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Chapter 7: Chapter 31-35

Chapter 31: You Can Be More Confident

Half an hour later, the meal that Julis had invited them to was over.

Throughout the meal, the princess had been chatting with Toudou Kirin the entire time, completely different from the notoriously difficult-to-get-along-with Glühen Rose that the rumors described. Seeing this, Amagiri Ayato was left utterly bewildered, having personally witnessed the fiercer side of Julis before.

Kaiser, on the other hand, was almost certain now—Julis had set up this meal specifically for Toudou Kirin.

One had to admit, the way girls bond and the speed at which they do so had always been perplexing. Even someone like Julis, who was said to be difficult to approach, could make Kirin gradually let go of her nervousness after chatting for a while.

By the time the meal was nearly finished, Kirin was already laughing and conversing freely with Julis.

Their relationship had progressed so quickly that they had even reached the point of feeding each other, leaving Kaiser momentarily stunned.

That being said, Julis's guidance had indeed helped Kirin lighten up significantly.

"It's about time."

As they stepped out of the restaurant, Julis glanced at the sky and turned to the group.

"I still have to take this guy for a walk. Do you two want to come along?"

She pointed at Ayato and directed the question at Kaiser and Kirin.

It seemed the princess still remembered her agreement with Ayato.

Kaiser, however, declined without a second thought.

"I'll pass. You two go ahead."

Why would he go? To be a third wheel?

Kaiser had no interest in that and was perceptive enough not to impose.

"I-I won't go either," Kirin said softly. "I still have schoolwork to do..."

That was, of course, an excuse.

The little girl hadn't thought too deeply about it—she simply felt that she had been out for too long, and if she didn't return soon, her uncle would scold her again.

"Neither of you?"

Julis muttered in mild discontent.

It wasn't like she usually had the chance to hang out with friends like this.

Though she didn't want to relax or indulge too much, the opportunity was rare, and she wanted to spend a little more time outside with them.

Of course, she quickly suppressed this thought.

Julis was not someone who would act unreasonably. If not for Kirin, she wouldn't have gone so far out of her way today in the first place.

"Well then, we'll be off. You two take care." Julis gave a brief reminder before turning to Kaiser. "As a senior, you'd better take responsibility and make sure Kirin gets back to Seidoukan Academy safe and sound. Understood?"

Kaiser rolled his eyes.

"Toudou is ranked first in our academy, you know."

In other words, even if he weren't around, it would be pretty hard for anything to happen to her.

"That's beside the point," Julis retorted, as serious as ever. "Responsibility is responsibility."

"Yeah, yeah." Kaiser spread his hands in resignation. "I'll take her back."

Before long, the two left, with Julis complaining the entire way and Ayato just standing there with a wry smile, enduring it.

Watching them go, Kaiser finally turned to Kirin.

"Shall we head back?"

"Y-yes!"

Kirin answered nervously, as if with Julis gone, her timid nature had resurfaced.

"Relax a little." Kaiser sighed. "It's not like I'm going to eat you."

"S-sorry..."

Kirin tried to ease up, but no matter how much she attempted, she simply couldn't.

"Forget it." Kaiser didn't press the issue. He started walking ahead and said, "Let's just go back."

"Yes!" Kirin quickly followed, occasionally sneaking glances at Kaiser's face, her expression slightly downcast.

"...Are you mad at me, Senpai?" she hesitantly asked.

"No." Kaiser wasn't that petty. Seeing Kirin looking so dejected, he couldn't help but say, "You overthink things too much. Everyone has a different personality. You're still—" He coughed. "You're still young. Being a bit shy is perfectly normal. There's no need to feel bad about it."

There were plenty of people who adored this type of shy, soft-spoken girl.

He didn't want to accidentally make her lose confidence—that'd be a real shame.

Unfortunately, Kirin didn't see it that way.

"I know I'm useless. My uncle tells me that all the time," she said self-deprecatingly. "Senpai doesn't have to comfort me."

