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Chapter 8: Chapter 36-40

Chapter 36: "Renzuru"

"Swish!"

As the chilling blade sliced through the air, its edge flashing with a sharp glint, a gust of wind accompanied its rapid descent toward Kaiser.

It was an incredibly swift strike—unleashed the very instant Kirin Toudou closed the distance. The sheer speed was almost inconceivable.

"Coming straight at me from the start?"

Kaiser narrowed his eyes slightly. Even as the thought flickered through his mind, his body reacted instinctively. He raised Ser-Veresta, meeting the incoming Senbakiri head-on.

However, just as their blades were about to collide, Kirin suddenly withdrew her sword.

"Haah!"

Following the momentum of her strike, Kirin twisted her wrist sharply, retracting the blade in an instant. Then, with a rapid pivot, she redirected the sword from another angle, slashing toward Kaiser's flank.

"...!"

Kaiser's body moved instinctively once more, dodging the side slash by a hair's breadth.

Yet, even as her previous strike missed, Kirin seamlessly adjusted her footwork, spinning with fluid grace. Her sword traced a perfect arc through the air, maintaining both its speed and force as it swung toward Kaiser once again.

"Swish!" "Swish!" "Swish!"

The sound of Senbakiri cutting through the air rang out in rapid succession, silver arcs of light relentlessly pursuing Kaiser with unbroken rhythm.

It was a seamless barrage of attacks, each strike flowing into the next with terrifying precision, leaving no room to counter.

Kaiser attempted to counterattack, raising Ser-Veresta multiple times to intercept the incoming blows. But every time his blade was about to clash with Senbakiri, Kirin would swiftly withdraw her sword, avoiding direct contact—only to immediately strike again from a different angle, forcing Kaiser into constant evasive maneuvers.

At a glance, it appeared as though Kirin were wielding countless swords at once, unleashing an endless flurry of slashes upon him.

"Impressive!"

Kaiser evaded an upward diagonal slash aimed at his academy badge with an agile movement. He voiced his admiration even as he retreated rapidly.

"Don't even think about running!"

Kirin, now a far cry from her usual meek self, was relentless in her pursuit. She hounded Kaiser aggressively, refusing to let him escape. Each strike was executed with extraordinary fluidity, swift and precise, seamlessly chaining into the next.

Slash after slash—each faster, sharper, and more unyielding than the last. Her relentless attacks gave Kaiser the sensation of being ensnared in an ever-tightening web of swordplay, as though he were being swallowed by an endless storm of gleaming silver.

It felt as if he had been completely surrounded, trapped in a dance of flashing blades with no avenue of escape. The only outcome would be his exhaustion, leading to his inevitable demise at the edge of Senbakiri's blade.

"Here!"

Kirin's petite frame leaped into the air, her body spinning in a blur as Senbakiri's edge whirled like a deadly top, slicing toward Kaiser with fierce momentum.

"Not that easy!"

Kaiser had no intention of remaining on the defensive forever. Seeing Kirin's relentless onslaught showing no signs of stopping, he finally unleashed his full strength.

Countless star-like motes of light erupted around him as an astonishing surge of Prana ignited within his body.

From the VIP seating, Julis' eyes widened in shock.

"What an incredible amount of Prana!"

Beside her, Ayato Amagiri's expression turned solemn.

As a Genestella, Ayato prided himself on possessing an exceptional reserve of Prana—one of the highest in the academy.

To his knowledge, he had never encountered anyone who could rival his capacity for Prana. Not even his sister, nor any of the Page One ranked students in Seidoukan Academy, could match him in sheer energy.

Yet today, he had found someone whose reserves might be comparable to his own.

"Did he always have this much Prana?"

Even Claudia Enfield, who had always seemed composed, couldn't hide her surprise at the scene unfolding before her.

Kaiser focused his immense Prana into his arm. Then, in an astonishing move, he lifted his hand—meeting Kirin’s blade not with steel, but with his bare arm.

Clang!

The next instant, the sound of metal striking metal echoed across the battlefield as Kaiser’s arm intercepted Senbakiri’s blade.

"What?!"

Kirin’s expression changed.

Prana was known to enhance a Genestella’s offensive and defensive capabilities—particularly the latter, where its effects were most pronounced.

