

To Be a Power in the Shadows!

- Volume 4 -

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[Tenshi Translations]

Chapter 61

The Girl and the Sound of Rain

The sound of rain can be heard.

Rose's attention is slightly drawn by the sound of water reverberating from outside.

While re-adjusting her breathing, she puts down her thin practice sword.

Wiping off the sweat on her forehead with a single hand, she quickly runs her fingers through her dishevelled hair.

The sound of rain alone fills the dimly-lit dojo.

For a while, Rose closes her eyes and lends her ears to that sound. She drinks in a deep breath of the damp air.

She has always found the sound of rain to be beautiful.

Rose was born as the princess of the country of arts, Oriana Kingdom. She has been exposed to various arts ever since young, and her consciousness towards esthetics is very high. The Oriana royalty all each decide on one art and spend their entire life perfecting it. Be it painting, music, theater, every single member of royalty picks one that they like.

The young Rose showed great interest towards all arts, but was unable to choose a single one. In her eyes, all forms of art was beautiful and wonderful.

Painting, music, theater, embroidery, sculpturing, everything was so wonderful, so how could she choose? And so she chose everything. And she was talented enough to receive acclaim in all of them.

What road would Rose eventually choose? It was a question that every single artisan in Oriana Kingdom paid great attention to.

However, what Rose came to choose was the sword.

It was entirely abrupt, and with that choice came also her decision to abandon all other forms of art. She said that she would solely focus on the sword.

Everybody asked Rose why the sword.

Rose did not say much.

Her only reply was that she saw beauty in the sword.

But in Oriana Kingdom, the sword is scorned as something uncivilized. Not a single person would acknowledge the sword as a form of art.

Rose threw off her family's restrictions, and went to Midgar Magic Swordsman Academy as an exchange student.

The image of a certain beautiful sword is branded onto Rose's very heart.

It is her most precious memory, one that she has never shared with anyone. The reason why she had decided on the path of the sword is because of her far off aspiration towards a certain swordsman.

Rose cannot forget the beauty of the sword that she saw that day.

How can she imbue that same beauty in her own sword? This question is the foundation of her lifelong pursuit.

No one in the country of arts acknowledges her art. But she does not mind. Beauty is not something to be chased for the sake of someone else's acknowledgement.

Even without anyone's acknowledgement, she will walk her own path. So she had resolved.

Rose was satisfied with that.

But the other day, an envelope had reached her.

"Father is coming to this year's Festival of the God of War..."

The murmur falls unbidden from her sakura-colored lips. The king that scorns swordsmanship coming to watch the Festival of the God of War is unprecedented.

Without doubt, he is coming to bring Rose back.

A certain rumor that has been flying around lately had caught Rose's attention.

That there has been a fiancé chosen for her.

The day Rose heard that rumor, she had sent a letter home asking for clarification, but no reply came back.

There is already someone in Rose's heart. That boy who possesses a beautiful, burning heart who would not hesitate to lay down even his life for her, that's the one that she had decided to be her lifelong partner.

Which is why she must, at all costs, get her father to acknowledge that at the Festival of the God of War.

Firstly, her sword.

Then, fingers crossed, him too...

Rose slaps her own cheeks.

"Let's focus."

So saying, she discards her shirt that had gotten heavy from soaking up her sweat.

Her skin shines from the sweat. The sports bra purchased from Mitsugoshi Co. that is holding up her ample breasts is the only article of clothing she is wearing from the waist up.

Though her appearance is a bit immodest, Rose is the only person allowed access to this place, so there's no need to worry about it.

Rose brings up her practice sword, then recalls that memory.

The memory of the greatest sword swing that she had ever made in her life. That swing during the incident at school was undoubtedly the best one in her entire life so far.

The Festival of the God of War is soon. She has only a short amount of time to get that feeling back.

Rose's thin sword cuts through the air. Sweat dances. Beautiful honey-colored hair comes unbound.

Brushing away the hair in front of her face, Rose continues to swing her sword.

The sound of rain continues reverberating the entire time.

That feeling... did not come back.

Chapter 62

I Am a Man Who Rides the Waves

The season for the Festival of the God of War is has arrived.

I walk through the bustling streets of the royal capital. Everyone's faces are different from usual.

The people going to and fro are of different races, different nationalities, and different occupations, but all share the common goal of enjoying the festival. Though they're not talking to each, and may never meet again, everyone seems to be bound together by a curious sense of unity.

That's what festivals are.

And I, well, I don't hate this atmosphere.

If I had to say why, it'd be because I can do *that*.

Where a large number of people have their attention focused on is precisely the greatest stage.

Festival of the God of War.

"There's no choice but to ride this big wave, right?"

I can finally enact *that* item from my to-do list.

By *that*, I am referring to: Entering a tournament as a mystery entree and making the audience go "Oi, oi, that guy's definitely going to die" to "Wait, that guy is that strong?!" to "Who on earth is that guy?!?!!"

In order to make it happen, I'm going to need everyone's help.

I make my way through the crowds, heading for the royal capital branch of Mitsugoshi Co.

With the mentality of 'it's my friend's shop so it's ok,' I ignore the line and go directly into the store.

The place is enveloped in the flurried air unique to peak business hour, but it is not long until a pretty attendant spots me and approaches.

"This might sound like a lie, but I'm friends with the owner here."

"We have been informed."

I am doubtful for a moment whether she's actually been informed, but quickly realize that she has indeed.

I am brought to the room from the last time, the one with the fancy chair. I sit in that fancy chair.

Umu, this chair really does make me feel like a king.

A cup of 100% apple juice is prepared for me.

They sure know their stuff. I am in the apple juice faction rather than the orange juice faction. This chilled juice is delicious in the heat of summer.

Chirin, chirin, rings the sound of summer.

"Oh, wind chimes..."

I look out the window to see wind chimes hung up, beyond which is the blue sky and a large cumulonimbus.

"Please wait for a brief while."

I nod. The attendant lady goes off to call for Gamma, and another one arrives with a large fan and begins fanning me. While wearing a summer one piece with high skin exposure.

"I'm feeling slightly peckish."

"We'll bring something immediately."

While staring at the cumulonimbus, I make up my mind to come leech off this place if I ever find myself troubled for food.



The moment Gamma hears of her beloved master's visit, she delegates what she's working on to her subordinates, then hurriedly makes her way to the 'Chamber of Shadows.'

She has on a thin, black dress, with matching summer-like white heels. After spraying herself with a refreshing perfume, into the Chamber of Shadows she goes.

"Excuse me."

Her master is seated on the Throne of Shadows with legs crossed, staring at the sky. Is his sharp gaze looking at the cumulonimbus, or something else altogether?

Gamma cannot tell.

"I have one request."

So saying, her master turns his gaze towards Gamma.

Gamma's heart thumps at his gallant as ever eyes. The completely out-of-place thought of whether he notices her different hairstyle springs unbidden into her mind.

"Anything you ask for, my lord."

"I want to participate in the Festival of the God of War with a hidden personality."

So says her master.

That instant, the gears inside Gamma's head whirl at incredible speeds.

She is putting her full effort into trying to read her master's intentions, and to grasp their underlying reasons.

But... she only comes up blank.

Why is something like this necessary?

She cannot solve this mystery no matter how hard she thinks. And so Gamma raises her voice while swallowing her shame.

“That’s... may I ask why?”

Her master’s eyes leave her, and look toward the sky.

The moment she feels her master’s eyes leaving her, Gamma feels like her master had lost his interest in her. Her eyes begin to shake.

“The reason... can you not ask it?”

Her master’s eyes seem to be looking off somewhere in the distance.

Gamma hangs her head and bites her lip.

When Gamma had heard about her master fighting against Aurora the Witch of Calamity, she had wondered: if it had been her at the scene, would she have been able to read her master’s intentions?

Gamma has no confidence that she could.

Among the members of Shadow Garden who had been present, not a single one of them had been successful. But in the end, it was proved that their master’s decision had indeed been the best one, and that no one had been able to stand in the same place as him. But, if Gamma had been there, it would have been her duty to read his intentions.

Gamma is the brains of Shadow Garden. Her intelligence is why she is here.

So if she could not do it, then there would be no reason for her being in Shadow Garden.

And yet despite that.

Again, she has struck out.

“I’m sorry... it’s something that I can’t tell anyone.”

Gamma cannot read her master’s intentions, nor his emotions, nor anything at all.

What an unforgivable disgrace.

It would be so much easier to just do as she is told, without thinking anything.

“Very well, I will not ask. All shall be as my lord wishes.”

Gamma kneels with bowed head to hide the tears of frustration leaking from the corner of her eyes.

Chapter 63

The Mysterious Young Swordsman Jimina

After secretly wiping away her tears, Gamma instructs her subordinates to bring over a certain item.

“This is?”

So asks her master while looking at what she has in her hands.

“Slime formed based on the Wisdom of the Shadows. After running magic through it, its texture changes to become exactly like actual skin.”

“Heeh~”

Gamma holds out the skin-colored slime towards her master.

“So I just put this on my face?”

“Yes, my lord.”

Her master puts it on his face and lightly stretches it.

“Feels like sticking a sheet of clay onto my face.”

So says her master while looking into the proffered mirror.

“From here on is Nyuu’s job.”

“Please pardon me.”

Nyuu stands in front of her lord, and takes out a carving knife and various other tools.

“I will now shave the slime.”

“I see.”

“What kind of face do you wish for?”

“Hmm... a weak-looking face.”

“Weak-looking, is it...”

Nyuu thinks for a short while.

“How about this man?”

Gamma spreads open some documents, and shows Nyuu the family census of a certain young man.

“Jimina Sehnem. Noble of the Altena Empire, 22 years of age. Due to his slothfulness and low aptitude as a magic swordsman, was disowned five years ago. Wandered through the lands as a mercenary and escort, but ended up accepting an escort mission for a demon possessed.”

(T/N: When read together, ‘jimi na seinen’ literally means ‘ordinary/plain young man.’ I changed seinen->Sehnem as an artistic flair.)

He was merely slothful, not sinful. He guarded the carriage of a demon possessed without knowing anything. In other words, he had merely ran out of luck.

“His bone structure is similar, so it should do well. We have his identification papers too.”

“Indeed. Safer than making up a fake identity out of nowhere. My lord, is this fine with you?”

“Un, let’s go with Jimina-kun, then.”

“Then I shall begin.”

With knife in hand, Nyuu begins working on the slime.

She who is good with cosmetics is Shadow Garden’s authority on special effect makeup.

In no time at all, the plain face of a plain young man has been carved out from the slime.

“Ohh, this is...”

Looking at the mirror, their lord raises his voice in appreciation.

“How do you find it, my lord?”

“*Un*, very nice, makes me look really weak.”

It is a face without any specific characteristics, describable only by the word ‘plain.’ With a slightly unhealthy pallor and a stubble, it comes across as completely unreliable. The corners of the mouth are turned down, and the skin is also dull.

Gamma’s heart warms while watching her satisfied master.

“After you run magic through it, the shape gets fixed, so then you can take it off and put it on as you please.”

“Very nice, very nice indeed.”

“The faults are that the flexibility is much lower than the normal slime bodysuit, and that it holds almost no defensive capability.”

“So it’s specialized only for the face. You’re right that this isn’t suitable for the bodysuit.”

“Yes, my lord. And also...”

After listening to Nyuu’s complete explanation, their master stands up.

“It’d fit the image better if I have a hunch, right?”

So then he bends his back and walks.

“Very skillful, my lord.”

Gamma claps her hands and smiles.

By looking at someone’s posture and the way they walk, that person’s understanding of how to use their own body can be inferred. Power is mostly something that begins from the legs. People who are proficient at using their body would walk in a way that maximizes the transfer of power from their legs to the rest of their body. Of course,

that is not the be all and end all of measuring someone's strength. But it is indeed a reference.

Gamma had been taught this by her master long ago, and she had completely understood it. However, she simply had not been able to put it into practice. Gamma's posture is perfect, but that's all it is. She is an archetypal example of how posture and strength can be unrelated to each other.

"Then I'll slope my shoulders slightly, and yep, this seems about right. I don't really want to shift the position of my pelvis, as it might make me pick up some strange quirks."

Gamma heartwarmingly watches over her master practicing a weak-looking walking gait as she gives instructions to her subordinates.

"Ready an outfit and a cheap sword."

"How thoughtful of you."

That sentence alone is enough to fill Gamma's heart.

"Alright, this is great. I'm off to register for the Festival then."

Apparently, their master had tweaked his vocal cords. Now he has a lower, husky-sounding voice.

"Here are your identification papers. Please take care of yourself."

Gamma lowers her head to see off her master's back.

"Thanks. Oh, right."

Right before the door, her master stops.

"That hairstyle really suits you."

Gamma's brain grinds to a halt.

As the door shuts with a *patan...*

“Pegyah!”

Gamma’s heel snaps.

“Gamma-sama?!”

Gamma has a nosebleed as a result of hitting the floor face first, but her face is the very image of sheer bliss.



The registration for the Festival of the God of War is being held at the reception area of the fighting arena.

I join the end of the line for magic swordsmen, then observe my surroundings.

The warrior in front of me is tall and has well-trained muscles. At first glance, he looks strong, but his center of gravity is not stable.

Unn, it might be a close call, but I think I look just a little bit weaker than him.

Another warrior joins the line behind me.

His center of gravity is stable, but he has too much fat in his stomach. More like, it seems that his center of gravity is stable because of the fat. He most likely drinks too much.

But it should be fine. He has a grim face, so I’m sure I look weaker than him.

In that manner, I look all around, arbitrarily hosting a ‘who looks the weakest’ tournament inside my head.

In order to have people go from “Oi, oi, that guy’s definitely going to die” to “Wait, that guy is that strong?!”, it’s a necessity that I look the weakest among these people.

That guy is small fry, that guy over there is also small fry, the one across is small fry also, and the one all the way over there is trash... come on, why are they all small fry.

But it should be fine. The current me is Jimina Sehnem.

As a result of a strict judging, I conclude that I am indeed the one who looks the weakest here.

I nod as a way to convince myself. At that moment.

“Wait a second, you over there. Stop right there.”

“*Nn?*”

“If you participate, you’re going to die.”

When I turn around, I see a young girl wearing a magic swordsman getup.

My heart leaps. Could it be that *that* event is happening?

“Who are you?”

“My name is Annerose. If you are joining with a halfhearted attitude, then I advise you to stop.”

Annerose glares up at me with a sharp gaze.

That instant, I do a guts pose inside my heart.

Indeed, this is... the event that happens without fail when a weak-looking character applies for a tournament!

Chapter 64

Spartan Hazing From a Festival Regular!

“You’re an amateur, right? I can tell with a look.”

Annerose walks towards me, and stops barely within reach.

She has light blue eyes shining with a strong will, and her hair of the same color is cut to around shoulder length.

“You have a cheap sword, and a weak-looking body.”

Annerose lightly taps my sword and body with her index finger.

“Though the swords used in the tournament are dulled, if you take them lightly, you *can* die.”

Then once again, she shoots me a sharp glare.

I look into her eyes, and think for a bit. The reaction that I should show here is...

“I’d advise you to not judge books by their covers.”

So saying, I turn away from Annerose.

Indeed, the setting that I’m going with here is that I look weak but am actually really strong. And thus, it would be contrary to come off deferential here.

The best effect is if I get them to think ‘this guy is weak, but sure is presumptuous.’

“What is with that attitude. And here I am actually worrying...”

“I don’t need it. Save it for someone who does.”

Ah right, gotta remember to use the pronoun ‘ore’ to refer to myself.

(T/N: There are many options in Japanese for the pronoun 'I,' depending on gender, age, relative status to the conversational partner, etc. 'Ore' is the most masculine one, to the degree where in some situations would come across as excessively aggressive.)

"I'm being serious, you really..."

"Oi brat, that was a warning, not advice. And warnings are meant to be taken seriously."

Abruptly, a man interrupts our conversation.

If I have to use a simile to describe him, then he is like an rough-looking pro wrestler. However, the sword on his waist is well-used, and the various scars on his face give off a 'veteran of battlefields' aura.

In actual fact, among everyone present, he seems to be the strongest after Annerose and me.

"I am Quinton. I've participated in the Festival several times already, and every time I see weaklings like you pouring cold water on the audience. How about you just run on back home and suck your mama's tits?"

Quinton's brazen ridicule is met with voices of approval and vulgar laughter from the surroundings.

But I shoot Quinton a sideways glance, then sneer.

"At the very least, I'm stronger than you."

Quinton's face turns livid.

"Gyahaha! Quinton, you're being looked down on!"

"Quinton, you gonna just let a small fry run his mouth off about you?"

Quinton's eyebrows scrunch up from the jeering, and he grabs me by my collar.

"Oi, you better be careful with your tongue. Who the fuck did you say is stronger than me?"

I do not answer.

But I do raise a corner of my mouth in a sneer again.

“Seems that you are in need of some... educating!”

So saying, he throws me.

I crash into some people, then roll on the ground.

“Yea, show him who’s who!!”

“*Gyahaha*, make sure you go easy on him!!”

The people around Quinton and me back off into a ring. As expected of these people who make their living from violence, they sure know how to react.

“This is your last chance to apologize.”

So says Quinton while cracking his neck with *koki koki* sounds.

“Your standard really is low.”

I shake my head with a ‘yare yare’.

“I will fucking KILL you!”

Quinton charges at me with a punch.

To be honest, unarmed combat in this world is almost entirely undeveloped. More like, people are stronger when using a weapon, so the only opportunities for unarmed combat are either when the fighter is that much stronger, or when the fighter has been driven to the ropes to that degree. Otherwise, unarmed combat almost never happens.

If there is an unarmed combat tournament, I would undoubtedly take first place. That’s how much confidence I have.

The various ways that I can react to this situation flash through my mind.

Countering with a left straight or right hook would be simple yet effective. Stopping

him with a jab or front kick then wait-and-see would be safe. Not doing anything and going completely wait-and-see would be even safer. Meeting him with an elbow or knee would be very effective. Tackling him and then locking him into a joint lock on him would be good too.

If this was a real fight with a strong enemy, I would definitely go with the jab. But not with a fist, but with outspread palm, all five fingers aimed towards his eyes.

But against mere Quinton, there is no need to go that far. In the first place, I... don't even feel like fighting yet.

“ORA!!”

Quinton's fist sinks into my cheek.

Then I am sent flying away flashily, crashing into the surrounding human wall.

“There's more where that came from!!”

Quinton's punches land on me.

Right, left, right, left, left, left.

I allow myself to continue being punched without raising my own hand, then arbitrarily collapse by myself where I think appropriate.

“This guy is weak! He's way too freaking weak!”

“*Gyahaha*, so he *is* a small fry after all!”

The gallery's derision is music to my ears.

“Is he too scared to do anything? What a wimp!”

Quinton looks down on me and scoffs.

“My fists are not so cheap as to be used on the likes of you.”

So I say while looking up at Quinton and smiling.

“So you haven’t had enough yet?!”

“Stop it already!!”

Quinton’s raised fist is stopped by Annerose’s voice.

“You’ve already gone too far. If you’re still itching for a fight, then I’ll be your partner.”

Annerose glares up at Quinton.

“Oi oi, the lady said she’d be your partner!”

“*Gyahaha*, can you be my partner instead?!”

In contrast to the jeering, Quinton’s face grows grim.

Leaving behind a ‘tch,’ he turns on his heels.

“What’s wrong, Quinton? Going for a piss?”

“How boring, it’s already over?”

As Quinton leaves, the human ring also beaks up.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t foresee it turning into that.”

Annerose reaches out a hand.

I stand up while ignoring that hand.

“If you’d actually wanted to, you could have stopped it at any moment. Am I wrong?”

Annerose flinches from my question.

“Rather than something that you can’t recover from happening to you during the tournament, I thought it better for you to learn a lesson here first. But he really did go too far. Are your wounds alright?”

Annerose reaches towards me, but I intercept it with one hand.

“No problem.”

“But you... eh?”

It seems that Annerose has noticed. Despite having being punched so many times, there are no obvious wounds on me.