"You think I'm just comforting you?" Kaiser stopped in his tracks and looked at her. "I think you're underestimating yourself."

"Leaving aside the fact that you're ranked first in our academy—just consider yourself alone. At your age, how many people in the world can achieve what you have?"

Kaiser often found Kirin's physique suspiciously unscientific for her age, but there was no denying that she was only thirteen.

Thirteen years old. A first-year in middle school. In his past life, she'd be a kid who had just graduated from elementary school.

Even the Festas had an entry age requirement of thirteen to twenty-two, meaning Kirin had only just reached the minimum age to compete. She still had a full ten years ahead of her to shine on this stage.

Yet, at this age, she had already reached the pinnacle of Seidoukan Academy.

Ranked first!

That was an incredible feat in this dueling metropolis.

Many students spent their entire academic careers, even a full ten years, without ever making it to the top. But Kirin? She started there.

That was why, when she appeared in her official ranking match, the entire academy had paid attention.

She might not be the strongest in all six academies, but she was undoubtedly one of the most promising.

If given ten years to grow—who knew what heights she could reach?

It was unfathomable!

Most astonishing of all was that Kirin had achieved this entirely through her own efforts.

She wasn't a Strega, nor did she wield an Orga Lux. Even her physical abilities and Prana weren't the most outstanding—not compared to Ayato after unlocking his full power, at least.

Yet, with nothing but sheer swordsmanship, she had conquered Seidoukan Academy.

In the original story, Kirin had even defeated Ayato—handing him his first loss since arriving at the academy!

That was after Ayato had unsealed his power and obtained Ser-Veresta. At that point, he was undeniably one of the strongest in Seidoukan Academy—so much so that Julis herself admitted she wouldn't stand a chance against him, not even once in ten duels.

Even Kaiser, as he was now, wouldn't stand a chance against Ayato at full strength without Ser-Veresta.

And yet—

Kirin had taken him down in five minutes.

What if she had an Orga Lux—a weapon like Ser-Veresta that suited her?

What kind of monster would she become?

That kind of potential was why so many people had their eyes on her.

If that wasn't enough to make her confident, what would be?

Did she need to ascend to godhood?

"You should be more confident," Kaiser told her, meeting her gaze. "You're incredibly talented—there's no doubt about that."

Kirin lifted her head to look at him.

And this time, she didn't avert her gaze out of nervousness or embarrassment.

Staring at the boy in front of her—the one who had always faced her directly—Kirin remained silent for a moment.

Then, summoning her courage, she asked:

"Senpai... why did you challenge me specifically?"

She had finally asked the question.

Chapter 32: I Will Bring You Down from the Throne

Why did he challenge Toudou Kirin specifically?

That question was almost unnecessary.

"You're ranked first," Kaiser replied matter-of-factly, smiling. "Who wouldn't want to challenge the number one and take their place?"

It wasn't just about reputation and status—it was about tangible benefits.

In the short term, high-ranked students enjoyed privileges at the academy. The Page One members had especially outrageous perks, and the benefits of being ranked first were even more extreme. Just the special stipend awarded each month was enough to live comfortably without worries. Who wouldn't be tempted?

In the long run, students with top rankings also gained advantages in world-class competitions like the Festas, enjoying certain favorable conditions and increased exposure. The potential benefits were beyond what ordinary people could imagine—especially for a school's number one.

So, it was only natural for anyone to want to challenge the top. Excuses for doing so were easy to find.

As the one actually sitting at the top, Toudou Kirin obviously understood this better than anyone.

And yet—

"Senpai doesn't care about those things, does he?"

Kirin spoke with unusual seriousness.

"Oh?" Kaiser raised an eyebrow, intrigued. "What makes you think that?"

"Because you're not that kind of person."

Her tone was filled with rare certainty.

"You're quite confident about that," Kaiser said, half-jokingly. His teasing made Kirin a little embarrassed.

"It's because of what you said before..." she mumbled.

"What did I say?" Kaiser pressed.

