
YUU MIYAZAKI
ILLUSTRATION BY okiura
THE ASTERISK WAR
08. IDOL SHOWDOWN



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okiura


RUSALKA
TUULIA
Tuulia
PÄIVI
Päivi
MAHULENA
Mahulena
MONICA
Monica
MILUŠE
Miluše


IT WAS THE OPENING CEREMONY OF THE TWENTY-FOURTH GRYPS.
MADIATH MESA WAS GIVING HIS SPEECH AT THE PODIUM, OVERLOOKING THE CONTESTANTS.


SAYA SASAMIYA
Saya Sasamiya



THE ASTERISK WAR

08. IDOL SHOWDOWN

YUU MIYAZAKI

ILLUSTRATION: OKIURA

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THE ASTERISK WAR, Vol. 8

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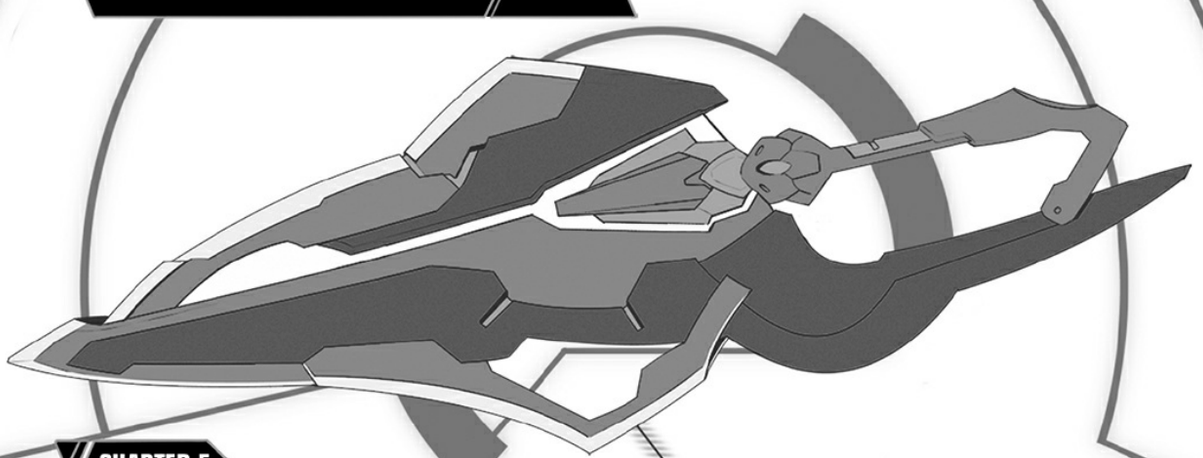
Yen Newsletter

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characters

SEIDOUKAN ACADEMY

AYATO AMAGIRI



The protagonist of this work. Wielder of the Ser Veresta. Alias Murakumo.

ALIAS: Gathering Clouds, Murakumo
ORGA LUX: Ser Veresta

JULIS-ALEXIA VON RIESSFELD



Princess of Lieseltania. Ayato's partner for the Phoenix.

ALIAS: the Witch of the Resplendent Flames, Glühen Rose
LUX: Aspera Spina

CLAUDIA ENFIELD



Student council president at Seidoukan Academy. Leader of Team Enfield.

ALIAS: the Commander of a Thousand Visions, Parca Morta
ORGA LUX: Pan-Dora

SAYA SASAMIYA



Ayato's childhood friend. An expert in weaponry and machines.

ALIAS: none yet given
LUX: type 38 Lux grenade launcher Helnekraum, type 34 wave cannon Ark Van Ders Improved Model, and others

KIRIN TOUDOU



Disciple of the Toudou School of swordsmanship with natural talent. Saya's partner for the Phoenix.

ALIAS: the Keen-Edged Tempest, Shippuu Jinrai
LUX: none (wields the katana Senbakiri)

EISHIROU YABUKI

Ayato's roommate. Member of the newspaper club.

LESTER MACPHAIL

Number nine at Seidoukan Academy. Brusque and straightforward but has a deep sense of duty.

RANDY HOOKE

Lester's partner for the Phoenix.

KYOUKO YATSUZAKI

Ayato and company's homeroom teacher.

PREVIOUSLY IN *THE ASTERISK WAR...*

Having turned down Magnum Opus's offer, Ayato, vowing to awaken his sister from her long sleep through his own efforts, decides to join Claudia's team in the Gryps. After entering his second year at Seidoukan, he and Sylvia visit the campuses of the other schools during the school fair, meeting several other strong individuals. Amid all this, Sylvia encounters the person for whom she has been searching for many years, her former teacher Ursula—who then attacks her, before once again disappearing. Saved by Ayato in the nick of time, Sylvia comes to a dangerous discovery...

CHAPTER 1

TRAINING

Not long after the end of the school fair, the winds of summer began to sweep over Asterisk.

The sky was high and brilliantly clear; the branches of the lush, green trees rustled in the breeze, and the sun blazed brighter with each passing day.

Unfortunately, Ayato and company didn't have the luxury of stopping to appreciate the joys of the season; instead, they were spending every free moment locked away in their training room practicing for the upcoming tournament.

"Yabuki said something about the stages undergoing renovation for the Gryps," Ayato stated as he began his stretches, recalling what Eishirou had told him the other day.

"Ah, right. I did hear somewhere that they're improving the main stage and the three other large stages—or something like that," Julis replied, seemingly uninterested in the topic. "That's why the official ranking matches have been moved to the medium stages. Never mind how much of a nuisance that causes us."

Official ranking matches were held once a month within each of Asterisk's six schools, but there were also several stages throughout the city where the public could watch such events. They were among Asterisk's main draws for tourists during the large swaths of the year when there were no Festa events. With few exceptions—namely Jie Long—matches among Page Ones were customarily held on the town's largest stages.

In fact, both Ayato and Julis had turned down matches on the main stage in the Sirius Dome just last month. Julis's specialty was ranged combat, so she no

doubt wanted as wide a space as possible to be able to fight at her strongest.

“But didn’t you completely overpower Kannari the last time you fought her?” Ayato asked.

Julis had once said that she wasn’t well-matched against Seidoukan Academy’s seventh-ranked fighter, the user of the school-owned Orga Lux Longshanks. Nonetheless, in her official ranking match last month, Julis had managed to face down an opponent even stronger than she at ranged combat, snatching victory without encountering any serious difficulties.

The fact that she had managed to get her hands on one of the school’s newly developed weapons, a Rect Lux, certainly helped in that regard, but the most important factor was undoubtedly her own significant growth over the past year. She had showed steady improvement in all respects: from her physical endurance and strength, to her volume of prana, to the variety of techniques at her disposal, to the honing of the exact timing of when to use those techniques —all thanks to the cumulative effects of her daily training regimen.

“Oh? You’re one to talk, seeing how well yours went,” Julis bantered, the corners of her mouth rising up.

There was no denying that ever since Ayato had defeated Kirin and taken the number-one ranking he had faced more challengers in official ranking matches than any of Seidoukan’s other students. The fact that people kept on coming undoubtedly had something to do with the special nature of the title.

“Well, it isn’t all that uncommon for them to renovate the stages like this. It’s nothing to worry about.”

“…Actually,” began Saya, who was standing off to the side, inspecting one of her many handgun-shaped Luxes, “it’s quite extensive this time. They’re installing a new protection mechanism developed by Allekant.”

“A new protection mechanism…?” Kirin, the Senbakiri lying at her feet as she stretched her body, cocked her head as if this was the first she’d heard of it.

“It sounds like they’re using a new protective gel for shock absorption, developed by Allekant’s Sonnet faction.”

“Oh? You’re well-informed, huh?” Julis made an impressed noise.

Saya, still inspecting her handgun from every possible angle, gave a blunt answer: “Camilla Pareto told me.”

“Oh… Wait, what?!”

She had spoken so casually that they had almost just nodded along without even processing the words. Camilla Pareto, however, was the head of Allekant Académie’s Ferrovius faction and the genius who had created the autonomous puppets Ardy and Rimcy they had fought during the Phoenix.

She and Saya were supposed to be diametric opposites.

It wasn’t just Ayato who was taken by surprise.

“Since when have you been having these chats?” Julis demanded.

“Did you make up with her?” Kirin looked at her blankly.

“It isn’t like that,” Saya answered. “I still need to settle my score with her. That hasn’t changed. But…it’s not like there are any ill feelings between us.” She deactivated her Lux, letting out a brief sigh. “I’ve been thinking about my Luxes for a while now. Of course, I don’t want to criticize my father’s weapons—he built them specifically for me, after all—but they probably aren’t suited to team battles.”

Saya’s Luxes certainly had immense firepower, but it was hard to say that they were particularly precise. She was by no means a poor shot, but even with that, the chance that in the middle of a heated contest one of her teammates might get caught in the line of fire wasn’t small.

There would be ten people, friend and foe alike, on the stage during each Gryps match. For those in the rear, whose job it was to support the vanguard, it was an undeniable fact that accuracy was required.

“Which is why I intend to prepare some new weapons better suited to team combat.”

“I see. That certainly explains your visits to the Society for the Study of Meteoric Engineering.” Claudia, who until that point had been listening to the conversation in silence, clapped her hands together in understanding.

“Ah, so that’s where you’ve been?” Ayato asked.

The Society for the Study of Meteoric Engineering was one of Seidoukan's largest student clubs. According to Eishirou, they were better even than the academy's own Matériel Department when it came to making adjustments to Luxes. That said, Ayato was in no way dissatisfied with the Matériel Department's work on the Ser Veresta.

While the Matériel Department tended to tailor Luxes to their users' abilities, the Society for the Study of Meteoric Engineering excelled in certain kinds of modifications but were less experienced with others.

"…I needed a workshop, so I decided to join the club."

"You've joined a club?" This was the first time Ayato had ever heard of Saya doing such a thing.

Like Julis, Saya wasn't proactive when it came to building relationships with other people.

"And Camilla Pareto showed up, so I decided to have a little talk with her."

Camilla was in charge of the development of the new Luxes being worked on jointly by Allekant and Seidoukan—the Rect Luxes. Their development had already been completed, but as they were still collecting data on their usage, the two schools had decided to maintain their relationship for the time being.

Moreover, a special committee had been created at Seidoukan consisting of members from the Matériel Department and the Society for the Study of Meteoric Engineering, so it wasn't altogether strange that Camilla would make an appearance. That she and Saya could engage in cordial conversation was no doubt proof enough that there was no lingering animosity between them.

"Hmm… So you're working on a new weapon?"

"Not from scratch. That would be technologically impossible, and I don't have the time. So I thought I'd customize my current weapons. I still don't know if they'll be ready in time for the tournament, though."

"That's impressive enough as it is," Ayato stated.

It looked like Saya had also been putting a lot of thought into the team competition. She had been prompted to do so in order to keep up with Julis's

mastery of her Rect Lux and the remarkable growth of Kirin's swordsmanship, but it was by no means a bad development.

Saya puffed out her chest at the compliment. "Hmm… You should praise me more often."

Ayato, flashing her an amused smile, gently placed a hand on her head.

"So there you are, you little brats!"

Standing by the entrance was their homeroom teacher, Kyouko Yatsuzaki. As usual, she was holding her nail bat over her shoulder, carrying herself with a needlessly aggressive posture.

"Ah, Ms. Yatsuzaki… What is it?" Ayato wondered aloud.

"Huh? You're asking *me*? You're the ones who called me out here!" she bellowed, letting her nail bat swing down onto the floor.

At that moment, Claudia stepped forward. "Actually, I may have forgotten to mention it, but I thought it would be a good idea to start doing some combat practice… So I asked Ms. Yatsuzaki to be our opponent."

"Huh…?"

Julis glowered. "Why didn't you tell us sooner, Claudia?"

"I'm terribly sorry. I'll try to be more careful next time." Claudia bowed her head in apology, but her words rang hollow.

"Uh…," Ayato began, trying to mend the situation. "By combat practice, do you mean actually fighting together as a team? Not coordination practice?"

"Indeed. Our individual coordination with one another is no longer a problem, if I do say so myself. But without trying our hand at real combat, we can't know how well we'll be able to work together against actual opponents, nor how we'll fare at improvising and adapting."

They were all taken by surprise at this announcement, but none raised their voice in complaint.



It was a persuasive argument. After all, Claudia was the only one there who had any experience competing in the Gryps.

“It’s difficult to find opponents for team matches, even just for mock battles,” she went on. “No one wants to show their hand before the main event, so only an extremely confident team would even consider a practice match. Of course, there are always simulation matches, but as you all know…”

Claudia paused there with an ambiguous smile.

There was no need for her to finish that thought. The training room was equipped with a three-dimensional simulator, but given its limitations, it was in no way comparable to real combat experience.

In short, such experience wasn’t easy to acquire.

“That’s where Ms. Yatsuzaki comes in.”

Kyouko let out an exaggerated sigh. “It’s a pain in the ass, but this *is* part of my job. Even putting that aside, though, I kind of owe her one,” she added, glancing at Claudia. “So I’ll keep you company for as long as you can keep up.”

“We’re very grateful,” Julis began, glancing around dubiously. “But where’s your team?”

“Ha! You don’t need to worry about that! I’ve got everything I need right here.” As Kyouko swung her nail bat around in a loop, several of the nails began to emit a wan blue light.

“…!” Julis, the sole Strega among them, swallowed in realization.

A huge amount of mana suddenly burst out of the bat, swirling around and picking up speed as it materialized into four spinning vortexes. These slowly morphed like clay into vaguely human figures.

The dolls were completely smooth, their faces lacking eyes, noses, and mouths. They were navy blue in color, like the depths of the sea, each having the same stature and build as Kyouko, though lacking either clothes or weapons.

“Is that…the same kind of thing as Gustave Malraux’s magical beasts?” Julis asked.

“They look to me more like those shadow figures summoned by that person who kidnapped Flora…,” Kirin murmured.

In either case, there was no mistaking that they were the result of Kyouko’s Strega abilities.

However:

“…I thought your abilities were particularly effective against other ability users, Ms. Yatsuzaki?”

Saya’s question had been on the tip of Ayato’s tongue.

Rumor had it that Kyouko’s abilities gave her an overwhelming advantage against Stregas and Dantes. The dolls that stood in front of the students didn’t appear to have that sort of advantage.

“Capturing her opponents’ powers and making them her own… That’s Ms. Yatsuzaki’s ability. But this is the first time I’ve seen it in person,” Julis muttered guardedly.

“You mean, stealing an opponent’s abilities…?” Ayato whispered back.

“Something like that. I think her opponents can still use them, though.”

If that was true, Julis, a Strega herself, would be vulnerable to it. It made sense that she would be on alert.

“These dolls have my old teammates’ abilities. I can make copies of people, along with all their combat abilities. Physically, though, they’re only copies of me this time.”

“Teammates? You mean the people you won the Gryps with?”

The team that Kyouko had led as a student was legendary, being the only time in all of Asterisk’s history that the Le Wolfe Black Institute had won at the Gryps. Ayato didn’t know any of the details, but he had heard somewhere that all five members had been Stregas.

“Seeing is believing. You’ll understand well enough once we get started.” Ignoring Ayato’s question, Kyouko took four Luxes from the holder at her waist and threw them to her faceless dolls. “Let me show you the power of Le Wolfe’s former number two, the Witch of Nails!”

*

As the automated voice announced the beginning of the practice match, Ayato stepped forward to lead the vanguard.

It was a formation oriented to offense, with the vanguard composed of Ayato, Kirin, and the team leader, Claudia. Saya formed the rearguard while Julis was their support, responsible for monitoring the situation and assisting as the opportunity arose.