But to block her attack directly with his body? She had never encountered anyone who could do such a thing.

Just how much Prana had he used to achieve this?

After all, she was also a Genestella, and Senbakiri was a legendary sword with a storied history—its sharpness rivaled even that of most Lux weapons, surpassing ordinary Orga Lux in sheer cutting power.

Her strikes were sharp enough to cleave through steel.

Yet Kaiser had stopped it bare-handed...?

"This isn't the time to be distracted."

Kaiser's voice reached Kirin's ears just as a searing slash from Ser-Veresta followed.

"...!"

Kirin quickly flipped backward, twisting through the air to avoid the blazing arc. She somersaulted multiple times before landing, narrowly evading the strike.

However, she felt no sense of relief.

"...Renzuru was broken."

Her whispered words made Kaiser raise an intrigued brow.

"So that was Toudou-ryuu's Renzuru just now?"

Toudou-ryuu was a widely renowned sword school in this world.

Founded in the late Edo period, it was a modernized sword style designed specifically for one-on-one dueling, earning the moniker "Like Folding Cranes."

Swordsmen trained in this style could chain their strikes together with precision, their attacks forming an unbroken sequence—just like folding a paper crane, each move flowing into the next seamlessly, leaving opponents with no room to escape.

The ultimate technique of Toudou-ryuu, Renzuru, embodied this principle at its peak.

It consisted of a combination of forty-nine different attack patterns, forming an infinite chain of relentless slashes—claiming to have neither an end nor a limit.

No matter how one defended or evaded, Renzuru ensured that the assault continued without pause, overwhelming the target until they were utterly defeated.

Because of Toudou-ryuu's global reach, many in Asterisk had learned its techniques. However, among all practitioners, only one swordsman had ever truly mastered Renzuru.

The heiress of Toudou-ryuu herself—Kirin Toudou.

"Toudou-ryuu has forty-nine interconnected techniques. When combined into a flawless continuous assault, it forms Renzuru."

Kirin's clear voice echoed as she steadied her breathing.

"By freely linking these techniques together, a swordsman of Toudou-ryuu can attack ceaselessly, using subtle cues such as breathing patterns, spacing, and gaze control to prevent their opponent from counterattacking—completely suppressing them until they are defeated."

During her last Official Ranking Battle, the Tenth-Ranked "Mist-Deep Witch" had fallen to this very technique, overwhelmed by the relentless barrage, unable to counter even once before succumbing to defeat.

"Renzuru is inescapable. Once caught within its flow, breaking free is impossible—not even the previous Rank One could withstand it."

Kirin's expression mixed admiration with wonder.

"But you, senpai... you're the first person I've ever met who could break free from Renzuru—and in such an unexpected way."

She looked at Kaiser with pure respect.

"You really are strong."

Her genuine words of praise made Kaiser shrug.

"Well, that's thanks to who I am now. If it were the old me, I wouldn't have been able to pull that off."

And that was the truth.

Over the past month, Kaiser had completely absorbed all the Manadyte from the underground vault Claudia had provided him.

While his growth had now reached a bottleneck—where ordinary Manadyte could no longer enhance him—the immense reserves he had obtained had utterly transformed him.

He was no longer just another middling student who couldn't even make it into the Named Charts.

Now, in terms of physical ability, there was no one in Seidoukan Academy who could surpass him.

And in Prana, while he might not yet rival Ayato, he wasn't far behind. In all of Seidoukan, only Ayato could claim a greater reserve of energy.

That was why Kaiser had dared to block Kirin's blade with his bare hand.

Had it been the old him, he wouldn't have even considered it.

But now?

Now, he could stand among the strongest.

Chapter 37: The Place of True Strength

The moment Kaiser stepped onto the stage, his performance had already rendered the audience completely silent.

"...Did you see that?"

"No... I couldn't see a thing..."

"Their battle rhythm is way too fast. My eyes can't keep up at all."

"I'm not surprised that Keen-Edged Tempest is this strong, but what's going on with Blazing Star Swordsman?"

"Isn't he way stronger than he was in the last Official Ranking Battle?"

Many who had seen Kaiser's previous duel now wore expressions of astonishment, clearly taken aback by his display.

"He's keeping up with Kirin's speed?" Julis was just as shocked. "That guy... was he holding back in the last Official Ranking Battle?"

