

## Prologue

SOGOU AYAKA PARRIED THE BLOW of Banewolf's sword, sending a heavy shockwave down her spear and into her arms. Even against a huge man such as Banewolf, she didn't feel overwhelmed—perhaps because of her stat modifiers.

But now comes the real test! There's no guarantee he's going to play fair. I have to read his next move, and—

"Wah?!" Ayaka was knocked back hard, crashing bottom-first to the ground.

H-he took my legs out from under me?! But I never even saw—

She looked up to see Suou Kayako standing over her, looking sheepish and guilty at what she'd just done. Banewolf patted his shoulder with the flat of his training sword.

"It's good that you're being careful, watching for what comes next... but you couldn't predict Suou would attack you from behind, eh?"

"I'm sorry..." said Kayako, lowering her head.

"Bwa ha ha!" Banewolf laughed dryly as he reached his hand down to Ayaka. "What are you apologizin' for? You were only doin' what I told you to, Suou-chan!"

Ayaka accepted his hand and he helped her back to her feet. A few moments earlier, she would have thought it impossible that her friend Suou Kayako would sweep her legs out from under her, but...

Should she really have been so sure?

He's trying to tell me that I should always account for the unexpected.

"You're trying to teach me not to discount any possibility?" she asked.

"Oho! I didn't even need to come out and say it plain, did I? Promising student as ever, ain't you, Sogou... Phew, I've worked up a thirst!" Banewolf said, grabbing a bottle of ale from the table.

"I wonder if alcohol intake during exercise is advisable..." cautioned

Ayaka.

Banewolf ignored her and brought the drink to his lips. "Serious one, aren't you? Just like the chief, always complaining about something."

"You belong to the Monster Slayer Knights, don't you, Banewolf-san?" asked Ayaka.

"Call me Bane, it's shorter."

"Bane-san, do you belong to—"

"The knight stuff is just for show. It's important to Ulza that everyone sees me as some knight of the realm, y'see." He happily gulped down the rest of his drink before continuing. "The Monster Slayer King of Ulza's a

sniveling coward...which lets me relax, living the good life most o' the time.

But I've gotta fulfill my role every now and then, don't I? Show them I've still got what it takes when push comes to shove."

Banewolf turned to look at Sogou's group, pointing the tip of his sword toward them.

"How about we move on to your battle formation? There's strategy here...so let's put S-class Sogou-chan in the center, right? Let's get started."

"Excuse me, but why...?"

During the next break from training, Ayaka went to talk with Banewolf. Her gaze was on Kayako and the others as she wiped the sweat from her brow with a white cloth.

"Mmm?"

"Why did you offer to instruct us, Bane-san?"

"It's simple, ain't it? I just don't want you to die. The heroes from another world are our trump card against the Demon King's armies. If you guys kick the bucket, I gotta say goodbye to the easy life."

I guess teaching us is some sort of self-preservation.

"Look, they only called me out here because the Demon King's on the move, yeah? Geez, the root of all evil's a real pain in the neck," Banewolf grinned and stroked his beard. "...The Goddess did look a bit annoyed when I volunteered though, eh? I bet she had her reasons for shorting you an

instructor, Sogou. Never can quite figure out what that Goddess is thinking."

He turned his eyes to Yasu's group. Yasu Tomohiro was sitting cross-legged in a chair with his back to them, while the rest of them milled around idly nearby.

"I'd really like to start training that lot too, even just the basics..." said Banewolf, thinking back to their first day of training.

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It happened on the first day of their training. Banewolf offered a handshake and Yasu brushed it away without a second thought.

"What's with that high-and-mighty attitude?!" Yasu shouted, motioning again for Banewolf to leave. "Looking down on me, are you? Me, the 'Hero of the Black Inferno?!' They call you Dragonslayer?! Fool! I need no assistance from the likes of you! Nobody in my group does, either! Get that through your thick skull! Now begone!"

Banewolf just scratched his head and grinned back at him wryly before replying, "I didn't mean to come off arrogant or nothing... I'm not too good at manners and formalities and all that, y'know—back in Ulza, they're always chewin' me out for it. Well, I'll try to know my place in the future."

Ayaka watched the exchange, thinking, He wasn't upset by what Yasu said. He's being an adult... There's a lot I could learn from him.

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And since Yasu had rejected Banewolf's help, Ayaka now had ample opportunity to be his student.