Kyouko's team, by contrast, had one doll armed with an assault rifle and another armed with two handguns as the rearguard; a doll armed with a longsword and another with dual short-swords as the vanguard; and Kyouko herself, armed with her usual nail bat, as the team leader. The two vanguards held themselves at the ready while Kyouko stood behind them as the team's support. Two on the front line, two on the back, and one on support—that was generally considered the most balanced formation for a team.

Team matches ended with the destruction of the team leader's school crest, the team leader losing consciousness, or the team leader announcing their surrender—or considered from another angle, as long as the team leader remained standing, the match would continue.

"Haah!" Ayato held the Ser Veresta over his head, the doll carrying a longsword set in his sights, when— The doll stepped back, and bullets of light sprayed in his direction. Seemed he'd fallen for a simple diversion.

"Tch…!"

Thanks to his heightened perception through having entered the state of *shiki*, Ayato could call upon a perfect awareness of the battlefield conditions, and thus he had no difficulty evading the oncoming bombardment. But he was forced to let his quarry go.

Is the rearguard focused on only me…?

"Ha-ha! See that, Amagiri! Did you think I'd be dumb enough to face you directly?" Kyouko called across the stage, flashing them all a dauntless grin. "You're the one people are gonna be primarily watching and thinking most about countering—you and that Ser Veresta! Unless the other team has an Orga Lux just as strong, they won't even be able to cross swords with you!

There’s no need for anyone to bother trying to deal with that kind of advantage directly!”

“I see your point…,” Ayato muttered as he deflected the unending volley of bullets with the Ser Veresta.

She was no doubt telling the truth.

The same thing went for Claudia’s Pan-Dora, but Kyouko probably didn’t know any particulars about that. The only information the public had was that it gave its user some kind of precognition, but thanks to Claudia’s elaborate misinformation strategy, it was hard to see how that alone could be countered.

Countering the Ser Veresta was, in contrast, relatively straightforward—his opponents could simply try to avoid direct combat and focus instead on long-rage attacks.

Moreover, with both members of the rearguard focusing exclusively on him, taking into account their accuracy and timing, he would have a hard time dealing with them both.

If he was to focus on defense or evasion, his opponents would undoubtedly shift part of their attention onto his team members, but if he was to shift entirely to attack, he would leave himself vulnerable to a carefully timed shot.

Perhaps sensing his predicament, Julis attacked from a distance with her Rect Lux, but the dolls had little difficulty dodging the attacks of its remote terminals—their line of fire unbreaking.

“Ayato isn’t the only one to worry about!” Kirin called out as she and Claudia moved in to surround Kyouko from either side.

If they could defeat Kyouko, the opposing team’s leader, the match would be over.

However—

“You think I wasn’t prepared for that?”

“—!”

The vanguard, which had previously fallen back, now moved to block their advance.

Neither of the two girls so much as faltered, crossing swords with the dolls head-on. Kirin engaged the one wielding a longsword, while Claudia took on the one armed with short-swords. To Ayato's surprise, the two dolls were in no way inferior in skill to his two teammates. There was no mistaking that Kirin and Claudia had a slight edge, but the dolls were exceptionally good at knowing when to strike and when to fall back. Moreover, the pair that formed Kyouko's rearguard were managing to fire the occasional shot toward his teammates whenever Ayato let down his guard. At this rate, it would be difficult for any of them to shake off their opponents.



Thanks to his heightened perception, however, he was aware of a movement behind him.

"…Ayato, stand back."

By the time Saya had finished speaking, he had already leaped out of the way.

"Boom."

At that moment, a huge burst of light surging out of Saya's Helnekraum sped past him, scoring a direct hit on Kyouko—the explosion sending huge shockwaves throughout the room.

Using the Ser Veresta to shield himself from the still unending barrage of bullets, he glanced around the room, looking for any sign of her on the other side of the hot blast of air.

She shouldn't have had any time to counter the attack, but when the dense cloud of smoke began to fade, there was a wall of sand towering before her.

That must be someone else's ability, right…?

The sand slowly collapsed as it turned back into raw mana.

If each of the nails in her bat contained a different ability, Ayato's team would have little chance of defeating her. After all, they had no information to build upon to try to work out any countermeasures or effective strategies.

And that was when—

"Burst into bloom—*Amaryllis!*" Julis's rich, distinguished voice echoed across the room.

Julis must have taken advantage of Saya's attack to sneak into Kyouko's blind spot, where she built up an enormous fireball at the end of her outstretched sword—all while she turned the Rect Lux's remote terminals against the rearguard. The extraordinary spatial perception necessary to pull off such an attack left Ayato speechless.

Now's my chance…!

Taking advantage of the rearguard's momentary distraction, he shortened the distance between himself and Kyouko.

Several of their bullets still managed to score a hit, but a little bit of damage couldn't be helped now.

If Kyouko was to try to dodge Julis's fireball, he would take advantage of that opening to end the match then and there.

Moreover, even if she was to dodge it, Julis could merely detonate her amaryllis at will. It would be impossible to evade the resulting explosion. There was a chance that Ayato might get caught up in it, too, but in the state of *shiki*, there was still a possibility that he would have enough time to defend himself.

The conditions were in their favor.

"Hey, hey, you're not playing around, eh?" But Kyouko didn't look particularly concerned.

She calmly glanced toward the fireball, dodging it nimbly.

"In that case—explode!" Julis called out, just as Ayato had anticipated.

A terrible roar shook through the air as the flames raged, but— "Don't you think that's a bad move, with me as your opponent?"

The fire flowed straight into the palm of Kyouko's hand, like water being sucked into a whirlpool in the depths of a lake.

"Wha—?!"

"Heh, that'll make for three more, Riessfeld. Strong ones, too."

Kyouko was gripping three long nails, identical to the ones sticking out of her bat, between her fingers.

So that's how she does it…!

He should have expected no less from a champion of the Festa rumored to be able to seal away any and all abilities.

"But at that distance…!"

It might have failed, but Julis's attack had still given Ayato enough time for him to prepare one of his own.

But just as he was about to lunge toward Kyouko's mock crest with the Ser Veresta— "I guess I might as well use them right away."

Ayato felt a shiver run down his spine and immediately halted his attack, leaping back.

At that instant, a bluish-white light flashed in the palm of Kyouko's hand—a raging fireball shooting directly toward him with a terrible explosion.

It was Julis's amaryllis.

"Ugh…!"

He managed to shield himself, but the force was such that it threw him across the training room, bouncing on the floor before making an awkward landing.

"Oh, that was smart of you. Good job." Kyouko grinned, hefting the bat onto her shoulder.

"I'll take the compliment…" Ayato rose slowly, wiping the sweat from his forehead, before glancing around at his surroundings.

The dolls that had been fighting Kirin and Claudia had withdrawn to the back of the training room, and the rearguard had ceased their barrage of projectiles. Everything, it seemed, had gone back to the way it was at the start of the match.

"Hmm, not bad. I'll give you a passing mark, seeing as it was your first go. You'd easily be able to qualify, at least. And there's a world of difference between you lot and Enfield's last team." Kyouko complimented them in the same listless, vaguely threatening tone that characterized her teaching. "But if you want to win…that's another matter." At that, she lowered her voice, looking up at them from across the room. "Listen up! You might be stronger and faster than me—especially you, Amagiri, and you, Toudou—not to mention better at close combat. But, Toudou, you couldn't get past a doll that lacks even my skill, and you, Amagiri, you weren't able to take me down. You know why?"

"…Because your team's coordination was better?" Saya asked, puffing her cheeks in disappointment.

Kyouko put a hand on her waist, letting out a tired sigh. She looked as if she was relaxing her guard, but the prana she was channeling throughout her body didn't change. The dolls, too, seemed to be ready to resume fighting at any moment.

“Well, that much is obvious, but it wouldn’t make much of a lecture, huh? Basically, your skills and experiences with group battles are different. You first, Sasamiya. The rearguard is obviously supposed to support the vanguard, but you’re also supposed to hold the other team’s rearguard in check. If you’d put some more pressure on my guys, Amagiri, Toudou, and Enfield would’ve been able to move a bit easier.”

“…I see.” Saya nodded, looking slightly surprised.

“You next, Toudou. Your Linked Cranes move might be pretty flashy, but it ain’t suited to team combat. If your opponent’s strong, it’ll take you too much time to bring them down. And if they can hold you back, like those dolls did, someone else is going to exploit that to take *you* out.”

“I—I see…”

“And Riessfeld… You’re too reckless. Or maybe you were underestimating me? Is that it?”

“I wanted to see if you’re as strong as they say you are,” Julis replied, meeting Kyouko’s gaze head-on.

There was no mistaking that, against a Strega who could capture people’s abilities and throw them right back at them, it had been a pretty careless move. However, if she had hesitated, she would have missed her chance to see for herself just how Kyouko’s ability worked.

“Ha-ha, you’ve got some nerve. I’ll let you off this time, then. Think before you do anything next time around.” Kyouko turned her gaze to Ayato. “Amagiri, that was impressive—the way you sensed your surroundings. But you’re a little *too* good at it.”

“Too good…?”

“Of course, in a team battle, you need to pay attention not only to the opponents in front of you but also to your teammates—and to the other team’s rearguard. You’re better than anyone I’ve ever seen on that score… But it’s affected your reflexes. You’re so caught up in everything else that it’s dulled your judgment. Back there, if you hadn’t been paying so much attention to my own attack, you might have reached me first.”

So it backfired…?

He had thought that the technique would be most valuable in team battles, but it sounded like he would have to rethink how he used it in different situations.

“Anyway, your coordination ain’t half bad, so I’m guessing you’ll get better with practice.”

Ayato was dumbfounded that she could so easily detect areas that needed improvement, even after such a short observation time. Though, perhaps he should have expected as much from a former champion of the Gryps.

“Do you have any advice for me?” Claudia, the only person whom Kyouko hadn’t mentioned, raised her hand.

“…You’re as charmless as ever, huh, you little whelp? That was *too* flawless. It makes me sick just thinking about it,” Kyouko spat with a shrug. “And besides, even holding you back like that, you were still just waiting for an opportunity to make your move, weren’t you? I couldn’t afford to let my guard down with you.”

“I’m afraid there was no such opportunity.” Claudia, still holding the Pan-Dora, let out a light laugh.

Being the only one with any real experience in team battles, she did seem to be a level above the others.

“If you really want me to say something, how about you try to actually use the Pan-Dora for once? If you had done that, you would have been able to break through my dolls right away, and I’d have been no match for you and Amagiri.”

“Indeed. If it had been a real match, I would have done just that.”

“What I’m saying is that you shouldn’t hold back, even in the preliminaries. You’re too naive, thinking you can save your energy for the next match. The Festa ain’t so easy, you know.”

“…I’ll bear that in mind,” Claudia answered vaguely, flashing Kyouko a smile. She didn’t seem at all inclined to follow her advice.

“*Hmph*,” their teacher snorted, leaving it at that. “Well then, how about you

all try to keep that in mind for the second round? I'm telling you now, if you don't up your game, I'll kick your asses." And with that, her mouth twisted in a ferocious smile as she lofted her weapon onto her shoulder.

Her words might have sounded like a joke, but she was probably being completely serious. In other words, she wanted them to go after her with everything they had.

Ayato's heart rose with a swell of gratitude as he readied the Ser Veresta.

Over the next few months, they continued their special training with Kyouko on a weekly basis. While they were practically her playthings at first, by the time summer vacation rolled around, they were able to more or less hold their own against her.

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"I guess this is it?" After a second of hesitation, Ayato knocked on a door emblazoned with the number seven.

After a short moment, an air-window snapped open in front of him.

"*…Who is it?*" asked the person on the other side, her cheeks and chin coated with dabs of oil.

"Ah, Saya. How are you doing?"

"…Ayato? Hold on, let me open the door."

Seemingly no sooner had she finished speaking than it slid open, revealing a cluttered room filled to the brim with machinery. The floor was covered with so many cables that it was impossible to see where they all went, so much so that Ayato hardly knew where to stand.

There was only one empty space—in the back of the room. Saya, flopped down on the floor there, turned her head to greet him.

"…Coming all this way—is something wrong?"

They were in one of several classroom-sized workshops belonging to the Society for the Study of Meteoric Engineering, located below the main training hall.

Most clubs were based in the extracurricular activities' section of the main

school building, but it seemed that the highly influential ones were given special treatment.

In fact, that those who showed ability and results were given special treatment was a fact of life both in and outside the school.

“Sorry. You just seemed pretty busy lately. I thought I’d come and see how you’re doing.”

“Oh, I understand. Thank you. I’ll take a break, then.”

Her face lit up when Ayato showed her the bag of refreshments that he had brought, and she placed the wrench that she was holding on the floor.

Ayato, taking care not to step on any of the stray cabling, began to make his way across the room. “This place really is amazing,” he said.

“Yeah. It isn’t as good as my dad’s factory, but it isn’t bad… Ah, an ice cream bar.”

“I found a place that has them over at the middle school.”

“You know me too well,” Saya murmured as she rummaged through the bag, pulling out a fruit-flavored one and biting into it with a grin.

It was already the middle of summer. Outside, Asterisk was sweltering, but most places were comfortably air-conditioned indoors. Saya’s workshop was no exception, but the heat emanating from the machinery seemed to be overpowering it. It wasn’t quite as hot as outside, but it was hard to call it comfortable.

Which was no doubt why Saya was wearing only a tank top and work pants. Ayato hardly knew where to look.

“…So?”

“Huh?”

“You didn’t come here just to give me this, did you?” Saya, having already devoured the first ice cream bar, promptly thrust another into her mouth.

“…Ha-ha. And *you* know *me* too well, Saya.”

The girl simply nodded in agreement.

Ayato, wearing an awkward smile, scratched at his head and let out a brief sigh. “Well, the truth is… There’s something I wanted to ask you.”

“Ask me?” she tilted her head to one side, nonplussed.

“The Gryps is starting soon, and the training is getting more and more intense. I guess what I wanted to say is that that’s tiring enough, but even when you’re not training, aren’t you spending most of your time here, customizing your Luxes?”

“…We’re nearly at the end of summer vacation. If I don’t do at least this much… But to be honest, it doesn’t look like I’ll make it in time anyway. It can’t be helped.”

“I know that, but… Saya, it’s not like you have any particular reason to need to win, is there?”

“Ah… I see.” She put her hands together softly as she realized what Ayato was getting at.

Saya had joined Team Enfield because she wanted to help him. Unlike the other members, Ayato included, she didn’t have any wish that she wanted granted.

Ayato certainly appreciated her consideration, but he couldn’t help feeling a little guilty about the situation.

That was probably because she reminded him of his own motivations when he had decided to enter the Phoenix.

I wonder whether Julis felt this way, too…?

Saya, however, shook her head. “Don’t worry about it, Ayato. I wasn’t lying that night.”

That night. The words, the ones she had said when they’d stopped at her house on their way to Lieseltania, played back before him.

“So you can rely on me, when you need to. Next time, I’ll be your strength.”

That was what she had said, looking up at him as the moonlight illuminated her bedroom.

“…I see.”

Saya’s eyes had been completely serious.

In that case, there was nothing more he could say about it.

“…Besides, I don’t trust the integrated enterprise foundations. There are some things even they can’t do.”

“Yeah, there’s no doubt about that.”

The IEFs weren’t gods, after all.

“To me, this is much more reliable,” Saya said, taking her jacket from the nearby chair and pulling something that looked like a small pouch out of the pocket. She carefully removed an old, folded piece of paper, showing it to him.

“Ta-daa.”

“What?! I-isn’t that…?!” Ayato’s eyes opened wide in shock.

It was a wish coupon, one of many that had exchanged hands between them after their sparring matches as kids. When one of them used one, the other had to try to fulfill their wish—that was the rule.

“You’re still holding on to it, huh?”