No. He wasn't.

Claudia, standing nearby, silently refuted Julis' assumption.

She didn't know the full extent of Kaiser's true strength, but she was certain that he hadn't possessed this level of power before.

Even Toudou Kouichirou had managed to gather detailed data on Kaiser, and Claudia, who had been quietly keeping an eye on him for some time, naturally had access to the same information.

From everything she had gathered, one thing was clear—Kaiser had not been this strong before.

He had grown at an astonishing pace in a short period of time.

As for how... Claudia immediately thought of the Manadyte.

After all, when Kaiser had first sought her help, he had openly stated that with enough Manadyte, he could rapidly improve his abilities.

And now, it seemed that everything he had claimed back then... had come true.

"What an unexpected surprise."

Claudia muttered softly, not sure whether to be delighted or exasperated.

Kaiser, oblivious to the murmurs in the audience, remained locked in a standoff with Kirin.

"Toudou-ryuu's Renzuru is truly impressive. It was an eye-opening experience." He smiled faintly. "But if you think that alone will be enough to defeat me, it won't be that easy."

"Is that so?" Kirin gazed at him with a slight smile. "Then perhaps it's time you show me your swordsmanship, senpai?"

Hearing this, Kaiser shook his head.

"I don't have the kind of masterful swordsmanship you do, nor am I some rigorously trained swordsman. The only reason I use a sword at all is because my first true weapon happened to be one."

As he spoke, he gathered more Prana, his aura surging.

"You've said it before, haven't you? My swordplay doesn't seem like a style meant to fully unleash my own strength, but rather a technique focused on maximizing the potential of my weapon."

"You were right."

"And so, I'll show you where my true strengths lie."

A massive surge of Prana flooded into Ser-Veresta, causing the Urm-Manadyte embedded within the sword to glow brilliantly.

"Vmm—"

Black patterns emerged along the sword's body, writhing like living veins as they spiraled downward, merging into the Urm-Manadyte. The pristine white blade began to tremble.

The heat radiating from Ser-Veresta abruptly spiked, its once-white surface gradually darkening into a deep purple-black.

"Boom!"

In the next instant, Kaiser's entire body seemed to ignite, his form wavering like a mirage within the searing heat. Scorching winds erupted from him in every direction, rippling outward with terrifying intensity.

"He's coming!"

Kirin tensed.

"What an incredible heat...!"

In the VIP seating, Ayato and the others felt the scorching wind rush toward them.

"It's the same as last time!"

"The move that instantly defeated Arkadi Fankenn...!"

"He's finally using it!"

The audience collectively held their breath, their focus sharpening in anticipation of the battle's climax.

The heat radiating from Kaiser intensified further, turning the entire stage a deep crimson, as though it were being baked in an inferno. Even the defensive barriers automatically activated, preventing the sweltering air from reaching the audience.

At that moment, countless spectators recalled the rumors surrounding Ser-Veresta.

"Anything it touches melts. If it pierces the earth, it turns the ground into a furnace."

Now, that legend had become reality before their very eyes.

Caught within this blistering heat, sweat trickled down Kirin's forehead. She stared at Kaiser, momentarily dazed by the sight before her.

At the heart of the roaring heatwaves, Kaiser burned with overwhelming Prana, his entire body radiating like a miniature star.

This was...

"Blazing Star Swordsman..."

Kirin whispered in awe.

And the next instant, the blazing swordsman moved.

"Boom!"

Like an explosion of fire, Kaiser vanished from sight.

"——!"

A surge of instinctive danger flared in Kirin's mind. Without thinking, she leapt away.

"Vmm!"

The moment she moved, Kaiser reappeared where she had been—Ser-Veresta swinging down in a devastating arc, sending a scorching wave of flames slicing through the air.

"Boom!"

An explosion of heat erupted as he disappeared again.

"No——!"

Kirin couldn't see him, but she felt it—an oppressive heat rushing toward her at terrifying speed.

"Shhh——!"

The sound of cutting wind filled the air. Kaiser, wreathed in searing winds, streaked toward her like a shooting star, Ser-Veresta slashing forward.

At the last possible moment, Kirin's Prana surged to its peak. She twisted her body with all her might, barely dodging the violet-black blade slicing through the air.