If I have to point one out, the only thing I can raise is the small cut on the side of my mouth.

I use a thumb to wipe away the blood slowly oozing beside my mouth, then turn to leave.

“The taste of blood... how long has it been last...”

So I murmur in a small voice loud enough to be heard by Annerose.

“...! Wait! What is your name?”

I feel her strong gaze on my back.

“...Jimina.”

With that, I disappear into the sea of people.

Then I clinch a guts pose.

Hell yea!

I have successfully done it.

‘The small fry that everyone underestimates, but a small minority have realized that he might not be what he seems!’

I absolutely love this cliché.

In my opinion, those who unveil their strength before the tournament even begins are mere third-rates.

Where’s the fun in that? What’s the point of revealing your true strength in the least

interesting place possible?

Being underestimated by everyone before the tournament begins is just right. Then when the tournament begins, you make more and more people think “Wait, isn’t that guy kind of strong?” Then only at the climax do you reveal your true strength to make people go “Hell, that guy was actually that fucking strong the entire time?!” Now *that* is a first-rate flow.

To maintain control over the audience’s impression of me until that crucial moment is the task that I have been tasked with during this Festival of the God of War.

I host this single-person reflection session while hiding into the shadows.

Then after confirming that Annerose and the rest have left, I secretly get back in line and complete my registration.

Chapter 65

No Need to Rush, Youngster, For Life is Long

The prelims for the Festival of the God of War begin next week. I return to Sid's appearance to check out the fighting arena and consider all possible developments. Then I hit MagRonald and buy two sandwiches to eat on the way back to my dorm.

While walking beneath the twilight sun, I remember that I had promised to treat Alpha to MagRonald.

But Alpha always seems busy, so we haven't really found the time. Oh well, I'll get around to it someday. Alpha is Alpha, so she'll probably easily live for more than 300 years. And me, I intend to use magic to lengthen my own lifespan to over 200 years. I just have to treat her once before I die. Let's think long term.

As I approach the academy, the sound of cicadas increase in volume. Twilight in summer is the cicadas' time. Or maybe not, maybe that's just my arbitrary impression.

The academy as illuminated by the setting sun is well into the process of reconstruction. At this pace, the reconstruction should indeed finish in time for the usual starting time of the new semester. Previously, Hyoro had cursed it with "I wish it had all burned down," but I concur. I'm sure the entire student body that wishes for an extension of the summer holidays are of the same opinion.

I walk past the school buildings towards the road that leads to the dormitories.

There are very few people.

The large majority of students have returned home. Speaking of which, Nee-san had also said "we will go home together;" but then I ignored her and went to the Holy Ground. I wonder what happened after that? Would she be back around the time of the tournament proper?

While thinking such thoughts, I throw the last morsel of the first sandwich into my mouth.

At that moment.

“Unpreparedness is one’s greatest enemy, you know?”

The sheath of a thin practice sword touches my shoulder. There is almost no killing intent at all, so I didn’t react to it.

The owner of the sheath giggles, then withdraws the sword. She has honey-colored hair and a gentle smile. It’s Rose.

“Yaa, you back from practice?”

“Indeed. I found myself with some free time, so I went to swing my sword for a bit. Sid-kun, you went to MagRonald?”

“I’m acquainted with the store manager over there. Happened quite recently, though.”

“I also went the other day, with two friends. That place really is very delicious.”

“Two friends?”

“Yes! Natsume-sensei and Alexia-san.”

I don’t quite get the relationship between the three of them, but well, they were together at the Holy Ground, so maybe something came out of that?

“You close with them?”

“I’ve gotten really close with Natsume-sensei. Alexia-san is also a really good person, so it won’t be long before we become close.”

As long as you are under the impression that Alexia is a good person, that means you are not close to her.

“But it’s just that Alexia-san and Natsume-sensei don’t really seem to get along well with each other.”

Rose looks slightly sad.

What to make of the Beta and Alexia pairing? Though I do think they’re birds of a

feather.

“It’ll probably sort itself out eventually.”

“I’d be glad if that is the case... I’m just so worried about whether those two can get along well if I’m gone. From here on, we’re going to cooperate together. Though we still don’t know what it is that we can do, but we hope to make the world at least a little bit better.”

“World peace is important indeed.”

“Yes it is!”

Rose is now smiling brightly.

“Ah, I’m sorry. It’s about time for me, so I have to get going.”

Our surroundings are gradually getting darker.

“*Un*, see you around.”

“Um...”

Despite saying that she has to get going, it seems like Rose still has something else to say.

“What’s up?”

Rose hesitates for a while before opening her mouth.

“Now, I’m going to meet my father. It seems that he might be introducing my fiancé to me.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes.”

“Congratulations... is something that I’m not going to say.”

Rose’s face tells me that it is not something she wishes for.

“I am the princess of Oriana Kingdom. As a princess, I shoulder many expectations while I live. However, in my selfishness, I have betrayed all that.”

“Un.”

“I might end up betraying the expectations of a large number of people, again.”

Rose smiles a painful smile.

“But this time, it is not selfishness. It would be great if I’m just worrying for nothing. But... if... if something happens, will you believe in me?”

“Un, got it.”

Rose looks down as if to hide her face, then turns around to leave.

“Hey.”

I call her back, then throw the other MagRonald sandwich towards her.

“Take it. You should relax your shoulders a bit.”

“Thank you.”

Rose smiles at me gently.



The next day, I am jolted awake by Hyoro’s scream.

“Student Council President Rose stabbed her fiancé and fled!!”

While still in bed, I tilt my head in puzzlement at what drove her to do such a thing.

Chapter 66

The Harmless Poyoyon and Mole

“What is she doing, that girl...”

So sighs Alexia inside her own room, accompanied with a ‘tch.’

“It seems that Rose had fled to the northern part of the royal capital. She is most likely still within the city.”

The one who said that in a businesslike tone is Natsume, who is sitting on the opposite sofa.

Alexia looks at Natsume with a bitter face, then clicks her tongue again.

It is thanks to Natsume that the details of Rose’s attempted murder of her fiancé reached Alexia’s ears. Though her nature is suspicious as ever, but her information is sure. She has also supplied various information related to rumors regarding the Order of Diabolos.

“It seems that Oriana Kingdom wishes to treat it as an Orianan problem. They requested Midgar Kingdom to not get involved.” (Natsume)

“That sounds suspicious.” (Alexia)

“It does indeed. She can be tried under Midgarian law, but then that would affect the relationship between the two countries. Midgar Kingdom will most likely acquiesce.” (Natsume)

“Well, it’s my father we’re talking about. I’m sure he’s decided on wait-and-see.” (Alexia)

Alexia recalls the face of her peace-at-any-price father, then clicks her tongue once more.

“Rose-sama’s fiancé is Doem Ketsuhat, second son of a duke family of Oriana Kingdom.

Once she's caught, she will probably be punished heavily." (Natsume)

(T/N: 'Do M' = 'super masochist', and I think 'ketsuhat' = 'asshat'. Anyone got a better read? Here's the original for your reference: ドエム・ケツハット)

"She's a royalty, so execution is definitely off the table, but probably imprisonment or exile... But for now, let's the two of us find Rose-senpai first before Oriana Kingdom does, and hear her out." (Alexia)

"Wait a moment. Rose-sama did not tell us anything in regards to this case. I believe that we should avoid causing any international problems with our intervention." (Natsume)

"So, what?" (Alexia)

Alexia's eyes are focused on Natsume.

"I'm just saying that we should refrain from any actions that might possibly lead to problems." (Natsume)

"So you're saying that we should abandon her?" (Alexia)

"I did not say that. But we should think carefully before we act." (Natsume)

"So you're saying that I don't think before I act?" (Alexia)

"I did not say that. But we should spend a bit more time thinking things through." (Natsume)

"So you're saying that I'm an idiot?" (Alexia)

"I did not say that. People all have their own strengths and weaknesses." (Natsume)

"If you have something to say about me, then how about just coming straight out with it?" (Alexia)

"How could I be so presumptuous..." (Natsume)

Natsume hugs her shoulders while her eyes shake from anxiety.

Alexia walks forward with crisp steps, then grabs Natsume by her collar. Natsume's revealed cleavage jiggles with an almost audible *'poyoyon'* sfx.

"Don't you go acting all innocent and harmless with me." (Alexia)

Alexia glares at her at zero distance.

"*Hiii*, d-, don't kill meee...!" (Natsume)

Natsume struggles to get free, which causes her chest to jiggle with even more *'poyoyon'* than before. Alexia notices a mole on one of those lumps, which for some reason pisses her off excessively.

"As I keep saying, every single one of your reactions seem fake!" (Alexia)

"*Fueee...*" (Natsume)

"I am so going to kill you." (Alexia)

"*Hawawa...*" (Natsume)

Seeing Natsume looking up with teary eyes, Alexia clicks her tongue and lets go.

Natsume collapses onto the sofa.

"Rose-senpai surely has her own reasons. I also understand that she doesn't want to drag us into this. But that's what irritates me." (Alexia)

"So..." (Natsume)

"When I'm told to stop, that only makes me want to do it. When someone tries to not involve me in something, that only makes me want to rush into it." (Alexia)

"Umm..." (Natsume)

Natsume looks up at Alexia with a face that's clearly troubled as to how to respond.

"We are friends. I don't know what you're thinking inside, but at least you've also decided to act out being friends. Am I correct?" (Alexia)

“I, guess...” (Natsume)

“And we cannot abandon friends. Of course, I also will not abandon you. Understood?”
(Alexia)

“...Alright.” (Natsume)

Natsume stands up with her eyes cast down.

“In that case, then I’ll go gather information about Rose-sama. There also seem to be black rumors about her fiancé, so I’ll look into that too.” (Natsume)

“Sounds wonderful. I’ll go speak with my Nee-sama.” (Alexia)

“Let’s meet again tonight then, to exchange information.” (Natsume)

“Aren’t you recovering too fast?” (Alexia)

“So then, see you tonight.” (Natsume)

“Saying this just in case, but take care.” (Alexia)

“You too, Alexia-sama.” (Natsume)

Natsume bows once, then leaves.

Alexia stares at that back, then sighs heavily.

“Well, no other choice but to do something about it...” (Alexia)

After rearranging her slightly disheveled appearance, Alexia also exits the room.

Chapter 67

Sure-Win Golden Dragon's Sure-Win Formula

The weekend has come, and along with it, the start of the preliminaries of the Festival of the God of War.

I am sitting together with Hyoro in the audience seats at the fighting arena, watching the matches. The sun is still high in the sky, and spectators are sparse. Well, this is just the prelims after all. More like, this number is a pretty good turn out for the prelims.

Actually, I had fought two matches already last night. Not in the fighting arena, but at random grassy locations. Yep, the first and second rounds of prelims are held at the grasslands outside of the royal capital. Nobody comes to watch those matches. The quality of my opponents was also the worst. I beat both of them by knocking them out with a half-hearted lariat. Both victories were entirely joyless.

Then from the third match onwards, it's finally the fighting arena! By this point, the quality of the matches have finally reached barely acceptable standards. Though few, there are at least some spectators, which is also a big improvement. What most people refer to when they mention the Festival of the God of War is the tournament proper, after all.

"Oh yea, where's Jaga?"

So I ask Hyoro, who appears to be taking notes of some sort.

"He said that he went home to do some farming."

(T/N: The joke here is that Jaga's last name is 'Imo,' so when you put it together his name is 'Jagaimo' = potato. And he's farming. Lol.)

"I see."

Hyoro continues to enthusiastically take notes while watching the match. Around his neck is the Holy Sword necklace, the souvenir that I had gotten for him at the Holy Land. I'm glad that he likes it enough to wear it. But more than that, I have misgivings

about his sense of taste, to actually like something like that...

“So, what’re you doing?”

“I’m gathering battle data. Noobs would bet based merely on their intuition, but I am different. I collect data, I apply statistics, and then bet based on probability.”

“*Fu~n.*”

I steal a glance at Hyoro’s memo pad.

‘Probably strong’ ‘Probably weak’ ‘No idea’ is what it says.

“Winning in betting is considered from the cumulative total.”

So Hyoro says confidently while continuing with his notes.

“Is that so.”

“Noobs bet on one match and call that a win or a loss. But I am different. I do not fixate on the results of a single match. I increase the number of trial runs, combine the probabilities, and win in units of 10 matches.”

“Is that so.”

“For I am a man who wins by totals...”

“Good on you.”

I yawn.

“That’s an interesting conversation you guys are having over there.”

That moment, a young man appears behind us.

“Our conversation is interesting?”

“It is indeed!”

In response to my question, the blond handsome guy with an almost visible background

of sparkles smiles with a pose.

“You, you are...!”

“You know him, Hyoro?”

“You are the Undefeatable Myth, Goldoh Kinmekki-san!!”

(T/N: When read together, his name means ‘gold gilding/plating’.)

Goldoh-san brushes up his hair in response to Hyoro’s reverent gaze.

“That nickname is quite embarrassing. By all means, call me Sure-Win Golden Dragon Goldoh Kinmekki instead!”

“Y-, yes for sure! Sure-Win Golden Dragon Goldoh-san!”

Eh, I prefer ‘Undefeatable Myth’ though.

“Are you gathering battle data?”

“Yes I am!”

“Prospect, you hold. I, too, never forgo the collection of battle data.”

“I-, is that true?!”

“Indeed. Always in pursuit of victory... see?”

“SO COOL! Can you tell me more?!”

“Yare yare, just a little bit then.”

I have a feeling that this is going to take quite a while.

My entry is just about approaching too, so it’s good timing.

“Gonna go take a shit.”

“Go already.”

I change in the toilet, then head towards the participants' waiting room.



Hyoro is listening to Sure-Win Golden Dragon Goldoh Kinmekki's sure-win theory with rapt attention.

"For example, see. Take the next match as an example."

"Yes, sir!"

It just so happens that the participants of the next match are being called into the arena.

"Round 3, Match 12! Gonzales versus Jimina Sehnem!"

The two magic swordsman face off.

"My theory enables me to measure most people's general strength before it even begins. First let's consider Gonzales. His physical strength can be determined by looking at his muscle balance. His eyes and expression give him the aura of a veteran who has waded through many a battlefield. At a quick glance, his battle power is 1,364."

"B-, battle power?! What is that!!"

"After I gather and analyze a fighter's battle data, I quantify it. Battle power of 1,364 is not a bad number."

"Awesome!"

"In contrast, Jimina Sehnem... *fumu.*"

Sure-Win Golden Dragon Goldoh Kinmekki stares at Jimina with sharp eyes, falling silent.

"H-, how is he?"

"No, how could he... But, this is..."

“G-, Goldoh-sensei?”

“Sorry about that. I was merely a bit taken back.”

“Could it be that Jimina is actually that...?!”

“Indeed, that man... Jimina Sehnem is... an incredibly small fry!”

“Eh...? Small fry?”

“No doubt about it! I haven’t the faintest idea how he managed to win his way to the third round! Perhaps by a miracle?”

“He does look kind of weak...”

“Weak-looking face, weak-looking body, and weak aura! Jimina’s battle power is 33! Haha, he’s the bottom of the barrel as a magic swordsman!”

“Which means that it’ll be Gonzales’ win?”

“With just one blow, most likely. There’ll be nothing to see in this match.”

Then the match begins.

The one who moves first is Gonzales.

With a speed unbecoming of his large muscular body, he rushes towards Jimina, brandishing his sword.

His movements are a notch above most other participants in this third round. Goldoh’s evaluation of him as a veteran of battle seems to be not entirely unbased.

Jimina does not even react to Gonzales’ attack.

Every single person is sure of Jimina’s loss.

But, at that moment.

Gonzales... trips.

Right in front of Jimina, Gonzales stumbles and rolls.

Then in the same movement, his head hits the ground, and he loses consciousness.

The entire arena falls completely silent. 'Come on, he's gonna get up, right?' is what everybody is thinking.

But Gonzales does not even twitch.

Jimina sheathes his sword and turns to leave, before the judge finally reacts.

"W-, winner, Jimina Sehnem!"

"W-, WHAT THE FUCK WAS THAT?!"

"RETURN MY MONEY TO ME!!"

Jeering falls like rain upon the unconscious Gonzales.

Not knowing how to react, Hyoro peers at Sure-Win Golden Dragon Goldoh Kinmekki's face.

"W-, well, this happens too, every once in a while."

So says Sure-Win Golden Dragon Goldoh Kinmekki with a slightly twitching face.

"Battle data can help us to predict the outcome. However, nothing is ever certain in a fight. This was a good lesson, was it not?"

"D-, don't tell me, Sensei actually predicted that this would happen...?"

"Hmph..."

Sure-Win Golden Dragon Goldoh Kinmekki merely smiles in reply.

"Let me teach you something good."

"Eh...?"

"There are two ways to win a gamble. The first is to seek out a strong participant, and

to bet on that participant. The other way is to seek out a weak participant, and to bet on the opponent of that participant.”

Sure-Win Golden Dragon Goldoh Kinmekki stands up and turns his back.

“Tomorrow’s Round 4, Match 6 will be Sure-Win Golden Dragon Goldoh Kinmekki vs. Jimina Sehnem.”

“Wha-... you mean!”

Sure-Win Golden Dragon Goldoh Kinmekki turns around, and points at Hyoro.

“Have you... also figured out the sure-win formula?”

Then he leaves while brushing up his sparkling blond hair.

“S-, so cool...!”

Hyoro sees Sure-Win Golden Dragon Goldoh Kinmekki off with a dazed face.

“Yo, I’m back from my shit.”

A black-haired teenage boy returns to his seat.

“Oi, Sid! Tomorrow there’s a match with guaranteed victory! Bet all your money on it!”

“Eh, don’t wanna.”

“Just do it, pretend you were tricked by me!”

“No thanks.”

“Tch, forget it then. Don’t come crying to me afterwards!”

Then the two of them resume watching the matches.

Chapter 68

The Match Where The Stronger One Gets All the Attention

Round 4 of the Festival of the God of War has begun.

Annerose is sitting in the front row of the audience seats, waiting for a certain match.

With her light blue hair being brushed by the wind, her eyes of the same color are focused on the arena. The number of spectators has gone up a bit from yesterday, but more than half of the seats are still empty.

“Jou-chan, you also here to see that guy’s match?”

(T/N: ‘Jou’ or ‘Ojou’ is a relatively neutral way of addressing young ladies or girls. Then the suffix ‘-chan’ or ‘-san’ is a reflection of how familiar you purport to be to the lady/girl OR a reflection of the amount of respect. The former consideration is for someone you know, the latter consideration is for complete strangers.)

Hearing a voice calling out to her, Annerose turns around.

“As I recall, you are...”

“Quinton.”

The Quinton who is like a rough-looking pro wrestler sits heavily into the seat next to Annerose’s.

“You also watched the match yesterday in Round 3, didn’t you?”

“I did, yes. From your tone, you also...?”

“I had no intention to, but just happened to see it. Jimina’s Round 3 match, what did you think?”

Quinton sprays his legs forward while asking Annerose.

“At the very least, I don’t believe that his opponent just happened to trip by himself to allow him a lucky win.”

“Me neither. That guy definitely did something. I couldn’t tell what it was that he did, but thought maybe you caught it, Annerose-san of the ‘Seven Swords of Begalta.’”

Quinton’s insolent gaze is met by Annerose’s sharp eyes.

But quickly, Annerose turns her face away and crosses her legs. The slit in her skirt reveals a glimpse of her white legs.

“I’ve already discarded that name. Now I am ‘only’ Annerose.”

“Well sorry then. It’s a bit late, but congratulations on passing the Trial of the Goddess.”

“Thanks.”

“So, could it be that even Jou-chan didn’t catch it? What that guy did?”

“Y-, yea, I couldn’t catch it either.”

So answers Annerose with a slight pout.

“It was beyond my expectations that I would overlook it. It completely caught me off guard. However... I thought I saw Jimina-kun’s left hand move.”

“*Hou*, his left hand.”

“But I couldn’t tell what it was that he did with his left hand. The only thing I can say is that whatever it was, it was incredibly fast.”