“This is the last one. It’s a good thing I didn’t waste it. And it doesn’t have an expiration date. Which means—”

“Got it. It’s still valid.” Ayato raised his hands as if to say he wouldn’t debate the matter.

They might have just been silly games they’d played as children, but he couldn’t deny her that.

After all, they were both where they were now because of their past.

“Okay… But I don’t feel like using it yet, so you don’t need to worry.”

“You don’t feel like using it? Why not?”

Saya flashed him a forced, somewhat forlorn smile. “…Because I’m not brave enough.”

“Huh?”

What's that supposed to mean?

However, Saya's expression quickly returned to normal as she picked up the wrench she'd left on the floor.

"Well then, break's over. Back to work."

And then, with a backward glance at Ayato, who wasn't entirely satisfied with her explanation, she went back to customizing her Lux.

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The blade dug into her chest.

There was a sharp, burning pain as the taste of blood began to well up in her throat.

The flame burning deep inside her body began to grow weak, the strength ebbing from her limbs as the cold crept up on her.

"…Sorry about this, prez," Eishirou murmured in a low voice. He was holding a dagger. Not a Lux.

The light shone behind him. She couldn't see his face. Was he laughing? Or was he staring at her coldly, devoid of expression? But she had changed her approach with Eishirou. This future was supposed to have been changed. The memories poured back on her… But it was no good. He was surely smiling.

Her vision grew blurry, her surroundings dark.

Her body was cold, as if it were submerged in ice.

It was painful.

It was terrifying.

She was going to die.

What if she tried to get used to it? Impossible. She could never get used to such a thing. Death was the most primal of fears—as if anyone could get used to it. Infinite pain was no more than infinite hell.

She was slipping into the darkness, falling, falling…

And then Claudia's eyes snapped open.

"…It's been a while since *he* did it," she mumbled, holding on to the fading

memory.

She wiped the sweat from her forehead as she sat up on the sofa.

There was an unfinished coffee on her desk, surrounded by a number of open air-windows… She must have fallen asleep while working. The clock indicated it was just past three in the morning.

Claudia glanced at her mobile. It looked like she had just missed a call.

“Oh my.”

She smiled as she read the name and then hit the redial button without any hesitation.

“*Ah, sorry for calling so late*,” the voice on the other side of the air-window said, before Eishirou’s carefree smile popped up.

“Not at all. What is it?”

“It’s about those newbies you mentioned. It looks like I might have found something, so I thought I’d better let you know.”

“I expected no less. You’re a fast one, aren’t you?” Claudia smiled.

Her conversation partner blushed at the praise. *“Well, if it’s a request from you.”*

“Oh? But you might be better off keeping your distance from me now.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

While Shadowstar, Seidoukan Academy’s special operations unit, took orders from the student council president, it was officially under Galaxy’s control. Given that she was now going up against the school’s integrated enterprise foundation, it would be difficult to keep using it as she had in the past.

Moreover, this was a personal matter. If word was to get out, she wouldn’t be the only one to suffer the consequences—Eishirou would no doubt get dragged into it as well.

“You got a warning from the higher-ups, didn’t you? I wouldn’t have minded if you had declined.”

However, Eishirou waved his hands, his smile unwavering. *“Come on, prez,*

you know me better than that. I work in the shadows, even by Shadowstar's standards. At this point, it won't make much difference."

"I see. Then let me thank you for your loyalty." And with that, Claudia closed the air-window.

Of course, Claudia wasn't foolish enough to take Eishirou's words at face value. Given his position, there was little doubt that he had some kind of relationship with Galaxy's highest management. It was even rumored that he had connections with the other schools—and with Dirk Eberwein, the Tyrant of Le Wolfe, in particular.

"…But he's probably put his money on someone else."

From her position, at least, it didn't matter.

She just needed to hold out a little longer—a little longer, and she would be able to get her wish.

The preparations were complete; the pieces had begun to fall into place.

Now all that was left was for her—for Team Enfield—to seize victory.

If she could do that…

CHAPTER 2

THE GRYPS

“Wow… They’ve really changed it.”

Ayato looked down from his seat in one of the Sirius Dome’s many galleries. The stage was so changed, in fact, that it might as well have been completely new.

The most obvious difference was that it was now surrounded by a deep, moat-like ditch filled with the protective gel developed by Allekant, giving the stage the appearance of an island floating on the surface of a lake. It seemed that the gel was supposed to unfurl and surround the stage during matches.

On top of that, the existing defensive barriers were still located outside the protective gel.

“I guess they wanted to make it safer for the audience, but isn’t this overdoing it a little?” Julis, sitting beside Ayato, looked dumbfounded.

Kirin and Saya were sitting in the front row, apparently busy discussing something as well.

The opening ceremony of the Gryps was scheduled to take place later in the day, but for now, the participating teams had been invited to take a look at the upgraded venue.

As such, the galleries—normally capable of seating up to a hundred thousand spectators—looked strangely desolate.

Claudia let out a soft laugh. “It can’t be helped. Some of the top executives from the integrated enterprise foundations will be coming to watch. There would be a terrible fuss in the odd event that any of them was to get injured.”

“Top executives? Hmm… I guess it makes sense then, from their perspective.”

“The Executive Committee chairman apparently managed to convince them to hold the next Concordia here in Asterisk. It looks like they’ve decided to watch the ceremonies while they’re here—and at least some of the matches.”

It was fair to say that the top IEF executives were the highest powers in the world today. They hardly ever appeared in public, but it was said that they, or at least their representatives, attended a summit, the Concordia, every few years to coordinate their long-term interests.

“The last time they came here was just after the city’s large-scale improvement works forty years ago. Of course, the executives themselves will have changed over that time, too.”

“But even so…,” Ayato said, mulling it over, “does the Festa Executive Committee chairman really have that kind of influence?”

The Festa Executive Committee chairman—Madiath Mesa.

Based on what Ayato had heard, Mesa didn’t have a bad reputation—a sentiment that matched the impression Ayato had of him from their own brief dealings. The chairman had even done what he could during Flora’s kidnapping—and in helping to find Haruka.

But there was no forgetting the advice Ayato had been given by Stjarnagarm’s Commander Lindwall.

“Don’t put too much trust in Madiath Mesa.”

The words remained engraved in his mind even now.

“Let’s see. In terms of position, Mesa is only a mid-level executive at Galaxy. Moreover, given his heritage, he shouldn’t expect to rise higher than that. Under any normal situation, it would be impossible for him to have any kind of influence in determining the venue for the Concordia…,” Claudia answered in a hushed tone. “The Festa occupies an extremely special position for the integrated enterprise foundations. It is, after all, the sole event they manage jointly and for which they share responsibility. As such, the members of the Executive Committee are appointed from each foundation, and there is always a fixed ratio of members belonging to each one. There’s no need for me to explain how advantageous it is to have the chairman working for you, is there?”

“So what you’re saying is that it puts Galaxy in a strong position?”

“On the other hand, it’s also somewhat dangerous from a personal perspective. The previous executive chairman managed to evade those threats thanks to his political maneuvering. Madiath Mesa’s leadership, however, has left nothing to be desired.”

He did indeed come across as an unusually reliable and talented individual.

Nonetheless, there was still too little information out there for anyone to truly ascertain who he was as a person.

“I’m terribly sorry to interrupt you,” a cool and familiar voice from behind them said. “I don’t suppose I could have a moment of your time, Team Enfield?”

Ayato turned around to find a number of students from Saint Gallardworth Academy standing behind them, each impeccably dressed—their school crest, shaped like a halo, displayed prominently. Julis’s eyes opened wide, and neither Kirin nor Saya could mask their surprise.

“It’s been a while, hasn’t it?” Ayato held out his hand to the handsome young man at the head of the group, Ernest Fairclough. They had last seen each other at the school fair several months earlier.

Ernest, wearing a perfect smile, gave it a firm shake. “You look well, Amagiri.”

He was standing at the forefront of nine other Gallardworth students.

Which meant—

“And how are you, Pendragon? I see that you’ve brought Team Lancelot and Team Tristan with you. How very extravagant.” Claudia seemed to reflect that too-perfect smile like a mirror as she bowed to the Gallardworth students in greeting.

Team Lancelot was composed of the top five members of Gallardworth’s Page One students. Four of its members had participated in the previous Gryps.

Team Tristan was composed of Gallardworth’s sixth-to tenth-ranked Page One students, and so it was often described as the academy’s farm team when compared to Team Lancelot. There were, of course, many other teams from Gallardworth participating in the tournament, but those were the two that

stood out most in terms of raw ability.

“Well, some of us were insistent that we come to greet you all.”

But no sooner had Ernest begun speaking than a woman with gorgeous golden hair stepped forward.

“Oh my… It *has* been a while, Laetitia.” Claudia beamed.

“Yes, indeed. Too long! I’ve waited three years to repay you for that humiliation at the last Gryps! Mark my words, Claudia—I’ll crush you this time!”

The woman staring down in challenge was Gallardworth’s second-ranked fighter, Laetitia Blanchard, also known as the Witch of Shining Wings, Gloriara.

“Humiliation? Oh dear. Your team won.”

“Forget the team! This is about my own pride!”

Claudia merely parried the declaration with a light chuckle.

Julis watched from the side, her expression somewhere between astonishment and exasperation. “They haven’t changed at all, those two,” she scolded with her arms folded as she watched the exchange from the corner of her vision.

“Do you know her?” Ayato asked.

When it came to Gallardworth, Ernest was usually the one at the tip of everyone’s tongues, but the fact that Laetitia fought alongside him meant that she, too, wasn’t to be made light of. Judging by what Ayato had seen in recordings of her matches, she would have to be among the top five Stregas in all of Asterisk.

“…Like Claudia, she’s a regular at the Opernball in Lieseltania. She and Claudia both seem to have known each other since before that, though. It ends up like this every time they meet. Laetitia seems to have some sort of rivalry with her.”

“Oh? That’s impressive.”

Anyone who wanted to contend with Claudia would have to have quite the fighting spirit.

“Apparently, the Blanchard family has had a deep connection to the Enfield

family for several generations—”

“I can hear you, Julis,” Laetitia interrupted her with a piercing stare. “Just so you know, this has nothing to do with our families. This is between me and her!”

“Well, *excuse* me.” Julis looked away with a shrug.

Judging by how they addressed each other, Julis seemed to be more familiar with her than she was letting on.

“And on top of that, as a frien— Ahem! As an old acquaintance, I can’t watch on in silence as you try to realize such a foolish, stupid dream!” Laetitia declared, pointing a finger squarely at Claudia. “I’ll smash it into the ground; mark my words!”

Don’t tell me…, Ayato thought. *Does she know what Claudia’s wish is?*

Ayato and her other team members knew, of course, but they still had no idea what kind of motivation lay behind it.

If Laetitia knew, too, she would have to have a much deeper relationship with her than Julis had just suggested.

“In any case, if you plan to win this time, you’ll have to go through us sooner or later. That said, I wouldn’t mind watching you trip up in the preliminaries.”

The bracket for the preliminaries, up until the third round, had already been announced. Like the Phoenix, however, it was designed to prevent tournament favorites from facing off against one another too soon, so there would be no possibility of Team Enfield running up against either Team Lancelot or Team Tristan until at least the fourth round, when the next bracket would be drawn.

“Are you finished, Laetitia?” interrupted a voice that Ayato remembered well. “I’m afraid you’re not the only one looking to settle a score.”

“Elliot…,” Laetitia murmured, reluctantly stepping back.

“It’s been almost a full year, Amagiri.”

Greeting him with a light smile was Elliot Forster, alias the Shining Sword, Claíomh Solais, whom Ayato had defeated in the semifinals of the Phoenix. He excelled at countering and was a master of swordsmanship comparable even to

Kirin in skill.

The last time they had fought, Ayato hadn't been able to use the Ser Veresta, so it had been an old-fashioned duel between one swordsman and another. At that time, he had managed, somehow, to overcome him.

But that was a year ago now.

"Wow… It looks like you've been training. You're ranked six now, right?" Not having seen Elliot in so long, he couldn't hide his surprise at his obvious growth.

His fluffy blond hair was still the same, but his facial features had matured considerably, and while he was still somewhat shorter than Ayato, the muscles in his slender arms and legs were clearly more developed, even hidden by his uniform.

"No, I still have a long way to go… But I haven't forgotten the humiliation I felt when you smashed my crest." Elliot flashed him a fierce grin. "At the very least, I'm not going to let that happen again." His words brimmed with confidence, as if he could only barely hold his pride as a swordsman in check.

"Ayato…," Kirin whispered nervously.

"Yeah, I know," he replied with a short nod.

She had no doubt sensed the strength of the boy standing in front of them as well. As a swordswoman herself, she would have expected no less.

"You'll be able to see how much I've grown for yourself when we battle. I'll be looking forward to it." Elliot gave them a polite bow before stepping back to rejoin his team members.

"They say defeat helps one grow… But Elliot is a completely different person now. I suppose we have you to thank for that, Amagiri." Ernest smiled, putting a hand on Elliot's shoulder. "And," he added sweetly, "I'm looking forward to crossing swords with you myself."

Ayato heard Saya mutter, "Looks like you're popular."

He was about to say something in response when he noticed the Ser Veresta rattling in its holder.

"Oh my…" Claudia giggled.

It seemed that the Orga Lux at Ernest's waist—the Lei-Glems—was shaking as well.

"What's this…?"

"Perhaps they're saying something to each other as well? It *has* been more than a decade since any of the Four Colored Runeswords have faced one another like this."

The Four Colored Runeswords—the Ser Veresta, the Blade of the Black Furnace; the Lei-Glems, the Blade of White Purification; the Raksha-Nada, the Blade of Red Mist; and the Wole-Zain, the Blade of Blue Lamentation.

Throughout the long history of the Festa, there had never been a time when all four had been used against one another.

At present, the Wole-Zain was without a compatible user, and the Raksha-Nada was said to have been sealed away.

"I've heard they were all built in the same laboratory. Maybe they miss each other, or else…?" Ernest left the sentence unfinished, putting his hands together with a clap to change the subject, just like Claudia. "Well then, my apologies for taking up so much of your time. Let's do our best, all of us, fairly and cleanly. I hope to see you soon—preferably in the arena."

Claudia let out a chuckle as they watched the Gallardworth students march away in single file. "It looks like we've got some mutual friends, Ayato."

He could respond only with a forced smile.

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"It goes without saying that the skills and prowess of our contestants continue to rise with each and every Festa… I say this in no way to disparage the heroes of past tournaments. No, I am speaking rather with reference to the scientific data, which provides us all with the indisputable facts."

It was the opening ceremony of the twenty-fourth Gryps.

Madiath Mesa was giving his speech at the podium, overlooking the contestants at the front of the arena.

Just like during the opening ceremony of the Phoenix, the students who

would be participating in the tournament stood in long rows, separated by school, in the center of the upgraded stage. The huge floodlights installed on the ceiling of the dome illuminated the Executive Committee chairman's position in the middle of the platform.

"We all recognize the achievements and continuing successes of prior champions. Take Commander Helga Lindwall, for instance. There is not a person here who would deny that her strength remains undimmed even today. But if we compare the mean values of our contestants' prana, you, who are participating in this tournament, shine unmistakably brighter than the first generation to which she belongs." Madiath was speaking in his usual calm, lively voice, holding the audience captive with his words.

The galleries, empty until just a short while ago, were now completely full, overflowing with spectators bottling up their raging enthusiasm as they followed Madiath's every word.

"Moreover, there has been a remarkable evolution in strategy since that time —and in the development of Luxes. The recently unveiled Rect Luxes serve as a symbol of that progress… If you will forgive me for this digression, I sometimes find myself wishing such technology had been available during my own time as a student standing where you are today. Although, whether I would have been able to control it is a different matter."

A buoyant murmur spread through the stadium at the joke.