As they passed each other mid-air, Kaiser shot toward the ceiling, landing on the transparent barrier above the stage. Hanging upside down, he stomped against the barrier—exploding forward once again in a burst of fire.

Again and again, Kaiser lunged at Kirin, his speed reaching an almost supernatural level. The audience could only see a streak of flames flashing across the stage, leaving them gaping in disbelief.

"I can't see him at all...!"

Kirin narrowly evaded blow after blow, nearly having her school badge struck multiple times by Kaiser's seemingly omnipresent blade.

If not for the intense heat preceding each of his attacks, alerting her just in time, she would have already lost.

Realizing this, Kirin gripped her sword tightly.

"...Stay calm."

She took a deep breath, focusing her senses.

"The speed he's moving at is terrifying, but it's not completely untraceable."

She lifted her gaze, scanning her surroundings intently.

"...I have to focus."

"...I have to see through him."

A faint light flickered in her eyes as she steeled herself.

But—

"Too late!"

A voice suddenly reached her ears.

Before she could react, Kaiser's figure appeared in her vision.

This time, there was no heat—no warning.

"—?!"

Kirin's face paled.

"Vmm!"

The violet-black edge of Ser-Veresta slashed through the air. The high-energy blade vibrated, leaving behind an afterimage as its sound reverberated throughout the stage.

For a moment—

The entire audience stood as one, their movements synchronized by sheer instinct.

Even Ayato, Julis, and Claudia in the VIP seats shot to their feet.

On stage, Kaiser and Kirin had both stopped moving, standing opposite each other.

Kirin's body was leaning backward, as if about to retreat.

Kaiser stood motionless, Ser-Veresta humming in his grasp—the sword already in a completed strike.

The world seemed to freeze.

Then—

"Crack—"

A crisp sound echoed.

A single, glowing red fissure appeared on Kirin's school badge.

The badge slowly split apart.

"Clatter—"

The two halves hit the ground, ringing with finality.

"Duel concluded."

"Victor: Kaiser."

The mechanical voice announcing the result rang through the silent battlefield.

Chapter 38: Be My Partner

"Duel concluded."

"Victor: Kaiser."

As the mechanical voice announcing the result echoed loudly across the stage, not a single person in the audience reacted immediately.

"...Huh?"

Kirin Toudou stood frozen, her expression blank with confusion. It took her a long moment before she could even process what had just happened.

"...I lost?"

"Keen-Edged Tempest... lost?"

"No way..."

Many spectators exchanged stunned glances, struggling to accept such a sudden outcome.

Amidst the disbelief, Kaiser sheathed Ser-Veresta, returning it to its Activator state, and spoke up.

"With this, I'd say I've fulfilled my promise."

His words finally pulled Kirin out of her daze.

"I see..."

Looking at the young man before her, Kirin let out a bitter smile.

"In the final moment... you stopped using the heat wind to accelerate yourself, didn't you?"

That was why she hadn't sensed his approach.

"I had no choice." Kaiser shrugged. "If my heat wind always alerts my opponent the moment I get close, then keeping it active would just be a waste of Prana."

"Against someone like Arkadi Fankenn, it wouldn't have mattered. But against someone as sharp and quick-reacting as you, that flaw became too obvious to ignore."

"So really, I should be thanking you—for making me realize the weakness in my technique."

Had it not been for Kirin, Kaiser might never have noticed this critical flaw in his heat-assisted acceleration.

His gratitude was genuine.

Seeing this, Kirin could only smile wryly. But soon enough, she felt a strange sense of relief washing over her.

"Congratulations, senpai. You're now Seidoukan's Rank One."

Even though she had lost, even though everything she had fought for was now meaningless, Kirin was surprised to find that she didn't feel any sadness at all.

Instead, it was as if she had been freed from some unseen burden.

For the first time in a long while, her expression felt lighter.

Then—

"—Yes. That's the expression I wanted to see."

Kaiser suddenly spoke up.

"...What?"

Kirin blinked in surprise.

Kaiser smiled.

"The way you look now is so much better than when I first met you."

Hearing that, Kirin's mind flashed back to their first encounter.

Back then, her expression must have been heavy—so heavy that it had prompted him to say something like this.

"A face weighed down by burdens doesn't suit you," Kaiser said, his gaze steady. "Especially since I know exactly what you've been carrying all this time."

