to react.

I must not display even a hint of a reaction.

Why? Because I'm a mob.

I will not move even a muscle until the instant the sword makes contact with my chest.

The swords being used in this tournament all have their blades dulled, but taking a head on blow would still lead to quite significant injuries.

Her thin sword stabs my chest.

That instant, I spring into action.

Without showing any outward indication of moving, I fly backwards with only the strength of my toes, and incorporate the pushing power of her sword to add a spin to my flight.

Furthermore, I secretly take out a packet of blood that I had collected yesterday, and break it.

All this happened in less than a fraction of an instant.

I am sent flying backwards with a tailspin while spraying blood like a fountain.

"PegyoOOEEEEEEeeeeEEE!!"

The red tornado of blood paints a beautiful picture in the air.

Mob-Style Secret Technique: 'Tailspin Bloody Tornado'

Then I crash into the ground, bounce once, then roll across the stage.

A huge roar of cheering shakes the arena.

“Gu, guhah, voeeEEee!”

Then I break another pack of blood and pretend to vomit out its contents.

PERFECT!

Every single person in the venue is believing thoroughly in my mob-ness. Not a single person is doubting it.

I feel a strong urge to smile ear to ear at my full score performance, but I push it down.

Because this is not over yet.

It is *not* over yet.

“Gegeh, geho00ooo0000!!”

I spend 10 more seconds pretending to struggle to stand up while near death.

Indeed... there are still 47 techniques left in the Mob-Style Secret Techniques!



Why, how, is he standing back up?

Rose Oriana shudders at the boy who keeps standing up again and again no matter how many times he falls.

He is covered with blood from head to toe, and it seems doubtful whether he can even swing his sword properly anymore.

He is no shape to be fighting. Or rather, the fact that he can still stand is already a miracle.

Rose's sword may be thin, but it is by no means light. Though the blade is dulled, the magic imbued into it is real.

It is very possible to render someone incapable of further combat with just a single strike.

However.

How many times has this boy eaten her attack?

It is not only once or twice.

Despite having been bathed by her attacks for more than 10 times, still he stands back up with persistent fighting will.

Why is he going to such lengths?

Even though his physical body must have already exceeded its limits, his eyes are still not dead.

They are vividly telling her that there is still so much more that he wants to do.

Rose is incredibly impressed at his figure.

Exactly how much emotion did this boy bring with him when he stepped onto this stage?

He has a reason why he absolutely cannot lose.

There is no comparing the difference in strength between Rose and him. There isn't even a one in a million chance of him winning.

In spite of that, he does not give up.

His burning eyes are glaring at Rose.

It's not over yet.

It's not over yet, with only this little.

Rose can only sigh in admiration at the sight of him surpassing the limits of his body through his unbending will, continuously challenging an opponent that he can never win.

In Rose's heart is profound respect for this boy, Sid Kagenous, but also a deep apology to him.

At the start, she had looked down on him, thinking him an easy opponent that she can quickly defeat.

Indeed, it might be true that in a fight of only sword mastery, he wouldn't last even one second against her.

However, in the fight of the heart – this is Rose's complete defeat.

“The next one will be the end.”

Which is why Rose decides to quickly end this.

If this continues, he would probably continue standing up until he really dies.

She doesn't want to kill this boy of such promise.

The cheering in the arena has stopped some time ago.

Everyone is creeped out by him.

Rose imbues more magic into her sword than she has for any other strike today.

The air vibrates, and the audience buzzes.

However, even so.

“As I'd thought – you still won't give up.”

His eyes are burning with searing flames.

There isn't even a shred of fear towards her coming attack. There is only an infinite amount of fighting will in his eyes.

In which case, then she has no choice but to go all out.

Rose's sword begins to hum, but at that moment.

“STOP!! STAND DOWN, THE MATCH IS OVER!”

The referee interrupts and declares the match to be over. It is because he determined that it would be dangerous if he allowed things to proceed any further.

Rose sighs with relief.

However, it is the opposite for the boy.

“What! But I still have thirty three left...”

His eyes are still conveying that he can still fight.

“Winner, ROSE ORIANA!!”

Thunderous applause falls upon Rose.

Rose shakes her hand in response, then bows deeply towards the crumpling Sid Kagenou.

Chapter 32

The Undying Magic Swordsman

After the match, it seemed that I was going to be forcefully brought to the infirmary, so I gave them the slip and escaped.

That was dangerous.

If someone sees that I'm pretty much unscathed, how could I explain it? I almost had to cut myself back there.

I exit through the participants-only door, then walk down an empty hallway.

I guess the remaining 33 techniques would have to be saved for next year. Hopefully a good opportunity comes before then.

"U-, um..."

"*Nn?*"

Suddenly, a student that I'm not familiar with calls out to me.

It is a cute girl with pink hair wearing the school uniform. I feel like I might have seen her before. Or maybe not? Not sure.

"Your injuries... are you alright?"

"J-, just barely... avoided any deep wounds... I think?"

I nonchalantly take the pose of pressing on the wound on my chest.

"That's a relief. Um, I saw your match."

"I, I see."

"I don't watch matches often, but the way you kept standing back up, I thought it was

really cool.”

“Erm, it was cool...?”

“Yes...”

She nods with a slight blush.

What a strange girl she is to find a mob ‘cool.’ Well, there were indeed a lot of people in the audience, so I guess it wouldn’t be strange for one or two to have such eccentricities.

“So, um, this...”

The girl timidly holds out a small package.

“This is?”

“I baked some cookies... in return...”

Is this like a gift for a good match?

“Thanks.”

Since she already went to the trouble, then might as well.

The girl smiles happily.

“I-, if it’s alright with you, can we start as friends?”

“Friends? Sure.”

Aside from a certain exception, I generally live by a policy to not cause girls embarrassment.

“Yes! Step-father, we became friends.”

Step-father?

The girl is looking towards a middle-aged man with salt-and-pepper hair in a swept

back style who is walking towards us.

Now this thin man, I recognize.

“Vice Principal Ruslan...”

He is this academy’s vice-principal, and also used to be a master fencer who had taken the championship once at the Festival of the God of War.

And if this girl is calling him ‘step-father,’ then it must mean she is...!

“Sherry Barnett...!”

“Yes?”

According to my own investigation, she is arguably the biggest character in the Scholar Academy.

I had arbitrarily imagined her to be someone who offers fitting advice to a protagonist, or solves huge mysteries, or crafts powerful equipment to defeat bosses.

Since I’d most likely never have to fight directly with a student of the Scholar Academy, so honestly I had kind of let them slip from my mind.

“So you are Sid Kagenou-kun.”

Vice Principal stands next to Sherry.

“Yes, sir.”

“Are your injuries fine?”

“D-, due to some miracle... Ohhhh, she must have held back on me?”

He rubs his chin in contemplation.

“*Fumu*, it’s true that Rose-kun would be unlikely to mistake her strength. But you should still get yourself properly checked out by a doctor.”

“Yes, for sure.”

For sure I will not.

Ruslan nods, then places a hand on Sherry's shoulder.

"This girl only knows how to do research, and doesn't have any proper friends."

"Step-father!"

Ruslan laughs jovially before continuing.

"Now she can laugh as you can see, but she has also gone through a lot. Please be a good friend to Sherry. This is my wish as a mere father."

Ruslan's face is the very definition of serious, and Sherry is giving an embarrassed smile next to him.

'It's impossible because I'm a mob and she's not'... is not something that this atmosphere would allow me to say.

"...Yes, sir."

"Well then, I'll leave the rest to you two youngsters."

After giving my shoulder a pat, the Vice Principal walks off.

"Umm, *yoroshiku onegaishimasu.*"

"Yep, *yoroshiku.*"

"So, what should we do?"

She tilts her head...

"Oh, right, doctor! You have to go to a doctor first! I'm sorry for forgetting, I got a bit too excited."

...then smiles apologetically.

"No, it's fine."

“Eh, but...?”

“Don’t worry about the doctor, I’ll go later. I’ll definitely go. So let’s have some tea.”

“Umm, are you sure?”

“It’s fine, it’s fine.”

“Magic swordsmen are pretty amazing, aren’t they.”

“I know, right?”

This beauty who is way beyond the league of a mere mob smiles brilliantly at me.

After that, we had tea and her cookies together and chatted lightly. I came to realize that she’s actually a normal girl, but just that she’d recently accepted a request from some knight order to research an important artifact. Wow, that’s pretty impressive, I told her. By the way, the cookies were simple but quite delicious.

Well, she’s far from what can be considered as ‘friend of a mob,’ but with the size of the academy, we’ll probably never meet again, so it’s fine.

The next day, in order to not raise suspicion, I applied for 5 days of leave, on the pretext of recuperating from my injuries.

When I did go back to school, my classmates’ looks were a bit gentler than before.

Chapter 33

What Every Boy in the Universe Dreams Of

The next day after my revival, the morning class ended a bit earlier than normal.

“From now on, a candidate for the Student Council election, and also the Student Council President, will be here to give an address, so all of you, stay in your seats.”

So said the teacher to the students who were trying to rush off.

“Not that I care, but do you know where the third years have gone?”

“No idea.”

I give a half-hearted answer accompanied with a yawn in response to Hyoro’s random question.

“Oh, the third years? This week they’re away on an extracurricular trip...”

So informs Jaga after turning around from his seat in front of us.

At that moment, the classroom door opens, and two female students come in. In exchange, the teacher goes out.

I recognize one of the faces. It is Student Council President Rose Oriana, who I had fought the other day.

Why is it that even though it’s the usual uniform, when a chic person wears it, it somehow gains a mysterious chic aura?

“Umm, we are very grateful to the teacher for setting aside precious time for us today. About the Student Council election...”

The first year girl, clearly still not used to this, starts speaking in a stiff voice.

Is it only for me that speeches like this go in one ear and right out the other?

I notice Hyoro also listening to the speech with a blank face and yawning.

Jaga is taking down notes of some sort.

Abruptly, I feel like the Student Council President and my eyes had met. If she really remembers the mob who only suffered an unsightly defeat against her in the first round, then she'd be quite something indeed.

"Oi, the Student Council President just looked at me."

So says Hyoro while arranging his bangs.

"Good for you."

"Oi oi, I might get scouted by the Student Council."

"Good for you."