Above the galleries, Madiath's wry smile was being projected on several huge air-windows.

"Right…," Ayato murmured, a question popping into his mind. "The chairman was a winner at the Phoenix, too, wasn't he?"

"He was. What about it?" Julis answered in a low voice.

"I was just wondering who his tag partner was."

"Hmm…" She pressed a finger against her temple, her eyes shut tight as if rummaging through her memories. "I'm pretty sure it was a woman, but I don't remember her name. It's been a long time since I watched the recordings."

"I see… That's okay."

Judging by Madiath's age, Ayato and the others probably hadn't even been born yet when he had won. Given Julis's diligence, Ayato wouldn't have been surprised if she had watched the matches of every prior champion of the Phoenix, but remembering them all clearly would undoubtedly be too much for anyone.

"Why? What are you thinking?"

"No, it's nothing." Ayato waved the question away, returning his gaze to the podium.

He himself didn't know why the question had sprung to mind so suddenly.

"It is in consideration of these changes that we judged that the existing Festa facilities also needed to be changed, in order to keep pace with the evolving nature of the tournament. As such, we embarked on this large-scale upgrade, which, despite the somewhat forced deadline, I am pleased to announce has been completed according to schedule." Madiath paused there for a moment, casting his gaze toward the galleries. "The installation of the new protective gel will increase the safety of all our spectators, without compromising the enthusiasm and excitement that are hallmarks of this event. Moreover, it will allow our contestants even greater freedom to explore bold, daring strategies."

The galleries responded with a roar of enthusiasm.

Madiath's speech was, as usual, well received. Even among the students, there were not a small number who looked to be holding themselves tall in pride and excitement.

For Ayato, however, who knew the real reason why the stages had been refurbished, the words came across as mere sophistry. The student council presidents of each school, standing at the head of each block of students, seemed to be aware of the actual motivation as well—as Ernest and Xinglou Fan were wearing cold expressions.

Watching Madiath's composed demeanor, Ayato couldn't help but feel a strange sense of unease.

He had listened to the chairman's speech during the opening ceremony of the Phoenix last summer, too, but this time, he felt as if he had caught a glimpse of

some ominous void residing deep inside the man. Ayato found himself shuddering as he imagined that unfathomable cavity spreading yet wider behind that affable, spirited face.

It wasn't that there was anything strange about Madiath's appearance.

If he had to put it into words, what had changed was how Ayato saw him.

Perhaps Helga's warning had taken root, he thought.

"Hmm…"

Whatever it was, now wasn't the time to worry about it.

Ayato caught his breath, reminding himself that their first match was scheduled for that very afternoon, and tried to shake off all unnecessary thoughts.

"Saya, before we head in, I'm gonna go buy a drink," Ayato said. It was after the opening ceremony, and his team was making its way to the prep room. "Can you let everyone know?"

"…Got it." Saya, walking alongside him, nodded.

The other three girls were busy discussing something several yards ahead.

"If Kirin could use her sword-drawing techniques in a group battle, we might be able to use them to increase our total number of coordination patterns."

"I'm sorry… I don't think I'll be able to pull them off, not unless it's a one-on-one duel. And they'll take too long to get ready…"

"It wouldn't be impossible to bring about such a situation, but if it takes too long against an opponent who is too skilled, it could prove fatal."

Judging by what Ayato could make out, they seemed to be confirming their strategy for the upcoming match. He didn't want to disturb them.

"Can you get me something, too?"

"All right. Apple juice?"

"Not the one from concentrate."

"Got it." As he set off for the vending machine corner, Ayato waved his hand

to show that he had understood what she wanted.

He decided to take a peek at the nearby entrance. It was jammed full of the students who had been gathered on the stage until just a few moments earlier. While Ayato's match was at the Sirius Dome, many of the others would be taking place in the other arenas throughout the city, and the contestants, of course, all had to be shuttled to their destinations. Yet, not everyone would have a match on the first day—many would be wanting to return to their respective schools.

"Ayato!" A familiar voice suddenly called out his name.

He turned around, looking for the source, when he noticed a hand sticking out from behind a pillar, beckoning to him.

The person behind the unexpectedly childish action was, as he had guessed from the voice, Sylvia.

They had called each other several times since the end of the school fair, but it had been a while since they had last seen each other in person.

"…It looks like the student council presidents really have it tough, getting called out here even when you're not participating," Ayato said with a grin.

"Well, it's part of the job. My schedule's free at the moment, so I have to at least make an appearance at the ceremonies. It looks like Xinglou came as well."

"Right, I heard that she usually sends a representative."

Now that he thought about it, Xinglou Fan, whom he had first met during the school fair, had indeed sent someone else as Jie Long's representative to the closing ceremony of the Phoenix.

"Her representative is pretty famous, too, you know?"

"Huh? Really?"

"She's from Gaishi, the seventh office of the Ryuusei Kyuushi, an organization under the direct control of Jie Long's student council president. Basically, it's their special ops unit."

"…She's a special ops agent? And famous?"

Wouldn't that interfere with her work?

"Anyway, she isn't one of Xinglou's students, but she does seem to have some kind of relationship with her. And they've got pretty similar personalities."

"Similar? You mean…?"

"Right. She's a fanatic for battle."

He would have to remember to steer clear of her, Ayato thought.

"Ah, by the way, Sylvie. What's with that outfit?"

She was dressed in a disguise, just like during the school fair.

And yet, she had been wearing her uniform during the opening ceremony.

"I've got the rest of the day off. I thought I'd take a look around the Rotlicht."

In other words, she was going to try to find more information on her missing teacher.

"The city is crawling with tourists during the Festa, so it's a lot easier to blend in… Ah, don't worry, though, I'll watch your match," she added with a wink.

"Ha-ha, sounds like you'll be busy."

"…Hmm, aren't *you* taking it a bit too easily, though?" She raised a finger as she drew closer to him. "I mean, it's not like I think you'll be eliminated in the preliminaries or anything, but you can't afford to let your guard down in the Gryps, you know?"

"Y-yeah, I'll keep that in mind. But more importantly—" His heart skipped a beat as her purple eyes stared into his, and he glanced away. "You should watch your back, too. You've been going out a lot lately, haven't you?"

"Well… I guess so," she answered slowly, her voice so low he almost didn't hear it. He must have hit the mark.

Ayato hadn't accompanied her on those outings, but she had given him rough reports. She had been going out into the city in disguise more and more lately, especially since the beginning of summer vacation.

Of course, her goal was always to find a clue as to the whereabouts of her music teacher, Ursula Svend.

“You didn’t find anything, did you?”

Sylvia, regret visible on her face, shook her head. “No, nothing. I suppose that’s why I’m getting so worked up about it lately…”

“I see…”

If she could recognize it by herself, there was no need to remind her to be careful.

“But you know… I’ve been thinking, and I believe I’ve realized something.”

“What?”

“You heard how she was talking back then. I think she’s probably being controlled by someone. I mean, *that* wasn’t the Ursula I knew.” There was a piercing glint in her eyes, a cold anger lurking behind her words.

She was referring, of course, to the person whom she had taken for Ursula during the Gran Colosseo at the end of the school fair.

“I know there are abilities that can rob people of control over their bodies, but I’ve never heard of something that can alter their memories or personality. I mean, the amount of mana that would be required for that would be beyond what any Strega or Dante could physically handle.”

It was a known fact that mind control abilities were inhibited by prana, meaning that they weren’t particularly effective against Genestella.

“If such a thing was possible, it would have to be—”

“An Orga Lux,” Ayato finished for her.

Sylvia nodded. “At least, that’s the most likely possibility.” She let out a deep sigh, her shoulders slumping tiredly. “I’ve looked into it, but I can’t find any record of an Orga Lux with that kind of ability.”

The research and development of Orga Luxes was, naturally, a closely guarded secret, but thanks to treaties agreed to among the IEFs, every piece of urm-manadite used in such weapons was carefully cataloged and tracked. At the very least, it should have been possible to find out which pieces of urm-manadite were where.

“It does seem to be the most likely possibility,” Ayato admitted.

Moreover, the woman whom Sylvia had taken for Ursula had been able to temporarily deactivate the Ser Veresta. No matter how he thought about it, that wasn’t normal.

As far as Ayato was aware, it might not be beyond the realm of possibility for irregular Stregas or Dantes, such as Xinglou or Orphelia Landlufen, to do such a thing, but the most natural explanation was that it had been done by a Lux.

“Yep. So I’m going to look into it a little… Ah, sorry! You’ve got a match, and here I am distracting you! You need to focus on the Gryps, Ayato!”

“…All right. But if something happens, you can call me whenever you want, okay?”

“Ha-ha, thanks.” Sylvia flashed him an apologetic smile. “Ah, I almost forgot. I wanted to give you this,” she said, taking something out of her bag.

“What is it?”

“Lunch.” Sylvia giggled.

“…Huh?”

Sylvia smiled at him mischievously. “I told you, didn’t I? That I’d make lunch for you next time?”

Now that she mentioned it, she had indeed said something like that while they had been touring the school fair.

“You made it yourself? For me?” He gaped. He knew how busy her schedule was.

There would be an uproar if word was to get out that the world’s most famous songstress was cooking lunch for him, he mused. If her fans were to find out, they would no doubt curse him for the rest of his natural life.

“Take it. I *am* fairly confident in my cooking, you know… Or are you not allowed to eat something cooked by someone from a rival school?”

“O-of course not!” Ayato waved his hands, quickly accepting the lovingly wrapped box.

Sylvia smiled gladly. “G-good…” She glanced at the floor, letting out a quiet sigh. “*Haaah…* This is nerve-racking…”

“Sylvie?”



“Ah, no, it’s nothing.” She turned back toward him, waving her hands with her usual bright smile. “I’d like you to tell me what you think, though…”

“Ah, that might be…” Ayato carefully glanced around.

They were both fairly good at hiding their identities, so it was likely no one had noticed them yet, but he would be bound to attract attention if he was to start eating so close to the entrance hall. That wouldn’t be good.

“I’m joking!” Sylvia giggled. “It was a joke!”

“Huh…?”

She stepped back, seemingly unable to control her laughter. “Anyway, I’ll be back soon. Good luck at your first match!”

“A-ah, right. Thanks.”

Ayato watched in silent astonishment as Sylvia hurried off toward the galleries.

*

By the entrance of the Sirius Dome, next to a vending machine a little distance away, two girls stood watching, their eyes wide in astonishment, until finally they found the courage to speak.

“…Hey, Tuulia.”

“…What, Miluše?”

“…Did you see that?”

“…I saw it.”

“…That was… That was Sylvia, wasn’t it?”

“…It was her, all right.”

“…”

“…”

They fell silent once more before slowly turning to face each other—their smiles a mix of surprise and delight—and jumping up to give each other a midair high five.

CHAPTER 3

ECCENTRIC GIRLS

It had been a long time since Ayato had been in one of the Sirius Dome's many prep rooms.

"Oh? I see. That certainly does look delicious." Julis was staring at him reproachfully with her arms crossed.

"…And we were wondering where you were." Saya's gaze seemed to be boring into his back.

Considering that he had been so late returning and that he would be unable to hide the box of food he'd been given, he had resigned himself to his team members' displeasure. But no sooner had he told them that it had come from Sylvia than their gazes turned colder still.

This time, even Claudia admonished him: "The match is about to start. Did you think that wouldn't have an effect on our teamwork?"

"I didn't mean anything by it…"

Sylvia's food was so delicious, however, as to quickly put an end to everyone's complaints.

Spiced meatballs, potato salad, and open sandwiches topped with smoked salmon and all kinds of vegetables. It was a simple meal but clearly one into which a lot of time and care had been put.

Ayato could see no reason to fault Sylvia's confidence in her cooking.

He only wished he could take the time to eat it all somewhere more comfortable.

"Um, why don't we turn on the TV?" Kirin interjected, trying to lighten the mood. "They should have started introducing the teams…" She opened a large

air-window, and— *“Mico Yanase here, announcer for ABC, covering all the thrills at the main stage again this year! Captain Shizuna Hiiragi from Stjarnagarm, a graduate from Le Wolfe Black Institute, will be offering us commentary and analysis!”*

In the center of the air-window was the face of the same announcer who had covered the Phoenix.

“It’s great to be here.”

The commentator, on the other hand, a woman with black bobbed hair and sleepy eyes, was different from the last time.

Claudia seemed to purse her lips in mild surprise. “Oh my, I do believe that she’s one of Ms. Yatsuzaki’s former teammates.”

“Huh?”

If that was true, then she was a former champion of the Gryps herself.

“Commentators are normally selected from those who have done well in the Festa. It isn’t particularly strange,” Julis explained.

“…Then Ms. Yatsuzaki might be invited, too?” Saya asked.

“It’s different for anyone working at one of the six schools. Obviously.”

Such a person might, after all, face accusations of partiality.

“However, we truly are indebted to Ms. Yatsuzaki, so we will have to do our best to repay her,” Claudia said.

“That goes without saying. We’ll be fine as long as we do as well as she did, right?” Julis answered, flashing them a fearless grin.

They had been training under Kyouko’s strict guidance for several months now. Due to the finite limits of her abilities, they hadn’t been able to use mock battles each time, but nonetheless, by the time the end of summer came around, they had been able to hold their own against her and her dolls. That, Ayato hoped, would be good enough.

“Well then, Ms. Hiiragi, let’s cut straight to it. Which teams do you think look promising this time around?”

“The favorites to win are, of course, Gallardworth’s Silverwinged Knights—Team Lancelot in particular. Not only are they being led by Ernest Fairclough, their Runesword-wielding Pendragon, four of the team’s members did extraordinarily well in the last Gryps. Their only new member is Percival Gardner, known by many of her fans as Agrestia, wielding an Orga Lux popularly known as the Holy Grail. There hasn’t been a single team from Gallardworth with members wielding both the Runesword and the Holy Grail that hasn’t taken the championship.”

“The Runesword is, of course, the Lei-Glems, and the Holy Grail is the Amalthean Goat. It seems that a lot of students from Gallardworth, and their Orga Luxes, are given nicknames, like how Laetitia Blanchard is also known as the Saint, right?”

“That’s one of Gallardworth’s many traditions. Now, these two Orga Luxes will be incredibly difficult to contend with. Moreover, the other three members—the Witch of Shining Wings, Gloriara, who is the aforementioned Laetitia Blanchard; along with the Black Shield, Gareth; and the Royal Spear, Rhongomiant—will provide excellent support. Together, they really do make for a formidable team.”

“Just looking at the odds, Team Lancelot really is towering above everyone else!”

Ayato wasn’t surprised to hear that Ernest’s Team Lancelot was already being singled out as the likely champions.

“Well then, how about Gallardworth’s Team Tristan?”

“Unlike Team Lancelot, this one’s made up entirely of new members.”

“Team Tristan was the runner-up during the last Gryps, but most of its members from back then have already graduated. Won’t that be a problem for them?”

“That’s true, but Gallardworth’s sixth-ranked fighter, Elliot Forster—also known as the Shining Sword, Claíomh Solais—is said to be almost on par with Ernest Fairclough when it comes to swordsmanship. Meanwhile, their seventh-ranked fighter, Noelle Messmer, the Witch of Holy Thorns, Perceforêt, is incredibly skilled, too. If they can all work together well as a team, there’s no reason they wouldn’t have a good shot at the championship, either.”

“I see, I see. There’s little wonder Gallardworth has scored the most victories in the Gryps. Well then, what about their opposition?”

“I would expect Seidoukan’s Team Enfield to put up the most resistance.”

“Wow! That’s us!” Kirin burst out in surprise.

“Of course.” Claudia smiled as if it went without saying. “Looking it at objectively, we are one of the favorites.”