As someone who understood this world's story from the beginning, Kaiser had always known what Kirin was shouldering.

That was why, when he saw this small girl carrying such an oppressive weight on her shoulders, pretending he hadn't noticed was never an option.

She had won countless duels, yet never felt any joy in victory.

She had been Rank One, yet had never been truly proud of it.

Thinking about that, Kaiser had spoken those words before they parted ways that day.

Was it sympathy? Or pity?

Kaiser didn't know, nor did he want to dwell on it.

All he knew was that he had wanted to test the strength of Seidoukan's strongest, to stand on the grandest stage this world had to offer, to carve out an unforgettable life story.

Challenging Kirin had always been inevitable—regardless of the circumstances.

So he had never hesitated to say those words to her.

"Seeing your face now, I feel relieved too." Kaiser smiled. "So, congratulations, Kirin."

At his words, Kirin's eyes glistened faintly.

She couldn't quite put her emotions into words.

"Senpai, I..."

Just as she was about to say something, Kaiser cut her off.

"And now, I have a formal invitation to make."

Under the gaze of everyone present—on the grandest stage of Seidoukan Academy—Kaiser looked straight at the girl before him.

"Be my partner, Kirin Toudou."

Silence.

For a brief moment, the entire audience fell into stunned silence.

Then, as realization set in, almost everyone's eyes widened in shock.

"Partner...?"

Kirin's voice trembled slightly, her expression a mix of anxiety and disbelief.

If... if she wasn't misunderstanding... then what Kaiser was doing right now was...

"That's right."

Kaiser, as if reading her thoughts, nodded with certainty.

"The Festa season is about to begin. In just about a month, the Phoenix Festa, held every summer of the first year, will commence."

"I'm planning to enter the Phoenix Festa."

"And for that, I need a partner."

The Phoenix Festa was a duo tournament.

To participate—to even register—the first condition was to form a two-person team.

For Kaiser, who wanted to experience the most exciting moments this world had to offer, there was no way he could pass up the Phoenix Festa.

His initial reason for approaching Kirin had, in fact, been to invite her to form a team.

"You want to save your father, don't you?" Kaiser spoke seriously, his gaze unwavering.

"Then forming a team with me and winning the Phoenix Festa would be the fastest way to make that happen."

Winning any Festa granted the victors a single wish, which the Integrated Enterprise Foundation would fulfill.

Given their authority—practically rulers of the world—having them help free Kirin's father would be as easy as lifting a finger.

Of course, that required winning.

"I know—it won't be easy."

Though his words acknowledged the challenge, his expression showed not the slightest trace of fear.

"But I believe that if the two of us team up, we have what it takes. Don't you think so?"

One was Seidoukan's current Rank One.

The other had just defeated her and was about to take the Rank One position.

A team formed by the two of them... there was no need to explain how strong that combination would be.

"So?"

Kaiser extended his hand toward Kirin.

The entire audience held their breath, watching the scene unfold with excitement.

"Don't do it, Kirin...!"

Somewhere in the crowd, a voice shouted in alarm.

But it was ignored.

Kirin didn't even acknowledge it.

She simply stared at the outstretched hand before her, her expression uncertain.

She had thought about entering the Festa before.

As Kaiser had said, for any Genestella with a wish they desperately wanted granted, winning the Festa was the most direct path.

Kirin had once dreamed of entering and winning—of using the Enterprise Foundation's power to free her father.

But she knew.

She knew just how difficult it would be to win.

The Festa wasn't just any competition—it was a stage where all six academies clashed.

Even if she was Seidoukan's Rank One, every other academy had a Rank One of their own.

Competing against all of them—Kirin had never been certain that she could win.

And so, she had obediently followed her uncle's orders.

But now...

"If it's with senpai..."

A surge of emotion erupted in her chest.

Before she even realized it, she found herself slowly reaching forward.

And then—

She carefully placed her hand in Kaiser's.

"Oooooooooohhhhhh!!!"

A long-delayed roar of excitement finally exploded through the Comprehensive Arena.

This day would undoubtedly shake the entire academy.

Chapter 39: The Championship Contenders

Seidoukan Academy, Comprehensive Arena – Rest Area

After the duel concluded, Kaiser was once again directed to the rest area.

However, this time, he was not alone.