"Oi oi oi, I really don't want to get involved with bothersome things."

"Good for you."

And that's pretty much how the time is going by.

But suddenly, I felt a disturbance in my magic.

"Eh?"

"What happened?"

I am constantly manipulating and controlling my internal magic as practice, but as of just now, I suddenly can't seem to feel that magic anymore.

It feels like something is obstructing the flow of magic. I can either push through it with brute force, or I think I can also circumvent it by making my magic extremely fine.

As these thoughts go through my mind, I feel some presence approaching the classroom.

"They're coming..."

I just felt like saying that.

But at that moment.

Abruptly, an enormous explosion echoes out.

The door to the classroom is blown away, and the entire class is rendered dumbstruck.

Immediately afterwards, men in black holding naked blades march into the classroom.

“Nobody move! We are Shadow Garden, and we have occupied this academy!”

So shouting, they stand in front of the exit.

“No way...”

My mutter is drowned out in the surrounding commotion.

There is not a single student who can move.

Is this a drill, a prank, or... real?

Almost all of the students are having trouble coming to grips with the reality that the Magic Swordsman Academy is under attack.

I am the only one who has fully grasped the situation.

That these men are for real, that all magic in the surrounding has been blocked, and that the same thing is currently happening in all the other classes.

“Awe~some...”

Words of appreciation automatically spilled from my lips.

These guys, they’re truly gone and done it.

They’ve actually done it.

‘That thing’ that every boy in the world has dreamt of.

‘That thing’ that has colored a page of our teenage fantasies.

‘That thing’ being... having the school being attacked by terrorists!

I am shivering with emotion.

Exactly how many times have I fantasized this situation.

Several hundred, several thousand... several hundred million times.

I’ve explored all the innumerable patterns that such a situation can turn, and finally, it’s actually happening in front of me!

“Stay in your seats, and raise your hands!”

Seeing the students gradually coming back to their senses, the men in black threaten the students with their swords.

I thought I’d prefer to be on the terrorist side, but it already got chosen by them.

No worries, being on the student side is more common.

So, what should I do?

How should I move?

Infinite possibilities are spread out before me.

“It seems like you lot fail to understand what kind of place this is.”

At that moment, a gallant voice rings out.

A single girl places her hand on the sword on her waist and confronts the men in black.

“You wish to occupy the Magic Swordsmen Academy? It seems that you are not in your right minds.”

Only one person, Rose Oriana, is standing out to face against the men.

“We told you to discard your weapon, little girl.”

“I refuse.”

So saying, Rose draws her sword.

“Hmph, you’d be just right as a prime lesson.”

One of the men in black raises his sword in a fighting stance.

This is bad.

She still hasn’t realized that she can no longer use magic here.

“...! What is happening?”

Agitation colors Rose’s face.

“So you finally realized it?”

The man in black laughs behind his mask.

Bad, this is bad. This cannot continue like this.

“But it’s already too late.”

He swings his sword towards Rose.

There is no way that a girl whose magic has been sealed can ward off that sword imbued with magic.

I jump up from my seat and dash forward.

“...!”

Stop, this is isn’t how it’s supposed to go.

My brain processing speed accelerates, and the world slows down.

Right now, my heart is filled with a bottomless impatience and rage.

“...aaaAAAHHHH!!”

At this rate, she will become the first one to be killed by the terrorists, Victim #1.

That must not happen.

It definitely cannot be allowed to happen.

“AAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!”

The first person in the class to be killed by the terrorists is always...

A MOB CHARACTER!

“SSSSTTTTTTTOOOOOOPPPPPPPPPPPPPPP IIIIITTTTTT!!!!!!!”

Along with the roar from my very soul, I manage to slip in between the two of them.



Watching the naked blade drawing close, Rose foresees her own death.

With a weak body that cannot manipulate magic, she can neither block nor evade the attack.

In order to make the wound as shallow as possible, she tries to turn her upper body, but even that feels extremely sluggish.

She will not make it in time.

Death is there, as simple reality.

But at that moment, a cry pierces her eardrums.

“SSSSTTTTTTTOOOOOOPPPPPPPPPPPPPPP IIIIITTTTTT!!!!!!!”

Immediately afterwards, something crashes in from the side and sends Rose flying.

“*Kya...!*”

By reflex, she lands with an ukemi.

And when she looks up, a shocking sight greets her eyes.

“How could...”

There is a blood-covered boy lying limp on the ground.

The blood flowing over the floor is making a puddle that is growing larger by the second.

It was apparently a fatal blow.

“*KYYYYAAAAHHHHH!!*”

Someone’s scream reverberates around the classroom.

Rose rushes over to the boy’s body, not caring the slightest about the blood staining her clothes.

This boy is someone who had left an extremely deep impression on her only very recently.

“Sid Kagenou-kun...”

In response to Rose’s murmur, the boy faintly opens his eyes.

“Baka, why did you cover me...?”

She had met him only just so recently. She hasn’t even had the chance to have a proper talk with him yet.

There shouldn’t have been a reason for him to save her, even at the cost of his own life.

The boy opens his mouth, seemingly trying to say something.

“*Geho, goho!*”

But only manages to cough up a large amount of blood.

“Sid-kun!”

Some of the boy’s coughed up blood splatters on Rose’s white cheek.

The boy smiles with his blood-covered face... then breathes his last.

His dying face is one filled with accomplishment.

“Why...”

A single line of tears flow down Rose’s cheek.

Rose clutches the boy’s body and holds back the sobs racking her body.

Seeing the boy’s dying face, Rose finally understands the answer to all the mysteries.

His abnormally tenuous struggle in the Senbatsu Tournament.

That burning gaze that he looked at her with.

And how he protected her, even with his own life.

Everything is now connected.

Rose is not quite that slow on the uptake. With her status as a princess and her looks, ever since when she was young, a countless number of people have proffered love to her.

But no one previously have shown her such passionate love.

She has never been loved with love so deep that the other side is willing to even lay down his life for her.

“Thank you...”

She would never have the opportunity to answer his feelings.

But she swears that she will never let them go to waste.

“Hah, that made a good lesson.”

The man in black stops before Rose.

“...!”

Rose bites her lip and stares up furiously at the man.

“You still want to resist?”

“*Kuh...* I will do as you say.”

Rose hangs her head. She had already sworn to not let the boy’s feelings go to waste.

Now is not the right time.

“Hmph. Alright, everyone make your way to the auditorium!”

The men in black all begin moving.

They make the students stand up, bind everyone’s hands behind their back, and direct them to leave the classroom in single file.

There is no longer anyone trying to resist.

At the end of the line, two of the male students turn around for a brief moment.

“Sid...”

“Sid-kun...”

They look at the corpse on the ground, looking like they have something they want to say.

“Move!”

The men in black prod them to resume walking.

Then the classroom becomes empty.

The sound of footsteps recede down the hallway, until silence comes to fill the air.

Then.

The dead boy’s arm twitches.

Chapter 34

There Are Times When A Mob Has to Act

Confirming that there is no longer anyone left in the classroom, I pound my chest with my fist.

“Move! Move!”

Again and again, I pound my chest, forcefully trying to restart my breathing.

“MooooOOOVVVEEEE!!”

Then, finally.

“*Geho, goho, goho!*”

It worked.

My heart, which had stopped, successfully restarts.

Mob-Style Secret Technique: ‘10 Minute Heart Break Mob’

It is a secret technique that allows the user to maintain an abnormally long period of cardiac arrest without suffering any after effects by using minute amounts of magic to maintain blood circulation to the brain.

This technique is super risky, such that even a single mistake would guarantee death, but there are times when a mob has to act, even with his life on the line.

Today was such a time. That’s all there is to that.

“Owww...”

I examine the wound on my back. This time, there was a high chance that I would be looked at up close, so I had to allow myself to actually get slashed.

Of course, I evaded fatal damage, but to make it look real, the wound had to be relatively deep.

I apply first-aid treatment on the wound with magic. It seems that I can indeed continue using magic when I make it extremely fine. Alternatively, I think it'd be possible to forcefully get rid of this obstruction with brute magical force.

“I guess this is about right.”

It would take too long to completely seal off my wound, and it would also be bad if someone looks at it afterwards. Recovering to the point where it won't negatively affect my movement is good enough.

Then I can just go with the 'by some stroke of luck, I managed to hang on to life' excuse.

“*Yokkorase.*”

(T/N: In Japanese, people (more so for older people) sometimes say something meaningless when standing up, sort of as an expression of the effort. Yokkorasho, yokkorase, yokkoisho, and several other variations.)

I stand up while confirming my physical and magical status. I wipe off the blood on my face, and fix my messed up uniform.

A refreshing afternoon wind blows in through the window, causing the white curtains to billow.

Along with the curtains' movements, the strong sunlight and dark shadows change shape accordingly.

Fallen chairs. Disorganized desks. Broken door. And the blood on the ground. All of this speaks of the fact that normalcy has been broken.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath.

“Let's go then.”

Exiting the classroom, I proceed down the empty hallway.



Sherry Barnett was so engrossed with deciphering the artifact that she was late in noticing the commotion.

“This is...”

She peers closely at the artifact in her hands.

Her pink eyes narrow slightly, as if she has noticed something.

“No way... how could this be...”

Even though her eyes are focused on the artifact, the pen in her hand is still moving furiously.

The nearby tumult is not even being registered in her brain.

Both the sounds of explosions and footsteps in the hallway, everything is outside the realm of her consciousness.

“What’s happening?!”

“The academy is under attack!”

“If we can’t use magic, then we can’t move around carelessly.”

Even the two knights’ conversation is not entering her ears.

“How could this... how could this...!”

That’s how concentrated she is on the artifact.

Even normally, she often gets so concentrated on her research that she doesn’t notice her surroundings, but it’s never been to this level. This artifact has something of great importance that has so thoroughly grabbed all of her attention.

Her quill pen continues moving, with scratching sounds.

Her pink eyes are only a step away from the truth hidden in the artifact.

But at that moment.

Abruptly, the windows shatter, and a single man wearing black jumps into the room.

One of the glass fragments lightly graze Sherry's cheek.

"Ow...!?"

"Who are you!"

The two knights bring up their swords.

Due to the pain on her cheek, Sherry finally notices her current situation.

"Eh? Eh?"

Clutching the artifact to her chest, Sherry dives underneath a desk.