“Hmph. Then that means my guess was off.”

Quinton snorts as if he’s lost interest.

“Guess?”

“I thought he had used a forbidden artifact or something.”

“I see... I suppose that possibility also cannot be crossed out.”

“Either way, today’s match will make everything clear.”

“Agreed. His opponent is that Undefeatable Myth Goldoh Kinmekki.”

“I don’t know him personally, but apparently he’s famous? Something about him never having lost a fight before.”

“For better or worse, he is famous indeed.”

So says Annerose with a wry smile.

“Is he strong?”

“Let me see how to put it... So I’ve fought in a few different countries. I’ve been in actual battle, and have also participated in several tournaments. In tournaments in the past, I’ve been matched with Goldoh Kinmekki three times.”

“*Hou*... if he’s never lost before, that means that you lost to him all three times?”

Annerose shoots Quinton a light glare.

“As if. All three times, we didn’t fight. Whenever he meets a strong opponent, he runs away.”

“Hah? What the hell?”

“He makes sure to never fight against an opponent that he has a chance of losing to. He only participates in fights with guaranteed victory, and the other ones? He just forfeits. His nickname is ‘Undefeatable Myth.’ After all, it’s true that he would never lose. Though it seems that he hates that nickname and is going around calling himself Sure-Win Golden Dragon.”

“‘Sure win’ and ‘Undefeatable.’ It’s true that both sound the same but have completely different connotations.”

Quinton barks out a laugh.

“So in other words, we can’t expect anything from Undefeatable Myth-san?”

“Not quite, maybe.”

Annerose smiles with only one corner of her mouth.

“*Nn*, what do you mean?”

“It’s true that Undefeatable Myth only fights opponents that he’s sure to win, and climbs tournaments that way. However, he’s actually even won the championship in several small-scale tournaments.”

“*Hou...* so he’s not really that weak.”

Quinton’s eyes turn sharp.

“Indeed. His strength is in accurately gauging difference in strength. And he did not forfeit the match with Jimina. In other words...”

“I get it.”

Quinton laughs with a mad glint in his eyes.

“Even Undefeatable Myth could not see through Jimina’s true strength.”

“That, or that Jimina really is a coward relying on the power of an artifact or some other external aid.”

“In addition, Undefeatable Myth has only ever fought opponents that he was sure to win against. Which means that he’s never displayed his true strength either.”

“Now it’s gotten interesting.”

“Indeed, it will be interesting for sure.”

Quinton laughs like a beast, while Annerose licks her lip.

Then the two of them direct their full attention towards the arena.

Amidst a rain of cheers, Jimina Sehnem and Goldoh Kinmekki are both facing off

against each other.

The only people in the audience who understand the true meaning of this match are, as of this moment, only two.

“Round 4, Match 6: Goldoh Kinemekki vs. Jimina Sehnem! Battle... start!!”

Then begins the match.

Chapter 69

Evil ** Kill ** Dragon!!

The one who makes the first move is Goldoh.

Right at the moment the fight begins, he closes the distance in one go.

In the same movement, he unleashes a mowing attack with his excessively ornamented sword, aimed straight at Jimina's neck.

The targeted Jimina has yet to draw his sword. He is just standing in place, not showing any reaction whatsoever.

Sure of his victory, Goldoh flashes his teeth.

That instant, a '*koki*' sound can be heard.

"Eh?"

The one who exclaims in confusion is Goldoh. But it is not only him, but all eyes in the arena that are straining for a clue as to what just happened.

Goldoh's sword had missed Jimina's neck and swung by harmlessly.

When Goldoh comes to, he realizes that his torso is completely unguarded.

"Tch!"

Goldoh's face stiffens.

Seeing his opponent in such a fatally compromised posture in front of him, Jimina moves.

And then.

Jimina only slowly draws his sword.

That's it.

Completely overlooking the opportunity presented by Goldoh's mistake. Jimina's movements were so slow, it was almost as if he didn't even notice what had happened.

Goldoh quickly retreats back out of range, then glares at Jimina.

"You making light of me?"

Irritation can be heard mixed into Goldoh's tone.



"Did you see it?"

So Quinton asks Annerose in the audience seats.

"Just barely."

So answers Annerose while fixing vulture-like eyes on Jimina.

"As expected. I couldn't see a thing. I really thought that Undefeatable Myth's sword had gotten Jimina's neck."

"It really was a timing that is normally unavoidable. But... right before the sword hit, Jimina cracked his neck."

There is unmistakable shock in Annerose's voice.

"He cracked his neck? The hell does that mean?"

"He just cracked it, like normal. With a '*koki*,' then another '*koki*.'"

So saying, Annerose also tilts her own head, demonstrating what she's describing.

"Ok wait, that just made it even more incomprehensible."

"I don't get it either, alright? But the instant that he tilted his head, there was a *koki* sound, and Goldoh's sword really did miss."

“Oi oi oi, you gotta be shitting me. You saying that he tilted his head to crack his neck, which just happened to enable him to evade the sword?”

“Yes I am.”

“You pulling my leg?! Like hell such a coincidence happened!”

“What if it wasn’t a coincidence?”

Annerose’s eyes turn sharp.

“What... are you saying?”

“He had cracked his neck at a speed that even I would have missed if I wasn’t completely focused on him. Can a normal human do something like that?”

This is the logic that a super speed neck crack that bare eyes cannot catch is normally impossible.

“*Guh!* You’ve a point...”

“Perhaps for him, evading the sword was merely a byproduct. He first wanted to crack his neck, but it just happened that a sword was passing by, and it just so happened that his neck evaded the sword.”

“What the fuck! Now THAT’s a true impossibility! Goldoh’s sword was fast! And you’re saying it was evaded as a *byproduct*?!”

“I am also feeling extremely incredulous at the moment. Maybe it really was a sheer coincidence. But if it was not a coincidence, then...”

“!! Hell if I swallow that!!”



Goldoh speaks up while still glaring at Jimina.

“You piss me off. Just now, you had let a golden chance slip right through your fingers. That was the single chance in your entire life to defeat me, but you had let it go. And yet, why do you still look so composed!”

Goldoh gnashes his teeth audibly.

“Be more wracked with regret! Wail! Struggle more, in your unsightly way! Otherwise, it would be an insult towards me.”

Jimina merely silently listens to Goldoh’s words.

“Don’t tell me, you didn’t even realize that you had an opportunity? If so, then there’s no helping it, as you are but a small fry with only a battle power of 33.”

Goldoh laughs from the back of his throat.

“To think that a small fry cast shame on me. I’ll beat you down with all I’ve got. Don’t fault me if you accidentally end up dying, alright?”

Goldoh takes up a stance with his sword, then begins accumulating magic.

The air vibrates, and a large amount of magic gathers.

Great furor rises up from the audience.

“I’ll teach you something as a souvenir to hell. My battle power is 4,300!”

With that, he once again closes and swings his sword.

“EVIL GOD • INSTANT KILL • GOLDEN DRAGON SWORD?!”

The golden flow of magic seems to be evoking the image of a golden dragon.

The golden dragon assaults Jimina.

Or so things should have proceeded.

But in actuality, after a weird ‘kshuu’ sound, the golden dragon disappears.

“*Bubera!!*”

(T/N: Bubera is what people in mangaka Man ☆Gatarou’s works reflexively say when they are hit. Kind of like his made-up word for ‘ouch.’)

Then Goldoh flies through the air with a tailspin.

The audience falls silent.

Everyone watches on in shocked silence as Goldoh hits the ground with a splat. He does not show anymore movement after that.

“W-, winner, Jimina Sehnem!!”

So rises the victory cheer as Jimina turns around and leaves.



“To think that Goldoh Kinmekki is actually so strong...”

That is the first thing that Quinton says after the match.

After listening to Annerose, Quinton had somehow been looking down on Goldoh in his heart.

But to think that he can actually materialize his magic to such a degree.

That last attack of his had contained enough strength to easily clear the preliminaries of the Festival of the God of War.

“Turns out he is a lot more skilled than expected. If he had devoted his time to aiming higher and fighting with people stronger than himself, he might have been an even stronger magic swordsman.”

“So, what was it that Jimina did at the end?”

Annerose crosses her arms and sighs while answering.

“If I saw correctly... he sneezed.”

“Hah?!”

“If I had to venture a guess, it’d be because the golden dragon was too bright. Jimina’s sword fell along with a sneeze, which Goldoh charged into. Thus the collision.”

(T/N: "Reflexive sneezing induced by light, and sunlight in particular, is estimated to occur in 18 to 35 percent of the population and is known as the photic sneeze reflex (PSR)..." [Scientific American])

"Wait, wait, wait, that just sounds absurd. A dragon and a sneeze clashed and the sneeze won?!"

"That's what actually happened, so what can I do? Goldoh had mentioned a golden chance, but perhaps for Jimina it was nothing at all. Jimina could have defeated Goldoh at any moment. Thus there was no need to exploit a mistake... no, more like, maybe in Jimina's eyes, every single motion of Goldoh's is exploitable...?"

Annerose shivers at her own deduction.

No way.

Indeed, this is only a mere supposition... simply an overvaluation of Jimina's strength.

"How retarded."

Quinton laughs from his nose, then violently stands up.

"I'm the idiot for listening seriously. No way in hell I'd acknowledge such a ridiculous guy. If Jimina continues to win, then he'll meet me in the finals of the prelims. I'll unmask his true self for all to see."

Quinton shoots a glare towards the arena that is now absent of Jimina, then stomps away.

Annerose returns to her own seat, and ruminates over Jimina's movements.

"Can I do what he did...?"

Still staying in her seat, she cracks her neck and sneezes.

Again and again. Faster each time, and with smaller movements.

Koki, kshun, koki, kshun, koki!

"Kshun, ah..."

When she finally notices the weird looks that everyone nearby is shooting at her, she blushes to the tip of her ears and dashes away.

Chapter 70

In Expectation of This Happening

The Undefeatable Myth was finally defeated.

This news spread like wildfire among all the tournament mania in the city.

Despite this being only the prelims, there had been quite a bit of attention on Undefeatable Myth Goldoh Kinmekki. Though many were surprised to hear that he had been defeated by a completely unheard-of new participant, they found themselves convinced upon hearing the details of the match.

It somehow seemed like this new guy had won by chance.

That was the frank opinion of most of the tournament mania.

However, a small minority of them, as well as some who had seen the match first hand, came to hold doubts regarding Jimina's evaluation.

They purposely sought out Jimina's matches, hoping to see him up close to gauge his strength for themselves.

However.

"AAHHH!! Contestant Quinton is DOWN!! He cannot get back up! Contestant Jimina, once again he wins with a single attack!!"

Finals of Block B of the Festival of the God of War prelims once again ended with Jimina's victory.

Once again, with a single attack.

None of the tournament mania could accurately gauge Jimina's strength. Today's match confirmed Jimina's entry into the tournament proper, but not a single person understood how on earth he managed to win all the way to this point.

This is entirely too much to be pure coincidence, so he probably has some strength.

His opponent in the prelim finals, Quinton, was a magic swordsman with stable strength who is evaluated quite highly among the tournament mania. Since even this Quinton had lost, then they had no choice but to acknowledge Jimina's strength.

But since no one understood *how* Jimina won, no one could grasp exactly how strong Jimina is.

He's most likely stronger than Quinton, but is he strong enough to stand on the stage of the tournament proper?

Even if he *is* strong enough to do so, is that strength enough to earn him a place among the Festival's history of champions?

This topic became all the rage among the tournament mania.

Many did not believe that Jimina has the strength to go high in the tournament.

In light of his achievements, this couldn't be helped.

Almost all other contestants in the tournament have sold their names in other tournaments or battlefields. However, Jimina had not done any of that.

Objectively speaking, there wasn't a single thing to prove Jimina's true strength.

And thus, his evaluation naturally was low.

But a small portion of the tournament mania were pushing Jimina as a dark horse.

Looking at this year's participant list, it is almost certain that the champion will be Iris again. However, if there really is someone who can overturn that result... then it can only be this mysterious young man with as-yet unmeasured strength.

With such expectations on his back, Jimina leaves the arena.

The tournament proper begins next week.

The first match will be Jimina Sehnem vs. Annerose.

90% of people predict that it will be Annerose's win.



While thinking about how today's ossan opponent was strangely energetic, I leave the arena. His name was Q-... um, sorry, I forgot. He had quite relentless killing intent, so it was a bit new.

With this, my entry into the Festival of the God of War is confirmed. The first match is next week.

To this point, the audience's reaction is about so-so. The plan is to slowly begin revealing my strength in the matches starting next week, so until then I'll be doing image training.

While walking down the long corridor of the contestant entrance with such thoughts on my mind, I find my way blocked by a lady with light blue hair. If I remember correctly, her name is Annerose.

"You have business with me...?"

"To think that you would advance to the tournament proper. You've sure done it."

Her strong-willed eyes are looking at me.

"A natural result."

"I admit that I had misjudged your strength. But I have a warning for you."

"Warning...?"

"I've already seen through your movements. Don't think that you can continue winning in the same way as before."

Annerose flashes me a confident smile.

"Hmph..."

I laugh with only a corner of my mouth. Then, as if to insinuate that she is not worthy of anymore of my time, I indifferently walk past her.

...Please call out to me!

So I shout within my heart.

“What’s so funny.”

I can feel Annerose’s glare.

THANK YOU!

I turn only my neck around, as if sizing her up with only the corner of my eye.

“A warning from me too, then...”

So saying, I undo the wristband that I had put on in expectation of this happening, and throw it at the ground by Annerose’s feet.

Dosa.

The wristband makes a heavy sound upon hitting the ground.

“Th-, this is... don’t tell me you had this weight on while fighting...?!”

“These weights are the chains that seals my strength... guess play time’s over...”

Dosa, dosa, dosa.

I take off the weights on both hands and both feet, then begin walking away.

“*Kuh...* w-, wait a moment!”

But I no longer stop.

“I said, wait a moment!”

Annerose circles in front of me in a fluster.

“Don’t think that you’ve won with just this, alright? Watch...”

Then Annerose cracks her neck, with a *koki*.

For some reason, it's excessively fast.

"Even I can do something of this level, alright?"

"Is that so..."

I don't quite get it, so I just walk past Annerose with her doya-gao.

What did she even want to do anyways?

Chapter 71

Beta's Job

The summer morning is refreshing.

I open my mouth wide in a yawn while gazing at the blue sky spread out beyond my window.

I roll around in my bed, not doing anything in particular, just dazedly passing the time.

There isn't much of the summer holidays left.

The tournament proper of the Festival of the God of War begins next week too, so I've got to do image training.

However, spending time like this, letting time pass by without doing anything in particular, is necessary for humans.

Nah, sorry, that's a lie.

At the very least, it's necessary for me.

"Oi Sid! I've got a really interesting story, so open up!"

Suddenly Hyoro is pounding my door while shouting.

As long as humans live with humans, troublesome things are bound to occur. Why do humans continue to seek other humans even while feeling this troublesomeness? This is what I'm ruminating upon in the morning of my now scarce summer holidays.

Isn't this great, this feeling? It's like the 'yare yare' kind of master who keeps a certain distance from humankind.

"Alright, alright, I'm coming."

I unlock the door and allow Hyoro in.

“This is the wanted poster of Student Council President Rose. 10 million Zeny for capturing her alive! And at least 500k Zeny for useful information!”

“Fu~n.”

I accept the wanted poster from Hyoro and take a look at it.

“Let’s go catch her!”

“What, why?”

“I’m broke.”

So says Hyoro with desperation.

“Didn’t you say that there’s a match with guaranteed victory?”

“Don’t mention that to me ever again.”

“Didn’t you earn a lot from betting?”

“Shut up. Shut up. Ok, listen to me. I won’t say the reason, but anyways I’m broke. Thus, I need money.”

(T/N: Urusai damare.)

“Is that so.”

“So, help me.”

“Eh, so troublesome. Do it by yourself.”

“Don’t be so hasty, think about it deeply. Two people searching is a lot more effective than one person searching. Why? Because then the probability of finding her would be doubled!”

“Heeh~”

Even while my shoulder is being shaken by Hyoro, I’m just thinking ‘what a pain.’

In the first place, I quite appreciate Rose's rebellious spirit that enabled her to stab her fiancé. Isn't it great that she has all that energy and spunk?

So in other words, I'm leaning more towards the side that hopes for Rose's successful escape.

"Please, I'm begging you!"

Hyoro actually lowers his head.

"U~n..."

At that moment.

"Sid-kun, your Onee-san has come."

The dorm manager peeks into my room while saying so.

"Onee-san?"

"Sid-kun's older sister. She's waiting for you in front of the dorm, so don't keep her waiting too long, alright?"

Leaving those words behind, the dorm manager leaves.

"Claire nee-san... so she's back."

I have a really bad feeling.

In a split second, I weigh which option would be more troublesome.

"Alright, let's begin Operation Capture Rose."

"Sid, I had believed in you! As expected of my good friend!"

I grab Hyoro by the back of his neck, and open the window.

"Oi Sid, what are you doing?"

"There's no time. We're going by the window."

“Hah? What are you saying? Eh, wait a, EHHHHH?!”

“*Tou!*”

(T/N: Again, ‘tou’ is like what sentai rangers say when they jump, the idea being that it somehow makes the jump cooler.)

And thus we fly down.



“Iris-nee-sama said thanks for the information. She wants to continue the cooperation, apparently.”

“What an honor.”

So replies Beta while looking at the back of Alexia, who is walking in front of her.

The spiral staircase is illuminated by Alexia’s magical lamp.

They’ve already gone quite the distance down. The cold, humid air tells them that they are underground.

“It seems that Doem Ketsuhat is indeed connected to the Order.”

“Indeed.”

“Problem is, we have no evidence.”

“This is a problem between the Church and the country, so normal evidence would not be sufficient.”

“I am well aware. My father did stress this to me. He said that if we are to expose the connection between the Order of Diabolos and the Church, we would need justification that can convince our citizens and the surrounding countries.”

“Because if our country is branded heretical, everything would be over.”

“I don’t think that all members of the Church are tied to the Order of Diabolos. It’s probably only a handful of the upper echelons.”

“And that’s what makes this so troublesome.”

“Indeed.”

The two’s footsteps continue reverberating throughout the staircase.

“My father is solely insisting on not causing a dispute with the Church. But then what of the Order, right?”

“He probably intends to leave them alone, same as he’s done so far.”

“Same as so far...”

Alexia’s footstep is late by a beat.

“Merely my arbitrary conjecture. Please forget it.”

“...Well, that’s fine for now. Nee-sama said something that caught my attention. That the king of Oriana Kingdom seemed a bit vacant.”

“Vacant, you say...”

“It was my first time meeting him, so I couldn’t tell. But there was some sort of sweet smell around him.”

Sweet smell.

A certain drug comes to Beta’s mind.

“Perhaps it’s already too late then...”

“The Order has begun to move. With my father’s way of doing things, eventually our country would also...”

The two continue down the staircase, now in silence.

“We’ve arrived.”

Alexia has stopped before a deep vertical hole with a ladder.

“One of the entrances to the royal capital’s underground tunnel system. You know of it, do you not?”

“To some degree, yes. The tunnels that stretch underneath the entire city, built long ago as escape routes for the royalty, right?”

“Correct. But what with the gradual loss of maps and keys and secret passwords and whatnot, now it’s just a labyrinth.”

“So then, why are we here?”

“To erase you.”

Then Alexia puts a hand on the sword at her waist... and laughs.

“That was a joke. And you’re not even scared the slightest bit.”

“*Hiii*, don’t kill me...!”

“There’s a possibility that Rose-senpai is hiding inside these tunnels.”

Beta pouts slightly at the way Alexia completely ignored her wholehearted acting.

“Let’s begin searching in here.”

So saying, Alexia reaches for the ladder without delay.

“Um, please wait a moment.”

“What?”

“Did you tell anyone else about this?”

“How could I? Anyone I can trust to tell would stop me.”

“If this is a labyrinth, how can we be sure that we ourselves won’t get lost?”

“Easy. We just have to return the way we came.”