Her Kisou style of ancient martial arts was well suited to real combat situations—but form alone though was not enough. Training was not the same as the battlefield, and Banewolf had plenty of experience with real fighting. He knew about life-or-death struggle, and he had many lessons on how to survive it. That's likely what the Goddess meant when she talked

about technique and the art of battle.

Ayaka looked to the rest of her group, who were wiping the sweat from their foreheads. Survive... Yes. All of us will survive this...

Their training grounds were now divided in two, split by a high wall down the middle. Sogou Ayaka, Yasu Tomohiro, and Kirihara Takuto's groups were in one half, and in the other were Ikusaba Asagi's group and the Takao sisters.

There must be some reason they divided us up like this...

Kirihara's group clearly didn't think much of Asagi, and it seemed unlikely they would get along. Putting them together in the same training grounds was a recipe for trouble.

I can see why they split those groups up...but the Takao sisters? Does the Goddess not want me talking to them?

Hijiri had been the only other student to speak up against the Goddess.

It would make sense to avoid putting two rebellious elements together.

Is that what she's planning? Come to think of it, Kirihara-kun and his group have been acting differently toward Hijiri-san too...

There was something restless about Kirihara's corner of the training grounds, something that didn't start just recently. It all began on the first day of their training together.

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"Let me reintroduce myself," said the eldest brother on their first day of training with Kirihara Takuto's group. "The name's Agit of the Four Holy Elders. You're in charge of this group, right? Looking forward to working with you."

Kirihara was sitting on a bench in the center of the training grounds, his legs spread apart assertively, leaning forward on the hilt of his sword which was stuck point-first into the ground before him. Oyamada Shougo sat

by his side, the rest of his group behind them.

"You... You lot strong?" Shougo asked.

"I figure so, yeah?" answered Agit.

"Stronger than those Elite Five, or whoever?"

"Never fought them before, so I couldn't say." Agit's expression was gentle, but he looked down to see Kirihara glaring up at him.

"Focus. Give it some thought," Kirihara said.

"Hmm? What do you mean, exactly?" asked Agit.

"You're just another obstacle for us."

"Obstacle...?"

Kirihara looked away and gave an exasperated sigh. "I hear stories about these heroic blood warriors. You one of them?"

"I guess I am, yeah."

"Then at the end of the day, you're lower than us heroes. Cut-rate. Defective."

"Hmm, you don't mince words, do you? That bites."

"I also question the need to speak such harsh truths, but... In the future I won't be able to restrain myself from surpassing you in every way."

Agit looked back at his siblings. His sister, the older of the two, shrugged her shoulders. Kirihara placed his sword under his arm and tapped at the air in front of him with his index finger.

"A wall. Right in front of you, there's a wall you can't see. In other words, an obstacle which is going to stunt your growth... But—" Kirihara stretched out his arm. "Dragon Buster."

The golden beam of light streamed past the Four Holy Elders in an instant, followed by a sonic boom. The air swirled around them from the pressure wave, ruffling their hair before the light evaporated a short distance from the training ground wall. Kirihara's unique skill was now level 3, and he had learned to control its power and range with startling precision.

"I'm the greatest S-class hero there is, and I've still got room to grow.

To break through such obstacles... Understand now, second-rate heroes?" said Kirihara, his arm still stretched out toward them.

"I see. You mean to say that you heroes from another world are a level

above us, right? Hmm, but you know..."

There was a sound, like the wind had been sliced in two. For a moment, everyone was frozen in place until Oyamada was the first to break the silence.

"Ah?! Y-you little... When did you get over there?! Is this a declaration of war or what?!"

A blade was pressed to Kirihara's neck.

It was Agit's.

The elder smiled weakly, ignoring Oyamada's howls and bringing his face closer to Kirihara's. "When there's still this much of a power gap between us...are you sure that's the attitude you want to take?"

Even though he'd been caught off-guard, Kirihara stayed expressionless and quiet. Finally, he turned his stare to Agit.

"These shallow displays of power are so childish. You're one step short of complete irrelevance, you know? Ready for the fall. You do understand that, don't you?"

Agit looked surprised. He withdrew his blade and pulled back.

"Hmm... Quite the balls you've got there, eh? I'm looking forward to training you more than I expected. You pass, Takuto Kirihara."

"You're that desperate to deny it?"

Agit grinned happily. "You're funny, Kirihara."

Ayaka's heart was beating out of her chest at the sight.