When she lightly rubs her cheek, some blood is left on her hand.

"We are, um, Shadow Garden. Wait, was it Shadow Guardian? Ah, whatever. I am Lex, Lex the Treacherous Player. You all can call me Lex-sama."

The man in black laughs behind his mask.

"This is seriously in the way."

Then he throws away his mask. He has dull red hair and a frivolous aura, as well as eyes that look like that of a starving stray dog.

"Hi!"

The mask slides to where Sherry is, causing her to shrink even deeper into her hiding place.

"Shadow Garden... so you bastards are the rumored..."

"Regardless of your aim, don't think you can get away easily after attacking the academy!"

Lex laughs at the two knights' words.

“Yea, they probably won’t get away easily. Shadow Garden, that is. Oh, and by the way...”

There is a break in Lex’s words.

“I’ve already forgotten what our aim is.”

Ka, ka, ka, reverberates his laughter.

“Are you screwing around with us?”

“No, I’m not screwing around. Just that I don’t really care about it. I was told to retrieve some pendant-like artifact thing. After retrieving that, then I can do whatever I want, they said.”

Lex’s eyes narrow with a sharp glint.

“Do you guys know anything about it?”

He scowls at the two knights.

“!... Not the faintest idea.”

“We’ve never heard of such a thing.”

The knights’ answers brings a big smile to Lex’s face.

“Your faces are saying that you do know something!”

The air vibrates with magic. Lex is applying a huge amount of pressure on the area with a ridiculous amount of magic.

“...!”

Sherry hurriedly clamps her hands over her mouth to hold back the scream that almost escaped, then desperately begins crawling over the floor.

Just a little more, the door is so close!

“Who~ should~ I~ start~ with~ first~?”

Lex sweeps the room with his starved stray dog eyes.

“How about that young lady over there?”

Abruptly, he disappears.

Then suddenly, he is standing before Sherry.

“KYYYYAAAHHHHHHH!”

“Bye~”

“NO!”

Sherry clenches her eyes shut and curls up while clutching her head.

But.

“We won’t let you!”

Lex’s downward swing hits the floor.

When Sherry slowly opens her eyes with trepidation, she sees a knight with hair like a lion’s mane holding his sword and standing in front of her.

“Heeh~, to be able to move this well even without magic.”

“Magic is not everything. With the difference in our strengths, warding off your attacks is a walk in the park.”

“Difference in our strengths... Don’t tell me you actually believe that you are stronger than me?”

Lex glares at the large knight with a vicious glint in his eyes.

“I do indeed.”

“Let’s at least hear your name.”

“Vice Commander of the Crimson Order, Glen of the Lion Mane.”

The other knight stands up beside Glen.

“Marco, also of the Crimson Order.”

“No one asked for your name.”

Then Marco looks back at Sherry.

“Run.”

Then the fighting begins.

Sherry scrambles over the floor, manages to exit to the hallway, then runs away at full speed.

The dying screams echoing from behind her causes her to clamp both hands over her ears.

Chapter 35

The Romance of Looking Down From a Rooftop

I am now on a roof, looking out over the entire academy.

I can see everybody in the school being shepherded towards the auditorium. The auditorium is so huge that it can easily fit everybody. The school entrance ceremony is always held there, and sometimes there are plays or speakers or whatnot that are also held there.

I can see many knights crowding around outside the academy, drawn here by all the noise. But they are maintaining a certain distance away, probably because that's the boundary beyond which magic is sealed.

There are almost no more presences within the rest of the school grounds. There's only men in black scouring the rooms for any students who are still hiding.

While looking at the state of the academy, a laugh escapes my lips.

I've always wanted to do this.

School under attack, students under capture, mysterious terrorist organization, and me, looking over it all from a rooftop.

I got to check off one item on my to-do list.

"Me looking down from a rooftop."

Been there, done that.

Well then, what should I play to occupy my time until night falls?

Actually, I've had a thought ever since those men in black rushed into my classroom.

That these terrorists have zero sense of esthetics.

It is now afternoon. The sun is shining brightly, the sky is clear with not a cloud in sight, and there's a refreshing wind blowing. Then there's these guys, wearing black longcoats.

How ridiculous.

They have made a crucial mistake.

That is... they have underestimated TPO.

Everyone is free to choose their own fashion, but disregarding TPO would turn it into mistaken fashion.

As such, now, they just look dumb. Black longcoats are only for night time, duh.

But well, I want to enjoy this for a while longer, so it's not a problem that they're taking their time. What a waste it would be for this to end quickly.

I have decided on Operation Take-My-Time-Till-Night.

While looking over the academy with such thoughts in my head, I spy two men in black walking down a hallway.

Yep, black longcoats in broad daylight really do look dumb.

Hey, let's play sniper.

I cut out a thumb-sized piece of slime from my slime suit.

I roll it into a ball and imbue it with magic, lie down on the rooftop, then take a finger flick pose.

"You fool, you're in my line of fire."

So muttering, I flick.

Psshun.

Leaving behind the sound of something slicing through air, the slime ball pierces through the man's forehead.

“Ah...”

Then the slime ball also pierces the other man’s heart.

To think that I’d get the One Shot Two Kills achievement here.

Come on, I wanted to shoot one more time.

“Oh well, let’s look for another target then.”

I ready another slime ball, then close one eye and curl my fingers over my other eye, as if I’m looking through a scope.

I spy a defenseless idiot walking around the school building that I’m facing.

“Target confirmed, pink-haired girl... eh?”

Isn’t that Sherry?

What is she doing. She’s walking around while restlessly looking all around, but she’s actually already been found.

“Sherry-chan, they’ve noticed you.”

I see a man in black rapidly approaching Sherry from behind her.

I take aim... then flick.

Psshun.

The man’s head bursts.

“Mission complete.”

Sherry continues walking on, oblivious to what had happened, until she turns a corner and leaves my sight.

Fumu, she’s involved with all this.

My mob sensor is telling me, with utmost certainty, that the main scenario is proceeding

right now.

When the main scenario finally reaches the climax, then I appear gallantly as a power from the shadows... noice.

Alright.

I gather magic in my legs, confirm that no one is looking, then jump.

“*Tou!*”

(T/N: In sentai shows, jumping while saying ‘tou’ somehow makes it cooler lol.)

I land on the roof of that other building.

Then I slip into the building through an open window on the top floor.

I proceed down the hallway and... spotted.

That pink hair looking around restlessly like a suspicious person.

“As I said, they’ve noticed you.”

There is another man in black behind Sherry.

Right before he grabs her, I move at top speed.



“Eh?”

Feeling some movement behind her, Sherry turns around.

She thinks she also heard the sound of something cutting through the air, but there’s no one there.

The quiet, empty hallway stretches on into the distance.

“Just my imagination...?”

Carefully checking her surrounds, Sherry continues walking on with her flapping shoes, clutching the artifact tightly to her chest.

The knight had said back then that magic cannot be used.

If his words were real, then Sherry thinks she knows what's going on. It's related to her.

And then, this artifact is also...

Sherry hugs the artifact even closer.

"I have to do something about this...!"

The figures of the two knights who fought to let her escape resurface in her mind.

She cannot let their deaths go to waste.

With such thoughts whirling around in her head, she turns the corner.

"Ah!"

There's a man in black there! Sherry quickly hides back behind the corner.

What to do, it seems that their eyes had met!

There's that sound again, of something cutting through the air.

"It's fine, I wasn't spotted, I wasn't spotted..."

So praying, she slowly peeks around the corner...

"Oh whew, he didn't see me..."

The man in black is gone.

Resolving to focus more, Sherry resumes her flapping steps while carefully observing her surroundings.

"Ah!"

There's a man in black in a classroom who is looking out at the hallway!

Sherry hurriedly hides herself, but it's too late.

The classroom door is opened, and the man in black comes out.

"Hii."

Sherry clutches her head, and clenches her eyes shut.

...

.....

Again there's the sound of something cutting through air.

"Eh?"

Sherry opens her eyes with trepidation, and realizes that the man in black has disappeared.

"Oh wheeewww, I wasn't spotted..."

Sherry focuses even more, then flaps on.

She checks all corners, the inside of all classrooms, and even behind her.

Looking here, looking there, looking everywhere.

Having to confirm everything in her surroundings naturally means that her process becomes extremely slow.

"Ah!"

She trips.

Falling flat on the ground, she watches the artifact flying through midair.

The artifact falls on the ground... or not. Right before it does, it is caught by someone.

Looking upwards, she sees her recently-made friend standing there.

“Sid-kun...!”

However, he is covered with blood.

“Eh, are you alright?! You’re hurt...”

“I’m alright. By some miraculous stroke of luck, I managed to pull through. So don’t worry about it.”

For some reason, he seems really tired, and is looking at Sherry with a half-opened eye.

“There is a lot that I want to say. Firstly, please stop walking while immersed in your thoughts. Secondly, please stop talking to yourself out loud. Thirdly, please pay attention to the ground.”

Then he sighs deeply.

“But before anything else, please take off your really noisy flapping loafers, alright?”

Sherry nods.

Chapter 36

Relieved That It's More Decent Than Expected

With me supporting Sherry, we make our way to the Vice Principal's office. Incidentally, along the way, I secretly took care of 5 more guys.

We open the slightly heavy door and go inside.

The interior is decorated quite tastefully, and one of the walls is covered with bookshelves that reach the height of a normal person.

There are stacks of documents on the Vice Principal's desk, and sunlight is gently shining through the north-facing windows.

It has a really composed atmosphere, and truly feels like 'an adult's space.'

Sherry begins going through the drawers with familiarity.

"Please don't make loud noises, alright?"

The pink hair on the other side of the table nods silently.

"Fuu..."

I throw myself onto the two-person sofa and let out a long breath.

I'm so tired.

There is no doubt that Sherry is this time's main character, but it's beyond her. There's absolutely no way she can clear this scenario by herself. In situations like this, the main character always has a partner character, but there isn't even the shadow of such a presence. This is a really crappy scenario.

So after thinking about it, I decided to take up the assistant mob character position myself.

As a mob, I must never take the position of a main character. Never ever.

“Found it.”

Sherry comes back over to this side of the table with a bunch of documents in her hands.

Then she spreads them out over the coffee table.

“What’s this?”