“Um, this is kind of hard for me to say, but can you stop involving me in your whimsical

fancies?”

“No.”

The two glare at each other for a while.

“If you have a problem, then you can go back by yourself.”

Alexia goes ahead and starts climbing down the ladder by herself.

Beta considers just leaving Alexia to her own devices and going home, but at this current point in time, it would indeed be problematic if Alexia dies.

“Protecting her is also your job, Beta.”

So convincing herself, Beta also reaches for the ladder.

Chapter 72

A Power in the Shadows Playing Under the Moonlight

I am walking through the royal capital in early morning.

Hyoro said that he's going to go ask around and went off somewhere.

In this world, people begin moving when the sun rises.

The streets are already bustling with people.

Though I did say that I would look for Rose, I'm not actually going to do it seriously. My hope for her successful escape is still unchanged as of now, so I guess I'll just kill time while pretending to look for her.

But well, I do kind of want to ask her about the motive that led to this incident full of rebellious spirit that involved stabbing her fiancé. If possible, I'd like it hear it in her own words.

Either way, as long as I can kill time, that's good enough for me.

Anger is something that fades with the passage of time. I'm sure Nee-san just needs some time to calm her head.

While thinking such thoughts and sort of dazedly wandering the streets, I suddenly pick up the sound of a piano from somewhere.

"Fumu..."

I'm actually kind of good at the piano.

In my previous life, I had practiced the piano as part of my training to become a power in the shadows. Well alright, that's a lie. It was just my parents forcing me to learn it.

To be frank, rather than practicing the piano, I would much rather have spent that time doing actual training for becoming a power in the shadows. In other words, I had zero motivation. But then again, what meaning does that hold in the face of parents?

(T/N: Asian parents.)

And so I grudgingly started learning the piano, but eventually came to think it not so bad.

Firstly, if someone is good at the piano, surrounding people arbitrarily make their own assumptions.

Such as, this guy is busy because he has to practice the piano as soon as he gets home.

For the me who had limited human relationships to the bare minimum for the sake of becoming a power in the shadows, that misunderstanding was extremely convenient.

Secondly, I simply came to recognize the coolness of the piano.

A power in the shadows playing the piano under the moonlight... how cool is that?

Exactly, this is the character setting that 'I am not only strong in fighting, but also proficient in the arts.'

Awe~some...

Before I realized it, I had gotten quite serious about the piano.

Of course, my top priority was my training to become a power in the shadows. However, I did become quite fond of the idea of playing the piano to set up the mood for a battle.

And so, I don't mean to toot my own horn, but I'm actually quite good at the piano.

"This... is pretty good, hmm..."

So I murmur.

Thing is, the person who's currently playing the piano is also quite skilled.

Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 14 "Moonlight Sonata" huh...

This is a song that I really like. More like, it's in my list of 'best ever' for a power in the shadows.

And so, I don't think myself inferior when it comes to "Moonlight Sonata." However, this performer's expression is also quite unique and tasteful.

"Not bad at all... I can almost see the light of the moon inside my mind... even though it's morning at the moment..."

As I play out the "oh, this person is not so bad either" cliché, I suddenly jolt in realization.

Isn't it strange to hear a song by Beethoven in this world?

My face turns serious as I make my way through the crowd towards the sound of the piano.

Alright, I'll be honest.

I already know what's coming.

I'm not a complete idiot, alright?

The sound of the piano is coming from the first floor cafe of one of the royal capital's top class hotels.

The security is so tight that normal people can't go in, but the guards here let me go right in.

As I go into the store without reservation, the performance is just about over.

"Epsilon..."

She is a beautiful girl with dazzling hair the color of a clear lake. Though her dress is a sleeveless dress, her chest area is, of course, fully covered to hide the slime.

Her legs are also completely covered under tights, and her boots with hidden heels are cleverly concealed.

A magnificent job as always.

When I draw close, she also seems to notice me.

She gives the customers a bow, then leads me towards the waiting room.

After the door closes with a click, she smiles.

“My lord, you were listening? How embarrassing...”

She looks at me with upturned eyes and slightly blushing cheeks, but I refuse to be deceived.

“Epsilon, that song just now was Moonlight Sonata, was it not?”

“Yes. Among the numerous songs that my lord had taught me, it is the one that I love the most.”

“Oh, is that so? It’s my favorite too.”

Though I had no intention of teaching her, it’s quite a happy thing to find someone else liking something that you like.

“Thanks to my lord, I am building my connections and influence as a pianist and a composer.”

“Eh, composer...”

“Yes, my lord. Beginning with Moonlight Sonata, I’ve also used Minute Waltz, Turkish March, The Girl with the Flaxen Hair, and...”

(T/N: Moonlight Sonata is by Beethoven. Minute Waltz is by Chopin. Turkish March is by Mozart. The Girl with the Flaxen Hair is by Claude Debussy.)

Epsilon continues proudly talking about how she’s received rave reviews from nobles for ‘releasing’ famous classic and modern songs, how she’s gotten awards, and how she’s been invited to the country of arts.

I apologize, Beethoven, Bach, Mozart... and all other great composers.

In this world, all the credit for your great works has gone entirely to Epsilon.

“...The previous concert was extremely well received, so I’m soon going to Oriana Kingdom for work. As I’m sure you already know, Oriana Kingdom is currently a place with very worthy ‘work’ to be done.”

“It is the country of arts after all.”

“Indeed, because it’s the country of arts... this time especially, I expect to get some really good ‘work’ done.”

Epsilon smiles bewitchingly.

“Do your best out there.”

“I will do great ‘work’ and give them a performance truly worthy of the wonderful songs entrusted to me from my lord.”

Epsilon gives me a graceful bow.

“Oh right, I’m changing the subject, but would you happen to know anything about where Princess Rose has gone?”

“Princess Rose, is it? I believe that matter is currently being handled by Beta, so I am not too informed on it. Ah, but I did hear something about her escaping into the royal capital’s underground. For the full details, it would probably be best to ask Beta directly.”

“Ah, knowing that alone is already more than enough.”

If I really do happen to find Rose by luck, then I’ll at least listen to what she has to say.

“Thank you. Umm...”

While looking at the smiling Epsilon, I think of what to say after my thanks.

Just like how I was glad to hear that she likes Moonlight Sonata, there must be words that she would be glad to hear.

“Your figure is as beautiful as ever, isn’t it?”

“Th-, th-, there’s no such thing I still have a f-, f-, far way to go...!”

Without looking at Epsilon’s face, I divert my gaze outside of the window.

Ah, the blue summer sky sure does stretch on. Ah, the world sure is turning today too.

Chapter 73

The Girl Who Dreams a Dream and the Boy Who Walks a Dream

Rose is plodding through the dark underground.

The wound on her back that she had received while escaping is even now still oozing blood. Though it is not deep, it is also definitely not shallow.

She needs treatment urgently, but with pursuers on her tail, she has no time nor opportunity for that.

She is concentrating her magic on the wound as a makeshift measure, but the pain is only increasing along with the passage of time. And in inverse proportion, she is expending both magic and physical strength.

Her breathing is ragged.

Even while keeping her senses sharpened to pick up signs of pursuers, she has been thinking the entire time.

That moment, what was the truly correct choice?

What was the best choice?

This question without an answer is merely going round and round in her head.

Stabbing Doem, her fiancé, was an on-the-spot decision. But it was by no means an impulsive action. Within the limited amount of time allotted to her, she had concluded that this was the best choice. Or at least, it was supposed to be.

But her plan had failed.

Doem still lives, and she is now a fugitive.

But hindsight is 20-20. Her mistake was in mis-gauging Doem's true strength. But that does not necessarily mean that her choice to eliminate Doem was also a mistake.

It can even be said that she had no other choice. The instant she saw her changed father... the instant she saw the eyes of the king of Oriana Kingdom, Rose had decided to eliminate Doem. The connection between Doem and the Order and all other rumors involving the Order had instantaneously turned into confirmed truths in her mind the instant she saw the father who had lost his self and been turned into a mere puppet.

That's why she drew her sword.

Was she impulsive at that moment?

Was she too impatient?

Was she not moving in haste and anger?

At the time, Rose had thought herself calm.

She did not want to borrow Alexia's nor Natsume's help. To the very end, this matter must have handled purely within Oriana. That's what her intuition told her, and that's what she followed.

This political intuition of hers was not wrong.

Although she ultimately failed, this is Rose's own mistake, and a problem of Oriana Kingdom alone. The sparks have yet to spread to Midgar Kingdom. She had unconsciously avoided the worst case scenario.

But that, too, is merely a matter of time.

The words that Doem had shouted when she fled reverberate inside her mind.

"Surrender yourself before the end of the Festival of the God of War! Otherwise, I'll make the king of Oriana Kingdom start killing VIPs!"

If the Orianan king truly kills VIPs as Doem threatened... war will break out. Rose could not tell how serious he was, but she gets the message that the Order sees her Oriana Kingdom as no more than a mere pawn.

If that really is so...

Rose gnashes her teeth in vexation.

Her father was not a particularly enlightened monarch, and Oriana Kingdom is not that big of a country.

But he is her one and only father, and it is her one and only motherland.

And that's why she wanted to protect them both.

That feeling was what fueled her agitation.

Rose slams a fist into the wall of the underground tunnel.

All that can be said at this moment in time is that she had let her emotions free rein and acted impulsively. If she can eliminate Doem, then all would be resolved. Such had been her misreckoning.

But after all is said and done, Doem himself is also a mere pawn. The Order has most likely spread its roots deep into Oriana Kingdom, so getting rid of Doem alone would not resolve anything whatsoever.

There should have been a different choice.

A magical choice that could have solved everything altogether...

Rose sinks into a sitting position in the damp underground tunnel.

If only she had chosen the absolute best solution, and everything had gotten resolved... Catching herself thinking such impossibilities, Rose laughs in self-derision.

Everything is already done and in the past. She does not even know why she is fleeing.

What does she plan to do after fleeing?

What should change if she flees?

Should she not surrender?

Oh yes... surely that would be best.

“I see... I should just surrender.”

She still does not know what she should have done instead at that time. However, what she should do at this moment in time is clear to see.

If she surrenders, at the very least, war would be evaded.

She feels just a little bit lighter. But then she is immediately assaulted by an overwhelming sense of loss and sorrow.

Rose takes out a wrapping paper from MagRonald out of her pocket. She’s already eaten the contents, but there’s still a faint smell of bread coming from it.

Then she thinks of a certain black-haired boy. Surely he has already heard of her incident by now. What does he think about it?

Is he worried for her?

Does he believe in her?

Could it be... that he is searching for her?

If she had successfully eliminated Doem and restored the king’s sanity... if there had been such a future where everything is resolved perfectly... could she had spent her entire life with him?

Surely that was merely a dream that she had wanted to see.

“I’m so sorry...”

Rose apologizes.

A single tear rolls down her cheek.

The dream that she had painted has already crumbled into dust.

Rose carefully folds the MagRonald wrapping paper, then returns it to her skirt pocket. Almost as if it is the last fragment of her dream.

“Ow...!”

A sharp pain runs through Rose’s chest. She peeks into her shirt to see a pitch black patch of skin.

That is the proof of demon possession. The symptoms have appeared only recently.

At the very start, her dream was already an impossible one. Rose hangs her head and laughs.

That moment, a soft sound reaches Rose’s ears.

Is it the sound of a pursuer?

But the sound is too gentle and beautiful to be footstep. When she strains her ears, she recognizes it as the sound of a piano.

“Moonlight Sonata...?”

As someone well versed in music, she knows that song. This song that had been exceptional well received even in Oriana the country of arts is now coming from the tunnel in front of her.

“How beautiful...”

The performance is so deep and perfect that it is as if the performer is pouring everything of his whole life into it.

Rose begins walking towards the source of the sound, as if led by moonlight.

This place is called the Royal Capital Underground Labyrinth, but Rose feels that it’s more of a historic site than a labyrinth. The ground is properly paved with stone, and there are carvings of reliefs and ancient letters on the walls.

On the way here, she’s come across several doors in the walls, but none of them could be opened. Either a key was required, or some ancient mechanism had broken down.

The sound of piano grows closer.

Then Rose turns a corner, and sees a big, broken door in front of her.

The sound is coming from beyond.

Rose ducks through the large hole in the door, and finally arrives.

The space she finds herself in is a cathedral with fantastical light shining through. The sky high stained glass depicts the three heroes and the defeated demon.

Radiant light is falling from the stained glass.

And in the middle of the light is a single grand piano.

“Shadow...”

In this long forgotten cathedral, *he* is here, playing Moonlight Sonata by himself.

Chapter 74

The Single Ray of Light Shining Into the Darkness

Rose closes her eyes and concentrates on that beautiful melody.

The Moonlight Sonata that Shadow plays is different from any other rendition that Rose has ever heard before. The song might be the same, but the expression can vary greatly based on the performer.

Shadow's Moonlight Sonata is darkness.

A deep, endless darkness. With a single ray of light shining into it.

Is that light from the moon? Or is it...

But before she is able to arrive at an answer, the performance comes to an end.

Only after fully appreciating the lingering note reverberating around the cathedral does Rose clap her hands.

The clapping of a single person echoes.

Naturally, Shadow hears that clapping. He stands up, and bows elegantly in response.

"Shadow, you are..."

Abruptly, Rose realizes that she does not know what to say next. However, she feels that Shadow would definitely leave if she does not say something.

"Among all the renditions of Moonlight Sonata that I've ever heard, I can say with certainty that yours is the best. Umm..."

Rose herself does not know what she is saying.

There surely are other things that she should ask Shadow.

“What is it... that you hope to achieve...”

So says Shadow in his reverberating-from-the-abyss voice.

“Eh...”

With a little thought, Rose understands. He is inquiring about the incident.

“I... merely wanted to protect everyone... wanted to grasp the best future... But I could not do it...!”

Rose squeezes out her words.

“And it’s over...?”

“Eh...?”

“Your fight, it’s over...?”

“Even I... don’t want it to end here...!”

Rose hangs her head but clenches her fists.

She wanted to make it work. Even now, she still thinks so. However, there is no longer anything that she can do.

“If you still have the will to fight... then I shall grant it to you...”

So saying, Shadow gathers violet magic on top of his outstretched hand.

“...Power.”

“Power...?”

The violet magic grows increasingly bright, beautifully coloring the entire cathedral. The dense magic causes the air to vibrate.

“If I gain that power, would I be able to change the future...?”

“That would depend on you.”

Rose finds herself enthralled by the violet magic. What if she possesses Shadow's strength?

Then surely everything would have been different.

If she has the strength... then there would still be things that she can do. As the princess of Oriana Kingdom, there would still be things that she needs to do.

Light returns to Rose's eyes.

"I... want it. I... want that power...!"

"Ask, and you shall receive..."

Then the violet magic is let loose.

It shoots straight towards Rose's chest and, after being sucked in, begins circulating around her body.

That warm strength calms Rose's agitated magic. Her magic, which had felt somehow heavy and unresponsive, silently begins flowing like water.

"How amazing..."

Rose thinks so from the bottom of her heart.

So this is Shadow's magic...

So this is the world that Shadow sees...

"Resist... and prove to me that you are worthy to fight beside me."

Before she realizes it, Shadow's figure has already vanished.

Only his voice remains, as a lingering echo.

"Forget it not... true strength comes not from power, but from the way you live..."

Then Shadow's presence fades entirely.

Rose is left alone in the cathedral.

She hears the footsteps of her pursuers. She feels the vibration in the air.

Magic more than she has ever felt in her entire life fills her entirely.

She had even considered resigning herself to being caught. But now, with this power in hand... there is so much that she can still do.

Rose draws her narrow sword, steadily gazing at the broken door.

Then the next instant, a group wearing black appears through the door... and blood fountains.

They had, without even knowing what had happened, fallen to Rose's sword.

After staining the cathedral with blood, Rose sheathes her sword and closes her eyes.

So this is how Shadow has been fighting against the Order all along. In places beyond anyone's eyes, endlessly continuing the fight.

Shadow's Moonlight Sonata rises back up in Rose's mind.

She feels that she's come to understand the single ray of light shining into the deep darkness.

That light is perhaps Shadow himself. He is not the darkness, but the single ray of light standing against the darkness.

So Rose believes.

Chapter 75

The Girls' Paths, and His Decision

"See, if we keep unrolling this roll of thread, then we won't have to worry about finding our way back."

So says Alexia while proceeding through the underground passage.

"Yay us."

So replies Beta from behind while yawning.

"Did you just yawn?!"

"Nope. But we have been at this for more than half a day already, so how about let's go home? She's probably not in the underground labyrinth anyways."

"I wonder indeed. I got the information from a pretty trustworthy source though..."

"How about let's go back for now and re-confirm the information?"

The two's footsteps echo around the underground passage illuminated by Alexia's magic light.

The monotonous passage continues into the distance.

Abruptly, Beta senses an enormous magic signature, and stops her feet.

After a slight delay, Alexia also stops, and turns around.

"Just now... someone used magic. And an incredibly big one at that..."

"Perhaps it was Rose-sama?"

"By the way, did you sense it even faster than me?"

“Mere coincidence. I am only proficient enough to protect myself.”

“Well, whatever. Let’s hurry.”

The two begin running towards where the magic had come from.

Then they pass through a large, broken door, and find themselves in an old cathedral.

“Rose-senpai...”

There stands Rose, with her eyes closed.

At her feet are several men wearing black who are no longer breathing. Sensing Rose’s vibe being different from usual, Alexia does not approach any further.

“So it’s Alexia-san...”

Rose slowly opens her eyes.

“That magic, what happened...”

“Power was given to me, and I... I will walk the path that I believe in.”

So saying, Rose walks past Alexia.

“W-, wait a moment! What is going on anyways?! Why did you stab your fiancé?!”

Rose turns only her head around at Alexia’s shout.

“Alexia-san... I’m sorry, but I don’t want to drag you into my problems.”

Then she gazes at Alexia as if looking at something bright.

“Just tell me the reason! I can’t help you if you shut me out!”

“Telling you would already be dragging you in.”

Alexia glares into Rose’s eyes.

“Inside the Holy Ground... we could not do a thing. Not knowing who is right and who

is bad, we were there merely as onlookers. I have this really strong feeling that if I remain in the dark, someday something really important to me is going to be stolen away. We talked about this, didn't we?! That's why we said we'd protect what's important to us, all 3 of us, together!!"

Listening to Alexia's words, Rose seems to be looking at a faraway place.

"I really wanted to believe in the words from that day. But in spite of that, why are you looking at me with those eyes? Are you also treating me like just another onlooker?!"

"I'm sorry..."

"Answer me!"

Rose's smile is tainted heavily with sorrow.

"I... can no longer return. That's why I'm envious."

"I don't get it. Are you saying that you're envious of an onlooker who doesn't know anything?!"

"That's not what I meant. I have already lost many things, and surely will lose many more things from here on. Everyone will reject me and curse me as evil."

"What is it that you plan on doing...?"

"I'm sorry... I have to go now."

Rose begins walking, but Alexia stops her with a tongue click.

"Stop right there."

So saying, Alexia draws her sword.

"I've had enough. I'll stop you even if I have to use force. I am no onlooker."

Rose also draws her thin sword.

Alexia and Rose gaze at each other. In Alexia's red eyes is anger, and in Rose's honey-colored eyes is deep sorrow.

Rose's sword flickers.

The next instant, both of them move at the same time.

Their reaction is concurrent, the speed of their sword is equal, and their skill is on par with each other.

For the briefest of moments, surprise flashes in Rose's eyes. Rose is the strongest in the Magic Swordsman Academy. There should have been a significant difference in skill between her and Alexia. At the very least, that's how things had been when they entered the academy.

However, Alexia's sword has grown so much in such a short period of time. Furthermore, Alexia's sword bears great resemblance to *his* sword.

Indeed, Alexia's sword... is Shadow's sword.

The two swords clash.

Magic flashes and stains the cathedral.

Though the two are even, the result is clear.

Alexia's sword flies through the air, while the pommel of Rose's sword slams into Alexia's chin.