Certainly, looking only at their ranks, they had both Seidoukan’s current and previous number ones, and the school’s second-and fifth-ranked fighters. Moreover, the Ser Veresta and the Pan-Dora were famous Orga Luxes in their own right.

“Team Enfield includes the winners from last year’s Phoenix, along with another two who made the top four tag teams. And the other member, Claudia Enfield, the Commander of a Thousand Visions, Parca Morta, is not only Seidoukan’s second-ranked fighter, but she also wields the Orga Lux Pan-Dora, which is said to have the power of precognition. They’re one of very few teams we can expect to hold their own against Gallardworth.”

“Well, that does sound interesting!”

“That said, there is an unknown entity this year. Jie Long’s Team Yellow Dragon includes the Ban’yuu Tenra’s top disciple, whom it seems has finally been allowed to take part in the Festa. We should expect him to be quite the dominating figure, I’d say.”

“You’re talking about Jie Long’s second-ranked fighter, Xiaohui Wu, right? Like the Ban’yuu Tenra, Xinglou Fan, he’s hardly ever appeared in public. It sounds like we should expect great things from him!”

“The team’s other members are the winners of the Phoenix four years ago, Hufeng Zhao, the Peerless Thorn, Tenka Musou; and Cecily Wong, the Flower of a Thousand Thunderbolts, Raigeki Senka; along with one of the strongest teams from last year’s Phoenix, the Li siblings. They should make a very powerful combination. Moreover, the team name, Yellow Dragon, can only be used with the permission of the Ban’yuu Tenra—and only then if she judges them worthy of representing Jie Long. I don’t think anyone would question calling them one of

the favorites."

The faces of all five members of Team Yellow Dragon appeared in the air-window. Ayato had met three, and he had seen videos of matches featuring the wavy-haired girl, Cecily Wong. The man with the rough, masculine features was still, however, a mystery.

"So he's the Celestial Warrior, Hagun Seikun…"

"Yes. There's practically no useful data about him," Claudia answered. "If we have to fight them, we'll just have to hope that we can get a measure of his strengths and weaknesses from their earlier matches."

He was Xinglou's top disciple, so he would no doubt be incredibly strong, just as the commentator had said.

"We shouldn't underestimate Cecily Wong and Hufeng Zhao, either. If I had to be honest, if those two had participated in the last Phoenix, I don't know whether we would have won." Julis, her expression grave as she stared at the images in the air-window, clenched her fists.

Ayato, who had seen Hufeng Zhao's abilities for himself during the school fair, had no reason to disagree. As far as physical combat was concerned, Hufeng was probably a step above him.

Cecily Wong, on the other hand, was an expert in *seisenjutsu*, and Julis, though a Strega, seemed to be quite worried about her. Judging by the recordings of her matches, she seemed to excel in lightning techniques, but her prowess in the martial arts couldn't be overlooked, either.

"Those twins will no doubt be just as much a problem as they were during the Phoenix. If nothing else, their abilities will make them extremely effective in group combat."

Shenyun Li, the Phantom Builder, Gen'ei Souki, excelled at using *seisenjutsu* to make things that weren't there appear real—while Shenhua Li, the Phantom Vanisher, Gen'ei Musan, excelled in using it to make things that were there disappear. There was no mistaking that such abilities would naturally be more effective supporting team members than used on their own in a tag battle.

"What a nuisance," Saya murmured.

"…You can say that again." Kirin nodded in agreement.

"As for this year's dark horse, I'd keep my eye on Queenvale's Team Rusalka. They made their debut at the last Gryps and managed to advance all the way into the top eight. I'm looking forward to seeing what they can pull off this time."

"Rusalka is, of course, also a rock band, and so they're always busy doing something. They haven't fought together as a team since the last Gryps. As a graduate of Queenvale, I can't wait to see what they have in store for us this time!"

"…Personally, I hope they haven't grown too much," Claudia said, her expression clouded as she faced the air-window.

"You've been brooding about them for a while now." Julis sighed. "To be honest, I don't think we need to be that worried… I mean, at the very least, they aren't going to be as much of a problem as the other three."

All five had watched as many recordings of the other teams' previous matches as they could find. Given that Rusalka had made it into the top eight in the last Gryps, there was no denying that they were a strong team. However, even taking into account whatever growth they might have shown over the past three years, Ayato doubted whether they would be as much of an obstacle as the favorites from Gallardworth and Jie Long.

"But we'll need to keep an eye on Miluše, at least," Ayato pointed out. "She's Queenvale's number three, after all."

There might not have been any data on Rusalka's team matches since the last Gryps, but there was a decent amount from the official ranking battles. All five members of Rusalka, it seemed, had challenged Sylvia individually, and all five had been soundly defeated. *As long as they hadn't intentionally thrown the matches, that ought to be enough to gauge their skills*, Ayato thought.

"Does that mean that, even though they aren't strong on their own, they've got good teamwork?" Kirin asked timidly, her hand raised in the air.

Claudia, however, slowly shook her head. "No. They certainly do have good teamwork, but I'm more worried about—"

“Their Orga Luxes,” Saya finished for her.

“Exactly.”

“Hmm… The Lyre-Poros, was it?” Ayato asked after a moment.

Team Rusalka was famous for their Orga Luxes, which doubled as musical instruments. It was said that the heart of the Lyre-Poros was originally a single urm-manadite core that had been divided into five pieces. As such, it was essentially one weapon wielded by five people, meaning that it required five separate users—each with high compatibility ratings—just to be able to be controlled.

Ayato opened an air-window and searched for data on the band.

Each of the five instruments had unusually complicated names. Miluše, it seemed, wielded a guitar component known as the Lyre-Poros Calliope, Päivi a drum component known as the Lyre-Poros Erato, Monica a bass component known as the Lyre-Poros Melpomene, Tuulia another guitar component known as the Lyre-Poros Polyhymnia, and Mahulena a keyboard component known as the Lyre-Poros Thalia.

“Judging by these recordings, it looks like they work by manipulating sound…”

As he had expected, the team’s strategy during the last Gryps looked to be based around both attacking and defending through the use of sound waves. There didn’t seem to have been any teams able to use the five parts of the Orga Lux together before Rusalka, so there was no other information available.

“…” As she watched the recording, Claudia’s expression turned grave.

“What is it?”

“…No, don’t mind me. There isn’t much point worrying about a team that we might not even have to face. Let’s focus on more pressing concerns.”

“Ah, okay…”

Ayato couldn’t say he wasn’t worried about an Orga Lux that seemed to have even Claudia so visibly concerned, but it wouldn’t be a problem unless they had to actually fight them.

In the live broadcast from the Sirius Dome, the announcer and the

commentator had already moved on to the next teams.

“Yes, exactly! Also from Queenvale, we have Team Melvielle and Team Kaguya, which I’m willing to bet we should all keep a close eye on! Especially—”

“Team Kaguya?” Ayato found himself echoing the name.

“What?” Julis turned toward him.

“No, it’s nothing. Someone I know is in it, that’s all.”

“…From Queenvale? You mean someone who isn’t Sylvia Lyyneheym?” Julis’s gaze turned cold.

He had said too much, but it was too late to take it back.

“Oh? I looked into Team Kaguya myself, but this is the first I’ve heard about a friend of yours being part of it,” Claudia cut in. “Might I ask who it is?” There was nothing outwardly strange about her smile, but there seemed to be an unusual level of pressure behind her words.

“She’s really just an acquaintance… It’s Yuzuhi Renjouji. She’s a student at our dojo.”

Kirin’s eyes snapped open. “Your dojo…? You mean, she knows the Amagiri Shinmei style?”

“Well, technically, at one of the branch dojos. You remember, right, Saya? The Yatsuka Dojo?”

“…Ah, the archery one.” Saya put her hands together as if only now remembering.

“You know her, too, Saya?”

“…No, I just know about the dojo. Haruka and Ayato’s father went there sometimes.”

“Anyway, I’ve never been suited to archery, so I don’t have much to do with them. And I’ve only met Yuzuhi a few times when we were kids.” Ayato paused, a slight frown wrinkling his brow. “Unlike me, Yuzuhi is a first-class archer. She was one of the best—even when we were kids. I’m a bit worried about how much she might have improved since then.”

“She *must* be good—to make you say that…” Julis, too, broke into a frown.

“I see… I had thought Sophia Fairclough would be the only real challenger in Team Kaguya, but it looks like I’ll have to reevaluate them,” Claudia mused.

“Fairclough…? You mean, like Ernest?” This time, it was Ayato’s turn to be taken by surprise.

“Yes, his younger sister. She’s quite talented with a sword. They say that she’s just as good as her brother, Pendragon… Or maybe even better. She does have a weakness, though—”

“Hold on,” Saya interrupted, raising her hand to her temple as if she had a headache. “It’s too much. I can’t remember all this.”

Saya had a hard time remembering things she didn’t have a particular interest in, a trait that was most apparent during class.

“Well, there are a lot of promising teams competing this time around, after all. Don’t overdo it,” Claudia said, patting Saya on the head. “I’ll be sure to keep everyone updated with any relevant information. All you need to do is focus on the teams that we’ll definitely be facing.”

“Th-thanks…” Kirin, too, placed a hand over her chest in relief.

“And it looks like Allekant’s Team Androcles will be entering with a new kind of unannounced weapon. It’s apparently different from the new Rect Luxes, so I’m really looking forward to watching its debut. And my own former school, Le Wolfe, has contracted soldiers from the private military company HRMS to form Team Hellion. Word has it that company president Liberio Pareto selected all five personally and is even loaning them the Orga Lux Vershe-Velun, the Sword of Devouring Hunger—”

Even though the live commentary introducing the various teams had yet to finish, Claudia closed the air-window before turning toward her teammates. “Now then, shall we go over our strategy for our first match one last time?”

*

At the same time, in Team Rusalka’s prep room at the Canopus Dome, the site of the tournament’s first match— “It’s time for an Emergency Meeting on How to Unseat Sylvia Lyyneheym!” Miluše announced triumphantly.

The girl had been fidgeting with excitement throughout the trip from the Sirius Dome. Now that they had finally arrived, she puffed out her chest grandly as if launching into a long-awaited announcement.

“…Um, what’s going on?” Mahulena asked nervously.

“Ha-ha! Listen up! You’ll never guess what—”

“We caught Sylvia in a secret rendezvous with a guy!” Tuulia cut in smugly.

“Whaaat?!” the three other members—Päivi, Monica, and Mahulena—all cried out simultaneously.

“Hey, Tuulia! That’s not fair! I was going to say it!” Miluše protested, swinging her arms around wildly.

“Heh-heh, the early bird gets the worm.” Tuulia smirked, easily dodging her.

“Argh! Not fair!”

“Come on, stop fooling around already and tell us what happened!” Monica called out as she rose to her feet. “I mean, did you really see it?”

“We saw it, all right! It’s a huge scoop!”

“We even got it on video!” Miluše added before opening a small air-window with her mobile and playing back a recording.

They had been some distance away, so their voices hadn’t been captured clearly, but the video distinctly showed the figures of a girl and a boy having some kind of intimate conversation behind a pillar.

“Whoa… That’s definitely Sylvia!” Päivi, her gaze fixed on the air-window, nodded enthusiastically.

It was hard to see through her disguise at first glance, but even Mahulena could recognize those distinctive facial expressions.

“Right, right?” Tuulia burst out, pointing at the air-window. “And look, she’s giving him something!”

“…What is it?” Mahulena asked.

“Listen carefully!” Tuulia winked at Miluše, who then turned up the volume.

There was a lot of distortion and background noise, but— “She cooked lunch for him?!”



“Spot on!” the two girls cried out in unison, jumping up to give each other a high five.

Miluše turned to Monica. “No matter who we sell this to, there’s no way they can call it fake, right?”

“…Indeed, we could even skip the media clubs and take it straight to the big online news outlets… Awesome! Awesome! *Awesome!* This will be a huge scandal! We’ve really hit the jackpot this time!” Monica, forgetting for a moment her usual poise, cried out exuberantly, her lips twisted in a frightening grin.

“R-right, yeah…” Miluše drew back a little at the forcefulness of her response.

“…Huh?” Päivi, still watching the recording, tilted her head to one side. “Isn’t this…the Murakumo?”

“Wha—?!” Mahulena exclaimed as everyone scrambled back in front of the air-window.

“We were only looking at *her*, but now that you mention it… That is a Seidoukan uniform, isn’t it?”

“I-it *is* him! It’s that Ayato Amagiri!”

Mahulena couldn’t help but wonder why it had taken them so long to recognize him.

Ayato Amagiri, known as Gathering Clouds, Murakumo, was Seidoukan Academy’s number one—and a top celebrity in Asterisk. He had been a favorite topic among Festa aficionados even before seizing the championship but particularly so ever since defeating Allekant’s autonomous puppets in the final match.

“…Wow, I wasn’t expecting it to be this big… So I guess that means her…d-d-date during the school fair—that was…!”

“This’ll be the biggest scandal *ever*…!” Miluše cried out, clenching her fists triumphantly.

“…Huh? H-hold on, hold on a second.” Monica, having returned to her usual feigned innocence, took a toy-shaped mobile device from her pocket. “Hey,

look, look at this," she said as she opened a cutely decorated air-window.

It was a gossip site. Monica scrolled through the articles as though intimately familiar with them. There were headlines like The Murakumo's Passionate Love: Princess Riessfeld!, Phoenix Tag Partners Also Partners in Life, and Why Is the Murakumo Accompanying Princess Riessfeld on Her Triumphant Return to Lieseltania?

"As you can see, Ayato Amagiri is supposed to be with Glühen Rose."

"…But is this reliable?" Mahulena wondered, dubious about the clearly sensationalist titles.

"Who knows? But the princess *did* go home around the end of last year, and the Murakumo *did* go with her. Even the normal news covered that. And besides…" Monica paused there for a moment, raising a hand to her lips to conceal a girlish laugh. "There are other articles, too, but I thought they might be a little too steamy for you all."

"…Steamy?"

"Things like a love triangle, or a square, or even a pentagon… I mean, the Murakumo is taking part in the Gryps, too, and all his teammates are girls, right? People are saying that he gets along incredibly well with all four…"

"N-no, he couldn't be…" Mahulena couldn't stop herself from blushing.

Miluše and Tuulia, on the other hand, merely looked puzzled.

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"…You're both still wet behind the ears, I see," Päivi murmured under her breath.

"What she means is that…it might not just be Sylvia whom Amagiri's going out with…," Mahulena explained.

Miluše, after tilting her head to either side for a moment in thought, suddenly looked up as the pieces came together. "So he's just playing around with her?!"

"Wh-what?! *Ugh*, that Murakumo! What a horrible thing to do!" Tuulia cried out, her face flush with anger.

Mahulena was left feeling strangely uneasy at their overly simplistic

conclusions. “N-not exactly, it’s just a rumor,” she pointed out, trying to calm them. There’s no way to know whether it’s true or not…”

Neither Miluše nor Tuulia, however, were paying her a bit of attention any longer.

“Argh…! We’ve got no choice; let’s put the plan on hold for a while!”

“Huh…? You mean, we won’t release the video?” Mahulena blinked in surprise.

Miluše nodded as if that was the only natural conclusion. “Obviously! I mean, I’d feel so sorry for her!”

“…Weren’t we planning to drag her down though?”

“That’s that; this is this!” Miluše declared.

“Well, now that it’s come to this… I’d feel pretty bad if we did go through with it…”

“We’ve got no choice.”

“What? You’re all actually pretty soft, huh?”

Even the other members—though Monica did look a little disappointed—didn’t raise any objections.

Mahulena felt like grasping her head in exasperation, but she couldn’t deny that she did feel a certain amount of relief.

Now, she knew for certain.

Her band members weren’t bad people.

They just weren’t particularly bright; that was all.

“So—change of plans!”

“Huh?”