Kirin hesitated for a moment before whispering almost inaudibly, "Senpai said... that if you won against me, my expression wouldn't be so heavy anymore..."

Clearly, she had remembered those words all this time.

In truth, what Kirin really wanted to ask wasn't why Kaiser challenged her—but why he said that.

It had created an illusion.

An illusion that he had challenged her for her sake.

Kaiser didn't deny it. He simply smiled faintly and continued walking.

Kirin quickly followed, walking beside him while constantly sneaking glances at his expression.

The little girl had patience—or perhaps she had already used up all her courage and didn't dare ask again.

Kaiser, meanwhile, kept walking forward, eyes fixed ahead.

"I know a little about your situation."

He spoke as if to himself.

The moment those words left his mouth, Kirin stiffened.

Kaiser, as if not noticing, continued.

"Your uncle, Toudou Kouichirou, works for Galaxy, the corporate conglomerate backing Seidoukan Academy."

"He's the head of the Seventh Guidance and Investigation Bureau in the Integrated Performing Arts Division, responsible for overseeing human resources in the Far East region."

"The Guidance and Investigation Bureau is the unit that effectively manages Seidoukan's scouting personnel and is closely linked to Festa performances. Because of that, his authority is quite significant."

"But he's not satisfied with that. He wants to climb even higher."

"So, he's trying to use you to get there."

Ignoring Kirin's increasingly shaken expression, Kaiser continued speaking.

"The Integrated Performing Arts Division is highly valued by Galaxy's highest executive board. If someone in its upper ranks could personally cultivate a Festa champion of historic proportions, it could secure them a position in the company's headquarters."

"To achieve that, he used you. He arranged your duels from the moment you enrolled, ensuring you became one of the Page One members. Then, during your first official ranking match, he had you challenge the former number one—so that by defeating them, you would immediately ascend to the top."

"Since then, nearly all your matches and schedules have been controlled by him. To keep you in first place, he constantly strategized for you, providing opponent intel and countermeasures, all so that you could become an unprecedented number one and elevate his own standing."

"In other words, sitting in the number one spot was never your choice."

Kaiser finally turned his gaze toward Kirin.

"Am I wrong?"

Kirin fell silent.

"...So, Senpai already knows that much about me."

Her voice was low, her expression dim.

"Not exactly." Kaiser shrugged. "I still don't understand why you go along with it."

That was a lie.

Kaiser understood better than anyone why Kirin obeyed the demands of a strict, even cruel uncle who berated and controlled her.

Because she wanted to save her father.

"...My father was imprisoned for a crime when I was eight."

Her lips trembled as she spoke, and Kaiser, momentarily surprised, listened as she shared her secret with unexpected ease.

"That day, he took me to a shop... and we ran into a robber."

"I... I wasn't careful and got caught as a hostage."

"To save me, my father..."

Kirin's voice grew quieter and quieter. The words "killed him" were barely audible, swallowed by the surrounding noise.

"I want to save my father."

But this sentence—she spoke with remarkable clarity and determination.

"That's why I came here, to this city."

This was the place closest to her wish.

"My uncle is influential. He managed to suppress my father's case all on his own. If his status rises and he gains more authority, then he can help free my father from prison."

This wasn't wishful thinking.

Kaiser knew all too well that in this world, bending laws and rewriting realities for personal gain was far from uncommon.

Especially here.

Invertia had long since shattered the old world order. In its place stood the Integrated Enterprise Foundation—a new economic system that had become the true rulers of society.

This system was what allowed the world to recover so rapidly.

But at the same time, to fuel that economic growth, these conglomerates would stop at nothing.

The Festas themselves existed to stimulate the economy—a massive, lucrative spectacle orchestrated by the corporate powers.

To make it work, they built this city, drawing Genestella from all over the world to fight on this stage.

And to attract Genestella, they made a promise—

Anyone who wins a Festa can make a wish.

A wish that all six conglomerates would work together to fulfill.

That was why competition among the six academies was so fierce—so ruthless that ambushes, betrayals, and even assassinations were not uncommon.