"You've really done something incredible this time."

Leaning against the wall, Julis looked at Kaiser, her expression complex—whether out of admiration, frustration, or something else entirely, even she wasn't sure.

"Yeah, I'm still a bit surprised myself."

Ayato, standing beside Julis, let out a small laugh.

In addition to the two of them, Claudia was also present. She seemed to be in an exceptionally good mood, browsing multiple floating screens in front of her with an amused smile.

"As expected, the news of Kaiser inviting Kirin to be his partner for the Phoenix Festa has already spread all over the internet."

With a wave of her hand, Claudia shifted the screens to display the latest reports, allowing everyone to see the contents.

The headlines included Kaiser's victory over Kirin Toudou, securing his place as Seidoukan Academy's new Rank One, but the real bombshell was the announcement that the academy's new and former Rank One had teamed up for the Phoenix Festa.

"It's spread this fast already?"

Ayato blinked in surprise.

"That's only natural." Julis, however, wasn't surprised at all. "The new and former Rank One of Seidoukan teaming up for the Phoenix Festa—there's no way this wouldn't be the hottest topic right now."

The Festa was a world-class tournament, beloved across the globe. Any news related to it would automatically gain traction.

And within each academy, the Rank One student was always one of the most closely watched figures.

Now, with Seidoukan's top two forming a duo for the Phoenix Festa, it was inevitable that the internet would explode with discussions.

In fact, if Kaiser and the others hadn't left the stage immediately after the duel, he would have already been mobbed by Seidoukan's student-run media clubs, making it impossible for him to even leave the arena.

"The other participants in the Phoenix Festa must be feeling the pressure now."

Claudia maintained her usual cheerful tone, clearly enjoying the spectacle.

"After all, a Rank One is already considered the strongest in their respective academy. Even among the six academies competing in the Festa, a Rank One is an undeniable top seed—one of the strongest contenders for the championship."

"In past tournaments, whether it was the Phoenix Festa (duo), the Gryps Festa (five-person team), or the Lindwurm Festa (solo), the Rank Ones of

each academy have always been the most popular, highest-supported, and most-feared participants."

"And now, our academy's new and former Rank One have joined forces for this Phoenix Festa. It's easy to imagine the kind of impact this will have—the level of support you'll receive, and the fear you'll instill in your competition."

Claudia then turned to Julis and Ayato, covering her mouth with a playful smile.

"As actual competitors in the Phoenix Festa, what do you two think?"

Julis shot Claudia a glare.

But Kaiser, ever perceptive, noticed something hidden beneath Julis' irritation—a faint but undeniable sense of tension.

Ayato, on the other hand, was far more candid.

"Kirin is already incredibly strong—not just as the former Rank One, but as the heiress of Toudou-ryuu. She's mastered Renzuru, one of the most advanced techniques of her style. Honestly, if I had to fight someone like her, I'd feel a lot of pressure too."

He wasn't admitting defeat, but he also wasn't arrogant enough to assume victory.

When it came to pure swordsmanship, Ayato knew he couldn't match Kirin.

Even if he unleashed his full strength, his chances against her were probably fifty-fifty at best.

And that was optimistic.

Ayato understood his own limitations. His power was unstable—if he couldn't secure victory within a short timeframe, he would lose.

Even with his newly obtained Orga Lux, his chances against Kirin weren't great.

Without that Orga Lux?

His odds would probably drop to less than thirty percent.

And now—

"Her partner just defeated her in a direct duel. The new Rank One of Seidoukan Academy. This is a nightmare for every other Phoenix Festa contestant."

Julis, despite her reluctance, had to admit it.

The fact that Seidoukan's strongest duo was entering the tournament had sent shockwaves across the academy.

No doubt, the news agencies would be milking this story for all it was worth.

Even the betting markets would likely adjust their odds, shifting the favor toward Kaiser and Kirin's team.

"With the two of you forming a team, this Phoenix Festa already has its strongest championship contender." Claudia smiled knowingly. "As Student Council President, I'm thrilled. If you two can win, it'll do wonders for Seidoukan's overall ranking this year."

"At the very least, our academy's performance won't look so embarrassing anymore."

Hearing Claudia's words, Kaiser finished skimming through the news articles and closed the floating screens. A faint smile crossed his lips.