Thus Alexia crumples from her knees.

What decided the match was simply the difference in the amount of magic.

If Alexia had the same amount as Rose... there's no telling what the result would have been.

"I'm very sorry."

With a final apology, Rose walks away.

Then she notices Natsume.

Strangely, she had completely failed to sense Natsume's presence.

“Natsume-sensei... I’m sorry, but I have to go.”

“I won’t stop you. I don’t have the right to stop you.”

So says Natsume with an unreadable face.

The Natsume in Rose’s memory always had a gentle expression.

“It’s just... I’m a bit surprised, I suppose. It seems that the idiot had thought things out in her idiotic way. The three of us are from different countries, different organizations, have different personalities, and have different beliefs. However, we were heading towards the same goal. Perhaps we actually made a pretty good group...”

“Natsume-sensei...?”

“I bid you godspeed. Our paths will surely cross again. Until then, I’ll be babysitting for a little while longer.”

So saying, Natsume kneels down and tends to Alexia.

“Natsume-sensei, who are you...?”

“You should get going. She’s only unconscious, and will wake up soon.”

Natsume flashes a slightly impish smile.

There’s so much to ask.

But both understand that neither are in the mood to answer anything.

“Well then...”

Rose turns around, and vanishes.

Natsume rests Alexia’s head on her knees and sighs.

“So this is your decision, Shadow-sama...?”

The figures of the three heroes and the tragic demon depicted on the stained glass somehow seem to be hinting at something.

Chapter 76

The Basics of Human Relationships Is Abandonment Play

Humans have difficulty maintaining any emotion for a prolonged period of time.

Even when something precious is lost, the sense of loss would not last for ten whole years. Emotions get weathered down gradually, same as the stones on riversides and beaches.

Similarly, even positive emotions, such as happiness, won't continue for ten whole years. So even the emotion that is anger would also wane as time passes.

In other words.

I am an advocate of the theory that if you evade an incoming collision with someone else and leave them alone for long enough, time will take care of the issue for you.

"Do you know what I was thinking while waiting for you in front of your dorm?"

"No idea."

I answer frankly the question posed by Claire-nee-san, who had forcibly barged into my room.

Guess one day was not enough.

It seems that Nee-san needed a longer cooling-off period.

"I was beating you up inside my head. Again and again and again. For every second that I was waiting, my anger doubled."

"Interesting."

It's my first time learning of a kind of anger that increases with the passage of time.

But well, all humans eventually die. Regardless of how angry Nee-san gets, she can't bring that emotion to her grave. In other words, it's still something that can be resolved with the passage of time.

"You are thinking 'whatever' inside your head right now, aren't you."

"No way, of course not."

I am currently looking up at the ceiling of my dorm room, with Nee-san mounted on me and strangling my neck.

I catch glimpses of Nee-san's red eyes and black hair moving from the edge of my vision.

"Should we perform an experiment to test how long humans can go without breathing?"

"When humans get strangled, they faint because the carotid artery gets cut off and so blood stops flowing to the brain. It's actually not related to breathing at all."

"Ohhh, I see. Either way is fine though."

The hands on my neck are tightening gradually.

Oh, I've a good idea. How about I just allow myself to lose consciousness here and go to sleep?

"You're thinking of allowing yourself to lose consciousness and go to sleep, aren't you."

"N-, no way, of course not."

"It's written all over your face."

"Just your misunderstanding."

"The next time you break a promise, I won't ever forgive you. Capiche?"

"I'll try my best to become a human who fulfills his promises. And so, could you kindly get off me?"

Nee-san lets go of my neck, but still maintains her position on top of me.

“I heard that when dogs establish hierarchy, the dominant one gets on top.”

“I see. But no worries, I already understand fully.”

“Not good enough. I don’t like your attitude.”

So saying, Nee-san drops a piece of paper onto my face.

“This is...?”

I pick it up and take a look. Seems to be a ticket of some sort.

“Special seating at the Festival of the God of War. Absolutely unattainable by normal channels.”

“*Heehhh~*”

“I’m giving it to you, so go see the matches and learn from them. You can call me blind, but I see great potential in you, really.”

“Is that so?”

“Because I recognize your potential, I’ll practice with you. If you earnestly put in the effort, you can go quite far. More like, do so.”

“*U~n*, that’s quite impossible, I think.”

“It’s not impossible. You hear me, right? Make sure you definitely go watch!”

“Alright ok.”

“Good boy.”

Then Nee-san gets off of me while still looking displeased.

“Speaking of which, Nee-san, you’re not participating this year?”

“Hah?”

Nee-san glares at me with a seriously scary face.

“I *am* participating, as the replacement school representative in place of Princess Rose. You’re not going to tell me that you didn’t know that I’d be participating, right?”

“O-, of course I knew. I was just confirmin—*—guhi!*”

Nee-san’s left hand is once again on my neck in an eagle grip.

Then she brings her face close and glares at me from zero distance. Like what those school delinquents do.

“Incidentally, you remember my birthday, right?”

“O-, of course.”

“Of course you do. And so you have also memorized my tournament record so far, right?”

“O-, of course.”

“What was the date of my first victory?”

“Y-, yep I remember.”

“Very well. There are things in the world that you must never forget. Things that you must not forget... if you wish to live long.”

I can only silently nod my head.

Nee-san patronizingly slaps my cheeks a few times before letting me go.

“This year I’m going to take the championship, so make sure you come watch.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

After one last glare, Nee-san leaves my room.

“Haaah~ That was tiring.”

Tomorrow is finally the start of the tournament proper.

“Let’s get started on image training.”

I close my eyes as is.

Chapter 77

And Who Are You

The new week has begun, and along with it the tournament proper.

Apparently Nee-san has to go into the arena first. So I am alone in looking for the special seating, ticket in hand.

This fancy and gold-leafed ticket truly does shout 'special seat.' Upon following the directions on its back, I find myself in front of an extremely extravagant door. Unlike normal seats, this place alone is mysteriously isolated.

I'm thinking 'nah it's probably not here, right?' while showing the ticket to the staff standing before the door, but turns out it really is here.

I am guided into the room with extreme courtesy. But the instant I step inside, I want to leave.

This place is no 'special' seating. This is the VVIP seating.

It's filled with some ridiculously high ranked nobles and their families. Almost the entirety of the Academy's top caste are gathered. Over there is the daughter of the current leader of the Magic Swordsman Knight Order, and that ikemen over there is the second son of a Duke's family. Oh wow, I actually recognize a few of them from Royal Capital Bushin Style Group 1's class.

After taking the seat that I am guided to, I realize that I am right next to royalty.

"Ara, who might you be?"

Red eyes and hair the color of flames. She is none other than Alexia's older sister, Princess Iris Midgar.

"I am Sid Kagenou. It appears that there's been some mistake with the seating arrangements. Please pardon me."

I clench an elegant about face and attempt an escape.

“*Ara*, so you are Claire-san’s younger brother. Which would mean that Claire-san had given you the ticket.”

“...You know of my sister?”

My escape attempt has fallen flat. There’s no way I can pretend to not hear when a member of royalty talks to me. With the sole exception of Alexia, of course.

“Indeed. The incident where my younger sister was kidnapped was what triggered our relationship. Claire-san plans to join the Crimson Order after her graduation. Please, take your seat.”

“Umm...”

“There’s no mistake with the seating arrangement. Kindly take your seat.”

“...By your leave.”

How can I refuse Princess Iris’ honest smile? If it was Alexia’s pure evil smile then I could have easily just flicked my middle finger and turned right around though.

“I’ve heard much about Sid-san from Claire-san. I’m quite envious at how close the two of you are.”

“Uh, I don’t think we’re actually that close, really.”

“Speaking of which, Sid-san has been getting along well with Alexia too, haven’t you?”

“Rather than ‘getting along well,’ we’re... our relationship is more like one picking up the gold coins that the other throws, I guess.”

“Throwing gold coins?”

“Like throwing a bone for a dog to retrieve.”

“Oh, so you two have been playing together with a dog? Thank you for playing together with Alexia.”

“Eh, not really ‘with’ a dog, I’m the dog... ah never mind. Oh, right, the gold coins originate from the royal family, so I’m the one who’s actually been taken care of.”

Princess Iris appears to be smiling from the bottom of her heart while listening to me.

“Alexia and Sid-kun truly are getting along well, I’m so glad.”

“No, no, that’s not really true, at all.”

“Alexia was originally supposed to come today also, but she suddenly said that she had something else to do...”

“Haha, is that so.”

“I’ll apologize on her behalf, is that alright?”

“No, no, no, please pay it no mind. Really.”

And that’s pretty much how our conversation is going as I continue sipping on the complimentary drinks.

“Which participants are Iris-sama paying attention to this year?”

So asks the daughter of the current leader of the Magic Swordsman Knight Order.

“Ah, I wish to know too.”

The ducal family’s second son ikemen joins in.

Apparently they got to know Princess Iris personally through Royal Capital Bushin Style.

“I’m looking at all the participants who made their way to the tournament proper, but if I really have to mention one...”

Princess Iris places a hand on her cheek while choosing her words.

“The former member of the ‘Seven Swords of Begalta’ Annerose-san, I suppose. I am familiar with many of the faces participating in this year’s tournament, but it’s her first time in this one. I saw her final match in the prelims, and she truly is strong. Once she

wins her first round, she'll be facing off against me, so I'm looking forward to it quite a bit..."

There is great confidence in her smile.

"I also saw her match. She really is strong, much stronger than I myself currently am..."
(girl mob)

"I saw it too. But of course, the victor will be Iris-sama for sure. After that incident, the support behind Royal Capital Bushin Style has lagged quite considerably, so when Iris-sama clinches the championship here..." (guy mob)

"Wait a moment, don't pressure Iris-sama, and don't push it all onto her shoulders!"
(girl mob)

"No, that was not my intention, I was merely..." (guy mob)

The two begin quarrelling, but Iris' voice interrupts them.

"Calm down, both of you. It's fine, from the very start I've intended to win. Royal Capital Bushin Style, this country, and many other things, I've resolved to shoulder them all."

"Iris-sama..." (girl mob)

"As expected of Iris-sama." (guy mob)

I'm a bit sorry about it now that the atmosphere's turned kind of serious, but I want to join in on the conversation too.

"Umm, is there any other participant that has caught your eye...?"

I cut in just like that, pretending to not read the atmosphere.

"Speaking of which, who are you?"

"Why do I feel like I've seen you somewhere... Oh right, you're the kouhai who previously came to Group 1."

"Ohh, so you are Claire-sama's..."

“He is Sid Kagenou. Claire-san’s younger brother.”

Princess Iris’ introduction evokes looks of understanding on both their faces.

“Unlike Claire-san, you have no talent, right? But don’t worry about it, steady effort will get you far.”

“Your sword didn’t look particularly remarkable. There’s no much meaning in looking upwards, the most important thing is steady and earnest effort.”

Wow, I’m so thankful for the precious advice from the two senpai.

“Thank you. And so, is there any other participant that Iris-sama is paying attention to?”

“Hmm...”

“H-, how about the opponent of Annerose-sama in the first match, that Jimina Sehnem? H-, he’s also participating for the first time.”

I attempt to survey the general reaction to Jimina in a completely natural manner.

“Jimina... I haven’t seen any of his matches, so I can’t really say.”

Princess Iris dodges the question.

1. So Princess Iris still doesn’t know about Jimina.

“Ah, I saw it. His sword is fast, but that was about it. His posture is amateur, and it feels like he’s come so far on luck alone. I’m quite certain that it will be Annerose-sama’s win.” (girl mob)

“I saw it too, but... he does not possess the qualifications to stand on the tournament stage. He only has momentum but no true strength.”

So both of them have determined Jimina to be a small fry.

Pretty much as expected. So my control on the general impression of Jimina so far is going well.

All the pieces are in place.

Here on is where everything starts to move...

“Though not a participant, there is one more person that I’m paying attention to.”

After asking what I wanted to ask and receiving a satisfying answer, suddenly Princess Iris brings the conversation somewhere else.

“The champion of the first Festival of the God of War, the elven Sword Saint nicknamed ‘Goddess of War’ has come to the royal capital.”

“The elven Sword Saint... don’t tell me!”

“She hasn’t appeared on any stages for more than 10 years already!”

Umm.

“I am sure that every single participant in the tournament is paying attention to the Goddess of War, Beatrix-sama’s intentions.”

Who’s that?

I’m not paying any attention at all though.

Chapter 78

What Always Ends up Happening from Stopping at the Last Instant

When the time for my match comes close, I leave the room on the pretext of having to visit the toilet and hurry to the participants' waiting room. It seems that Nee-san had successfully won her first match. Perhaps she might be able to go pretty far.

As I walk down the corridor with such thoughts in my mind, a gray-robed person passes by me.

That instant, my feet stop.

Then a slight moment later, the other person also stops.

We turn around at the same time.

Blue eyes size me up from the depths of the gray robe.

"You smell of elf."

It is a husky female voice.

The faded gray robe appears frayed in several places.

I maintain silence, waiting for her next words.

"Do you know any elves?"

Her blue eyes gaze into my eyes, as if trying to probe inside.

"I do have several friends who are elves."

There's no particular reason to hide it, so I admit it.

“I am looking for an elf.”

“Is that so.”

“She’s a cute girl.”

“Heehh~”

“Anyone come to mind?”

“With just that alone, I can’t really...”

“She looks really similar to me.”

“I see.”

“She’s the daughter of my departed younger sister.”

“Heehh~”

“Any elf who looks really similar to me come to mind?”

“Umm.”

“You’ve thought of someone?”

“I can’t see your face because of your robe.”

“Oh, right.”

She draws back her hood and exposes her face.

I don’t react at all.

I consciously make the effort to not react at all.

Her face looks extremely similar to Alpha’s.

“Hmm, I don’t think so, no.”

“Really?”

“Yea.”

I should probably confirm this with Alpha the next time I meet her. Though they don't look completely alike, but there's enough similarity there that I would believe it if they are related by blood.

“I see.”

She shrugs her shoulders in disappointment, then draws her sword in a natural movement.

There's no killing intent, no extra movement, simply a single sure-kill strike.

I catch it in the edge of my vision, and accept it.

I know what this is, she's going to stop at the last instant.

In result, her sword touches my neck and stops.

It's only touching. It hasn't even cut the surface of my skin.

Then at this exact timing.

“Uwah?!”

I fall on my butt, as if my knees had given way.

Yep, passing mark.

“*Mu?*”

She tilts her head and withdraws her sword.

“I made a mistake. Sorry.”

Then she bobs her head in apology.

“I thought you to be stronger. What's your name?”

So she says, while reaching out a hand.

“S-, Sid Kagenou...”

So I reply in a quivering voice, accepting her hand and getting back up.

“I am Beatrix.”

Beatrix does not let go of my hand.

“Erm...?”

“Nice hand. You will get strong.”

Then she flashes an elegant smile. That smile is extremely similar to Alpha’s.

“Sorry for surprising you.”

After one last apology, Beatrix turns around and walks away.

I gaze at her departing back, and mutter, “... she seems pretty strong.”

Then I, too, turn around.



Iris is waiting for the start of the next match in the special seats.

The special seats are situated such that anyone inside can command a view of the entire arena, and there is also a dedicated staircase that allows direct access to the floor of the arena.

There are already two magic swordsmen standing in the arena.

One of them is the person that Iris has her eyes on, Annerose. She is a female swordswoman with hair the color of water.

The other is a black-haired swordsman that she’s seeing for the first time, Jimina Sehnem.

Iris gazes at the both of them with sharp eyes.

“It’s just about to begin.”

A man sits in the seat next to Iris’.

That’s Sid’s seat.

“That seat...”

“Yes?”

Iris sees the man’s face and swallows her words. Then she mentally apologizes to Sid.

“Doem-dono...”

“Iris-sama, good day to you.”

Doem elegantly smiles, but his eyes are not laughing at all.

“Being able to watch a match together with Iris-sama, it’s like a dream come true.”

“Surely you jest. Does Doem-dono not have a fiancée?”

“To my chagrin, she’s run away. But there’s no cause for concern. It is merely a lover’s quarrel.”

Doem laughs breezily.

His face is quite handsome for a thirties-something, but Iris cannot bring herself to like that smile of his.

“Is the Oriana king not feeling well?”

“Unfortunately, he cannot make it today. But he did say that he would surely come tomorrow.”

Doem adroitly answers Iris’ question.

“Tomorrow also happens to be when the Midgar king begins attending.”

“What a coincidence.”

Iris attempts to probe Doem’s eyes, but fails to read anything from those unsmiling eyes of his.

“So she is the rumored Annerose.”

So says Doem while looking down on the arena.

“Indeed.”

“She is the magic swordswoman who’s riding on the biggest momentum right now, right? I heard that she left Begalta on a journey of training, but I would very much like to invite her to our country.”

“Sure you would. A magic swordswoman of her caliber would be greatly welcome in our Midgar Kingdom as well.”

“Ha ha. Doesn’t Midgar Kingdom already have numerous exemplary magic swordsmen? In comparison, our country...”

“That’s what our alliance is for, yes?”

“But we do feel quite apologetic relying so heavily on Midgar Kingdom.”

“Is that so...”

‘This is so tiring,’ sighs Iris inside her heart.

It almost feels like she’s speaking with a puppet.

“How is the opponent, Jimina?”

“Today will be the first time I see a match of his. The rumors about him are generally not so positive, and he himself also does not look strong.”

“Which means Annerose’s victory is guaranteed.”

“I’m not so sure though... Jimina gives me a slightly uncanny feeling.”

So says Iris in an ambiguous tone.

“Uncanny, you say?”

“Yes. He does not look strong with any stretch of the imagination. However, he possesses a characteristic that would never appear on the truly weak.”

“*Hou*... what characteristic is that?”

“Absolute confidence. From what I can see... he is absolutely confident that he will win.”

“Isn’t that just mere hubris?”

“Perhaps. But there is not even a shred of doubt in his eyes. Assured victory... exists at least in his eyes.”

“‘At least in his eyes,’ is it. Then do you see it too, Iris-sama?”

“No I do not. How about Doem-dono?”

“Me? I know nothing at all about the sword.”

“Is that so.”

Iris shoots a glance towards Doem’s well-trained hands.

“Ahaha, as expected of Iris-sama, nothing gets past you. The sword is scorned in Oriana Kingdom, so I beg your pardon. To be honest, I am proficient, to some degree.”

“‘To some degree,’ is it.”

“Indeed, to some degree.”

Doem flashes another smile that does not reach his eyes.

“Well then. Let’s take a look at how much this absolute confidence is worth, shall we?”

Then he looks down on the arena.

“Annerose vs. Jimina Sehnem!!”

Both participants’ names are called.

“Battle, start!!”

Then it begins.

Chapter 79

I've Won! (Assured)

The instant the match begins, Annerose charges into Jimina's maai.

She has already seen through Jimina's strength. Indeed, the secret to his strength is overwhelming speed.

He holds down his opponents with incredible speed that even she, as a former member of the Seven Swords of Begalta, cannot fully follow. That is both Jimina's strength as well as his method of fighting.

However, in contrast to his speed, his skill with the sword must be low.

Up to now, he has won all of his fights with only a bare minimum amount of sword exchange.

Why is that?

His opponents could not follow his speed. That's certainly a reason.

However, Jimina's posture is that of an amateur. Is it not true that it's actually Jimina himself who is avoiding sword exchanges?

What if he's actually afraid of exposing his shoddy skill with the sword?

In other words, in order to hide his skill level, he's been aiming for victory that does not involve crossing swords.

In that case, then the key to victory against him lies in not being bewildered by his speed. That is the conclusion that Annerose has arrived at.

But there is one thing that remains on her mind... that is, the weights that Jimina had taken off.

If, after removing his shackles, Jimina displays speed that exceeds what she herself

can react to... that would doubtlessly spell out her defeat.

That single worry is what Annerose has set out to squash the moment the match begins.

If the opponent is one who wins through speed, then she merely has to stop his feet.

If she does that, then she would not lose.

“HAAAHHHHHHH!!”