“Let’s take a break from Sylvia and focus on the Murakumo!”

“Whaaat?!” Mahulena cried out at this new announcement. “H-how did we end up here? I—I mean, what can we do even if we do look into him?!”

“If the rumors are true, and he really is this…sh-shameless, we’ll all teach him

a lesson together! And if Sylvia can see just how lame he really is, she'll lose interest in him, and then we can go back to trying to take her down!"

"…" Mahulena was left speechless at just how thoroughly derailed the plan had become.

"I see…"

"That's an excellent idea!"

"Just don't make me play the villain."

The other three, however, seemed to be completely on board with it.

"B-but even if it is true, what can *we* do…?"

"Heh-heh, you're pretty slow, Mahulena."

"Huh…?"

Miluše, pointing grandly with her index finger, looked full of confidence. "The Murakumo's taking part in the Gryps, too, so we're bound to go up against him sooner or later!"

Mahulena almost found herself asking what they would do if he was eliminated before that, but she swallowed her words.

Ayato Amagiri's Team Enfield was, after all, one of the favorites. At the very least, he should be expected to make it through to the main tournament.

And she knew for a fact that Team Rusalka would have no problem making it that far, either.

CHAPTER 4

THE PRELIMINARIES

“It’s finally time for the first round of Block B! Seidoukan’s Team Enfield is entering the stage now from the east gate!”

Mico’s excited voice rang out, and then the roar of the crowd engulfed them as the gate swung open.

During the last Festa, the passage had been connected directly to the stage, but now that the moat of protective gel had been installed, the entrance gate, too, had needed to be altered. As such, a hatch opened beneath the protective gel, and a huge pillar-shaped entrance gate rose to almost the same height as the galleries. Once that was in place, a semitransparent path appeared in the middle of the pillar, through which the contestants were to enter the stage proper. It struck Ayato as an excessively elaborate system.

Julis let out a disgusted sigh. “I guess it’s too late to say anything now…but this is practically a circus show.”

“That’s how it is. We’ll just have to bear with it, I’m afraid.” Claudia let out a light laugh before stepping onto the path, waving to the cheering crowd as though such publicity were an everyday thing for her.

“Th-this is…a little embarrassing…” Kirin, her personality not at all suited to this kind of attention, stared down at the floor, her face scarlet.

“…Let’s just get it over with. I have to get back to my work,” Saya said under her breath.

It seemed that she hadn’t finished upgrading her Luxes in time for the match. She had said she wanted to have them all finished in time for the main tournament, but Ayato had a feeling that would be more difficult than she was letting on.

He glanced over his shoulder to see a number of huge air-windows surrounding the gate, displaying Seidoukan's school crest and introducing them all with live, close-up video. Even he couldn't help but feel embarrassed.

There was a staircase at the end of the path leading down to the stage. Their opponents would appear from the opposite entrance.

"And now, challenging Team Enfield, we have Team Black Venom from Le Wolfe Black Institute!"

"It will be a spectacular upset if Team Black Venom comes out on top here."

At the other end of the stage, five almost stereotypical Le Wolfe students—each dressed in uniforms that looked modified to the point of not retaining a shred of their original material, and each sporting tattoos on seemingly every exposed patch of skin—turned toward them menacingly. Some looked as if they were trying to intimidate them; others seemed to be staring at them in scorn, but they were all clearly of bad character. They had already activated their Luxes, long-range weapons shaped like assault rifles.

"…You did call them thugs, but this isn't what I was expecting," Saya murmured.

Claudia had informed everyone during their last meeting that their opponents were all unlisted. As such, the data on them was extremely limited. While Le Wolfe's ranked list was the most dynamic among the six academies, the fact that these people had never been ranked at all spoke to their abilities—or lack thereof. Bluntly speaking, they didn't look particularly strong.

"There are a lot of people who get the wrong idea about the Gryps, at least compared to the other Festas," Julis remarked with exasperation.

"Get the wrong idea?"

"The Gryps is a team tournament, so the barrier for entry is higher than for the others… But at the same time, it's also the tournament with the most upsets. So basically, you get these people who think that, just by putting together a team, they can hope to snatch victory through some stroke of luck."

"I see…"

“But if they’d actually watch the matches properly, they’d know that those teams that do manage to take down the favorites only do so with great difficulty,” Julis all but spat out. “They need to be able to take advantage of the perfect moment to overcome their differences in ability. But these people think all they need in order to win is luck. The Festa isn’t that simple!”

And just as she came to that—

“Heh-heh… Yo, Glühen Rose. Wasn’t expecting to bump into you here!”

—the other side’s Mohawk-sporting team leader called out to her.

“…Sorry?” Julis stared back at him for a moment with a puzzled expression, her head tilted to one side. “Who are you?”

“Wha—?! Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten?!” The young man’s face turned purple with rage.

Ayato, who had been watching the exchange in silence, was the first to recognize him.

“Ah! He looks like one of the guys from back then, when you took me around the city…”

When Ayato had first arrived at Asterisk, he had asked Julis to show him around the center of the city. Mohawk was, it seemed, one of the students from Le Wolfe whom Silas Norman had hired to attack them.

“…Ah, so he’s one of *them*, is he?” She seemed to have finally recognized him, but she still didn’t seem particularly interested.

The same couldn’t be said, however, for their opponent.

“Quit screwing with me! I just decided to join this tournament as a bit of fun, but it looks like it’s finally given me my chance to settle things! We might not be able to win, but we’ll at least make you suffer, Glühen Rose! You’d better be ready!” At that, he turned his back on them and returned to his team’s starting position.

“…” Julis watched him go in cold silence before turning to Claudia, who nodded in understanding.

“The protective gel is being set up, meaning it’s almost time for the match to

start! Who will come out on top?”

With the match about to begin, the protective gel was welling up over the moat until it surrounded the whole stage, hardening through ultraviolet radiation emitters installed throughout the arena. It was taller even than the walls enclosing the stage, completely separating them from their surroundings.

It also blocked sound from passing through, but speakers had been installed around its circumference so participants could still hear the live commentary and the crowd cheering, almost as if the towering walls were not there at all.

The gel itself, which had looked blue before hardening, was now completely transparent.

“Gryps Block B, Round 1, Match 1—begin!”

No sooner had the automated voice announced the beginning of the match than the members of Team Black Venom all turned their weapons directly to Julis, and— With a terrible roar, they switched their target to Claudia, the team leader.

A barrage of bullets of light erupted from all five Luxes, descending upon Claudia like a storm while a thick cloud of dust rose to fill her surroundings.

“How’s this?” Mohawk laughed feverishly. “They say your Pan-Dora can see the future, but there’s no way that’ll help you against a saturation attack!”

He looked to be fairly confident of victory.

But like Julis had said, the Festa wasn’t that simple.

“Not a bad idea… But you were obviously bluffing,” Ayato pointed out.

“It wasn’t even particularly subtle,” Julis added.

“Wha—?!” Mohawk, upon seeing the two of them defending Claudia as the dust settled, stood frozen in shock.

Ayato had used the Ser Veresta as a shield, as had Julis with her Anthurium. Not a single projectile had reached Claudia.

“D-damn you!” Mohawk and his team members hurried to prepare for another attack, but it was too late.

“Here I come!” At that moment, Kirin leaped within striking distance, holding the Senbakiri.

The silver blade glimmered through the air, effortlessly slicing through the school crests of a large-bodied man with dreadlocks and a bald man with a snake-like tattoo on the back of his head.

“Y-you little brat!”

A meaty man in the rearguard tried to contain her with a hail of fire from a Lux resembling a heavy machine gun, but the silver-haired girl dodged the attack easily on her way to cutting through the crest of a man with spiked hair.

“Argh! J-just stay still…!”

The hefty man swung his Lux around, trying to catch her in his sights, but the volley went wide, and she didn’t even need to deflect it.

“H-hey! Forget about the girl, go for—”

“…Boom.”

A stream of light pouring from Saya’s type 39 Lux laser cannon, Wolfdora, grazed past Mohawk, who was crying out in panic as he tried to put some distance between himself and Kirin.

The overweight man was swallowed in a whirlpool of light, his screams echoing across the stage as he was flung into the far wall. There was a dull, heavy thud as he collided with it—the impact strong enough to send cracks running in every direction. He seemed to have lost consciousness.

“…And?” Claudia, aiming the Pan-Dora toward Mohawk’s exposed neck, asked the openmouthed, defeated team leader. “Go for…who exactly?”

Mohawk, sinking to the floor at the sight of her composed smile, announced his surrender.

*

“Look this way, please, look this way!”

“I’d like to ask Miss Toudou a question. When you launched your attack at the beginning of the match, how much distance did you have to narrow down between your targets before…”

Next to the passage leading to the prep room was a small area where the winners' interview was being held. During the main tournament, such interviews would, of course, be conducted in dedicated press halls, but unless something exceptional was to happen, those following the preliminaries were usually held in these kinds of informal spaces.

If there had been only two of them, like in the Phoenix, they would probably have been able to get it over with relatively quickly, but now they were five. Moreover, given that Team Enfield was one of the tournament favorites, it seemed that they had attracted a large following of reporters.

"Mr. Amagiri, your team is, of course, one of the favorites this time around, but are there any teams you consider to be particularly strong—any rivals perhaps?"

"Ah, well… Gallardworth's Team Lancelot and Team Tristan are pretty strong, I think."

"Miss Sasamiya, you used a lot of original Luxes during the Phoenix. Are there any new ones that you'll be using this time?"

"…That's a secret."

It felt as if they had already spent twenty minutes answering those kinds of question.

"…" Julis, clearly fed up with it all, was making no effort to hide her sullen mood.

"I'm terribly sorry, but can we wrap it up for now?" Claudia declared, no doubt reading the situation.

"C-can I ask one more question?" inquired a slim female reporter from the back of the crowd, her hand raised to catch their attention. She was wearing a press card around her neck emblazoned with ABC's logo.

She looked somewhat tense. Perhaps, Ayato wondered, she was new to the job.

"Um, Miss Enfield, this is your first time participating in the Festa since the last Gryps three years ago. Is there any reason behind that?"

“Not at all. I’ve simply chosen the environment where I can best use my skills. That’s the easiest way for me to have my wish fulfilled, after all.”

“And what is your wish?”

At that question, the reporters all leaned forward eagerly.

It was customary in Asterisk for the press not to look too deeply into contestants’ rewards for winning the Festa—in other words, their wishes granted by the IEFs. After all, unless the relevant party had themselves divulged it, such questions risked upsetting the foundations themselves.

However—

“Heh-heh, let’s see…,” Claudia said with a small laugh. “This *does* seem like a good opportunity.” She paused there, her shoulders trembling, as if holding herself back to let the tension build for a moment. “I wonder whether you’ve all heard of Professor Ladislav Bartošik?” she finally asked.

“Professor Bartošik? Wasn’t he involved with Orga Lux research…?”

A wave of confusion spread among the reporters.

Ayato noticed, however, that there were several among them who seemed to become suddenly uneasy.

Perhaps, he wondered, they knew more than they were free to share. It wasn’t difficult to imagine that the IEFs exerted some kind of control over the media, after all.

“But hasn’t Professor Bartošik been missing for several years now…?” the reporter asked.

“No, he’s presently in custody due to his involvement with the Jade Twilight Incident,” Claudia answered without hesitation, clearly anticipating the question. “My wish is to meet with him and have a little talk.”

An uneasiness quite unlike that which had assailed them a moment ago took root among the reporters.



There wasn't a person there who didn't know that mentioning the Jade Twilight Incident was taboo in Asterisk. No one could have forgotten about the incident, of course, but people had to be especially careful when touching on the topic.

"Um, what do you mean, exactly…?"

"There's a secret that only the professor knows the answer to. I want him to share it with me," Claudia answered before giving a slight bow to the rattled reporters and turning to leave.

"W-wait, Claudia!"

Her four companions, whom she had left stupefied behind her, hurried to catch up with her.

"I don't really know what's going on…but was that wise?" Julis asked, visibly troubled.

Claudia's wish would only make an enemy out of Galaxy. She herself had said that.

Seeing her come out with such a statement so publicly—and without any prior warning—it was only natural that Julis would be so taken aback.

"It was. Perfect timing, in fact, I would say," Claudia answered, still marching down the hall without so much as a backward glance, her usual enigmatic smile rising to her lips.

*

"Heh-heh… Ha-ha-ha! Well, that was impressive. Yes, very surprising… Quite beyond my expectations. Young Enfield really is something." Madiath's uncontrolled laughter reverberated throughout his office as he offered her his unfeigned applause.

In front of him was an air-window showing the live broadcast from Team Enfield's winner's interview, but he promptly changed the channel to CM.

"It looks like getting rid of the broadcast delay was the right decision after all."

In the past, live broadcasts of the Festa and related events had been subject

to a delay to give the tournament administrators enough time to prevent unacceptable content from reaching the public. The fans, however, had been strongly opposed to this arrangement from the very beginning, and abolishing the practice had been one of Madiath's first acts as Executive Committee chairman.

"…What's the meaning of this, Madiath?" a disinterested voice asked from the corner of the room.

The figure of the young woman, all but dissolving into the wall like a shadow and sporting a mechanical necklace-like object wrapped around her throat, belonged to Varda.

"Why does she want to see Ladislav?"

"Oh? Are you worried about your dear father?"

"…He might have created me, but we don't have that kind of relationship."

"It was a joke. But as for why young Enfield wants to meet the professor, even I don't… Hmm?"

At that moment, his mobile began to ring.

As he opened an air-window, the face of a fuming, redheaded young man appeared in front of him.

"What's the meaning of this, Madiath?!"

Madiath couldn't help but grin at the words, exactly the same as Varda's. "I'm afraid I'm just as shocked as you are. Why don't you try asking her directly? I'd like to know myself."

"Don't play dumb with me! If you know something, spit it out!"

"Believe me, I have no idea what she's trying to achieve," he answered honestly. "All I know is that she's been looking into the professor for some time now, which seems to have upset Galaxy quite a bit."

Dirk glared back at him as if he found that difficult to believe. "…Fine. But that woman's out of her mind. Picking a fight with a foundation—and the one backing her own school at that… Does she have a death wish or something?"

“I can’t deny that that does seem like the most probable outcome at this rate. But I do think this will make things slightly more complicated.”

“What?”

“What I mean is that dealing with this won’t be straightforward.” Madiath leaned back in his chair, clasping his hands behind his head as he curled his lips. “This is the perfect chance to bring Galaxy down. And given that there’s been a power balance among the six foundations for so long now, do you really think the others will let this opportunity pass by?”

“But the others shouldn’t even know about Varda. And Ladislav was only the ideological leader behind the Jade Twilight Incident, nothing more. Yes, it would be damaging for them if that was to get out, but…” Dirk paused there, crossing his arms, deep in thought. *“To begin with, hasn’t Galaxy already come to some kind of agreement with the others about how to deal with him? They can’t break that now, can they?”*

“That is indeed the case. This is an internal problem for Galaxy. They will, of course, try to extinguish this little conflagration, but if the others merely object to their methods, that won’t be enough to constitute a violation of the agreement, wouldn’t you say? Even from an ethical standpoint, the blame will fall squarely on Galaxy.”

Madiath’s sense of ethics had become somewhat extenuated for a period of time now, but while it was of little use in and of itself, he couldn’t say that it was completely devoid of value, given his public position.

Dirk snorted in irritation. *“Hmph! I guess it* will *be difficult for them to do anything out in the open if the other five are breathing down their necks…”*

“And this time, it will be five against one. Even Galaxy won’t want to do anything reckless. All it should take is for the others to give them a fair warning.”

“Do you really think it’ll get that far?”

“It will. I’ll make sure of that.”

“…So you’d side with that little vixen?” Dirk fumed, his voice positively seething with anger.