It’s all symbols and figures and equations. I haven’t the faintest idea what any of this is.

“This is an artifact called the Eye of Avarice. I’m almost certain that this is what’s interfering with all the magic in this place.”

She is pointing at a circular, ominous-looking design roughly the size of a ping pong ball.

“This Eye of Avarice sucks up all nearby magic and stores it. So when it is activated, it becomes extremely difficult to use magic in its vicinity.”

“The men in black are using magic as usual, though?”

“They must have registered their magical signatures with the Eye of Avarice beforehand. It’s already been confirmed that the Eye doesn’t suck magic from registered signatures. Extremely fine magic and extremely vigorous magic, the Eye cannot absorb, but in the first place, no one can handle such magic.”

Fumu.

“This ability alone is already quite troubling, but actually, the magic stored in the Eye of Avarice can also be used. I believe that the original purpose of this artifact is to be used so, but due to the fact that it cannot store the absorbed magic for a long period of time, it was deemed as a faulty artifact.”

“So, if a long period of time is impossible, does that mean that a short period of time is possible?”

“Yes. Currently, there is a large number of magic swordsmen students captured in the auditorium. If all the magic being absorbed from there is released all at once... the entire academy would be blown to bits.”

“Heeh...”

“This Eye of Avarice is something that I’ve previously researched and deciphered. Due to how dangerous it is, I never did publish my results and gave it directly to the country for safekeeping, but... how did things become like this.”

Sherry looks at me with a meek gaze.

“Either there was another one with the same function, or the one you gave to the country was stolen. So, putting that aside, is there a way to counteract the effects of the Eye of Avarice?”

“Yes there is.”

Sherry nods, then takes out a large pendant.

“What a dirty-looking pendant.”

“I believe this is a controller for the Eye of Avarice. In the first place, the Eye is not an artifact by itself, but a pair, together with a controller. With the controller, its status is no longer a faulty artifact incapable of long term storage.”

“So it becomes capable of long term storage?”

“I don’t know for sure because I’ve never studied the two of them together, but I think there is a high possibility.”

“Fumu.”

“And this being the controller, it is also capable of temporarily stopping the Eye of Avarice. In that time frame, we can free the students from the auditorium.”

“Sounds good. So, what needs to be done?”

“Umm, I still haven’t finished deciphering this artifact, so I’d need to finish that up first.”

“Fumu.”

“After I’m done, then this artifact needs to be activated and then brought close to the Eye of Avarice.”

“How so?”

“Umm... because there are so many guards all around, I think our best bet is to go underground.”

Sherry gives me a slightly troubled smile.

“Underground?”

“Yes.”

She walks towards the bookshelves, then begins to take out several books. After which one of the bookshelves rotates, revealing a staircase that leads downwards.

“Wow.”

I love contrivances like this.

“There are several escape routes hidden throughout the school facilities. But it seems that this one hasn’t been used recently.”

Sherry’s eyes cloud over with sorrow and worry.

“The dust on the steps is undisturbed... there are no footsteps. How reassuring it would have been if stepfather had escaped from here already.”

“Vice Principal Ruslan, huh. He is your stepfather, right?”

“He had originally been supporting my mother’s research. We were in his care ever since long ago. Then when my mother died and I had nowhere to go, he took me in and raised me by himself.”

“He sounds like a really great person.”

“Yes he is, very much so. I’m always being helped by him... which is why this time, I

want to help him.”

So says Sherry with a bright smile.

“Hope he’s safe. So, what happens after we get close from underground?”

“Ah, umm... we get close from underground, then throw the activated artifact into the auditorium.”

“It won’t break?”

“Even if it breaks, it would still cancel out the Eye’s effects for a while, so that would be fine too. Then everything after that would have to be up to the magic swordsmen students themselves, I think...”

The ending is a bit weak, but I guess I can become Shadow and somehow make do. More like, it’d make for a pretty good entrance scene for me, so I should probably be grateful for it.

“Wonderful. Let’s go with that, then.”

“Yay. Then I’m going to continue deciphering this artifact.”

“My wound is hurting, so I’m afraid I can’t be of much more help. I wish you all the best.”

I’m relieved that she actually has a pretty decent plan. With this, then it seems there’d be almost no more screen time for the assistant mob character.

“Sid-kun too, don’t push yourself too hard. I’ll do my best. I’ve never been able to do anything so far, so now I’m going to save stepfather and everybody else.”

“*Un*, add oil. Ah, I have to go to the toilet.”

Leaving behind Sherry, who’s already engrossed with her work, I head out for some fun.



The man with the eyes of a starved stray dog, Lex, opens the doors of the auditorium and boldly saunters in.

Several men in black follow Lex in.

When they pass by, the students sitting in chairs all keep their heads down.

All doors of the enormous auditorium have been blocked by the men in black. The students are constantly under supervision, and talking is forbidden.

With a frivolous smile on his face, Lex walks through the auditorium and into the waiting room at the back.

“So, how did it go?”

So asks the man in black sitting inside the room, as soon as Lex closes the door.

It is a low, dignified voice.

His face is covered by a mask, and though the rest of his appearance is the same as the others, he has an aura such that anyone can tell with one look that he’s of a different status.

“Don’t be so impatient, ‘Thin Knight’-san. The occupation of the school is almost complete. The Knight Order is raising a racket outside, but that’s of no concern to us.”

“I don’t care about any of that. What I’m asking is, how went the retrieval of the artifact?”

“Ahh, artifact, the artifact...”

Lex shrugs his shoulders and looks at the Thin Knight.

“Probably that girl has it. The one with pink hair.”

“You failed to retrieve it?”

Lex scratches his head and averts his eyes.

“Well, you could say that, I suppose.”

“Are you fucking with me?”

The Thin Knight’s magic raises, causing the air to shake.

That killing intent causes Lex's face to go stiff.

"Come on, don't be mad. We know the general area where she is, we'll get it soon enough."

"Do you know just how much your fooling around has hindered the progress of the plan?! The next time you fail me, I WILL kill you. Do you understand!"

"Yes, yes! OK."

The Thin Knight watches with sharp eyes as Lex leaves the room with raised hands.

"Ah, by the way."

Stopping right before the door, Lex seemingly remembers something.

"I think there might be a pretty dangerous guy around."

Lex turns around to gauge the Thin Knight's reaction.

The Thin Knight silently prompts Lex to continue.

"Several 3rd have been killed. Two 2nd have also been killed. Most of them died with their hearts directly crushed, or had a fatal point pierced by a small hole. The latter is most likely from a rapier. All the bodies had only a single wound. Which means the opponent must be extremely skilled."

So saying, Lex smiles like a starved wolf.

"*Hou...* so Shadow Garden is moving. We've successfully lured them out."

"Probably. You should probably watch your back too."

"*Kuku...* you are telling *me* to watch my back?"

"Well, you'll probably be fine, former Rounds-san."

"Hmph. Bring me the artifact *and* the head of that Shadow Garden member. Failure will not be forgiven."

“Che, I shouldn’t have told you.”

With one final grin, Lex leaves the room.

The Thin Knight, left alone in the room, laughs to himself.

“Finally, everything will be fulfilled...”

Taking out an ominous-looking artifact from his chest pocket, he gazes at it with a suspicious glint in his eyes.

“With this, I can reclaim my rightful place amongst the Rounds.”

A disturbing laugh continues reverberating around the room.

Chapter 37

The Course of an Advanced Psychological Battle

That was something that happened when Lex was walking down a hallway together with some subordinates.

A very strange phenomenon befell them while they were searching for the artifact.

Lex's subordinate, who was walking ahead of him, suddenly vanished.

"Hah?"

Unable to comprehend what had just happened, Lex looks all around, but there is nothing that looks out of place.

The only thing that might be a clue is the sound of something cutting through air.

Shunn, shunn, there it is again.

And then.

"...!"

The subordinate next to him disappears.

But this time, he barely managed to see.

It is the figure of a teenage boy wearing the academy uniform, covered in blood.

He had knocked out that subordinate with the heel of his palm, then whisked that subordinate away.

Lex was only barely able to see all that by strengthening his eyes to the very limit and concentrating. That's how fast it was.

"Be careful, we're under attack!"

So shouting, Lex vigilantly scans his surroundings.

“...Ah?”

But he is immediately rendered dumbstruck.

The other subordinates who were supposed to have been following behind him are no longer there.

Before he knew it, he had apparently become the only person standing in that long hallway.

Then... *shunn*.

As soon as that sound reaches his ears, Lex protects his heart with everything ounce of his strength.

“*Kuh...!*”

An enormous force slams into Lex’s arm.

Baki.

Together with the hair-raising sound of snapping bone, Lex is blown backwards with great momentum.

“*Kuh... FUCKER!*”

But he manages to immediately get back on his feet and draw his sword.

However, there is no one in front of him.

Lex tsks.

With a single attack, his right arm, which had even been protected with magic, was broken.

If his guard had not made it in time, his heart would have been pulverized for sure.

Shunn.

This time, Lex moves at the same time as the sound.

Relying on pure intuition, he swings his sword towards the presence at his back. The timing is perfect.

However.

This bastard... he can go even faster?!

After his sword harmlessly flies behind the teenager, Lex immediately shifts to protecting his heart.

“Agah...!”

But he loses his ribs in this exchange.

Lex allows himself to fly backward, trying to catch a clear look at the teenager while he slowly kills his momentum.

But there isn't even an afterimage for him to see.

“...Tsk.”

Lex spits out some blood-stained saliva, then takes up a stance.

An enemy that he almost cannot see at all. Counterattacking is impossible. He is only single-sidedly taking a pounding.

Objectively speaking, there can be no worse predicament as this.

However... he has safely overcome this level of predicament numerous times before.

He is Lex, one of the Named Children.

“Seems you're using a pretty useful artifact there.”

So says Lex in a voice that his opponent can hear.

He's figured out the secret.

Through only this amount of fighting, Lex has seen through what's happening here.

The enemy's movements has completely surpassed what a human can make. Which would mean that the other side must be borrowing an abnormal power.

"At first glance, it might seem like I am at a disadvantage. But actually, you're also pushing yourself quite hard, aren't you?"

To gain inhumanly speed would require a corresponding amount of sacrifice. The proof of this did not slip by Lex's eyes.

"Your uniform is already soaked with blood, isn't it?"