"...Well, let's hope things go that smoothly."

His casual response made Julis pout in frustration.

"It won't go smoothly. We're not just going to roll over and let you win." She turned to Ayato, annoyed. "Say something, will you? You always act like you don't care about winning. If people didn't know better, they'd think you had no interest in the championship at all."

"Well..." Ayato scratched his head with an easygoing smile. "I don't personally care all that much. But since I've already promised to help you win, I won't be giving up so easily."

As he spoke, Ayato placed a hand on the sheath at his waist, glancing at Kaiser.

"Besides, this guy seems pretty eager to fight against you and Ser-Veresta. If I don't give it my all, I think it might get upset."

The moment Ayato finished speaking—

"Vmm!"

A low hum emanated from his sheath, as if responding to his words.

And at the same time—

Kaiser's Ser-Veresta, resting in his own sheath, vibrated in response.

A surge of Mana gathered around both of them, causing a momentary shift in the air.

The tension was palpable.

Everyone in the room tensed instinctively.

But before anyone could react—

"Calm down, Ser-Veresta."

At Kaiser's command, Ser-Veresta immediately ceased its vibration.

The energy in the air dissipated in an instant.

Ayato, who had been holding down his own sheath, blinked in surprise.

"...You and your sword really get along well." He sounded almost jealous.
"Mine barely listens to me most of the time."

Kaiser didn't respond to that.

Instead, his gaze lingered on Ayato's sheath, his thoughts deepening.

"So Ayato really did obtain another Orga Lux."

Because he had been focusing on the Official Ranking Battle, Kaiser hadn't kept up with Ayato's recent developments.

He hadn't seen the news about Ayato acquiring an Orga Lux.

But now, there was no doubt.

As expected of the protagonist. Even if it wasn't Ser-Veresta, he had still managed to pass the compatibility test and obtain one of the Four-Colored Magic Swords.

"I wonder... which sword did he get?"

It wasn't hard to guess.

From what Kaiser knew, three of the Four-Colored Magic Swords had already been claimed.

That meant Ayato's sword could only be the remaining one—

A sword so mysterious that it had never appeared in the original story.

The final of the Four-Colored Magic Swords.

The thought made Kaiser's pulse quicken.

"Between the two of us—who is stronger?"

For the first time in a long while, Kaiser truly anticipated the answer.

Chapter 40: Leave on Your Own Accord

Shortly after, the group that had gathered in the rest area dispersed.

Claudia returned to the Student Council Office to continue handling matters related to the Festa, while Ayato and Julis, seemingly feeling a newfound sense of urgency, decided to head off for training.

Kaiser, making sure that there were no longer any student reporters lurking outside, finally left the rest area and headed toward another section of the competitor's area.

Naturally, he was looking for his partner.

However, when he arrived at Kirin Toudou's rest area, he was met with the sound of a furious roar.

"Do you even realize what you've done?! How dare you?!"

The voice was harsh and crude, immediately causing Kaiser's brows to furrow.

He attempted to walk in directly, but the competitor rest areas were designed with access restrictions—unless the room's registered user granted entry via their console, outsiders were completely locked out.

Kaiser's frown deepened. Without hesitation, he drew Ser-Veresta's Activator and activated it.

The Orga Lux shrank to a dagger-sized form, its violet-black blade gleaming faintly.

Gripping the miniature Ser-Veresta, Kaiser lightly swung at the door.

"Shhh..."

With a faint burning sound, the Mana circuits powering the lock mechanism were severed, rendering the security useless. The automatic doors slid open silently, revealing the scene inside.

Kaiser immediately saw Kirin Toudou and Kouichirou Toudou.

At that moment, Kouichirou was facing away from the entrance, furiously berating Kirin, who stood before him with her head lowered, her small frame trembling slightly.

"Losing to a mere Rank Thirteen wasn't enough? You even let yourself be tempted by his offer and agreed to partner with that worthless brat for the Phoenix Festa?!"

"Who gave you the right to make that decision?!"

His anger exploded—he slammed a fist into the nearby wall, causing it to tremble from the impact.

Kirin remained silent, only flinching slightly.

Her head remained bowed, her entire body shivering—not just from fear, but from sheer uncertainty.

"Did you think this would free you from me?" Kouichirou snarled, his rationality all but lost. His voice was filled with rage and resentment as he continued his verbal assault.