If Toudou Kouichirou managed to become an executive in Galaxy, securing a prisoner's release would be effortless.

That was why Kirin obeyed him.

And yet—

"For someone who can help him climb the ranks, he sure treats you terribly." Kaiser's voice was calm. "I heard he beats and scolds you all the time. That whole incident with the princess—when you helped her—he must've given you hell for it, didn't he?"

Otherwise, Kirin wouldn't have been in such a bad state for those few days.

"...It couldn't be helped."

Kirin lowered her head.

She had disobeyed.

She had aided a competitor.

"It couldn't be helped, huh?"

Kaiser's expression remained indifferent.

Then, he spoke.

"In that case, my decision to challenge you was the right one."

Kirin's eyes widened.

"Senpai...?"

She stared at Kaiser in bewilderment.

And he smiled.

"Wait and see."

Kaiser's voice was quiet but firm.

"I will bring you down from that throne—

And shatter his ridiculous delusions."

Chapter 33: Things Will Be Different

Seidoukan Academy—Girls' Dormitory

Toudou Kirin stepped into an unusually spacious room.

"...I'm back."

Though the room was empty, she spoke the words out of habit—perhaps as a way to dispel the lingering loneliness in her heart.

At just thirteen years old, Kirin still hadn't grown out of her old mannerisms. Even though she possessed the determination to save her father, everything she had to endure weighed heavily on her.

Her uncle's oppressive expectations.

The isolation of having no real companions.

The constant challenges that came with being ranked first.

All of it placed an immense burden on her young heart, making the solitude of her dorm room feel even more unbearable.

Yet today, something felt... different.

"...Kaiser-senpai..."

Lying on her bed, Kirin found her mind swirling with his words.

She didn't even remember what she had done or said after that conversation. She had simply followed behind him in a daze, all the way back to Seidoukan Academy. Only when he saw her off at the dormitory entrance did they finally part ways.

"What exactly did Senpai mean?"

Kirin had asked herself that question countless times.

At first glance, Kaiser's final words didn't sound particularly kind.

After all, he said he would bring her down from her throne and shatter her uncle's ambitions. That was not something she should be happy about.

If her uncle had heard those words, he would have flown into a rage.

And yet...

For some reason, Kirin couldn't bring herself to feel upset.

Instead, she felt a faint, inexplicable sense of anticipation.

As if—after being trapped in a swamp for so long—someone had finally reached out a hand toward her.

What was he planning to do?

What was he thinking?

Why did he say something like that?

One question after another filled Kirin's mind, making it impossible to think of anything else.

Until—

"Beep."

A holographic window suddenly appeared in front of her.

" ... "

Kirin pursed her lips, hesitating to accept the call.

She already knew who it was.

More than that, she simply didn't want to hear that voice right now.

She didn't want her thoughts to be disrupted.

But...

She also knew she still wasn't strong enough to disobey her uncle's will.

Suppressing her emotions, Kirin reached out and accepted the call.

Meanwhile...

Having just escorted Kirin back to the dorms, Kaiser had yet to return to his own residence. Instead, he had opened the Official Ranking Battle system.

"Challenge Request: Rank #1."

He quickly located Toudou Kirin's name and selected it without hesitation.

Though there were still more than two weeks before the next Ranking Battle, now that he had made his decision, there was no need for any further hesitation.

With that done, Kaiser closed the holographic screen and headed toward the underground storage facility.

However, before he could reach his destination—

A call came in.

"President?"

Seeing the familiar face on the screen, Kaiser was a bit surprised.

"Good afternoon, Kaiser-kun."

On the other end of the call, Claudia Enfield sat in what appeared to be the Student Council office, a massive glass wall visible behind her. As always, she wore a mature and composed smile.

"I heard Julis invited you all out today. Did you have fun?"

She chuckled softly as she asked the question.

"It was fine. Just a simple meal." Kaiser answered truthfully, then added with a playful smirk, "Too bad you weren't there, President."