The way he moved just now... I didn't even see him draw his blade.

She felt she could see it now—the gap in their abilities that couldn't be filled with experience points and stat modifiers alone. Just as the training grounds were beginning to settle back down...

"Arrogant bunch of kids we've got here, eh?!"

The eldest sister of the Four Holy Elders—her black ponytail swishing around behind her—put everyone on edge again. Abis Angun was taller than her brother and had a stronger build, with a face just as beautiful as his. Despite this, she radiated a nervous energy.

Abis lazily wore her ceremonial robes open at the chest—enough that it attracted a lot of attention. Whenever she walked, her breasts would sway as if they were ready to pop out at any moment. The boys were mesmerized by her.

I could never wear clothes like those... Never in a million years.

"Ki-ri-ha-raa-?" Abis bared her teeth aggressively as she stepped toward him. "What was that about shallow displays of power? You're firing off your freakin' skill to show off too, huh?"

Kirihara cracked his neck, unamused.

"You're way off mark. In my case, there was nothing shallow about it."

"Hmm? Then you won't mind if I come make sure now, will y—"

"Hey, hey, hey!" Oyamada interrupted, stepping in front of Abis. "I ain't lettin' you talk to Takuto like that and ignore me, got it? Who made you queen of the world anyway, huh, Captain Mammaries?! Listen here! We're high-level heroes, yeah? I don't know what the deal is with you Four Holey Smell-ders, but chill with the attitude! Got that? Don't let your head get

bigger than your tits!"

Emboldened by Kiriara's cool composure, Oyamada kept going.

"You think we gave a bad first impression or what? Once we smash that freakin' Demon King and his armies, I'm gonna come back here just to bully you! Got it?!"

Poke, poke, poke.

Oyamada's finger jabbed into Abis' chest, but she didn't react to it at all, instead baring her teeth at him and grinning wickedly. Her right hand moved to grab his index finger.

Poke, poke...snap!

"Gyaaahhh!"

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"Sulking again like a little kid, are ya, Oyamada?" Abis gave him a mocking smile.

"...Shut up. I'll kill you."

"You say you'll kill people all the time, little man. That's s'posed to scare me?"

"Huh? One more word, and I'll use my freakin' unique skill to—"

"To embarrass yourself again?"

"Ugh..." Oyamada groaned and remembered what happened when he used his unique skill, right after she'd broken his finger. She dodged all of his attacks, then broke another finger for good measure.

When the Goddess Vicius learned of the incident, she only smiled and said, "Oh, I suppose that was inevitable." It was considered a part of their training.

"You're crazy! I'm gonna make you cry someday, hear me?"

"I'm sorry, what was that? Want me to break another one?"

Oyamada exhaled but didn't move to attack—he couldn't.

The difference in power between them was clear. The Four Holy Elders were strong—overwhelmingly so. Kiriara, on the other hand, was quietly training with Agit.

"You're smarter than Oyamada, I see, Kiriara," he said.

"I use what I can...take every last thing that my enemy has to offer. I haven't forgotten you and your siblings' unimaginative behavior, though. A day will come when I test you... Be prepared."

"Hmm... Not gonna get bored with you and Oyamada around, are we?"

The door to the training grounds opened suddenly. Asagi's group walked in, followed by the Takao sisters, the Sabre-Toothed Tigers, and finally...

"It appears your training is going as planned! Thank you ever so much."

...the Goddess Vicius.

"So long as you can accomplish the goals I set forth, I leave the

instruction up to you. I can hardly ignore method and practice, but what is most important are results. I can't possibly complain if you give me results now, can I? They are the only reliable measure, one might say."

"To what do we owe this visit, Vicius?" asked Agit.

Ayaka wondered the same. Since the Goddess had gathered all the heroes from the other half of the training grounds, it must be something important.

"Right now, I'm having you all develop practical combat skills as a matter of urgency... But of course, you need to continue leveling up as well." She placed a hand on her cheek and sighed. "But alas...Alion's ruins are all but spent. There are only a few golden-eyed monsters left to be killed in the dungeons. That simply won't do."

Kirihara directed the point of his training sword at the Goddess.

"Finally time to start touring the other countries' ruins then?"

"With the Demon King's armies on the move, I'm afraid we don't have time for leisurely field trips. We shall set out tomorrow..." said the Goddess, bringing her hands together and smiling widely, "...for the Land of the Golden-Eyed Monsters."