After rushing into Jimina’s maai in a split second, Annerose shouts with fighting spirit while unleashing a slash towards him.

It is an attack that has completely caught him off guard.

However, he still manages to block Annerose’s sword.

As expected, he’s fast.

A sword attack brandished with a timing that normally cannot be blocked, was indeed blocked by him.

However, due to blocking her sword, his feet are not moving.

This is Annerose’s true aim.

“Shiii!!”

Annerose once again attacks the stationary Jimina.

Once again Jimina blocks her successfully, but Annerose’s furious onslaught allows him no opportunity to make use of his speed.

Three more attacks, four more, five more, Annerose’s sword is met by Jimina’s again and again. Until finally Jimina’s posture becomes unstable.

I’ve won!

So Annerose is assured while stabbing Jimina’s chest.

Her stab is indeed going through, but...

“Eh...?”

There’s no feedback on her sword.

Rather than that, Jimina’s figure has actually completely disappeared from her line of sight.

“...It’s an after image.”

His voice emanates from behind her.

Annerose’s shoulders quiver.

Calm down.

She purposely turns around slowly.

She is indeed shaken. But she must not let him know that. So she tells herself.

“You’re faster than I thought...”

Her voice is absolutely normal. At the very least, that’s what she thinks.

Then she focuses her eyes on Jimina and thinks.

What can she do?

His speed is indeed far beyond what she can react to.

What method is there to overturn this difference in speed?

Think.

Think...!

THINK.....!!

“Eh...?!”

Abruptly she realizes that Jimina's figure has disappeared once more.

Even before thinking, Annerose moves.

That moment, being able to react to that briefest of vibrations in the air is not skill nor experience, but pure luck.

Gakiii!!

The incredible clash sends Annerose flying.

She desperately clutches onto both her fading consciousness and the sword that she is almost dropping.

"Kuh...!"

A groan of pain falls from her lips.

Jimina is standing a distance away but right in front of her, with his sword languidly lowered.

He doesn't take up a stance, nor does he rush over to finish her off.

But Annerose does not think of that as hubris.

He has the strength befitting of that attitude.

"I acknowledge it. You are strong."

Annerose calms her heavy breathing, and hardens her resolve.

Jimina is simply, but absolutely overwhelmingly, fast.

Annerose does not think of it as unreasonable. For everyone is strong in their own way, speed being one of them.

But neither does Annerose think that she cannot win.

Her chance at victory is low. However, it is not zero.

If her opponent is only fast, then... she merely has to adjust her strategy to match.

Counter.

The moment Jimina attacks is the last chance of victory left to her.

The problem is whether she can react in time to Jimina's speed.

The block that she made just now was nothing more than sheer luck.

She does not expect to be able to do the same thing again.

In that case, then rather than luck, she must rely on her own strength.

If she can't react, then she'll rely on her experience.

If her experience is insufficient, then intuition.

It doesn't matter what it is that she relies on.

The crucial key is timing. After that she'll merely have to cut him down with all the skill that she has amassed.

Annerose silently sharpens her focus to the absolute limit, and waits.

Then.

Without any warning.

Jimina's figure vanishes, then in the next instant... no, even before that, Annerose swings her sword.

There is no one where her sword is slashing towards.

But the next moment.

I've won!

Jimina reappears.

Annerose is assured of her victory.

Her sword is perfectly in line with Jimina's path of movement.

At this speed, there is no way he can evade in time. So she thinks.

"Eh..."

Annerose simply gazes at him with a dumbfounded face.

Because he has stopped.

As if this had been decided from the very start, he has stopped exactly beyond Annerose's maai.

Annerose's sword barely misses his nose, cutting nothing.

This is no coincidence.

This is maai management to the absolute limit.

He possesses an unbelievable eye for spatial awareness.

Annerose had thought that she had adjusted her strategy to him. But in actual fact, it is he who had adjusted his strategy to her.

"Ah, I see..."

That instant, she finally understands.

With that split second of exchange, everything has been clarified.

He, Jimina Sehn... possesses skill that is also on a completely different dimension.

Then Jimina's sword approaches the demoralized Annerose.

That strike is the slowest one today.

However, that sword... is so sublime as to bring 'skill' to the level of 'art.'

“Ahh...”

How beautiful indeed.

With that being the last thing she sees, Annerose’s consciousness fades to black.

Chapter 80

Exactly Who Are You?

“Strong...”

Iris’ murmur is picked up by Doem from the next seat over.

On the arena, Jimina is right in the middle of turning to leave after KO-ing Annerose.

“‘Absolute confidence’... Iris-sama’s intuition was spot-on indeed.”

So comments Doem to cover up the shock in his mind.

“No, even I did not expect him to be this-... I find it hard to believe how a magic swordsman of his skill has remained nameless so far.”

“Me too. Jimina Sehnem... I truly have never heard it before.”

“I’ve also never seen his sword before. It was so sharp, and above all else, so beautiful.”

“It’s from none of the existent schools.”

Doem has never before seen such a beautiful sword flow. Most likely it is the same for Iris. So it means that a practitioner of a never before seen school has come public for the first time.

“Indeed. Though we won’t know for sure without asking him directly. It was truly astonishing.”

Iris leans into the back of her seat. Then she sighs, as if to expel all of the tension in her body.

Everyone in the special seating is buzzing about the upset. Their interest has fully shifted from Annerose to Jimina, and the subject of his next match has become the hottest topic around.

“In the second round, it will be Iris-sama against Jimina, wouldn’t it?”

“Yes it would.”

Iris smiles.

“It seems that you are confident about it.”

“I very much intend to win.”

“*Hou...*”

“His sword is fast, sharp, and more beautiful than any other. In terms of beauty of the sword, I cannot even hope to match him. However, victory is not based on beauty. If that is his full strength, then he is still far from me.”

“I feel the same.”

Doem nods, but continues thinking silently. If that was truly Jimina’s all, then naturally Iris still holds the advantage. Iris’ magic cannot be stopped with average techniques.

But what if that was *not* his all?

“In all likelihood, he is still hiding something. He has been faking his posture, his stances, and sword all this time, yet still managed to win to this point.”

“Despite knowing all that, your confidence still stands?”

“Though I do not know what it is that he is hiding, I will simply cut everything in my way. I quite dislike losing, you see.”

Iris smiles beautifully, then stands up. That smile is radiating with so much competitiveness that it seems almost belligerent, even.

“I see.”

“Well then, it’s time for my match, so pardon me.”

While seeing Iris off, Doem heaves a sigh.

Doem had beforehand investigated everyone and anyone who might pose as an obstacle to the plan. Naturally, Jimina's name had not been on his list.

If he truly is to become an obstacle, then the faster he eliminates him, the better... but haste makes waste. It shouldn't be too late to make the judgment after seeing his match with Iris.

Jimina Sehnem. The practitioner of a beautiful and completed sword.

It absolutely does not make sense for someone so skilled to be nameless.

Surely there is some reason for it.

Some reason why he needed to hide his true strength.

A reason why he did not go public earlier.

Perhaps he is the sole disciple of a school buried in history, or maybe even someone from Outlaw City with a forged identity.

Outlaw City— a nest of greed and evil that does not belong to any country. Even the Church has yet to spread her influence to the Big Three, and their close aides, who reign over and contest for supremacy over Outlaw City.

If he's truly someone who successfully left Outlaw City, then chances are that he's from the Queen of Blood's 'family.' Judging by his strength, he is at least echelon class. Perhaps there is a need to do a background check on him...

One more possibility is that he's from Shadow Garden. But Jimina is a man. And furthermore, those people should have no need to make a scene at the Festival of the God of War. The probability of this one is low.

At any rate, Doem feels a depthless... something... from him.

It seems highly likely that he, too, is a member of the 'hidden world,' same as himself...

"Who on earth is he...?"

Doem's murmur is drowned out in the furor of the arena.



“Wait a second, Jimina!!”

After regaining her consciousness, Annerose immediately runs off after Jimina and calls him to a halt.

As Jimina turns around, Annerose stops right in front of him.

“It was my utter and complete loss. I truly could not do anything to you at all.”

Annerose looks up at Jimina and smiles.

“For the sake of becoming stronger, I left my country quite a while ago. And I really do think that I’ve gotten stronger than back then. But it seems that somewhere along the way, I had also grown conceited.”

Then she holds out her hand.

Jimina looks down at Annerose’s hand, then slowly holds out his own hand.

“It was a lesson that I needed. Thank you.”

“It was my first time without the weights. You have nothing to be ashamed of.”

“...You honor me with your words.”

Annerose smiles, then the two shake hands.

“Jimina, who exactly are you? How did you get so strong?”

Jimina smiles forlornly, then turns his head. His eyes seem to be looking at a place very far off.

“Discarding everything... I am merely a fool who sought nothing but strength...”

“Jimina...”

Annerose feels her chest grow tight while gazing at his lonely side profile. Surely he has had a sorrowful past that allowed him no other choice.

“If... that’s only if you want, but how about coming to Begalta Empire and becoming an officer? I can guarantee a position worthy of your skills.”

But Jimina shakes his head.

“...It’s a bit too... bright... for me.”

Then he turns around and begins walking off.

“Wait! I, I’m leaving tomorrow! So if you change your mind before then, you can come see me!”

Jimina no longer stops.

Annerose stares at his shrinking figure, then finally turns around.

In this world, there is always someone better. Having fought Jimina, and having seen his sword up close, has become an irreplaceable experience for her.

That was almost like a sword whetted and honed to the very limit, to the point where it has become art. In that sword, Annerose felt like she saw everything of the world contained inside.

He will surely claim the championship. And not far in the future, his name will surely thunder across the entire world.

He will surely climb to unimaginable heights.

The current her can do nothing but merely look up at him. However, she can still grow. The path that she must tread has already been illuminated by Jimina’s sword.

One day, surely, she will become strong, and meet him again.

She swears to continue fighting, until that day comes to be.

Chapter 81

Breakfast at the Special Seating NAO

Oh yeah~, that went well.

Oh that went well indeed.

As planned, I managed to fight while heavily stressing on beauty of form. For the sake of becoming a power in the shadows, I had a phase where I solely focused on mastering beautiful sword forms. It's so pretty that it's quite different from Shadow's sword, but I'm glad that my efforts from back then have finally borne fruit.

Thanks to Annerose, I've already accomplished around 70% of what I wanted to for the Festival of the God of War. The only task left is to bring things to a good conclusion. But I have several options that I quite like, so it's hard to choose.

The simplest one would be to win the championship, but after looking at the tournament brackets, it seems that the biggest climax to this narrative would be the next match, the one against Iris. Simply disappearing after defeating Iris is also worthy of consideration. It would totally give off the whole "mysterious powerhouse" kind of feeling.

After defeating the person that everyone acknowledges to be the strongest, then saying something like "My aim has been achieved..." and then vanishing.

Nice, isn't it?

If I defeat Iris and then disappear, then Nee-san would very likely win the championship.

Me turning out to be an evil assassin would be great too, it'd be so intense.

In the middle of the match, I can say "I am sent from an assassin organization... your life shall be mine!" and then abruptly start fighting with complete disregard for the rules. The fact that this would enable me to leave the tournament in a natural way scores high in my book.

Ah~, but I guess ending by claiming the championship really would give me the greatest sense of accomplishment.

There are still several more options that could turn out really fun, so let's take the time to think this through before deciding.

As I return to the special seats while thinking such thoughts, I notice a random ossan that I don't know sitting in my chair. I quietly close the door and do an about face.

Nee-san's match is already over anyways, so it should be fine.

So I return to the dorms early to do a bit more image training.



The next day.

I am sitting in the special seats and enjoying their complementary morning coffee. Apparently Mitsogoshi Co. still holds a monopoly over coffee. How impressive is that?

“Delicious.”

By the way, I'm the type to add lots of milk and sugar.

At first I had really been leery of this special seating, but after getting used to it, I very much enjoy its convenience. Just by asking one of the maids, I can get most anything for free, so I get to feel like a celebrity.

After enjoying the atmosphere of the venue for a while, Princess Iris makes her appearance.

“Good morning.”

“Mor—ning, good morning.”

(T/N: His greeting started out casual, then he caught himself and added a suffix that makes it more respectful.)

“Oh, coffee. It's sure gotten popular lately. I like the fragrance, but I'm a bit bad with the bitter taste...”

“You can just put in lots of milk and sugar and turn it into café au lait.”

“Café au lait...”

Princess Iris immediately calls one of the maids over to server her one, and gives it a taste. She sure moves fast.

“Oh, this is pretty good...”

“I know, right? It’s like a magic technique to make all coffee taste the same.”

With that, I also order some toast and eggs to make it into a classy breakfast.

If there was social media in this world, I would have totally snapped a smug selfie and wrote “breakfast NAO with royalty in special seating.”

Around when I finish my breakfast, the other actually important people begin to slowly file into the room.

Then their gossiping—oh, I should call it ‘socializing’ I suppose?—begins. As someone from a baron family, naturally I’m not part of the conversation and am left behind. It’s fine, I don’t intend to be a part of it anyways. So please stop trying to be considerate by directing the conversation to me, Iris-sama.

Amidst this slightly uncomfortable atmosphere, it has become almost time for the second day of the matches to begin.

Everyone else also heads towards their own seats, and the mood starts to calm down.

At that moment, the door to the special seats opens again.

When I turn around, I see a figure clad in a faded gray robe.

As before, her face is hidden inside her robe, but that’s unmistakably Beatrix.

She notices me and gives me a small wave, to which I smile and nod in return. Kind of like a “hey, we meet again” feel.

However, the eyes of everyone else in the room grow harsh.

I can almost audibly hear “who the hell is this dirty-looking fellow why don’t the guards kick her out already.” So this is wordless pressure, huh.

“Dear customer, I beg your pardon, but...”

A maid calls out to her, but then at that moment.

“It’s fine. She’s my guest. Please, come sit here.”

Iris calls out to Beatrix.

Beatrix sits next to Iris. Then I’m on the other side of Iris. Incidentally, the seat that Beatrix is in actually belongs to Alexia.

“Iris-sama, this person is...”

“She is the God of War, Beatrix-sama.”

When one of the nobles approaches and asks Iris, her answer causes a great stir through the crowd.

“She is *that*...”

“God of War...”

“The legendary Sword Saint...”

Oooh, that sounds so cool! I also want people to say “that guy is the legendary Shadow...” one day.

“It has been quite a while since Beatrix-sama last came into the public scene, hasn’t it?”

“*Un*. I’m looking for someone.”

She nods in response to the noble’s question.

“My niece, her face looks very similar to mine.”

Clearly having learned her lesson, this time she draws back her hood immediately.

“Ohh, how exquisite...”

“Anyone recognize my face? I heard that lately there have been eyewitnesses in this country of an elf with a face similar to mine.”

“*Hou*, in this country... I do not think I would ever forget it if I see an elf as beautiful as Beatrix-sama.”

“So, no recollection?”

“Unfortunately...”

All the nobles uniformly shake their head.

“I see...”

She puts her hood back on in disappointment.

“I’m sorry. Everyone here has a wide range of connections, so I thought you would get a clue by asking here.”

Iris apologizes to Beatrix.

“No worries. I’m an elf, I have lots of time.”

“Incidentally, has Beatrix-sama seen some of the matches of the Festival?”

“Not many.”

“Is that so. Just within the range of the ones that you know, which participant do you have your eye on?”

“Participant... *u~n*.”

She looks around the room while considering.

“Sid.”

Then she points at me.

“Umm, Beatrix-sama...?”

“I’m paying attention to Sid. Surely he can become strong.”

“Uh, no I won’t.”

I deny her within a second.

The stares from all around hurt.

“This young man... will become strong?”

“He is our kouhai, but his innate talent is a bit...”

“I mean, he *is* Claire-san’s young brother, but his sense for the sword...”

“Since Beatrix-sama has said so, then it must be so.”

With Iris’ statement, the ambiguous atmosphere is settled somewhat.

However, the nobles’ gazes towards Beatrix have turned skeptical.

Is she even the real one?

They can only see a dirty vagrant.

From my eyes, though, I see that she is, in a good way, in her most natural state.

Her appearance, personality, title, and strength too — she is not ornamenting anything, so the average person cannot see through to her true strength.

“Well then, if anything catches your attention in the match, then please point it out to us too.”

For now, the general consensus is to prop Beatrix up, at least while in Iris’ presence.

Then amidst this ambiguous atmosphere, the second day of the Festival of the God of War truly begins.

Chapter 82

The Smelly Man is Part of the Plan

When Doem steps into the special seats room, a person in a gray robe turns around and looks at him.

The physique tells Doem that the person is female, despite her face being hidden under her hood. After looking at Doem, she then turns her head to look at the Orianan king standing beside Doem.

Then a word.

“Smelly.”

“Oi woman, that’s disrespectful.”

“Sorry.”

Doem suppresses his shaken heart by glaring at the woman in the gray robe.

In order to turn the Orianan king into a puppet, Doem had used a plant that causes strong dependency. The effectiveness of the plant is beyond reproach, but it does have the flaw of causing addicts to emit a unique sweet smell.

But he is having the king hide that smell with perfume. No normal person should be able to notice it.

“Doem-dono, this person is Goddess of War Beatrix-sama.”

“Well, I’ll be...”

Goddess of War Beatrix. He’s heard the news of her being in the royal capital, but to think that she’s here in the flesh!

She does not at all look like a master of the sword worthy of the nickname ‘Goddess of War.’

She is wearing a faded gray robe, and is not mannered. After offering a single word of apology, she's already turned back to watching the fight.

She doesn't look strong, but... if her true strength is as the rumors say, then there is the possibility that it is Doem himself who is unable to see it. In consideration of the fact that Princess Iris herself has acknowledged this person, then he should assume her to be the real one indeed.

He's heard that Goddess of War Beatrix's face bears great resemblance to that of the hero Olivie. If only he can see the face under that hood...

"I beg your pardon, it was I who was disrespectful."

With both Beatrix's and Doem's apology, the matter is settled. Beatrix's comment is treated as if it was directed towards Doem.

Doem also does not want to draw any attention to the smell.

But still, what luck for Beatrix to appear at the Festival of the God of War.

Today, of all days...

Doem softly clicks his tongue.

"King of Midgar, I delight to find you well today again."

"Umu."

Changing gears, Doem turns to greet the Midgarian king, who is seated on a throne placed in the middle of the room.

After exchanging the standard greetings, the king of Oriana sits next to the king of Midgar. Then Doem sits on the other side of the king of Oriana.

The Orianan king is capable of standard responses, but anything beyond that is doubtful. That's where Doem comes in, to guide the conversation and follow up where necessary.

Well, everything so far is still according to his plan.

Doem's top priority at the moment is the capture of Rose.

The last time they met, she had already begun manifesting symptoms. Her blood would be of extremely high value to the Order.

For the sake of that, Doem has baited her with the threat of making the Orianan king assassinate the Midgarian king should she fail to show up at the Festival of the God of War.

Naturally, it was just a threat, but Doem is not averse to actually carrying it out.

If the Midgarian king is killed, war would break out, and Oriana Kingdom would be destroyed. However, preparations are already underway to turn the heir of the Midgarian throne into a puppet. If all goes well, the Order has the greatest benefit to reap. There is indeed the risk of failure, but the possible reward is so valuable as to merit the carrying out of this plot.

If he is to raise an unknown variable, it would be Iris. She has displayed signs of suspicion towards the unresponsive Orianan king. The possibility of her interfering cannot be dismissed.

But by initiating the assassination in the middle of her match, he can eliminate her from the equation. As such, all is still well.

However, now Beatrix is also present. To eliminate her would be difficult, and her strength is also above that of Iris'. If she moves in obstruction, she would pose an even bigger problem than Iris.

Furthermore, the aim of the mysterious Jimina is also yet undetermined. He is undoubtedly a resident of the Hidden World. For sure he is moving with some aim in mind, but a background check on him revealed nothing whatsoever. This is the work of a pro. He merits the greatest amount of caution.

Doem heaves a huge sigh.

Though everything is going according to plan, there are too many unknown variables all around. The situation is not one where he can relax in at all.