Indeed... it is thanks to the bloodstained uniform that Lex was able to solve this mystery.

His enemy is using the power of an artifact to gain that inhuman speed. But the cost is that his body takes damage with each usage.

Judging from the amount of blood on the uniform, Lex determines that his enemy is close to reaching his limit. And if Lex can properly take advantage of that moment... then he would win.

Able to strip his enemy naked with only a tiny piece of information... this is Lex the Treacherous Player, one of the Named Children.

"Based on my judgment, you only have two or three attacks left in you. That is your fucking limit!"

So declares Lex with full confidence.

There is no response from his opponent. Ever since Lex had begun speaking, the other side had not done anything to him, choosing only to maintain silence.

"So I hit the bullseye."

A corner of Lex's lips curls upward in a smirk.

His victory is in sight.

However... Lex's current situation is not as good as he is making it sound.

Another way to rephrase what he just said is that he still has two or three almost

invisible attacks that he needs to evade.

“Heyyy, why’d you go silent?”

That’s why Lex opts to put on a strong front.

He must not let his opponent see him faltering.

This fight... is an advanced psychological battle.

“Come get me, you chicken!”

Shunn.

At the same time as the sound, Lex evades relying only on intuition.

He tilts his upper body, shifting away from the trajectory of the incoming palm heel.

But.

So fast!?

He abruptly brings his left arm forward in a guard.

“GAAHH!”

With several snaps, his left arm is also broken.

Maintaining his grip on his sword through sheer willpower, Lex retreats.

But his enemy gives chase.

This enemy who had only been making burst attacks so far is giving chase.

This... must mean that he is trying to finish up this fight!

“COME AT ME, YOU FUCKER!!”

Along with a roar, Lex pours everything he has into protecting his vitals.

His enemy is at his limit!

As long as he successfully endures this attack, it would be his victory!

Immediately after, the palm heel smashes into his abdomen.

“Gahah!! AAAAAaaaaahhh!!”

Lex is blown backwards while spewing blood out of his mouth.

He flies through a wall into a classroom, crashing into tables and chairs while tumbling to a stop.

“Goho, goho...!”

Clutching his stomach, Lex can't help but to vomit up another mouthful of blood. His ribs have punctured several organs.

But... he is still alive!

It seems that putting everything into defense had paid off.

“He he...”

Lex laughs with blood still on his lips, and looks up.

But what greets his eyes is...

“Wh-, what is this...”

The classroom is filled with innumerable corpses lying in a haphazard pile.

All of them are clad in black.

And each one of them bears only a single wound.

Could it be that all these Children were... by himself?!

Katsu, katsu, katsu.

Someone is coming down the hallway, his footsteps ringing out clearly and crisply.

Katsu. Katsu.

The footsteps stop before the door to the classroom.

Silence.

Lex realizes that his sword hand is sweating like crazy.

Kacha.

The click of the door knob turning breaks the silence.

Then... the door opens.

There is no one there.

But there is a *shunn* sound, at which Lex's right arm is ripped off.

Shunn.

Shunn.

Shunn.

Every time that sound rings out, Lex's body loses a different part.

"Ah, aa, aaH, aahh..."

The final moment when the only part left, his head, is sent flying, Lex finally realizes that this enemy has no limits.

"You... were wonderful."

That is the last thing Lex hears the moment all life leaves him.

Chapter 38

Lending Just a Tiny Bit of Help

Nyuu looks down at the bodies in the devastated research lab. Her dark brown hair and eyes are accompanied by lame-looking glasses and the academy uniform.

She can dress up in inconspicuous clothing, but she has a sexiness that cannot be hidden.

“The Crimson Order’s ‘Glen of the Lion Mane,’ huh.”

The corpse’s anguish-filled face is glaring vacantly at empty air. It seems that he had suffered quite a lot before dying.

He was quite famous within the Knight Order, but with his magic sealed, he became easy picking.

Then Nyuu’s interest shifts elsewhere.

There is one more knight on the ground. He is actually still breathing.

“Marco Granger. So you had entered the Crimson Order.”

Nyuu recognizes him.

He has beautiful blue hair and a handsome face, and is also quite skilled as a knight. There were even rumors that he might be elected as the Grand Commander of the Knight Order in the future. Now that she’s thinking about it, she remembers that he has also had a strong sense of justice ever since he was young.

In what seems like a lifetime ago, Marco had been Nyuu’s fiancé.

They’ve exchanged many letters, and have danced together in many balls. But in the end, he was only the partner that her parents had decided. Nyuu doesn’t know what he had thought of her, but to the very end, she never did come to fall in love with him.

But then again, she didn't particularly hate him either.

She didn't love him, but she did think of him as a nice person.

She didn't feel averse to the idea of marrying him in the future, and had actually thought that by marrying this person who everyone praises, she might have a shining future ahead of her.

Path, decided by someone else.

Partner, decided by someone else.

Future, decided by someone else.

Back then, Nyuu had a very thin sense of will. She merely followed along with the values espoused by those around her, and obeyed the orders from those in a position to order her. Even now, she doesn't think such a way of living is that bad. It's just that in comparison to her current life, it seems so very constrained.

While looking at Marco's face, Nyuu recalls the memories of them dancing together.

Remembering herself being brought around like an accessory by the handsome Marco, Nyuu smiles wryly.

Memories that she wants to forget, but cannot forget.

"Nyuu, what are you doing?"

Nyuu turns around at the voice that suddenly addresses her.

She feels no presence, but there's no need for alarm. Because she recognizes that voice.

"Shadow-sama..."

There is a black-haired teenage boy with a common-looking face standing in the research lab.

The boy walks past Nyuu, then opens a cupboard in the lab.

"This person used to be my fiancé."

“Heeh~ What are you going to do about him then?”

“Personally speaking, I have no reason to save him, nor any reason to kill him.”

“Isn’t that fine to just leave him be, then?”

So saying, the boy continues looking for something in the cupboard.

Nyuu leaves Marco and stands beside the boy.

“Shadow-sama, I’m sorry for the delay, but I have something to report.”

“Un.”

“Currently, Shadow Garden is lying in wait in the vicinity of the academy. They can move as soon as you give the order.”

“Un.”

“However, there would be a certain risk with fighting under this magic restriction. The only ones who can move as usual are the Seven Shadows, but the only one of them currently in the capital is Gamma-sama. And, um, Gamma-sama is not very suited for this kind of...”

“Yep, she’s got zero sense.”

“That’s... yes, sir. As for me, I can only use about 50% of my usual strength...”

“I see.”

“Gamma-sama is currently taking general command. She predicts that this state of magic restriction would not last long, so her standing order is for us to standby until it is lifted.”

“Un.”

“The men in black have barricaded themselves in the auditorium, then shown no further movement. They have also not made any demands. The Knight Order has the academy surrounded, but the only one of them who has enough strength to fight these men is Iris Midgar and the Grand Commander. Due to the fact that the two of them are

usually at each other's throats, cooperation between them is highly unlikely."

"Un."

"Do you have any further instructions for us, Shadow-sama? If not, then we'll continue being on standby."

"Un."

"Will that be all, sir?"

"Un... ah, wait a second."

"Yes, sir."

"I'm looking for a few things, give me a hand. Mithril forceps, earth dragon powdered bones, ash magic stones..."

As the boy continues to rattle off a list of utensils and ingredients, Nyuu takes them out from the cupboards and shelves.

"Thanks, you were a great help."

"It was my pleasure. Umm, may I ask what you are going to do with all these?"

Nyuu asks the teenage boy who has both hands full.

"Aah, this? It's for modifying an artifact."

"Modifying an artifact?"

It is beyond her expectation that he would be proficient even with artifacts, but then again, his existence being what it is, it would not be surprising if he is. But it's just, why this during the current situation?

"What's causing the magic interference right now is an artifact called the Eye of Avarice. These are for the final modifications to a different artifact that can temporarily cancel out the effects of the Eye of Avarice."

"How... as expected of Shadow-sama."

To think that he's already determined the cause of the magic interference, and is even already in the process of preparing a countermeasure.

But to prepare something that can counteract an artifact capable of causing such an enormous magic interference would require an abnormal amount of knowledge. In fact, it would be impossible without knowledge on par with the top minds of the country.

Nyuu shivers at his unfathomable brilliance.

"It should be done around when the sun sets."

"Then we will ready ourselves to begin moving in concert with that timing."

"It's gonna be fun, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir."

After seeing off the teenage boy with utensils and ingredients in both hands, Nyuu reconfirms her former fiancé's consciousness.

Her jet black blade touches his neck.

His breathing and heartbeat are both normal, with no tremor.

He is indeed alive, but unconscious.

"Guess you got lucky today."

Leaving only a shallow cut on his neck, Nyuu turns around and leaves.



"I'm back."

Seeing Sid coming back with utensils in his arms, Sherry smiles.

She takes each item from him and lines it up on the table.

"Thank you very much. With this, I will be able to finish it."

“Ganbatte.”

Sherry immediately goes back to working on the artifact.

Sid takes a seat on the sofa and reads a book.

The time passes by in silence.

The sunlight shining through the windows gradually takes on a madder red shade.

Every once in a while, Sid gets up to go to the toilet.

Seeing Sid going to the toilet so often, Sherry hands him some digestive medicine, which he accepts with a complicated look on his face.

Then the sun sets. The madder red color grows darker, and the shadows begin to grow thicker.

When Sherry lights a lamp, the outside of the room has already gotten another shade darker.

The sun has already completely disappeared when Sherry’s work is finally finished.

“I’m done!”

Sherry looks up at Sid with the pendant in her hands.

Sid, who is reading a book with his legs crossed elegantly, looks up.

“That’s amazing.”

“Yep, I did it!”

“*Un*, the sun has also set, so it’s good timing too. The future of the academy is in your hands.”

Sid stands up and gives Sherry’s back a few pats.

“There’s no longer anything for me to help you with. Go and save the world with your own hands.”

“I, I’ll do my best!”

After replying in a slightly nervous voice, Sherry picks up the lamp and heads towards the staircase leading underground.

“Really thank you so much, Sid-kun. It’s all thanks to you that I can go save my stepfather.”

Right before she reaches the staircase, Sherry turns around and lowers her head.

“All I did was lend you a tiny bit of help. Everything else was your own effort. Hope your stepfather is safe.”