Madiath, however, merely smiled. “As chairman of the Executive Committee, isn’t it only natural for me to protect our participants?”

“…Tch! You’re more or less an executive at Galaxy yourself. Don’t come crying to me if it comes back to bite you.”

“Of course, it will need a deft hand. Besides, if they do get serious—that is, if they’re prepared to incur some losses—even I won’t be able to stop them,” Madiath answered with a faint smile.

At that moment, Dirk, his rage finally boiling over, cut the transmission.

“Good grief…,” muttered Varda, who until then had been listening to the exchange in silence. “You humans are beyond comprehension. Why are you trying to further complicate things for yourselves? How illogical.”

She probably wasn’t expecting an answer, but Madiath let out a small laugh anyway. “The way I see it, things are more interesting that way.”

*

The special conference room in Galaxy’s headquarters was completely devoid of ostentation.

It was filled only with a long table, surrounded by a neat row of chairs on either side. Anyone entering it for the first time would no doubt be struck by how utterly uninspiring it was.

That was what Nicholas Enfield had felt the first time he had come there.

Sitting at attention in the seat closest to the wall, he understood well enough the rationale behind the total lack of decoration.

In this room, anything that did not exist to benefit Galaxy was unnecessary.

That rule applied equally both to objects and people.

“Well then, if everyone’s arrived, let us begin,” a cold, calm voice announced.

Galaxy’s eighteen highest executives—of whom more than half were attending through video link—turned their gazes toward the woman who had spoken first.

She was Isabella Enfield, Nicholas’s wife and superior—and one of the highest executives present. Her graceful blond hair, tied up in a bun, and her well-

tailored black suit both served to emphasize her rare beauty, and all of it completely belied her true age. She looked upon everyone there with a calm smile—the only expression that Nicholas had seen her give to anyone in over ten years.

Her eyes, however, emanated the same machinelike iciness as each of the other executives.

“This meeting concerns how to deal with Seidoukan Academy’s student council president, Claudia Enfield,” she said plainly and dispassionately. “Please give us all your unreserved opinions.” It was her own daughter whom she was talking about, but there wasn’t so much as a shred of emotion in her voice.

Nor did any of the other executives mention that fact. That was to be expected. No one who clung to selfish desires, such as concern for one’s family, would have been able to reach their kind of position within the integrated enterprise foundations.

“We have already received requests from EP, Solnage, and Frauenlob to come to a fair decision under the pretext of the Festa. W&W and Jie Long seem prepared to do the same.”

“What a nuisance.”

“That will make any open methods of dealing with her difficult.”

“But we cannot leave her be.”

“There is no guarantee that her team will win. Perhaps we should continue to monitor the situation?”

“Even so, we will have to make certain preparations.”

“Given that it relates to the Festa, we should use Madiath Mesa. If we were to give him a valid reason to disqualify her…”

“No, he can’t be trusted.”

“Moreover, there will be a backlash if we are seen to have had a hand in it.”

The executives raised their voices in turn. There was no interruption, and yet, no sooner had one person finished speaking than the next would begin, without pause. Each one had been stripped of personality to the extent that it was

impossible to tell who had said what.

There was no need to distinguish among them here.

They never exchanged opinions, only logical evaluations of information and possibility.

One could even say that the huge corporate entity that was Galaxy was engaging in a dialogue with itself.

“What if we disposed of Bartošik?”

“That would violate the agreement with the Varda-Vaos.”

“Is there any need to honor it?”

“We will lose everything if its existence leaks out. It would be unwise to antagonize it.”

“What is its present status?”

“According to the report from Yabuki’s group, it seems to have been identified in Rikka at the beginning of spring…”

“It will be quicker to deal with Claudia Enfield directly than to try to do something with Bartošik.”

“What if we used Yabuki’s group?”

“No, that should be the last resort. More importantly…”

“Galaxy’s position must be…”

From Nicholas’s position, the room seemed to have lapsed into silence, but while their eerie voices had faded away, the wheels of their conversation were still turning.

“Well then, if everyone is agreed, let us proceed accordingly,” Isabella stated finally, before standing to announce the end of the meeting.

*

It was the fourth day of the Gryps at the Canopus Dome.

Hufeng Zhao stood motionless on the stage, at a complete loss for words.

His master, Xinglou Fan, had, as usual, given them all an impossible order.

He could understand her instructions for the first round: for Xiaohui Wu not to engage in combat, leaving the match to the team's four other members. It made sense, in a certain way, to try to keep Xiaohui's prowess a secret. And given the relative strength of the opposing team during that first round, that handicap hadn't proved to be a problem.

Still, he found it impossible to understand her instructions for the second round.

In a complete reversal, this time, Xiaohui was to take down the opposing team all by himself. If they had been facing a team as weak as the last one, Hufeng might have been able to see some logic to it. There was no denying that Xiaohui would have been able to handle such a team. However, it was a mistake, Hufeng felt, to take their opponents so lightly this time around.

The opposing team's leader was Seidoukan's fourth-ranked fighter, the Mage of Icy Shards, Hrimthurs. The other members were all listed, too. Even if they weren't at a level where they might be expected to take the championship, they were certainly strong enough to reach the main tournament.

The preliminaries were designed in such a way that the teams with the best prospects didn't end up facing one another, but the situation was different for strong teams of average standing. After all, it would reflect poorly on the Festa's administration if the tournament was entirely predictable.

One or two such teams were inevitably allocated to each block that contained a favorite team. And whenever there was an unexpected development in the Gryps, it was usually at the hands of one of them.

However—

"I-incredible! Who could have expected that the match that everyone expected to be the highlight of the second round would unfold so one-sidedly?" The announcer's voice, echoing through the arena, was trembling. On the other side of the protective gel, the audience was as silent as the grave.

There was little wonder why.

Even Hufeng and his teammates had been left completely dumbfounded.

In the center of the stage, two young men—Hrimthurs and Xiaohui—stood

facing off against each other. The other Seidoukan students lay defeated on the ground around them.

“Huff…huff…!” Hrimthurs, breathing heavily, his handsome face distorted in exertion, was gripping a sword of ice he had created with his abilities, bracing himself for combat.

Across from him, Xiaohui, his spear-like Lux held in one hand, looked down on him calmly.

“Heh… This must be a bad dream, Hagun Seikun.”

“…”

Hrimthurs glared at his opponent, his cold eyes brimming with fury.

Mana stirred around them, and a chill wind that could be felt even across the stage dozens of yards away began to pick up strength.

“At least let me deal one blow!”

With that, the ground within a diameter of close to ten yards around Hrimthurs suddenly froze solid.

No, Hufeng corrected himself, *it wasn’t only the ground*. Xiaohui’s feet, all the way up to his calves, were encased in ice, too, restricting his movements.

“Haaaaaaaaah!” At that moment, Hrimthurs summoned six long spears of ice, launching them at Xiaohui with a shrill cry.

It was a long-range attack from multiple angles against an immobile opponent. Not at all a bad move.

“…”

Xiaohui, however, casually struck at the ice that encased his feet with the butt of his spear, shattering it instantly.

In the midst of the ice fragments dancing around him like diamond dust, he swung his left hand toward the approaching spears of ice—a slip of paper materializing between his fingers.

The spell imbued in the charm took form with a sudden burst, and a wall of flame erupted in front of him. The ice spears flew straight into it, sublimating

into steam in the blink of an eye.

“Now’s my chance!” Hrimthurs cried out, leaping through the rising steam and unleashing a slash attack.

He was fast. On top of that, he had somehow managed to freeze the ground and hold Xiaohui in place once again.

He might have only been able to hold Xiaohui back for a moment, but it was clear that he was a Dante of incredible skill and technique.

But even so, Xiaohui was still able to deflect the desperate attack without so much as batting an eyelid.

Hrimthurs was clearly the faster of the two. Moreover, at that distance, his sword of ice should have been much more effective than a long, two-handed weapon like Xiaohui’s spear. And yet, with a graceful, almost imperceptible movement, Xiaohui parried the strike.

Hrimthurs took his blade in both hands, trying to push back his opponent. Yet Xiaohui, far from wavering under the force of Hrimthurs’s attack, was holding his spear with only one hand, shaking off his opponent and shattering his sword of ice into countless air-borne particles.

“What—?!”

There was a world of difference between their physical abilities.

Even so, Hrimthurs didn’t falter, summoning a new, larger sword of ice and launching one strike after another before raising an ear-splitting cry and lunging out with all his strength.

And yet, he still couldn’t reach his opponent. He couldn’t even get close.

“…”

Throughout it all, Xiaohui’s expression remained completely unreadable.

The first thing to break was, of course, the ice sword.

With each stroke, cracks spread along its pale-blue surface—small chips flying off in every direction—until finally it shattered with a clear, crystalline burst of sound.

“—!”

Despair engulfed Hrimthurs’s face.

At that instant, Xiaohui stepped forward—that was all it took for the ice surrounding him to shatter into mist—and casually placed his palm on Hrimthurs’s stomach.

It was a slow, graceful blow, so gentle that it looked almost like a massage.

A tremendous shock shot through Hrimthurs’s body, strong enough to echo across the stage and create a deep crater around the two fighters.

Hrimthurs lost consciousness, crumbling onto the floor like a doll whose wires had been cut.

“End of battle! Winners: Team Yellow Dragon!”

As the automated voice rang throughout the arena, Hufeng finally felt as if he understood why his master had told him not to worry about Xiaohui.

“That boy will have no problems, no matter what*.”*

Her confidence in him hadn’t been misplaced.

Xinglou attached great importance to individual strength, and so it was rare for her disciples to fight together in teams. She would do nothing to stop them from studying such fighting techniques independently, and she might even assist them if asked, but for her, fighting alongside others was an extension of one’s ability to fight for one’s self.

“Well, that’s Elder Brother for you. I can’t say I was expecting that,” Cecily muttered beside him.

“I thought we knew just how strong he was—”

“—but that was just like watching our master fight.”

Judging by the tone of their voices, even the twins were taken aback.

Of course, it wasn’t the first time they had all seen Xiaohui fight, and they had even trained with him themselves in the past.

However, they could see now that what they had witnessed then was only a fraction of his power.

“…Let’s go back,” Xiaohui said as he strode toward the gate.

His four teammates all dropped to one knee, placing their right fists in their left palms as a gesture of respect.

“That was amazing, Elder Brother!”

*

It was the sixth day of the Gryps at the Sirius Dome.

Normally, those who were too strong weren’t welcome at the Festa.

The spectators tended to have little interest in contestants who ended their matches too quickly, so the real job of the Festa’s administration was to ensure that the level of excitement remained steady throughout the tournament. If they failed to do that, the television programs would lose viewers, and the gambling houses would decline in popularity.

The exceptions to the rule were those contestants who had something to offer other than raw ability.

Helga Lindwall, for example, was known for her beauty just as much as her overwhelming skills, and Orphelia Landlufen had a sinister character that struck fear in the hearts of all those who watched.

And Team Lancelot, two-time champions of the Gryps, were known for their great nobility. Or at least, that was what Laetitia Blanchard thought.

No matter who they were facing, the Silverwinged Knights never underestimated their opponents, never jumped at petty illusions, and always reached the path of victory through strength and strength alone.

“Haaaah!”

Ernest Fairclough, the very symbol of those ideals, was at that very moment engaged in battle in the center of the stage.

He swung the Lei-Glems in a wide arc, the silver blade leaving a long, pale afterglow in its wake.

His opponent tried to defend himself with his own sword-type Lux, and though he twisted his body around as quickly as he could, he was still too slow.

The Lei-Glems passed straight through him as if carving through thin air.

His school crest, however, split in half.

“It’s only been a few seconds, but the Runesword has already claimed its first victim! But shouldn’t Fairclough’s opponent have known about this ability, Shizuna?”

“Even knowing about it, in the thick of combat, your body will react according to instinct. Moreover, Fairclough is Asterisk’s strongest swordsman. There would be very few people with the ability to defend themselves against that in their first match against him.”

“Well now! The Lei-Glems really is impressive—being able to cut through only what its user desires*! And that user, Pendragon, is beyond extraordinary!”*

Laetitia, only half listening to the live commentary that echoed throughout the arena, focused her prana.

Mana gathered behind her, and two pairs of brilliant white wings burst from her back, easily more than twenty yards in width.

They were the Ailes d’Ange, the namesake of the Witch of Shining Wings.

The huge, diamond-shaped wings carved through the air, straight into the center of the stage, shielding Ernest from an oncoming barrage of bullets fired by the opposing team’s rearguard.

Lionel Karsch, alias Rhongomiant, took advantage of that opportunity to launch a surprise attack from the opposing team’s left flank, breaking straight into their formation. With his towering pole-arm-shaped Lux, more than twice his own height in length, he took down both members of their rearguard in one fell swoop.

The purpose of the attack wasn’t to bring the team down so much as it was to throw it into confusion.

“Agh…?!”

As soon as their barrage ceased, Ernest leaped out, cleanly slicing through the school crests of both members of the other team’s vanguard in a single strike. He was so fast that the term *lightning speed* was for once no mere exaggeration.

And then—

“A halo of mercy and atonement I give to thee!” Percival called out solemnly, one hand raised to the sky, as Kevin Holst, alias Gareth, shielded Ernest from attack.

A huge chalice-shaped Orga Lux was floating on a slight angle above her. Something that looked like a thorn rose above it, its tip emanating a golden light. It grew brighter with every passing moment, with light filling the chalice, until finally it became a torrent, spilling out with tremendous force.

“Ah—!”

The golden light swallowed both members of the opposing team’s rearguard, striking them like the wrath of an angry deity.

When finally the golden glow dissipated, they both lay flat on the ground unmoving, though they appeared to be physically unharmed.

Percival’s Amalthean Goat, the Horn of Atonement, was, like the Lei-Glems, a school-owned Orga Lux. Its ability was known as soul removal. The light emitted by it was capable of rendering an opponent completely unconscious while leaving no physical injury.

“End of battle! Winners: Team Lancelot!”

With the opposing team leader down, the automated voice announced the end of the match.

It probably hadn’t lasted even three minutes.

“Th-that’s it! But what strength! What strength Team Lancelot has! Those are our defending champions for you, folks!”

No matter their opponent, Team Lancelot would always face them with respect. They never hid their cards. Their opponents could research them as much as they liked, could try to devise whatever countermeasures they saw fit. None of that mattered. Team Lancelot would rise to meet them.

It was that, more than anything, that made them the reigning champions of the Gryps.

CHAPTER 5

DILAPIDATED RUINS

It was the seventh day of the Gryps at the Sirius Dome.

Team Enfield had just passed safely through the third round, making it into the main tournament.

“Phew… It’s going well so far,” Julis said upon returning to the prep room, flashing them a tired yet satisfied smile.

“Indeed, and we’re all in good condition, too. Let’s keep it up.” Claudia seemed to be relieved as well.

Galaxy was still showing no sign of activity, and Ayato had begun to wonder whether Claudia’s worries weren’t misplaced.

Or maybe…the interview after the first match really did achieve something…

At the very least, they should have been happy that everything was proceeding without incident.

“But it looks like the other favorites have all made it through as well,” Kirin said uneasily as she scrolled through an air-window displaying the results of the preliminaries.

There were still several matches yet to take place, and the teams that would enter into the main tournament hadn’t all been decided. The favorites, including the Silverwinged Knights and Team Yellow Dragon, however, had all managed to proceed without any hiccups.

“We’ll need a good strategy, no matter who we go up against…”

With the exception of Team Lancelot, the favorites had each been able to win their respective matches without having to show off their true strength, and so the only data that they had to plan with came from their members’ various

individual matches over time.

“Well, we still don’t know who we’ll be facing next, so why don’t we discuss it again tomorrow once the new brackets have been drawn up?” Claudia asked. “I’ll need to attend the event myself, but you can all take some time off to relax.”