But in spite of all this, as long as Rose show up in the venue, then all would be resolved. Her appearance would null the need for him to take any risks.

And show up she will, without fail. She is not someone who can abandon her father and country. That is how Doem read her.

It's true that there are many unknown variables, but they do not matter. Everything should go well.

So Doem tells himself while watching the fight.

Then with the passage of time, the fight ends with Claire Kagenou's certain victory.

"Hou..."

Though she is not a participant who he had been particularly paying attention to, her strength is unexpected. She possesses high magic, but is not being thrown around by the magic.

She is already quite strong, but clearly possesses the talent to become even stronger.

"Claire-san... so she has gotten stronger once again."

After ascertaining Claire's victory, Iris stands up.

"My match is coming up, so pardon me."

Everyone showers Iris with words of encouragement, at which point the black-haired teenager sitting next to her also stands up.

"Gonna hit the toilet."

Every single person is thinking 'we didn't need to know that, just go already.' With the sole exception of Beatrix, whose eyes are following his exit.

He is called Sid, and is a run-of-the-mill teenage boy. For some reason, he is sitting next to Princess Iris, but otherwise there is absolutely nothing else noteworthy about him. Doem forgets about him almost immediately, then directs his attention towards the coming match.

This match between Iris and Jimina also holds great meaning for Doem.

Firstly, it might give him clues as to the aim of Jimina, a resident of the Hidden World.

Furthermore, this is the opportunity when Iris is absent from the room.

The two leave the room, and after a while... Iris and Jimina step into the fighting arena.

Chapter 83

From A Far Away Height...

The moment Iris enters the arena, she is greeted with thunderous applause.

This tremendous popularity is the proof that she is the main character in this tournament.

Iris studies Jimina as they face each other, and calms herself down.

Jimina Sehnem. He is undoubtedly a formidable opponent. Even when seeing him up close like this, she cannot gauge his strength, despite feeling a depthless something from him. Strength incongruous with his appearance. A young man that emits an out of balance feeling that messes with her sense of reality.

However, Iris does not think that she cannot win. Above that, Iris *must* win.

She believes it her calling to win in this Festival of the God of War.

Her political sense is nonexistent, and she herself admits it. The only thing she can do is to be Midgar Kingdom's symbol of strength.

'As long as Iris Midgar is present, then Midgar Kingdom is safe.' It is her calling to be the one to grant this sense of security to her citizens.

To that end, she does not mind being propped up as a portable shrine. As someone with no other strength than brute force, she understands that she would be used in politics.

But that was only until recently.

As the price for having been a mere prop so far, her first effort at standing on her own two feet... fell flat. Anxious about the future of her country, she founded the Crimson Order, but could not gather people nor resources, ultimately changing nothing.

Since then, she's been able to gradually gather some numbers, but she is still miles

away from her vision.

But having said that, she is aware that dipping her hand into politics this late in the game would only lead to her being used by everybody and every faction. So politics will be left to the politicians, while she will gather her strength in the way that she knows best.

She knows how powerful her popularity with the citizens is. Those who can serve as the brains of the Crimson Order have already been gathered. All that's left is for her to take the championship at the Festival of the God of War and cement her popularity amongst the populace. Then everything else will fall into place.

With this belief in her heart, Iris raises her sword and waits for the starting announcement.

Jimina, I'm sorry, but I'll be going full throttle from the very beginning. Regardless of what you are hiding, you will not have time to use it. Everything will be decided in a split second.

“Iris Midgar vs. Jimina Sehnem!! Battle start!!”

Immediate rush.

Along with the start of the match, Iris steps forward, then stops.

“...eh?”

A tiny utter of doubt escapes her lips.

Why does Jimina's figure feel so far away?

Did she mistake the distance between them?

But she double checks—she is not mistaken. However, it's her feeling that is telling her that Jimina is far away.

She does not know the reason why. Perhaps she is just nervous.

But that doesn't matter. All that matters is that she had stopped moving.

She refocuses, readies her sword, then throws in a feint.

The instant she confirms that Jimina's eyes have been drawn by the feint, she rushes in.

But.

"...?!"

Once again, her feet stop.

She jerks her upper torso as if to evade something, then leaps backward.

She saw a sword.

She saw Jimina's sword severing her head.

But Jimina's sword had not moved at all.

Naturally, her head is still connected.

"Why...?"

She could not help murmuring out loud.

She clearly saw Jimina's sword.

The instant she rushed in, Jimina's sword had slashed with overwhelming might and cleanly severed her head.

She had thought everything to be over.

Her loss... no, she had been sure of her death.

But apparently that was a mere illusion. Jimina doesn't even have his sword raised, and is just standing there in place.

Iris cannot comprehend what had just happened.

She brings up her sword, and attempts to circle the edge of the arena, as if to probe

him.

One round. Two rounds. Three rounds...

The distance between them remains unchanged. Yet somehow, Jimina's figure feels even further away now.

"...You're not coming?"

So Jimina asks.

But Iris cannot step in.

Every fiber of her being is telling her not to take that one step.

"HaaAAAHHHH!!"

Iris screams, as if to throw off her hesitation.

Then she takes that step with the greatest amount of speed that she can muster.

However——his eyes are following me!!

Jimina's gaze is still solidly centered on Iris.

Then, as if to indicate something, his eyes move.

"——aaaAAAHHHH!!"

That instant, Iris brakes by instinct.

An enormous burden assaults her body, and she even hears a disturbing sound from her knee joints.

But without paying that any mind, Iris stops herself, then flies backward in a tumbling motion.

She had clearly seen Jimina's sword piercing her chest.

"...No way."

However, her chest is completely unwounded.

There is also no trace of Jimina having brandished his sword.

“This cannot be happening...”

Before her eyes, Jimina is just standing there, still with sword unraised, same as before.

“...What’s wrong?”

So he asks.

Iris’s body shivers in response to... something.

She’s got to do something.

Agitation and fear thrusts her into motion.

That same instant, Jimina’s eyes move.

As if he is reading the future, his eyes and the tip of his sword both flick to a position in front of Iris.

At which, Iris hallucinates her arm being cut off.

“Ah, aaaa...”

Finally, she understands what is going on.

She understands that Jimina has only been feinting her the entire time.

He completely reads her movements, then sends her warnings with only his eyes and the tip of his sword.

That if she doesn’t stop——she would die.

With just that alone, Iris has been hallucinating his sword.

The visions of her being cut were almost indistinguishable from reality.

Past words from her master raise up in Iris' mind: "A master's 'lies' feel like reality." True to those words, her master had led the young Iris around by the nose.

But what Jimina is doing now is "reality" far beyond what her master had been capable of.

Is something like that even possible...?

Iris does not claim to be the strongest in the world. She understands that there's always someone better out there. However, from an objective point of view, her strength as a magic swordsman should be within the top ranks of the world. That's what she had believed.

And such a person is being led around the nose by mere feints?

If that is true, then Jimina's true strength——he would indeed be the strongest in the world, hands down.

And that would be in a dimension that not a single person can even come close to.

Is that actually possible?

Really?

Iris berates herself.

"Don't be tricked."

He hasn't even swung his sword once. All she has to go off on is mere speculation.

"...Don't stop."

So Iris murmurs, as if towards her instincts.

She firms her resolve to not stop no matter what, then takes a step forward.

There is a sound of something cutting through air.

The next instant.

An incredible impact slams into Iris' entire body.

Her consciousness blacks out for a few seconds, then she finds herself staring at the sky.

In the middle of the arena, Iris is lying on her back, staring at the sky.

What had happened?

Iris could not see Jimina's sword at all. All she remembers is Jimina's eyes tracing her movement, then an incredible impact.

It's a miracle how she still hasn't let go of her sword.

Iris forces her aching and unresponsive body to sit up.

"Iris Midgar... is this all you amount to?"

A sword is thrust before her eyes.

Jimina is looking down at Iris with eyes devoid of emotion.

Even though he is so close that she can touch him by reaching out, his figure appears to be so, so far away.

So very far away...

Ahh... so that's what it was.

Iris finally realizes.

His figure appearing far away was no illusion.

From the very start, he has been in a far, far away height, looking down upon her. A place so far that Iris can never touch, no matter how much she reaches out...

Iris' sword falls from her hand, raising a dry clang.

In the arena that has fallen as silent as a crypt, that clang echoes.

Iris Midgar had been defeated with a single attack.

That fact has caused everyone to be frozen with shock.

Amidst the silence.

Kotsu, kotsu, sounds out footsteps from Iris' back.

A stir gradually runs through the arena.

Kotsu, kotsu, kotsu goes the footsteps, until they stop.

Every single eye in the audience is focused on the person who had caused those footsteps.

Even Jimina is displaying slight surprise on his face.

"I have returned, Father."

The person standing there is the beautiful princess of Oriana Kingdom, Rose Oriana.

Not sparing even a glance for Iris and Jimina, Rose is staring straight at the special seats box.

Chapter 84

Final Duty

That Iris Midgar had fallen to a single stroke of the sword.

Before that reality, Doem merely stands in dumbfounded shock.

Being a resident of the Hidden World, Doem knows powerhouses stronger than Iris Midgar. However, does the strongest one that he knows possess the strength to fell Iris Midgar in one stroke?

No.

Without catching her off guard, without any coincidences, such a thing would be impossible.

In other words, this is something that cannot happen.

Being able to defeat Iris Midgar in one stroke makes Jimina the strongest magic swordsman that Doem knows.

Such a... youngster!

Having been surpassed by someone so much younger than himself wounds his pride that much more.

The shock in Doem's heart had, before he knew it, turned into burning jealousy.

His head is rejecting and denying Jimina.

There must be a reason to explain Iris' defeat. Even if it was not a coincidence, there's the idea of compatibility in fighting. It just so happens that Iris is the kind of fighter that Jimina finds easy to fight against. Maybe.

Besides that, Iris' strange movements is also suspicious. Suddenly stopping as if on guard against something, meaninglessly circling around Jimina. Perhaps Iris was in

bad shape, or Jimina had taken advantage of some weakness of hers.

There are a million reasons for Doem's head to deny Jimina's strength.

But, despite that.

Doem's instincts have already bowed to Jimina's sword.

He's understood that there is a vast difference between the world that he sees, and the world that Jimina sees.

Their theories and ways of thinking in regards to fighting are fundamentally different. Even if he trains for several hundred more years, he still would not be able to catch up to this young man. That is how polished Jimina's sword is. His sword, which seems like a convergence of the best points of every kind of sword, is refined to the point of being a priceless form of art.

All while denying Jimina's strength, he also admires Jimina's sword, like a little boy.

Just as he had admired his master in his youth. Jimina's sword possesses *something* that draws all swordsmen.

Doem gnashes his teeth.

No way he will acknowledge this young man.

It's not yet confirmed that this young man is the strongest.

Doem knows many powerhouses. However, he's yet to meet the Order's highest echelons.

That's why the title of 'the strongest' is not Jimina's to take.

"Beatrix-sama, what did you think of this match?"

So asks Doem, desperately wanting words that would deny Jimina.

Beatrix's green eyes are gazing at Jimina from the depths of her robe. In her eyes are unmistakable... appreciation.

“...I want to fight him.”

“Hah?”

But just as Doem is about to ask her to explain her words, the venue buzzes loudly.

Doem looks towards the arena, and sees...

“Rose Oriana...”

Doem’s face warps into a sneer.

So she has come.

As thought, she is a foolish woman. It is already too late for both Oriana Kingdom and the Orianan king. The puppet king is already no more than a mere husk. Thanks to that, Doem has the entire country in his grasp. To be incapable of understanding that and just nonchalantly strolling in, Rose is too soft-hearted to be a princess.

Doem covers his mouth to hide his twisted smile, then steps forward together with the Orianan king.

“My beloved Princess Rose. Finally you have returned to me.”

There is a staircase that leads directly from the special seats room to the arena. Doem and the Orianan king make their way down.

“Oh my Rose, you have returned. Come, come to me.”

The Orianan king speaks according to Doem’s instructions. His words have no heart, they are but the words of a mere puppet.

While walking down the stairs, Doem sends instructions to his subordinates with his eyes, so that they can apprehend Rose at a moment’s notice.

Rose comes up the steps.

“Father, I have come to apologize. For what has happened, and what will happen... I have made a mistake, and will surely mistake again. However, I, as a princess of Oriana Kingdom, and also as your daughter... will walk the path that I believe in.”

Rose's voice is quivering. Tears are welling up in her eyes.

However, the resolve in her eyes is set.

Doem notices that in a split second, and falls back.

First let the king go in front.

With the king as a shield, this woman cannot do anything.

As long as he has his puppet king, Doem's plan will go well.

"I forgive you your sins."

So says the Orianan king. Doem did not give him any such instructions.

"Thank you very much, Father."

Everything after that explodes in an instant.

Rose's sword flashes from its sheath on her waist, and Doem hides behind the king in reflex.

Doem's subordinates all spring into motion.

But Rose is just too fast.

Doem's eyes widen in shock.

'Wha-?!'

Leaving everything behind in her wake, Rose's sword reaches, and pierces, the heart of the Orianan king.

"As princess, and as daughter... this is my final duty."

The king's arms, which seemed to be trying to hug her, fall powerlessly halfway. Rose's sword has indeed pierced through the king's heart, even reaching behind and stabbing into Doem's stomach.

“Thank you for everything so far, Father.”

Then she withdraws her sword.

Blood fountains from the king’s heart, and he collapses.

The tears finally fall from her eyes.

“Y-, YOU BIIIIITTTTCCCCHHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!”

Doem howls.

Blood is also falling from Doem’s stomach, but it’s not a fatal wound.

His anger is from the loss of his puppet. Doem’s plan... has been shattered.

“CATCH HER RIGHT THIS FUCKING INSTANTTTTTTT!!!”

His subordinates rush towards her.

Rose makes no move to escape.

She turns the tip of her sword towards her own neck, then looks at Doem and smiles.

Don’t tell me...

All the blood drains from Doem’s face.

“N-, NO, NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!”

But right at the moment that Rose puts strength into her arms.

“...So this is your choice?”

A single flash, beautiful as art, blows away Rose’s sword, together with all the other surrounding swords.

The one standing there is the common-looking young man, Jimina.

“Y-, you are...”

But in his hands is a jet black blade, darker than the shadows in the night.

Chapter 85

Mysterious Masked Swordsman Slayer, At Your Service!!

Until that breathtakingly beautiful flash, Rose had been resolved to die. If she herself is captured and used, then there'd be no meaning in her father's death. That alone, she can never allow to happen.

Death is frightening.

However, that is her only venue of escape. She got to live as a princess, and had so many wishes fulfilled. And in turn, she believes she's carried out her duties as befits her station in life.

So that's why this is her final duty.

So she had resolved.

"Y-, you are..."

But the instant she saw the sword that deflected all swords, and the young man who wielded that sword, a memory from her youth rises unbidden in Rose's mind.

"The time for lies is over..."

Then Jimina places his hand on his face, and tears it off.

Shock runs through the audience.

Beneath the peeled off skin is a mask familiar to Rose.

Then a black mass bursts out in a spiraling cloud that envelopes him.

When the black spiral settles, it reveals a man wearing a jet black longcoat.

“Shadow...”

So whispers someone.

However, for Rose, he goes by a different name.

He is the reason why Rose had started on the path of the sword, he is the one who wields the beautiful sword that has captured her heart.

“Shadow, don’t tell me you... you are Slayer-san?”

A flashback plays in Rose’s mind.



Long ago, just once, Rose had been kidnapped.

When she had accompanied her father to Midgar Kingdom on official business, she had secretly slipped out to play. While playing with the commoner kids, her world had suddenly gone black.

The next instant, she had lost consciousness.

When she came to, she found herself in a dim room, bound.

Her hands and feet were both tied up with straw rope, and her mouth was gagged.

Despite the lack of any external wounds, the fear and unease made her shake uncontrollably.

“Here I was, thinking that she was a brat with a well-groomed appearance, and she turns out to be the princess of Oriana Kingdom!”

The bandits were talking in the next room over.

They probably searched her personal belongings. Rose’s identity had been exposed.

“As expected of Big Bro! You sure are lucky!”

“Stoopid, this is my own ability!!”

Coarse laughter rang out.

Rose considered her situation, and despaired. There were two options available to the bandits. They could demand a ransom from Oriana Kingdom directly, or sell her to someone else who understands her value.

She knew they would choose the latter. Rose's usefulness is high, but it's too much for lowly bandits to handle.

They would sell her, and safely get the money. Then Rose herself would be used by enemies of Oriana Kingdom...

That train of thought plunged Rose into further despair.

She wriggled around, desperately trying to slip out of the ropes.

She shouted through the mouth gag.

However, her struggle was in vain.

"Oh, our dear princess has woken up."

"You, go take a look."

Footsteps drew near.

Rose's shouting turned to screams, and tears fell from her eyes.

But the instant right before the door to the room was opened.

"Hyahaa!! Cough up all your money right now!!"

The out-of-place voice of a child rang out.

"Wh-, what's with this brat!"

"Where did you come from?! Never mind, kill him!!"

"Ora ora ora ora!!"

There was the sound of something slicing through the air.

Then screams rang out.

“Wh-, what’s with this brat!! He’s strong!!!!”

“This can’t be happening! Three people in one instant?!”

“You people will become the practice targets for my stylish sword.”

Once again, the sound of cutting wind.

A thick stench of blood reached Rose’s nose. She fearfully peeked through a gap in the door.

The scene that greeted her eyes is that of a child wearing a sack and bandits running about trying to escape.

“Those who run are bandits! Those who can’t run are bandits that I’ve practiced on!!”

“Hi, hiiiiii!”

“St-, stop ittt!!”

The boy wearing a sack brandished his sword.

“——?!”

The beauty of that trajectory stole Rose’s eyes and caused her to forget her situation. Rose didn’t know much about the sword.

But this sword... it was more beautiful than any art that Rose had ever come into contact with in her life.

The sword brilliantly decapitated the bandits, interrupting their screams.

Rose simply gazed at the child wearing a sack in blank amazement.

“I even went to the trouble of going on an expedition, but you guys have no money? Nn, wait, there’s one more.”

Upon noticing Rose's gaze, the child wearing a sack opened the door of her room.

Light shone into the room, and Rose's eyes met the child's.

"A kidnapped child, huh. Seems you've had a tough day."

The child wearing a sack brandished his sword. That sword was just so beautiful that Rose's eyes were fascinated by it.

"Take care on your way home. Bye bye."

The child in a sack quickly made his departure.

Rose suddenly realized that her ropes had been severed.

"Wa-, wait!"

Rose desperately called him to a halt.

"Yea?"

The child in a sack stopped and turned around.

"Wh-, who are you?"

"Me? I'm, well, lemme see. I'm still in training but... you can call me the passing Stylish Bandit Slayer."

"Stylish Bandit Slayer-san... Umm, Rose wants to do something to thank you."

"Nnn, then don't tell anybody about me. Can you do that for me?"

"O-, ok, yes I can."

"K, seeya then."

So saying, Stylish Bandit Slayer-san disappeared.

"Stylish Bandit Slayer-san..."

He had saved Rose in her despair, and changed her fate. His beautiful sword had stolen her heart, and became the reason for why she stepped onto the path of the sword.



That memory from her childhood is a precious, precious thing for her. It's a secret only for her, something that she had not told anyone, ever.

But today, for the first time, Rose speaks of the secret.

“Shadow... so you were Stylish Bandit Slayer-san all along.”

Shadow remains silent.

But for Rose, his silence is his answer.

So he has been fighting against evil even from his childhood. Just like that day when he had saved Rose, he had been saving many others.

Rose recalls Shadow's words: ‘true strength comes not from power, but from the way you live.’ Indeed, it is Shadow's way of living that is his true strength.

Rose feels ashamed at how she had easily chosen death.

She can still fight. However, living on is too hard, failure is too scary, so she had wanted to end it all.

Death is merely a cop out.

Rose can still fight.

Because she has fallen for his beautiful sword——and his way of living.

“Your fight is not yet over...”