“Yep!”

Sherry flashes one last smile, then descends the staircase.

The damp staircase continues downwards for a while, until it stops in front of a tunnel with different air.

Her lamp is the only illumination in these dark underground passages.

If she makes one wrong turn, she could very easily get lost.

“Umm...”

Sherry opens her map and confirms the route to the auditorium.

“I have to go straight, then take the third right...”

Her progress at the beginning is slow and fearful.

She remembers having taken these passages before with her stepfather. Even though he was busy with work, she had selfishly begged him to play with her. It is a precious memory for Sherry, one that she’ll never forget.

She has no memory of her actual father. He had died soon after her birth.

Her memories of her mother is also fading. She had been killed in the night by a robber when Sherry was 9.

That night, Sherry had been hiding in a closet and peeking out from a crack. She remembers the black shadow of the robber, her mother's scream, and that disturbing laughter. Even to this day, sometimes they still plague her dreams.

For several years after that incident, Sherry wasn't able to speak at all. She rejected everything around her, and focused solely on the artifact that her mother had left behind. She immersed herself in research, as if to follow her mother's footsteps.

The one who saved her was her stepfather.

He adopted her, supported her research, and showered her with the love of a father, until she finally regained her voice.

For Sherry, memories of family are mostly all with her stepfather.

She has been supported by her stepfather all this way. Finally the day has come for her to do something back in return.

"I've got to make sure this succeeds."

Sherry continues proceeding down the passage, all alone.

There is no longer fear in her steps.

After a short while, she reaches her destination.

"So this is underneath the auditorium..."

There are several paths here.

One leads to the first floor, one leads to the middle, and one leads to the second floor...

She confirms with her map in hand, then walks on.

"Ah...!"

Then she finds it.

It is a small vent grill between the second and third floors.

It's too small for a human to go through, but more than enough to throw the pendant through.

Sherry furtively peeks through the vent grill.

The main trick to erasing her presence is to let all the strength out of her body. Sid had told her so.

She lets out all her strength, and slows down her breathing.

There are many students sitting in the auditorium. There are also quite a few teachers.

The number of men in black are actually not that high. Sherry thinks that as soon as the magic interference is gone, escape should indeed be possible.

Alright.

Sherry backs away from the grill, then takes out the pendant.

Then she places the prepared magic stone into the slot on the pendant, which then begins to give off white light and letters.

Firmly gripping the shining pendant in her hand, Sherry throws it into the auditorium through the vent grill without any hesitation whatsoever.

Chapter 39

Wanting to Live for Just One More Day

Rose observes the men in black with her ice-blue eyes.

It has already been quite some time since she's been brought to the auditorium. The sun has already set, and the auditorium is illuminated by warm lamp light.

She had already cut the constraints tying her hands together with a small hidden knife that she had on her. While pretending to be still tied, she had passed the knife to the student next to her, after which the knife continued being passed on to each successive student.

She herself can move at any moment. But she fully understands that her moving wouldn't mean anything.

The men in black are not high in numbers, but each and every single one of them are quite strong. And they are also following a clear chain of command.

There is that one called Lex, and also that 'Thin Knight' who seems to be the highest in command. Both of them are stronger than the others by several notches, and the teachers who had mistakenly gauged the difference in strength and tried to resist had been slaughtered without being able to achieve anything.

Even if she can use magic, she is not sure that she can win.

Fortunately, Lex hasn't come back in quite a while. It would be great if he was defeated by the Knight Order outside, but... she can't imagine someone with Lex's strength making such a big blunder. Honestly speaking, Rose really hopes to be able to do something before he returns.

The Thin Knight is frequently holed up in the green room at the back of the hall, but every once in a while he would come out and look around. Then when he sees that Lex hasn't returned yet, he would curse a bit, then go back inside.

From the Thin Knight's dense magic and posture, Rose can tell that he has skill far

beyond that of any normal master. He might be even stronger than that Iris Midgar... well, she hopes not. If he really is, then even if she regains her magic, her chances of winning against him are extremely slim.

Either way, now is not the time to move.

However, it is also true that time is running out.

Along with the passing of time, Rose can feel the magic inside her body gradually being drained away. It is very likely related to the phenomenon of not being able to use magic, but she cannot determine the cause. Rose herself can still hold on for a while longer, but the students with small magic capacity are already beginning to struggle. In several hours, they would begin to suffer from magic deficiency. Then the chance for a counterattack would be lost forever.

Unease and impatience whirl inside her heart.

But what helps her to rein herself in is the figure of a certain boy.

Every time she remembers the gallant figure of Sid protecting her at the cost of his own life, something hot wells up within Rose's chest.

She must not let his feelings go to waste. Rose endlessly repeats that to herself while continuing to wait.

Then that moment arrives all of a sudden.

A brilliant white light suddenly illuminates the auditorium.

She does not know what it is. However, she is already moving before any coherent thought is formed in her mind.

It doesn't matter what that light is. All she knows is that her instinct is shouting at her that this would be the only opportunity she would ever have.

When everyone is still blinded by the brilliant light, Rose dashes towards the man in black closest to her.

The moment her hand reaches his unprotected neck, Rose realizes.

She can use magic!

In an instant, Rose severs the man's neck with a hand chop coated with magic.

She doesn't know why she can suddenly use magic, and she really doesn't care.

She grabs the sword from the waist of that man who is now missing his head, and thrusts it into the air and shouts.

“OUR MAGIC IS FREED!! ARISE, THE TIME FOR THE COUNTERATTACK IS NOW!!”

The auditorium erupts.

Boys and girls standing up, instantaneously breaking free of their bonds. Then the freed students begin moving.

Everyone is united with the same will, and the very air shakes with their fervor.

Rose unleashes her enormous magic, and sends one man in black flying.

Everything for the sake of victory.

Rose is fully aware that right now, this very instant, she is the symbol of their counterattack.

As long as she continues to fight, everyone else will fight.

She must continue winning in a way that everyone can see.

So she decides to pay no mind to her magic output, focusing only on swinging her sword with all her might.

“FOLLOW THE STUDENT COUNCIL PRESIDENT!!”

“GRAB THEIR SWORDS!!”

While feeling the attention centered on her, the animosity and the acclaim, Rose continues killing enemies and freeing more students.

Her figure is exactly that of those heroes depicted in epics.

Everyone is looking up to her, and chasing after her.

However, what she is doing is also a reckless charge without properly pacing her magic usage.

No matter how much magic she might have, the more she uses, the closer she approaches her limit.

Rose calmly assesses her own limit while feeling the rapid drain.

As she loses magic, her strikes becomes duller, and her body becomes heavier.

An enemy that she could have killed in one strike now requires two. Then two becomes three.

Just a little more, a little bit more... but against her wishes, she finds herself already surrounded.

Just one more person, then she'd probably collapse.

The auditorium is already fully enveloped in the students' fervor. Even if she falls now, there is no stopping the students anymore.

One boy's feelings passed onto Rose, then Rose's feelings passed onto everyone else. Even though several lives had been lost in the process, those feelings had indeed been properly passed down.

It was not wasted.

The death of the boy, and also her own incoming death.

There is a reason why Rose of the country of arts had aspired towards the sword. It is a really silly reason that she had never told anyone, a mere dream of a child.

However, Rose had decided to seriously pursue it.

Has she gotten a little closer to that dream?

While such thoughts were flashing in her mind, Rose brandishes her sword for one last time.

There is almost no magic imbued in that attack. There is also not much strength. And neither is it particularly fast.

But drawing an arc more beautiful than any other strike that she has ever made, it cleanly decapitates one more enemy.

It is the very best strike in Rose's entire life.

That moment, Rose feels like she had grasped a very important sensation.

But...

The fact that it had come to her at the very last instant of her life is just too regrettable.

While staring at the blades falling down on her from all four directions, Rose wishes that she can live for just one more day.

And then.

Her wish is granted.

A black whirlwind sweeps over her.

Leaving vivid red blood flying in the air, all the enemies around her are wiped out in a fraction of a moment.

Her vicinity becomes silent, as if time had stopped.

And in the midst of it all, there stands a man in a jet black coat.

"Well done, ye who wields a beautiful blade..."

That voice that sounds like a reverberation from the depths of the earth is directed towards Rose.

Those words were probably praise for Rose's final strike. However, Rose has received a shock so great that it cannot be expressed with such words.

"My name is Shadow."

The sword of that man who introduced himself as Shadow... was stunningly incredible.

“I, I’m Rose. Rose... Oriana.”

Unable to recover from her shock, Rose replies in a quivering voice.

Shadow’s sword is at a faraway pinnacle. It is a sword that is the fusion of the best techniques from innumerable schools, polished and sharpened to the limit, attained through unceasing effort. Rose even felt eternity from that sword.

It is a sword far more complete than that of anything that Rose had ever seen in her life.

“Come forth, oh loyal companions of mine...”

Shadow shoots a beam of violet light towards the sky. A large group of figures wearing black rush into the auditorium, bathed in that violet light.

Reinforcements...?!

Rose’s unease is quickly proved needless.

The group lands elegantly, then immediately engages the men in black in combat.

Internal strife... does not feel like this. And neither do they seem to be from the Knight Order.

And when she observes them more closely, Rose realizes that they are all women. And also...

“So strong...”

Every single one of them is strong. All of them are unbelievably strong.

The men in black are going down in mere moments.

All of these women’s swords are the same as Shadow’s. There is no doubt that Shadow is the one leading all of these paragons of strength.

“Shadow-sama, we are glad to see you unharmed.”

“Nyu, huh.”

One of the women kneels besides Shadow.

“Their ringleader has set fire to the academy and is making to escape.”

“How foolish... I leave this place to you.”

“Yes, sir!”

“Do they actually think they can run away...?”

Shadow laughs in a low voice. Then he turns around, slices the auditorium’s door into bits with a single swing of his sword. The men in black in the way were also reduced to mere pieces of meat by the same swing.

That swing had been quite similar to Rose’s, as if he was showing it to her. Then he calmly continues walking onwards, until his figure melts into the night.

In Rose’s eyes, every single one of his movements had been the greatest lessons of her life.

“Are you alright?”

The woman who had been called Nyu is calling out to Rose.

“Yes...”

“That was a really good strike back there.”

After saying that, she brandishes her own jet black blade, and dives into the fray.