"Unfortunately, with the Festa season approaching, my workload has only increased," Claudia sighed, feigning regret. "If I had the chance, I would have liked to go... though I'm not sure how Julis would feel about that."

"That sounds rough." Kaiser offered a token of sympathy before getting to the point. "But I doubt you called just to ask about that, right?"

"Why not?" Claudia tilted her head slightly. "You all got to enjoy a pleasant outing while I was stuck working. Am I not allowed to ask how it went?"

Her words were spoken in the same teasing tone as always.

Yet, for some reason, Kaiser felt that her smile seemed somewhat forced... and maybe even a little—resentful?

...No way.

"...If the President is interested, I could invite you next time?"

Kaiser tested the waters with a casual suggestion.

To his surprise, Claudia blinked, momentarily taken aback. Then, her smile grew more genuine.

"Are you inviting me, Kaiser-kun?" she asked, her tone laced with amusement. "Just me? Or would you invite others as well?"

Kaiser let out a dry laugh, unsure how to respond.

Something felt... off.

Had her attitude toward him changed?

"Alright, I won't tease you anymore."

Sensing his unease, Claudia reined in her playful demeanor and adopted a more serious expression.

"Kaiser-kun, are you really planning to challenge Toudou Kirin in the next Ranking Battle?"

So, she had already found out.

But Kaiser wasn't surprised.

As Seidoukan's Student Council President, it was only natural for Claudia to be immediately informed of any major challenges.

And soon enough, word would spread. Before long, the entire academy would know that Kaiser had issued a direct challenge to Toudou Kirin.

It was bound to cause a huge stir.

Kaiser had already anticipated that.

"I am," he answered without hesitation. "President, do you think I'm being reckless?"

After all, just a short while ago, he had been an unknown student ranked outside the listings.

Even though his victory over the former #13 had proven he was at least Page One material, challenging the number one so soon after his rise would make many people think he was getting ahead of himself.

Given those circumstances, it was only natural for Claudia to be concerned.

"Toudou-san is very strong," Claudia stated outright. "Even though she's only a first-year in the Middle Division, her skills are unquestionably at the top of the academy."

"Even with Ser-Veresta, the level of power you displayed in your last Ranking Battle wouldn't be enough to defeat her."

"Even knowing that, do you still plan to go through with the challenge?"

Her voice was calm but firm, showing her genuine concern.

But Kaiser's expression didn't change.

He had watched Kirin's battles before. Even if he hadn't seen them live, it was enough to grasp her strength.

So he knew—Claudia wasn't exaggerating.

With the abilities he had demonstrated in his previous battle, he might be able to handle some Page One members. Even against Julis, who was ranked fifth, he would be confident in his chances.

But against Kirin, things were different.

Even the original protagonist had lost to her once—even after unsealing his power and obtaining Ser-Veresta.

Even with Ser-Veresta in hand, Kaiser wasn't sure if he could win.

At least, not as he was now.

But—

"That was before," he said calmly. "By the time the next Ranking Battle arrives, things will be different."

" ... "

Claudia studied him for a moment.

Then, she smiled.

"In that case, I'll be looking forward to seeing how much you've grown."

Kaiser simply nodded, then continued toward the underground storage facility.

Time Passed Quickly

Before long, the day of the Official Ranking Battle had arrived.

The Comprehensive Arena was once again bustling with activity.

Word of Kaiser's challenge had spread far and wide, fueling excitement for this round of battles.

Chapter 34: Rank One—Here I Come

Comprehensive Arena—Main Stage

By now, the audience had mostly taken their seats.

"This is the third Official Ranking Battle of the year, right?"

"Yeah, it's been three months since the semester started. Next month, the real highlight won't be our academy's ranking matches—it'll be the Festa."

"So this season's Festa is finally starting."

"The Phoenix Festa is up first. I wonder who from our academy signed up?"

"I heard the Glühen Rose—Rank #5—registered for the Phoenix Festa."

"What? That princess actually signed up?"

"Who's her partner?"