Shadow thrusts his jet black sword.

As a result, a large hole appears in the arena wall.

“Go...”

“Thank you!”

Rose picks up her rapier, then jumps through the hole without hesitation. She still has much left to do.

“St-, stop right there!!”

“None shall pass...”

So saying, Shadow stands before the hole.

Chapter 86

Summit of the Path of the Sword

Before anyone had noticed, thick clouds had gathered, covering the sun and throwing the world into shadow.

Within the clouds can be heard sounds of thunder.

Rain begins falling, one drop at a time.

“What are you all doing?! CHASE HER!!”

Doem’s rage-filled roar rips into the air, and his subordinates that had been merely observing the situation all leap into motion.

After positioning themselves to surround Shadow, who has taken up position in front of the hole, they all rush towards him at the same time.

However, the next instant.

A single flash of jet black mows them all down.

A single stroke. All these magic swordsmen that Doem had carefully hand-selected were all knocked back, and are now rolling on the ground.

“How can this...”

So this is Shadow. Just as the rumors had indicated, any run-of-the-mill person would not even be his opponent.

Doem clutches his bleeding stomach while backpedaling.

“S-, someone! Is there anyone?! Someone who can defeat him?!”

Then he shouts.

But the only response he gets is the sound of the rain.

Midgar Kingdom's knights have Shadow surrounded, but only from a distance away.

Not a single one of them are underestimating Shadow's strength, not after seeing how he had defeated Iris.

The rain begins to pour. Thick raindrops strike down on everyone alike.

Shadow's jet black longcoat has gotten wet and shiny from the rain, thus reflecting the sudden flash of lightning.

Then more lightning strikes. And every time it does, the figure of Shadow is lit up and branded into the eyes of everyone present.

"I'll go."

Together with that voice, a gray-robed female jumps into the air.

In midair, she throws away her robe and draws her longsword. Then she alights onto the battlefield.

"Goddess of War, Beatrix..."

So whispers someone.

The one entering a stance with her sword held up amidst the falling rain is a beautiful blond-haired elf.

With only a chest guard and loincloth on, her white skin is wet by the rain and illuminated by the lightning.

Shadow vs. Beatrix. The two quietly confront each other, as if to sound out each other's maai.

The start of the fight is triggered by a violent peal of thunder.

Shadow's sword lengthens as if to match Beatrix's.

Then, a flash.

Shadow's jet black sword mows.

The rain is slashed.

For a brief moment, an area devoid of rain is created by the trajectory of his sword.

Indeed, Shadow's sword had missed.

"Hou..."

Beatrix had retreated half a step instantaneously, thus evading Shadow's mowing attack.

Then she immediately shifts into counterattack.

A razor-sharp thrust rushes towards Shadow, just like a spear.

Behind the mask, Shadow seems to be smiling.

Shadow dodges that by turning his body half around, and uses the momentum from that motion to release another slash with his sword.

But Beatrix withdraws her sword in time.

Even while drawing back her sword, she crouches, thus evading Shadow's attack.

Then she shifts into counterattack again.

The two are only tearing apart raindrops.

More than ten moves are exchanged in the blink of an eye, slicing the rain again and again.

The severed raindrops turn into small sprays drawing beautiful arcs illuminated by lightning.

Everyone is watching with bated breath.

This is exactly a dance.

The sword movements that no normal person can follow with their eyes leave their traces in the air, painted with rain and lightning.

A breathtaking sword dance.

Not a single person is in doubt that these two are standing at the summit of the path of the sword.

But it is Shadow who announces the end of this dance that they'd love to watch forever.

"This sword is insufficient, huh..."

Shadow leaves Beatrix's maai, and gazes at her.

Beatrix does not press in, choosing instead to utilize this opportunity to calm her breathing. Her bountiful breasts heave up and down violently.

"So strong..."

She lets slip a sigh of admiration.

Her blue eyes simply gaze at Shadow.

For a while, the two do not move.

"I shall show you my true sword."

So saying, Shadow returns his jet black blade to its original length.

That is his original maai.

"I'm coming."

At the same time he speaks, he's already stepped in.

Then, as if it's the easiest thing in the world, he closes their maai.

"?!"

Then an impact.

The instant Beatrix realizes that her maai had been breached, she abandoned offense and focused solely on defense. However, she could not see Shadow's sword at all.

Not only her, no one else in the venue could see it.

That single stroke... did not cut rain.

“——*Kuh!!*”

Knocked back by the impact, Beatrix rolls inside the rain.

Though she could not see the sword, she was able to defend through her intuition alone. However, it was barely by the skin of her teeth. She was unsightly knocked back far away, unable to even initiate a counterattack.

She immediately leaps back to her feet in preparation for a follow up attack.

Thunder roars, and Shadow disappears along with the fading lightning.

That instant, Shadow is already standing before her.

Brandishing his invisible sword.

She concentrates on Shadow's sword with all of her nerves, then again is assaulted by an impact.

“——!!”

She truly could not see it.

Ignoring the dirt smeared onto her face, Beatrix stands up and immediately jumps back to take a distance.

Once again she had blocked in time, but it was only due to intuition and luck.

There is no guarantee that she'll be able to block the next one too.

But no follow up attack is forthcoming.

Beatrix stares at Shadow underneath the lightning and racks her mind.

Why can't she see it?

It was not merely fast. Shadow's sword is somehow... different.

Through her experience of fighting accrued over her long life, she finally reaches the answer.

Shadow's sword is——nature itself.

During a fight, while dealing with many swords at the same time, a fast sword is indeed a threat. However, even a fast sword requires a preliminary movement. Even if she doesn't see that preliminary movement, her fighting experience can tell her when the attack would reach. As long as she pays attention, dealing with it is not impossible.

But the sword that is the greatest threat during a fight is the one beyond her awareness. Speed is not needed there. The key lies solely in being beyond her awareness.

Shadow's sword is natural.

Without killing intent, without hesitation, without strength, possessing only naturalness.

People do not pay attention to what is natural.

Just as she does not pay attention to the falling rain, Shadow's sword slips out of her awareness.

“That's amazing...”

Beatrix can only stand in wonder before the depth of Shadow's sword. His technique is a bottomless abyss that no one can ever reach.

And thus, she resolves herself for her defeat.

“Oh Goddess of War, let me see how you struggle...”

Shadow holds up his jet black sword.

Beatrix does not have the confidence to block the next strike.

However.

“Wait a moment.”

A dignified voice interrupts the fight.

“Let me join the fun.”

There stands Iris, with unsheathed sword.

Chapter 87

Your Real Enemy

“Princess Iris...”

Beatrix gazes at Iris with a face that indicates that she has words she wants to say.

“I know. I know better than anyone that I am no match for him...”

Iris tries to hide her frustration with a smile.

“However, I cannot pull back here. After doing whatever he wants at the Festival of the God of War and turning it into a total mess, how can I let him get away without doing anything about it? Even I have my pride. Both me, and also Midgar Kingdom...”

Then she shoots Shadow a glare.

“Even if it costs me my life, I will stop Shadow’s movements. Beatrix-sama, please take advantage of that moment to finish him off.”

“...Very well. I will match you.”

Seeing Iris’ resolve, Beatrix decides to cooperate with her.

Drive fills the two’s eyes as they confront Shadow together.

“Come, then... show me your struggling.”

Shadow turns the point of his sword downwards, taking a defensive stance.

Iris begins slowly inching towards him, probing for an opportunity.

For a while, the sound of rain and thunder continue echoing around.

“You shall taste at least a single blow from me!”

A exceptionally loud peal of thunder prompts Iris to leap forward.

Immediately closing the distance, her longsword aims for Shadow's neck.

However, Shadow evades it by stepping back a mere half-step. Anticipating her sword to miss, he moves into the next motion.

However, Iris' sword stretches.

She has apparently let go of her sword to forcefully increase her reach.

Shadow instantaneously alters his movement. The sword that he was about to counterattack with returns in time to deflect Iris' sword.

So ends Iris' attack——or at least, that's what she wants him to think.

In actual fact, she is still rushing towards him, riding the momentum and reaching out to tackle his torso.

She has indeed demonstrated her resolve to stop his movement even at the cost of her own life.

There's no time for evasion.

“Well done.”

The next instant, Shadow's knee hammers into Iris' face.

There was no way she could have known.

Barehanded combat is actually Shadow's most proficient style.

Iris' body crumples.

However, she has indeed fulfilled her duty.

The instant Shadow was sending out his knee, he had indeed stopped moving.

And that was more than enough for her.

“HaaAAAH!!”

Beatrix’s single flash closes in on Shadow.

Beatrix’s longsword smashes against Shadow’s jet black sword with every ounce of strength that she can muster.

Along with an incredible crash, Shadow’s sword, hand, and arm are blown back with force.

Shadow has lost his posture.

This is the most ideal opportunity.

Beatrix seizes this moment perfectly to make a follow up attack.

However, Shadow is even faster at letting go of his sword.

In a split second, he had decided to discard his sword.

Then he disappears.

To a place beyond Beatrix’s view.

“Below?!”

He is stooped over so low that it seems like he is crawling on the ground. Before she can react, he has already grabbed her waist. In sharp contrast to Iris, his movements are levels apart in polish and elegance.

He is too close for Beatrix to use her longsword.

Shadow handily shoulders Beatrix, then slams her body onto the floor.

“Gahah!!”

The stone floor cracks from the impact. All the air inside her lungs is expelled.

But at that moment, the distance between them is just enough for her to swing her longsword.

Beatrix brandishes her sword even as her consciousness is fading away.

Shadow pays it no mind, proceeding to pick Beatrix up again and slamming her against the grou— or not, instead letting go halfway through.

Beatrix's longsword cuts nothing, as she herself crashes into the wall of the arena.

With a violent sound, her body sinks into the wall.

Then a sound of something cutting the air can be heard as something falls from the sky.

Shadow reaches out a hand to catch it, revealing it to be— a jet black sword.

As if everything had been according to his plan from the very start...

The lightning illuminates the two motionless bodies collapsed on the ground.

Beatrix and Iris had challenged him together but could not get even a single hit in. This shocking truth has filled all the spectators' hearts with disbelief and terror.

"...So it's over."

After one last glance at the two of them, Shadow turns his heels.

"St-, stop right there..."

That voice stops his feet.

"I, I can still fight..."

With shaky footing, Iris stands up.

In continuation, Beatrix also pushes aside the debris from the wall, getting up.

"Me too."

So the two swordswomen get back up.

But Shadow only gives them one more glance, before resuming walking.

“Stop right there! Or are you running away?!”

Iris’ voice causes Shadow to stop again.

“...Running away?”

The next instant, the entire fighting arena is stained with violet light.

“Wh-...?!”

“!!”

A devastating torrent of magic.

It flows out from Shadow’s body, drawing out a spiraling whirlpool.

The rain is being swallowed and erased by the magic.

“Don’t tell me... you really...?!”

“This... cannot be won.”

The overwhelming strength beyond anything that Iris and Beatrix has dreamt of causes the two of them to become petrified.

If he brandishes this strength, this entire arena would be erased.

Iris, Beatrix, and the audience——in the face of this strength, all of them are equal. Equally powerless, that is.

“Where is the need for me to run away?”

No one can stop him. Every single person is forced to swallow this fact, regardless of whether they are willing or not.

“Why...?”

Iris asks in a quivering voice.

“If you have all this power... you could have killed us at any moment.”

“...My aim has been achieved. I have no interest in your lives. For we have our own enemies to massacre...”

Shadow looks meaningfully at Iris, then draws all the roaring magic into his sword.

“Who your real enemy is... don't lose sight of that.”

Then, the violet magic is released into the sky.

The blinding light stains the arena, the royal capital, and the sky, completely blowing away the rain clouds.

When the light subsides, the only thing left is a clear, blue sky that stretches from horizon to horizon.

Shadow's figure is nowhere to be seen.

The clouds, the rain, the lightning, and Shadow himself... it is as if everything just now had been a mere dream.

“Who your real enemy is, don't lose sight of that'... Shadow, exactly who are you...”

Iris looks up at the cloudless sky, murmuring the words that Shadow had left behind.

His aim... and the real enemy...

“...How pretty.”

There is a huge rainbow hanging in the sky.

Chapter 88

Ashes of a Dream

Rose is running in the rain.

Not knowing where she's headed, simply plunging heedlessly onwards.

Before she knew it, the rain had stopped, and she is in the middle of a forest.

Shafts of sunlight shine through the gaps of the rain-slicked leaves above.

Rose leans against a tree, trying to calm her breathing.

Various thoughts are racing throughout her mind. About her father, about her country, and about her own prospects...

Everything is getting jumbled together, throwing her heart into disarray.

Regardless of the reason, she is the criminal who murdered the king of Oriana Kingdom. She has no intention of denying it, and also no longer feels like running from the responsibility into death.

She had wanted to shoulder both the responsibility of killing her father and the responsibility of a princess.

But the burden is just too heavy.

The more she thinks, the more Rose shivers with anxiety.

Resolve, conviction, responsibility, pressure. All of these weigh so heavily on her.

She can still fight. She must continue to fight. However, what can a 17-year-old teenage girl do...

Rose buries her head between her knees.

She makes herself small, but cannot stop the trembling.

It is only when the sunlight has turned madder red that she can gather herself to some degree.

“I have to move...”

So says Rose, as if to make herself listen, while standing up.

She has no specific destination.

However, she has no other choice but to advance.

She begins walking while looking straight ahead. But at that moment.

“There are two options available to you.”

A beautiful voice suddenly calls out to her from behind.

“?!”

Rose whirls around and sees an elf wearing a jet black dress.

Blond hair, blue eyes, an exquisite face that seems sculpted.

“Alpha...”

Alpha crosses her arms and smiles bewitchingly.

“You can either fight by yourself, or fight alongside us. Now choose.”

“Alongside...?”

Rose’s enemy and Shadow Garden’s enemy is the same.

But just because their enemy is the same, it doesn’t necessarily mean they can fight together.

But it is true that her options are limited.

Her pursuers would probably be here soon. If she intends to fight alone, she would have to find a place to lay low for a while, maybe in the depths of some mountain... no, maybe Outlaw City is also worthy of consideration.

But right now, Rose is charged with the crime of regicide. Even if she enters Outlaw City, she could be chased by bounty hunters.

“Can you save Oriana Kingdom?”

“That depends on you. We currently have no reason to move for your sake. If you want us to save your country, prove your worth.”

“Worth...?”

“How much you are worth... and how much Oriana Kingdom is worth...”

“If I prove it, you can save it...?”

“We have enough power to do so.”

Alpha’s replies are concise. She is merely laying out the choices available.

She does not sway Rose towards either, and neither does she offer a helping hand.

The choice is entirely up to Rose.

“...Slayer-san... I mean, Shadow, is he the head of your organization?”

“...Yes.”

The figure of when he saved the young Rose and fought against evil replays in Rose’s mind.

Then Rose chooses the path of believing in him.

“...I swear to fight together.”

“Glad to hear it. We welcome you. Follow me.”

So says Alpha in an emotionless voice, turning to proceed deeper into the forest.

“Can I ask one thing?”

So asks Rose while following along behind.

“Go ahead.”

“Who exactly is Shadow...”

He who possesses a strong heart of justice, having been fighting against evil even when young. He who possesses the overwhelming strength to defeat evil. The secret to his strength, his convictions, his upbringing; everything is a mystery. He is an existence entirely cloaked in mystery.

“If you wish to know, earn our trust.”

“Trust...”

“If you prove yourself worthy of our trust, then someday it shall be revealed to you...”

Then the two wordlessly head deeper into the forest.



They are walking within a fog so thick that even sunlight cannot shine through.

“This place, could it be...?”

“Forest of the Abyss.”

It is a legendary forest, one which no one knows the location of. But all the stories say that the moment you walk in, you would never be able to come back out.

The fog is so thick that Rose is constantly in danger of losing sight of Alpha, even though she should be right ahead.

The thick, violet-colored fog charged with magic is throwing Rose’s senses off.

“This fog is dragon breath...”

“Dragon...”

Though there is the rare eyewitness report of these legendary creatures, there has been no recorded subjugation within the last hundred years or so.

“In the past, when He came upon this land, He had fought with the Dragon of Fog.”

“He...?”

“In His youth, though He was able to defeat the dragon, He was unable to kill it. So the dragon came to acknowledge Him, and exhaled a long breath for Him.”

So this fantastical violet-colored fog is a dragon’s breath...

“This fog is deadly poison.”

Rose’s body shivers.

“So don’t stray far from me. The moment you do, you will die.”

“I understand...”

The two continue to proceed through the mist, until the world suddenly explodes with colors.

“This place is...”

Sunlight shines down upon a white, ancient-looking city.

“This is Alexandria, an ancient city once destroyed by the Dragon of Fog. This is our base.”

The ancient city Alexandria. Rose has seen the name come up on several ancient documents before.

But this city’s beauty is one that cannot be fully painted by words alone.

Expansive fields sprawl all around the city, growing a crop that Rose has never seen before. And there are numerous young girls vigorously harvesting those crops.

“They’re harvesting cacao. It’s what chocolate is made of. Eventually we’ll have you do that too.”

“That is chocolate’s... wait, so Mitsugoshi Co. belongs to Shadow Garden?!”

Alpha merely smiles.

The market of chocolate is still monopolized by Mitsugoshi Co. No one knows what it’s made of, much less its production process.

The two pass through the city gates and into the castle.

“Lambda?”

“Present.”

In response to Alpha’s call, a single woman appears and kneels on one knee.

“Newcomer. Train her.”

“Yes, ma’am. As you command.”

“Firstly show us your strength. If it’s you, the path should open soon...”

After giving Rose these final words, Alpha walks off somewhere.

Only Rose and the woman named Lambda are left.

She is a dark-skinned elf with gray hair and golden eyes. Her tall stature and supple muscles can be seen even above her black bodysuit.

Her eyes are sharp, and her lips are plump.

“I am Instructor Lambda. Follow me.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Rose follows Lambda, until they reach the back of the castle.

At this place, a great number of young girls are zealously training.

“Astounding...”

Rose can tell with a single glance. Everyone here is incredibly strong.

“Numbers 664, 665!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

“Here, ma’am!”

Lambda’s shout causes two girls to dash over from the group.

One is an elf, the other is a therianthrope.

“Did you call for us, Instructor!”

The elven girl asks in a shout. The therianthrope girl is standing at attention beside her.

“This is a newcomer. She’ll be joining your squad.”

“Understood, ma’am!”

“Number 666, undress.”

“Eh?”

Rose cannot understand what was just asked of her.

“Number 666 is you. Here, your name is a number.”

“I, am Number 666...”

“Now undress.”

“Eh?”

“Don’t make me repeat myself!”

The next instant, Rose’s clothes are sliced to tatters.

It took only a split second.

Rose's naked body is exposed.

"Wh-, what did?! Eh?!"

Rose crouches down while covering herself with body hands.

"From today onwards, you are a maggot. You are no longer anyone. Discard your name! Discard your clothes! Discard everything, and become a single soldier!"

Then a black mass is thrown at Rose's feet.

It is a black slime that bounces with a *poyoyon*.

"Number 664! Teach this maggot how to use it."

"Yes, ma'am!"

"*Nn?* What's this?"

From the remains of Rose's clothes falls out a small piece of paper.

Instructor Lambda picks it up, and thrusts it before Rose's eyes.

"That's...!"

That is the present that Rose had received from Sid. The wrapping paper from MagRonald.

That instant, the feelings for him that she had been suppressing in her heart overflows.

He was her very first love.

They fought in a match, he saved her live during the terrorist incident, and they went on a trip together.

Her irreplaceable, precious memories.

Just a mere week ago, Rose had been dreaming of being married to him for the rest of her life.

But Rose can no longer return.

Their paths have diverged, and will never cross again.

“What’s with that face? I told you to discard everything!”

The wrapping paper is further sliced into shreds before her eyes.

The scraps are carried by the wind, flying high into the sky.

Just like ashes of a dream forevermore lost to her...

A large tear falls from Rose’s eye.



PDF by: traitorAZEN