However, Nyu’s own sword has also reached outrageous heights. The men in black are only being single-sidedly cut down.

Rose’s common sense... no, everything that she knows of being a magic swordsman has been destroyed.

The swing brandished by this group in black is not that of any existent school.

It is a completely brand new school.

Where on earth has such a group, of such a school, appeared from? It is beyond strange that she had never even known of them until today.

“Fire, there’s a fire!!”

That shout brings Rose back to her senses.

There is indeed a fire coming from the back of the auditorium that is spreading quickly.

“Starting from those close to the exits, calmly make your way out of the auditorium!!”

So shouts Rose as she takes on the role of guiding the students.

Thanks to the group in black, casualties are minimal. The fighting is already reaching the end.

Rose lends her shoulders to two severely wounded students and escorts them to the exit.

“The Knight Order is here!!”

That shout causes everyone to sigh in relief. Rose also feels the strength leaving her such that she nearly falls, but she quickly regathers her focus.

She continues to help students out of the auditorium. The fire is growing, and all the men in black are dead.

And before anyone realized it, the group of women have also disappeared.

As if they had never been here in the first place, leaving no trace behind, without anyone noticing, their brilliant figures disappearing into thin air.

Rose helps the last student out of the auditorium, then turns around to look at the auditorium that is enveloped in roaring flames.

“Exactly who were they...”

All of a sudden, Rose thinks back again to Nyuu’s voice.

For some reason, that voice sounds so nostalgic, as if it is a voice that she had heard

long ago.

Chapter 40

That Which is Truly Important

In the nighttime, the light from the faraway fire dully illuminates the Vice Principal's room.

In that dim room, there is a figure moving around.

The figure pulls out several books from the bookshelves, and throws them to the ground and sets them on fire.

The small fire is fed more and more books, until it grows to the point where the room is brightly lit.

The now illuminated figure is revealed to be a thin, black-clad man.

"What are you doing in such an outfit... Vice Principal Ruslan?"

The thin figure shivers. He thought he had been alone in the room, but without him noticing, he apparently has company in the form of a teenage boy.

The boy is sitting on the sofa, legs crossed, calmly reading a book.

He is a black-haired boy with a face that can be found anywhere. However, the boy is not sparing even a glance for the man in black nor the spreading fire, focused only on his rather thick book. The sound of him turning a page seems unnaturally loud.

"So, you noticed."

So says the man in black. Then he takes off his mask, revealing the face of a middle-aged man. With his salt-and-pepper hair in an swept back style, he is undoubtedly Vice Principal Ruslan.

Ruslan throws his mask into the fire, then takes off his black costume and throws that in too.

The room becomes brighter by a notch.

“Just for reference’s sake, can you tell me how you figured it out, Sid Kagenou-kun?”

Ruslan sits down on the other sofa facing Sid’s.

“I could tell with a look.”

Sid gives Ruslan a glance, then returns to his book.

“A look, you say. Then perhaps it was my stride, or my posture... well either way, you have a very sharp eye.”

Ruslan studies Sid, while Sid continues reading his book.

The shadows of the two of them generated by the fire flicker and shift.

“For reference’s sake, can I also ask you something?”

So asks Sid while still keeping his eyes on his book.

Ruslan wordlessly prompts him to proceed.

“Why are you doing this? I didn’t really peg you as having this kind of hobby.”

“‘Why,’ huh... The story is going to have to go quite a while back.”

So murmurs Ruslan as he crosses his arms.

“Long ago, I had stood at the pinnacle. It was before you were even born.”

“I’ve heard of you taking the championship at the Festival of the God of War.”

“The Festival is a far cry from the pinnacle. The real pinnacle is a lot farther down the road. Though I don’t think you would get it even if I told you.”

Ruslan laughs. There is no scorn there, only an indistinct sense of weariness.

“Right after I reached the pinnacle, I became ill, which forced me to step back down. After all my effort clawing my way up, my glory lasted only for the briefest of moments. Then I had to focus on searching for a method to heal myself, until finally I saw the possibility for it in an artifact researcher named Luclaire.”

“Is this story going to be long?”

“A bit, yes. So, Luclaire was Sherry’s mother. She was far too smart, such that she was hated by the entire academic world at large. However, her knowledge and ability as a researcher was arguably the top in the world, so she was in a position very convenient for me. Thus I decided to support her research, and we managed to gather many artifacts.

Luclaire would research the artifacts, then I would use her results. She had no interest in wealth nor fame, so we had a good relationship. Then one day, I came upon the Eye of Avarice. It is the artifact that I had been searching for this entire time.

But Luclaire... that silly woman, she called the Eye of Avarice ‘dangerous’ and tried to apply to the country to take custody of it. That’s why I had to kill her. I started stabbing her from her extremities, then gradually worked my way inwards, until I finally stabbed her heart and even gave it one last twist.”

Sid closes his eyes to listen, with his book still open.

“So I managed to keep in Eye of Avarice, but the research was not yet complete. However, I quickly found another convenient researcher – Luclaire’s daughter, Sherry. She did not know anything, did not doubt anything, and merely devoted herself to me. All while remaining ignorant of the fact that I’m the one who ripped her mother from her. My sweet, sweet, foolish stepdaughter.

Thanks to the efforts of mother and child, the research on the Eye of Avarice was eventually completed. All that was left was to prepare a stage for absorbing magic and find a convenient scapegoat. And today... is the best day of my life, the day when my dream shall finally be achieved.”

Ku ku ku, laughs Ruslan.

“So how was it, did it make for a good reference?”

Sid opens his eyes at Ruslan’s question.

“Alright, I get the general gist of it now. But... there’s just one thing that I want to confirm.”

“Try me.”

“Is it really true that you killed Sherry’s mother and are only using Sherry?”

Sid takes his eyes off his book and looks straight at Ruslan.

“Of course it is true. What, are you mad, Sid-kun?”

“I wonder... Actually, I am someone who very clearly differentiates between things that are important to me, and things that are not.”

Sid casts his eyes down slightly.

“May I ask why?”

“To not be distracted, I think. I have something that I really want to achieve, and that something is extremely far away. That’s why I kept on whittling.”

“Whittling?”

“As most people live on, things that they deem important grow in proportion. They make friends, find a spouse, get a job... in that way, it grows. But I did the opposite. I kept on cutting things off as I lived on. Don’t need this, don’t need that, like that. In that way, after whittling myself down to the very core, I finally determined that which is truly important to me. Now I live only for the sake of that single, tiny thing, so I don’t really care much about everything else.”

Sid closes his book with an audible snap. He stands up, then throws the book into the fire.

“So you mean that you don’t care at all about the foolish mother and daughter pair?”

“Not exactly. I said that I don’t really care, not that I don’t care at all. Right now, I feel a little... chafed, I suppose.”

Then Sid draws the sword on his waist.

“It’s about time we get started. I have a feeling that we will get interrupted if we take too long.”

“Good idea. Well then, I guess it’s time for us to part.”

Ruslan stands up and also draws his sword.

The two white blades glitter in the light of the fire, and the outcome is decided in an instant.

Ruslan's sword pierces Sid's chest, sending fresh blood flying.

Sid's body crashes through the room's door from the momentum of the attack, straight into the now burning hallway. The boy's body is immediately swallowed by the crimson flames, disappearing from sight.

"Farewell, young man."

Ruslan sheaths his sword. The fire from the hallway is beginning to invade his room, its might growing with every passing minute. But the moment Ruslan turns his heels and is about to leave...

"Where are you going?"

"...!"

A voice that sounds like a reverberation from the depths of the earth reaches him. When Ruslan turns around, he sees a man in jet black standing there.

His face is covered with a magician's mask, and the hood of his longcoat is pulled forward deeply, but that coat is now burning with red flames. However, the man shows no sign of it bothering him at all, only silently drawing his jet black blade.

"You are...!"

Ruslan raises his own sword.

"I am Shadow, he who lurks in the shadows and hunts the shadows..."

"So you are that Shadow bastard..."

Ruslan, who is holding his white blade up, faces off against Shadow, who is carelessly dangling his jet black blade.

After staring at each other for a while, it is Ruslan who first stands down.

“I see, you are strong indeed.”

“*Hou...*”

“I, too, am someone who lived by the sword. Just by facing off, I can get at least a general read on my opponent. The current me is no match against you. So I’ll have to go full strength from the start.”

Ruslan takes a red lozenge out of his chest pocket and swallows it. Then he also takes out the Eye of Avarice and its controller.

“The Eye of Avarice reveals its true worth only when the two parts are combined. Like this.”

With a click, the two are joined together.

Abruptly, the two pieces release a brilliant white light, amidst which letters of the ancient language can be seen bursting out.

A spiral of ancient letters whirls around the room. Laughing maniacally, Ruslan pushes the artifact against his own chest.

“Right here and now, I shall be reborn!!”

The artifact sinks into Ruslan’s chest.

As if it is sinking into water, the artifact phases through both his clothes and his flesh.

“OOOOOOOOoooooooHHHHHHHH!!”

Ruslan furiously scratches his chest while roaring at the top of his voice.

The ancient letters converge on Ruslan, carving themselves onto his body.

The white light grows increasingly brighter, until it dyes the room pure white.

And then.

After the light subsides, there is Ruslan, on one knee.

He slowly stands up, as white smoke rises from his body. When he raises his face, it can be seen that there are tiny, shining letters branded onto his face, looking like a tattoo.

“Yes... this is the feeling... power, I feel the power coursing through me... I AM HEALED...!!”

Magic blows in violent torrents emanating from Ruslan, causing the flames to bend back.

A second glance reveals that the glowing letters are not only on his face, but also on his neck and hands.

“Do you understand it, the feeling of this raging power! This magic that supersedes all humanly limits!!”

Then Ruslan begins to laugh.

“Firstly, I will now try it on you.”

Ruslan disappears.

The next instant, he reappears behind Shadow, his sword already in the midst of a mowing attack...

A high-pitched clang rings out, and the air surrounding the two of them is blown away.

“*Hou*, good job blocking that.”

Shadow is just standing there, his back still to Ruslan. Only his jet black sword is behind him, blocking Ruslan’s sword.

Ruslan pours more strength into his sword, but Shadow’s doesn’t even tremble.

“It seems that I had underestimated you a little. How about this then?”