"Not sure. Apparently, some no-name ranked outside the listings..."

"Let's focus on the ranking battles first. There's a huge match today."

"Yeah, can you believe Blazing Star Swordsman actually challenged Keen-Edged Tempest? That guy's got guts."

"Rank #10, Mist Witch, lost easily to Keen-Edged Tempest last time. Does a Rank #13, who's not even part of Page One, really stand a chance against Rank #1?"

"But people say Blazing Star Swordsman has the strength of a Page One member. Let's wait and see."

"Hah. Hope he doesn't get crushed too badly..."

The audience buzzed with chatter, and the center of attention was undoubtedly the upcoming duel between Kaiser and Toudou Kirin.

Just like the previous Ranking Battle, only two matches featured Page One members. But unlike before, both were challenges issued by lower-ranked contenders.

One match was between Rank #15 and Rank #12.

The other—Kaiser challenging Rank #1.

There was no comparison.

A Rank #15 challenging Rank #12 was standard.

But a Rank #13, who had only recently entered the rankings, challenging the strongest in Seidoukan Academy?

It was the undisputed main event.

Naturally, their match was scheduled as the final battle of the day—only after all the other fights had concluded.

VIP Spectator Box

"Seriously, those two could've given us some warning."

Seated in the exclusive VIP section, Julis sat with arms crossed, looking visibly irritated.

"Yeah." Ayato, sitting beside her, smiled wryly. "I still can't believe he actually challenged Toudou-san."

Just a short while ago, the four of them had gone out together for a peaceful meal. The atmosphere had been lighthearted and pleasant.

For Kaiser to suddenly challenge Kirin—it was shocking, to say the least.

"There's probably more to this than we know," Claudia remarked from Julis's other side, smiling. "But regardless, their duel is happening. All we can do is watch."

Then, as if casually shifting the topic, she added,

"Speaking of surprises, I heard the two of you decided to partner up for the Phoenix Festa. Now that was unexpected."

At this, Ayato gave a sheepish chuckle.

Julis, on the other hand, looked distinctly uncomfortable.

"...A lot happened on our end too. Before we knew it, it just turned out this way."

Over the past two weeks, Julis had been continuously targeted by the same person who had ambushed her before. The attacks had escalated, causing her real trouble.

Ayato had somehow gotten involved in the conflict and, after a series of events, helped Julis drive off her pursuer.

Through this ordeal, the two had resolved their previous conflicts and even opened up to each other.

Thus, they had decided to team up for the upcoming Phoenix Festa.

"That's great news." Claudia, as the Student Council President, was well aware of the incidents Julis had been dealing with. She smiled knowingly. "I was a little worried you wouldn't find a partner. Your social skills aren't exactly the best, you know?"

"Mind your own business!" Julis huffed, turning away. "Besides, shouldn't we be focusing on today's match?"

"True." Ayato scratched his head. "I honestly don't know who to root for. This is complicated."

"Haha." Claudia, ever unbothered, maintained her usual smile. "Like I said, all we can do is watch."

"Let's just see how it all unfolds."

Hearing this, Julis and Ayato exchanged glances, momentarily setting aside their conflicting thoughts.

"...Who do you think will win?" Julis asked.

"I'm not sure." Claudia shook her head. "Logically, Toudou-san has the higher chance of victory."

"Yeah." Ayato nodded. "I've seen her fights. Honestly, her swordsmanship is unbelievable—it's overwhelmingly strong."

Ayato himself was a swordsman.

And his strength spoke for itself—he had only lacked the opportunity to fully demonstrate it.

Yet, when he watched Kirin's duels, even he had to admit...

He was outmatched.

At least in terms of pure sword technique, he couldn't compare.

Realizing that someone so skilled was only thirteen years old had sent a chill down his spine.

However—

"...Kaiser doesn't seem like the type to challenge someone without a reason. If he issued this challenge, he must believe he has a real shot at winning."

That was Ayato's take on the situation.