"How naive! What can you possibly accomplish without my help?!"

"Other than swinging a sword, you're completely useless! Who do you think gave you the opportunity to fulfill your so-called 'dream'?"

"It was me!"

"Without me, do you think you could have become Rank One?!"

Kirin didn't refute his words.

Not because she couldn't, not because she wouldn't, but because—deep down—she believed them to be true.

From the very start, Kirin had always thought that she had only reached Rank One because of her uncle's guidance.

If he hadn't arranged duels for her from day one, she wouldn't have secured a spot among the Page One upon entering the academy.

If she hadn't joined the Page One, she wouldn't have had the chance to challenge the previous Rank One in her first Official Ranking Battle.

If he hadn't provided her with detailed intelligence reports on her opponents, she wouldn't have been able to strategically defeat them, securing her place at the top.

So no—Kirin didn't deny it.

But to Kouichirou, her silence only confirmed his own self-importance.

"Because of your incompetence, everything I built for you has crumbled! Do you have any idea how much this has cost me?!"

"I poured so much effort into shaping you! You may be useless in everything else, but at least you were decent with a sword!"

"And now you've ruined everything!"

"All that work—wasted! And yet, you still have the audacity to agree to that brat's invitation for the Phoenix Festa?!"

"I won't allow it!"

As he spoke, Kouichirou reached forward—his hand aiming for Kirin's hair.

He had done this many times before. To him, it was habitual.

But today—

"Smack!"

A hand suddenly shot out from the side, grabbing Kouichirou's wrist before he could touch her.

"...What?"

Kouichirou's eyes widened in shock.

"S-Senpai...?"

Kirin, sensing something, looked up—and her breath caught.

Kaiser.

Somehow, without either of them noticing, he had appeared beside them.

"Hello, Chief Toudou."

Kaiser didn't even glance at Kirin. Instead, he greeted Kouichirou in an almost casual manner, as if this were a completely ordinary encounter.

"You...?" Kouichirou finally snapped out of his daze, blurting out instinctively, "How did you get in here?!"

"How else?" Kaiser's smile remained, but his words were blunt. "I walked in, of course. Lucky I did, too—otherwise, I wouldn't have had the pleasure of watching you abuse your own niece."

Kouichirou's face turned dark.

Not out of fear.

Out of rage.

"This is family business. You have no right to interfere!" He struggled against Kaiser's grip, shouting, "Let go of me!"

Kaiser did. Immediately.

"Thud!"

The moment Kouichirou was released, he lost balance and fell hard onto the floor.

"Uncle!"

Kirin gasped.

Kaiser, however, simply looked down at him. His expression remained calm.

"Now, now," he said lightly. "Are you saying that just because something is a 'family matter,' no one else should interfere?"

"Because if that's the case... what's the point of having law enforcement?"

"Even a stranger has the right to step in when they see a grown man trying to hurt a young girl."

Kouichirou's fury burned even hotter.

"Do you have any idea who I am?!" He glared at Kaiser. "I'm a corporate officer of Galaxy, the very organization that operates this academy! I'm an ordinary human—and you're a Genestella! Do you really plan on laying a hand on me?!"

His voice was laced with contempt and arrogance.

It was a well-known fact—Genestella were forbidden from harming ordinary humans.

The disparity in strength between the two races was too great. A Genestella attacking a human was considered an extreme offense, punishable by severe legal action.

This prejudice ran deep in society.

Many feared the power of the Genestella, labeling them as monsters. Any misstep from their kind was met with disproportionate punishment.

Kouichirou was one of those people.

He despised Genestella—even his own niece.

And he was all too familiar with using his status as a human to suppress them.

But Kaiser—

"Oh, I don't mind."

His voice was calm, cold, and composed.

"If I have a justifiable reason, I wouldn't hesitate." Kaiser's golden eyes glowed as he continued, "Even if you're an employee of Galaxy... If you lay a hand on a top-ranked student—a potential Phoenix Festa champion—you really think Galaxy would protect you?"

Silence.

For the first time, Kouichirou had nothing to say.

Because he knew—Kaiser was right.

Seeing the realization dawn on him, Kaiser's smile sharpened.

"Now then," he said smoothly. "Why don't you be a good sport... and leave us alone?"