Ruslan disappears once more.

This time, the high-pitched clanging rings out several times in quick succession.

Every time the sound is heard, it can be seen that Shadow's sword had changed positions slightly. Just the barest of movements, the bare minimum movement required to perfectly block each incoming attack.

After the fourth clang, Ruslan reappears in front of Shadow.

"To think that you could block even those. Very well, I shall acknowledge your strength."

Then he looks at Shadow with a smile full of confidence.

"In respect of that strength, I shall also get serious."

Ruslan's stance changes.

He raises his sword overhead, and begins gathering an enormous amount of magic. With blindingly white light, his sword becomes the eye of a whirlpool of magic.

"You may boast in the next life of having made me get serious."

His attack hurtles towards Shadow with incredible strength and speed.

But.

Even that is easily parried by the jet black blade.

"What?!"

Sparks jump due to the clash.

"You can handle even that?!"

"Don't tell me... this is all you're capable of?"

The two of them glare at each other in close proximity.

"*Guh*... No, it has only just begun!"

Ruslan's sword accelerates.

Its afterimages paint exquisite arcs in the air as it dances furiously.

“UUUUU0000000000HHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!”

The white sword flashes out in attack after attack to the accompaniment of Ruslan’s roar, but everything is repelled by the jet black sword.

“AAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!”

The white slashes clash with the jet black blade repeatedly, filling the air with sparks and the almost unceasing sound of metal on metal.

Like some sort of brutal and barbaric music, the sounds ring on, adding a new dimension to the burning night.

But eventually, it draws to a close.

After one last swing of the jet black blade, Ruslan is sent flying. His body crashes into his desk before rolling to the ground.

“*Guh... h-, how can this be...!*”

Suppressing the pain running throughout his whole body, Ruslan slowly stands up. His wounds heal at a visible rate, but the light of the ancient letters on his skin dim in proportion.

“To think that it would be such a tough battle. *Kuku*, you really are something indeed. But regardless of how strong you may be, you are already finished.”

“Finished, you say?”

“Hah, I’ve already made all the necessary preparations so that this entire incident would be blamed on you and your Shadow Garden. Evidence, witnesses, I’ve got it all. It doesn’t matter how great you are at fighting, it won’t do you even a whit of good.”

Ruslan laughs. His twisted countenance closely observes Shadow to see his reaction.

However, Shadow also laughs. Emanating from behind his mask, it is a low, low laugh that pours out.

“Wh-, what are *you* laughing at...”

“You. To think that you would call something on that level ‘the end.’ Oh, you fool.”

“You’re just being a poor loser.”

So says Ruslan, the smile gone from his face.

Shadow shakes his head. Condescendingly, even, as if he is mocking Ruslan for his failure to understand.

“From the very start, our path has never been that of the just. But neither is it the path of the wicked. We are those who simply walk our own path.”

Then Shadow opens his arms wide, his coating making an audible snap from the gesture.

“If you can, bring to us all the sins of the world. We will bear it all! But nothing will change. We will still carry on doing what we ought to do.”

“Are you saying that you are not afraid of having the entire world as your enemy?! That is sheer hubris, Shadow!”

“Then how about you come over and try to crush my hubris?”

Ruslan rushes over with a howl.

Then his white sword is swung down from overhead, slicing straight towards Shadow.

That attack which should have split Shadow’s head goes astray at the last second.

“What!!”

Fresh blood dances.

Ruslan’s left wrist is pierced through by a jet black blade.

Immediately, Ruslan changes to using his right hand and backs away.

But.

“WHAT!!”

This time, it's his right wrist that gets pierced.

Ruslan continues trying to back away, but Shadow gives chase.

"Guh... gah...!"

Under an onslaught of stabs faster than his eyes can even follow, Ruslan cannot even react as his body becomes stained with blood.

The innumerable thrusts pierce his wrists, then his feet, then his arms, then his thighs, gradually making their way inwards.

"From the extremities, then gradually working inwards..."

Shadow's low voice reverberates in between thrusts.

"Then finally it's the heart, with a twist... is that correct?"

The instant Shadow utters that sentence, his jet black sword pierces Ruslan's chest.

"How...!!"

Even while spitting blood from his mouth, Ruslan tries to pull out the sword in his chest, desperately resisting.

Ruslan's eyes clash with the eyes of the boy behind the mask.

"You bastard, you ar-...!"

Right as Ruslan is about to say something, then jet black blade twists.

"Gah, agah... aaa...!"

Then the jet black blade is jerked back, causing a great amount of blood to fountain out. The light in Ruslan's eyes and the ancient letters on his skin both gradually fade away.

All that is left is the gaunt corpse of a middle-aged man.

At that moment.

A small scream pierces the air.

“Stepfather...”

Shadow turns around in his clothes dyed with Ruslan’s blood... and sees a pink-haired teenage girl by the door.

“STEPFATHEEERRRRRR!!”

The pink-haired girl runs past Shadow, making a beesline for Ruslan’s corpse.

“Nooo... stepfather... Why... WHY...!!”

She clings onto the thin corpse as tears stream down her face, but her stepfather will never move again.

The girl’s tears fall like rain over Ruslan’s face.



Shadow looks down at the heartbroken girl, then turns around.

“There’s no need for you to know...”

Then he disappears into the depths of the crimson flames, with the heartrending wails of the girl ringing in his ears.

Chapter 41

Arrival of the Summer Rain

“What do you think?”

The one who asked that while holding out a single sheet of paper is a blond elf beautiful enough to turn anyone’s head. She is wearing a dress as dark as the night, and standing in the Mitsugoshi Co. building in the deep of night.

Gamma accepts the offered piece of paper and struggles for an answer.

“Umm, Alpha-sama... I, I don’t really...”

“Ah, sorry, it must be hard for you to answer.”

The elf called Alpha laughs lightly. The paper in between them is a wanted poster. On it is a sketch of Shadow’s figure in a jet black coat.

“Sworn enemy of the kingdom, Shadow. Charged with indiscriminate murder, confinement, arson, and robbery... what a terrible person this is.”

“There is also a wanted poster for Shadow Garden with Alpha-sama’s name on in. All they have is your name, though.”

“Let me see.”

Alpha reads the other wanted poster taken out by Gamma.

“Shadow Garden... this is a pretty terrible organization too, isn’t it.”

The light of the fireplace illuminates her from the side, giving her beauty an almost fantastical edge in the darkness of the night.

“But what a pity. I hurried back as quickly as I could, but almost everything was already over by the time I arrived.”

Alpha throws the wanted posters into the fireplace. She watches as the dark stain at the corners of the papers spreads.

“ ‘Bring to us all the sins of the world. But nothing will change. We will still carry on doing what we ought to do.’... what wonderful words indeed.”

As Alpha continues watching, the wanted posters gradually turn into ash, and crumble away.

“Somewhere in my heart, I had thought us to be on the side of justice. But apparently it was not so for him.”

Her beauty as illuminated by the flickering fire changes along with the shifting shadows, her expression giving off differing impressions accordingly.

At times like a goddess, and at times like a devil. Back and forth, and back and forth. Whimsically, capriciously, ficklely.

“It is our duty to answer to his resolve.”

Alpha turns around, the expression on her face causing Gamma to swallow her breath.

“Gather all of the Seven Shadows who are free.”

“Yes ma’am, immediately.”

Gamma bows her head. Cold sweat slides down her neck, slowly making its way down until it disappears between her cleavage.

Then after a slightly chilly gust of night wind, Gamma raises her head to see that there is no longer anyone there.

All that is left is the flames in the fireplace flickering vigorously.



“Umm...!”

Hearing a voice calling out to him in front of the half-burnt academy, the common-looking teenage boy with black hair turns around.

“Aah, sorry, sorry, I was thinking about something. So, what’s up?”

“Someone told me that I would be able to meet you if I waited here. Because I have something I wanted to tell you...”

The pink-haired girl looks straight at the boy.

“Sure, I still have time until it’s my turn for the witness interview. And since classes would be off for quite a while.”

“So, um, thank you very much for the other day.”

The pink-haired girl bobs her head.

“Sid-kun was really a huge help.”

“Nah, I didn’t really do that much.”

“If I was alone, I wouldn’t have been able to accomplish anything.”

“Don’t worry about it, really.”

“So actually, what I wanted to tell you today, is that I’m going to study abroad.”

“Aahh, that explains the luggage.”

The pink-haired girl is holding a large piece of luggage.

“Yes. I’m going to get on the next carriage. I’m going to Rawagas.”

“The academy city, huh... wow.”

“I, I’ve found something that I really need to do. And the amount of knowledge I have at the moment is far too little to do that thing.”

“I see. Hope you get to learn a lot over there, then.”

“And also... I no longer have a reason to stay here anymore.”

The girl looks back at the school with a sorrowful face.

“I really wanted to talk with Sid-kun more, but...”

“*Un.* Let’s meet again, someday.”

“Yes, let’s.”

The pink-haired girl smiles, then walks past the boy.

“Oh right, wait a second.”

“Yes?”

The girl turns around at the boy’s voice.

“Can... Can I ask what it is that you need to do?”

The girl gives him a slightly troubled smile.

“It’s a secret.”

“I see.”

“But, just that, if everything finishes... would you care to listen to my story?”

“...Anytime.”

The two exchange smiles. Then they both turn around and begin walking off.

The burning summer sun is suddenly obstructed by a large cumulonimbus. The tepid wind brings with it the smell of rain.

“I, definitely will...”

All of a sudden, the wind carries the girl’s voice to the boy’s ears.

That small whisper that normally would not have been heard by anyone was clearly heard by the boy.

He turns around, gazing at the girl’s dwindling back.

Then plop, plop, comes tiny raindrops from the sky. It slowly wets that pink-colored hair.

The boy walks on as if nothing had happened.

The two of them never turned back again.

Sherry Barnett

(名前) シェリー・バーネット

(性別) 女

(年齢) 16



= Sherry Barnett

もし全てが
終わつたら、
私の話を聞いて
くれますか？

ミドガル学術学園の生徒で副学園長の義娘。幼い頃に母を目の前で殺された過去を持ち、悲しみからアーティファクトの研究に没頭する。国内ではアーティファクト研究の第一人者として知られているが、学園では友達も少なく義父に心配されている。研究以外のことは苦手。



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