"That guy is definitely unpredictable." Julis frowned. "But I still can't picture Kirin losing."

Claudia didn't comment further.

Instead, her hand casually brushed against the sheath at her waist.

"...You'll surprise me, won't you?"

She murmured to herself, smiling softly.

And with that, the Official Ranking Battle was declared open.

Waiting Area—Contestants' Lounge

As the battles progressed, one fighter after another was called to the arena.

The waiting area gradually emptied.

Just like last time, Kaiser remained in a corner, leaning against the wall with his eyes closed.

Other competitors kept sneaking glances at him—some curious, some skeptical.

The last time he had been here, he was a nobody.

Now, he was one of the most anticipated participants of the day.

Not that he cared.

Ignoring the eyes on him, Kaiser remained deep in thought.

He recalled a scene from a few nights ago—the last time he absorbed Manadyte.

That night, with Ser-Veresta's assistance, he had drained every last bit of Manadyte stored in the underground vault.

Yes.

Every last piece.

Yet, the results had been... underwhelming.

"Even after absorbing so much, the growth isn't as dramatic anymore..."

Kaiser pondered.

"Is it because my current strength is already too high? Does progress slow down at this stage?"

"Or... have normal Manadytes stopped being effective for me?"

Whichever it was, one thing was clear.

His rapid power surge was coming to an end.

But—

"...This much is enough."

Kaiser opened his eyes, his irises gleaming with resolve.

"Rank One—Here I come."

A surge of immense Prana pulsed from his body, distorting the air around him for an instant.

The final battle of the night was about to begin.

Chapter 35: Kaiser vs. Toudou Kirin

At the same time, in another waiting area, Toudou Kirin sat alone on a long bench.

Dressed in her Middle Division uniform, she carried a real blade at her waist, its sheath resting lightly against her lap. She sat in silence, waiting for her turn, her gaze fixed on the holographic screen before her.

Displayed on it was an extraordinarily detailed report—every recorded aspect of her opponent's academic career, combat history, ability growth, and even trivial matters like dietary preferences.

It was an intelligence report prepared by her uncle, Toudou Kouichirou.

Kirin had read it countless times. She had memorized its contents so thoroughly that she could recite them backward.

Yet, every time she reviewed it, she couldn't help but feel amazed.

"Just a little over a month ago, he was so ordinary... but after obtaining Ser-Veresta, Kaiser-senpai became someone completely different..."

From the information her uncle had gathered, Kaiser's transformation after acquiring Ser-Veresta could only be described as a complete rebirth.

His performance in his duel against former Rank #13, Arkadi Fankenn, had already been surprising. But according to recent intelligence, his strength might far exceed what was shown in that match.

Although Kaiser hadn't fought publicly since his last Ranking Battle, there were rumors—accounts of him training at dawn, running at speeds beyond human limits and practicing swordsmanship so precise it seemed superhuman.

Kouichirou's intelligence network had collected all these details and delivered them to Kirin.

And every time she read through them, she found herself astonished.

"...I think I might actually be looking forward to this."

The thought escaped her lips before she could stop it—surprising even herself.

She had expected to feel conflicted about this duel, perhaps burdened by its significance.

Yet now that the moment had arrived, she felt neither nervous nor weighed down.

Instead—

She felt excited.

She knew exactly what that meant.

"More than worrying about everything else... do I just want a fair and honorable duel against Kaiser-senpai?"

After all, she was a swordsman.

And a true swordsman could not ignore the call of a worthy opponent.

The realization that she still possessed this desire—that she still craved battle against the strong—brought a small smile to her lips.

"Would the next competitors please enter the stage?"

A mechanical announcement rang through the waiting area.

Her school badge emitted a faint glow.

By now, all the other matches had concluded.

This was the final battle.

"...Alright."

Kirin patted her cheeks lightly, then stood up.

At her waist, Senbakiri shifted slightly in its sheath, letting out a faint metallic hum—almost as if it, too, was eager for the fight ahead.

Comprehensive Arena—Main Stage

"OOOOOOHHHHHHHHHH!!"

A wave of deafening cheers erupted through the stands as the final match was announced.

Excitement crackled in the air like an oncoming storm.

The long-awaited showdown was about to begin.

From opposite ends of the arena, two figures stepped forward.

The crowd's energy surged even higher.

"It's finally starting."

In the VIP section, Ayato and the others sat up straight, eyes locked on the two approaching fighters.

Down on the battlefield, the two competitors advanced toward each other.

And curiously—

Both of them were smiling.

Within moments, they stopped at the center of the stage, maintaining a measured distance.

Gazing at the girl before him, Kaiser narrowed his eyes slightly.

"...You're looking good, Kirin."

He chuckled.

"Yes. Even I'm surprised."

Kirin's expression was unusually calm—almost serene.

"I had so many things I wanted to ask you, so many questions I hoped you'd answer... but now that I'm here, none of that seems to matter anymore."

Kaiser met her gaze.

"That just proves what a true swordsman you are."

He smirked.

"You always say you're useless. But when you stand here, everything about you—your stance, your presence—tells a different story."

Kirin was silent for a moment.

Then, her expression grew serious.

"...Perhaps swordsmanship is the only thing I'm good at. Besides wielding a blade, I'm no good at anything else."

She exhaled softly.

"That's why, in this duel—I will find my answer. Through my sword, I will uncover your true intentions, Senpai."

"No need to go through all that effort."

Kaiser shook his head.

"When this battle is over, I'll tell you exactly what I intend to do."

"...Alright."

Kirin nodded firmly.

"Then, Senpai—please guide me."

With those words, she drew her sword.

The blade slid free from its sheath with a crisp, ringing note.

"Blade length: 2 shaku, 3 sun, 4 bu. Crafted by Inoue Shinkai. Name—'Senbakiri.'"

Holding the sword in both hands, she settled into a middle guard stance, her blade's tip perfectly aligned toward Kaiser.

"Please guide me."

In that instant—

Kirin's entire presence shifted.

The soft-spoken, timid girl vanished.

In her place stood Keen-Edged Tempest, the cold, razor-sharp swordswoman who reigned supreme at Seidoukan Academy.

This was the true Toudou Kirin.

"Zing!"

A brilliant crimson glow flared from the pitch-black Activator in Kaiser's hand.

The embedded Urm-Manadyte pulsed ominously.

A surge of Mana gathered—raw heat spilling into the air, condensing into a pure-white energy blade.

"Vwoom."

Kaiser twirled the sword effortlessly, its movements smooth and fluid—almost natural.

"One of the Four-Colored Magic Swords—Orga Lux, 'Ser-Veresta.'"

He lifted the blazing sword and pointed it directly at Kirin.

"Let's begin."

The moment his words fell—

The entire arena exploded into deafening cheers.

VIP Spectator Box

In the stands, Ayato's hand instinctively went to his waist.

Something was... vibrating.

"This is...?!"

Ayato's eyes widened in shock.

"Oh my."

Claudia smiled, glancing at him.

"It seems the bond between magic swords runs deeper than we expected."

She chuckled softly.

"Feeling the presence of Ser-Veresta... your sword must be getting excited too."

Hearing this, Ayato calmed down, his fingers brushing over the hilt of his sealed weapon.

He turned his full attention back to the stage.

"Here it comes."

Julis murmured.

As if on cue, the school badges of both fighters flared red.

"Seidoukan Academy, Official Ranking Battle—Final Match."

"Kaiser vs. Toudou Kirin."

"Duel—BEGIN!"

A mechanical voice declared the start of the fight.

Above the stage, holographic displays lit up with their names. The panels rotated outward, illuminating the arena.

"Ding!"

The moment the start signal sounded—

"Zing—"

A dazzling burst of energy surrounded Kirin.

Her Prana surged.

"I'm coming, Senpai!"

She called out—

And in the blink of an eye—

She moved.

Like a storm.

Like a flash of lightning.

Like pure speed itself.