Just like in the Phoenix, there were no matches on the eighth day of the tournament, both so the contestants would have a chance to take a break and so the brackets for the main tournament could be decided.

“…Ayato.” Saya pulled at his sleeve softly. “Can you take me shopping on the way back?”

“Shopping? I guess so… What do you want to buy? Given how busy the city was last year, I think we’d better make it quick.”

The commercial area had been incredibly crowded during the Phoenix.

And with Saya’s total lack of direction, things would only be more difficult for them.

“…I want to finish one of my Luxes tomorrow. I still need some more parts.”

Her work finally seemed close to completion. Ayato had been quite worried about her over the past few days, as she seemed to be cutting into her sleep to work on them, but he felt as if he could finally breathe a sigh of relief now that the end was in sight.

“I see. I guess we should go buy what you need, then.”

“It’s this store here,” Saya said, bringing up a map on her mobile.

“Hmm… It looks like it’s close to the redevelopment area. That probably means there won’t be many tourists around, but you know what it’s like around there. We’d better go before it gets dark.”

Saya nodded happily. “All right.” She started pushing Ayato from behind. “Let’s go.”

“S-Saya…?”

Both Julis and Kirin looked like they wanted to say something, but they merely

let out long, resigned sighs.

“Take care, you two,” Claudia called out as she watched them leave.

“Thanks for your business,” the stern-faced shopkeeper said as they left.

He seemed to specialize in secondhand gun-type Luxes and spare parts. When it came to the latter, Ayato had no idea what they were supposed to be used for, but Saya’s face had shone with glee upon setting eyes on them.

“…Yep, these will be good. I should be able to wrap things up now.” Saya, holding the bag of parts in her arms like a small child, was smiling with joy.

They had both put on nondescript hats to try to disguise themselves. That might not have been necessary were it not the middle of the Festa, but they couldn’t help that, and so they’d had to take precautions.

“That place has all kinds of stuff. It was worth coming.”

“Have you gone there before?” Ayato asked.

Saya nodded. “Once, last year, to get my dad a birthday present.”

“…Don’t tell me you came by yourself?”

Saya had absolutely no sense of direction, after all. Ayato doubted whether she would have been able to make it there by herself even with a map and navigation system.

“Kirin came with me.”

“Ah, I see… Wait, then why didn’t you ask her to come today…?”

“Hmph…” Saya puffed out her cheeks. “You still don’t understand how girls feel.”

“S-sorry…”

“We haven’t been out together since we were kids.”

Now that she mentioned it, it *had* been a long time since they had gone shopping together.

“Ah… It feels a bit different, though.”

Thinking about his childhood, he realized he’d spent almost every single day

with her. That wasn't just because they had lived next door to each other; her difficulty with directions had been apparent even then, and so he had often been asked by her parents to help look after her.

And in exchange, Ayato, who had been barred from attending the dojo by his father, had had someone to practice sparring with.

Saya nodded nostalgically as they reminisced over their childhood.

"Right. I told you I was more comfortable with a gun, but you insisted I use a sword."

"Ah, ha-ha… But you've ended up besting me now. Your winning percentage has shot right up since then."

Back then, Ayato had taught her the basics of the Amagiri Shinmei style so they could practice together. She had taken it in quickly, and on top of that, she'd incorporated it all into her own individual fighting style. She now used close-range fighting techniques to support her shooting and, as a result, had been able to increase the breadth of her offensive abilities.

They had engaged in countless bouts against each other, but Ayato had won more often than not. Now that he thought about it, that was when they had started to really get serious with their wish-coupon system.

"You should have joined the dojo officially. You were certainly skilled enough, and given where you are now, you could even learn the hidden—" Ayato, sensing a strange presence, paused there.

That's…

Someone was watching them—but no sooner had he sensed it than it disappeared.

"What is it?"

"No, it's nothing. Let's go." Despite his words, he signaled to her with his eyes.

That alone was enough for her to take in the situation.

They kept on walking, and they felt it again, albeit only faintly.

"…Are they targeting us?"

“They’re certainly tailing us.”

“…The people Enfield mentioned?”

Saya seemed to be suspecting Galaxy. It wasn’t unlike what he had felt in Lieseltania with Gustave Malraux.

However—

“It might be… But I doubt it.”

“Why?”

“This feeling… I’ve felt it before.”

It didn’t feel particularly dangerous.

If anything, it was more similar to when he and Sylvia had been followed during the school fair.

“What do we do?”

“Hmm…”

Probably because they were so close to the redevelopment area, there were far fewer people around than in the center of the commercial area. It certainly wasn’t deserted, but there were no crowds to blend into.

Last time, he and Sylvia had split up, but with Saya, that wasn’t an option. If anything, that would only make the situation worse.

In that case…

“We should just confront them.”

“Huh?”

Before Ayato had a chance to think, Saya came to a sudden stop, turning to look behind them, and took a deep breath before shouting, “You, over there! Come out!”

“S-Saya?!”

She had called attention to them. Passersby in every direction stopped what they were doing, glancing toward them.

“Damn, they noticed!”

“Retreat! Retreat!”

They could hear a flurry of panicked voiced from behind a nearby building and, after a brief moment, footsteps running down an alleyway.

“…Ayato. We’re going after them.”

“What? G-going after them…? Saya, wait!”

He couldn’t deny that he wanted to know who they were, but chasing after them here was too risky.

There was every possibility it was a trap, and even if it wasn’t, they couldn’t afford to make a scene. The consequences for causing trouble during the Festa were severe, particularly for participants.

Moreover, they had already had a match that day, and Ayato had already released his seal. It might not have been for a long period of time, but he couldn’t afford to overdo it with more matches coming up.

And yet, he couldn’t let Saya go off on her own.

“Saya!” he called out, chasing after her.

Still running ahead of him, she turned her head for a split second. “Ayato! They’re really fast!”

If it had been a sprint, Saya would no doubt have beat them easily, but the alley was filled with obstacles and turns. Moreover, whoever had been following them must have already been familiar with the route, as they were moving down it without any difficulty.

This reminds me of what happened during the Phoenix last year…

Although back then, it was he, along with Priscilla, who’d been chased.

Before they knew it, they found themselves surrounded by row upon row of abandoned buildings. The streets were empty. They must have reached the redevelopment area.

Every now and then, they would catch a brief glimpse of their erstwhile pursuers and then lose sight of them once more, until finally the alleyway opened up into a wider space.

“…Hmm.” Saya, still ahead of Ayato, slowed her speed so he could catch up.

The building before them looked like it had collapsed, blocking the way forward.

In front of it, a group of what appeared to be five young girls stood facing them.

They were hiding their faces with large-rimmed sunglasses, but their uniforms and school crests—as long as they weren’t fake—belonged to Queenvale.

Which means…

“Heh-heh-heh…” The girl in the center of the group, who looked to be their leader, flashed them a dauntless grin. “Looks like we got lost.”

At that, the four other girls all collapsed to the ground.

“Ah… I knew it…”

“…Of course.”

“We should have been fine with you in charge…”

“Aw, come on, Miluše!”

Ayato didn’t really know what was going on, but they didn’t seem to be particularly dangerous.

Or at the very least, he didn’t sense any hostility.

“Um, and you are…?” Ayato asked cautiously.

With that, the five girls huddled together, deep in discussion.

“What do we do…?”

“Now that it’s come to this…”

“The chairwoman’s gonna be mad…”

“We’d be better off…”

“Honestly…”

Ayato and Saya must have waited for close to five minutes, catching only incomplete snippets of conversation.

“Ahem!”

Having finished their discussion, the one who looked like the group’s leader cleared her throat and slowly took off her sunglasses, followed a moment later by the other four.

Ayato let out a deep sigh. “…Just like I thought. Team Rusalka.”

Perhaps Saya had expected as much herself, as she merely snorted in disappointment.

“H-huh? You aren’t surprised…?” The pony-tailed girl—Miluše—blinked in confusion.

The first thing that came to mind for anyone who encountered a five-girl group from Queenvale in the middle of the Gryps would no doubt be Rusalka. Moreover, in height and build, the five girls were almost identical to what he had suspected based on their data, so their disguises did little to hide their true identities. It was almost blindingly obvious.

“…So you were scouting us out?” Saya demanded softly, glaring at them.

Spying on one’s opponents to try to work out their weaknesses wasn’t against the rules, per se, but Ayato had never heard of a team doing it themselves. Generally, such activities were left to the various schools, both in order to prevent any incidents and so contestants could focus on other matters.

Miluše, however, looked back at them blankly before shaking her head. “Scouting? We weren’t scouting…”

“Huh?”

“Huh?”

An uncomfortable silence settled around them.

“Argh, you idiot, Miluše! If that’s what they thought, you should have just agreed with them!” the smallest of the group—Monica—rebuked her.

“Ah…” Miluše looked embarrassed for a moment but quickly regained her composure. “I-it’s fine! Now that we’re here, we might as well go all out!” She took a step forward, pointing a finger toward him. “Ayato Amagiri! Tell us, what’s your relationship with Sylvia Lyyneheym?!”

“Wha—?!” Ayato found himself shrinking back.

“Oh-ho… I want to hear, too.” Saya turned her glaring eyes toward him.

“Wh-what kind of relationship do we have…? I mean, what does that have to do with you?”

“Th-that’s…none of your business!”

It wasn’t a particularly good justification, but if that was all they were willing to say, then he had no reason to explain himself, either.

“I’m sorry, but it’s private,” he answered flatly.

At that moment, the sharp-eyed girl—Tuulia—stepped forward. “What was that? If you won’t answer us, then you really must be fooling around with her!”

“F-fooling around…?”

“We’ve got proof! You were on a date with her during the school fair!” Päivi called out.

“Right, right! We saw it for ourselves! You spent the whole time flirting!” Monica added.

“Ayato…” Saya’s eyes had turned dangerously cold as well.

“And now you’re on a date with someone else! You’re an enemy of all women! Have some shame!”

“Seducer! Lecher! Satyromaniac!”

“Where did you learn those words?!”

They were busy throwing insults at him, but the shiest of the group—Mahulena—who had remained silent until now, looked up at him. “Um… I’m terribly sorry about this, really…,” she said, bowing her head.

She seemed like the most reasonable of the five.

“Um, let me try to explain… Mr. Amagiri, there are a lot of women around you, it seems. So we were worried whether you might just be playing around with Sylvia… I’m really sorry to ask you something so private, but can’t you please explain your relationship with her to us?”

“There’s nothing to explain,” he murmured, scratching at his head. “I’m only helping her out, lending her my strength. We don’t really have a relationship like that…”

“Lending her your strength? What do you mean?”

“I—I can’t really answer that…”

Sylvia’s search for her missing music teacher, Ursula Svend, was a private matter. He didn’t have the right to tell anyone about it without her permission.

“What kind of answer is that?!” Miluše snarled, finding it as hard to accept as he had expected.

“…No, it’s enough for me.”

“Saya?”

“So you’ve stuck your neck out again, huh?” She turned toward him with a gentle smile.

“Ah-ha-ha… Well, I guess so.”

“Then do not worry.” She turned back to Rusalka, pointing her finger toward them just as Miluše had earlier. “You’ve misunderstood Ayato. So quit it with these false accusations.”

“What?! You’re defending him?! He could be playing around with you, too!”

“Ayato might be dense and always butting into other people’s business and completely careless when it comes to the consequences of his actions…but he isn’t the kind of person to trick anyone—or fool around with them. I know that, for sure.”

“Argh…! You’re pretty impudent for someone your size!”

“…Better to have a child’s height than a child’s lack of sense.”

“What?!”

Saya’s and Miluše’s gazes met explosively.

At that moment, Ayato felt a sudden surge of prana.

“—!”

“Watch out—!”

Almost immediately, a sword cut through the collapsed building that blocked their path—the rubble falling to the ground with a thunderous clash.

Luckily, the members of Rusalka had already noticed it, leaping out of the way before he could finish speaking.

“Damn, this is a pain in the ass!” a dull, stinging voice from the other side of the cloud of dust said. “Hey, Medulone! You sure this is the right way?” The rough voice, though completely at odds with her appearance, seemed to belong to a young girl stepping over the wreckage.

She looked about the same age as Ayato, with long, unkempt hair and eyes that were sharper even than the menacing sword she gripped in her hands.

Ayato had seen her somewhere before.

Don’t tell me…

If he was right, then it must have been she who’d cut through the rubble.

“Good grief… There’s no need to be so reckless, Roverica. There’s no point showing off out here.”

The next to step out of the dust had, by contrast, her hair done up neatly and was wearing a pair of elegant glasses. Her hourglass body looked a little older than the first girl’s, and she carried herself with composure.

“Quit making a fuss. I just want to get back as soon as possible. Anyway, this is all your fault for wanting to take that damn detour.”

“There’s no need to be so rude. It ought to be remembered as the place where President Liberio seized the highest glory. It’s only natural to want to see it with my own eyes, wouldn’t you say?”

“You think those ruins have any meaning? How pathetic,” the girl with unkempt hair spat out.

“Hey, you! What do you think you’re doing? That’s dangerous!” Tuulia called out to them both in protest.

Ayato could understand her complaint. If the wreckage had been cut through

at any other angle, it might have collapsed right on top of the five girls.

“Huh?” The girl frowned before rapidly closing the distance to Tuulia and driving her fist into her stomach.

“Koff?!”

She didn’t stop there, continuing to kick her mercilessly until she doubled over in pain.

“Gah…!”

“You ain’t got no right to talk to me like that! You wanna die or something?” The girl’s voice was as dark as winter’s deepest night. She flung Tuulia against a nearby wall before raising her sword overhead.

“H-hey, wait!” Miluše cried out, but she was too slow.

The girl swung down her blade, but just before it could reach Tuulia’s chest—“—!”

“Stop it!” Ayato, having broken his seal, blocked her sword with the Ser Veresta.

Saya, meanwhile, was aiming a handgun-shaped Lux directly at her. “Are you mercenaries all so quick-tempered?”

The girl stepped back, clicking her tongue.

As Ayato readied himself with the Ser Veresta, the girl—Team Hellion’s offensive specialist, Roverica—scowled at them in displeasure.

Hellion was a mercenary team, contracted by Le Wolfe to take part in the Gryps. Every one of them was a member of HRMS, a major private military company belonging to the Le Wolfe group, and all were experienced in real-life combat. Given that they were one of the tournament’s most talked-about teams, Ayato had naturally watched several of their matches and recognized each of the faces and names.

“That Orga Lux… Ah, I get it. You’re—”

“Ayato Amagiri, alias the Murakumo, and Saya Sasamiya, of Seidoukan’s Team Enfield,” the bespectacled girl—Medulone—interrupted. “And this must be

Queenvale's Team Rusalka."

Their school crests were the twin swords of Le Wolfe, but their uniforms were different. Their white-and-red outfits were the formal dress uniforms of HRMS.

"Maybe no one has told you, but contestants in the Festa are only allowed to fight in designated areas during the tournament. You do realize that what you just did is enough to have you disqualified?" Ayato warned her.

"Ha! You think I care? How about I do this?" She hefted her blade aloft.

The sword—the Vershe-Velun—was an Orga Lux said to have been used by the current president of HRMS, Liberio Pareto, when he had conquered the Lindvolus during his own student days.

"I couldn't care less about the rules. You think I'm gonna do what someone like you tells me to?!" Roverica's eyes burned with hatred and malice as she began to step toward him.

"Stop, Roverica," a dark figure making its way through the ruined building called out.

The voice belonged to a man with a large build, wearing the same kind of uniform as the others. He looked to be older than Medulone. It was Team Hellion's leader.

There were two more shadows standing behind him.

"Don't get in the way, Nevilleworth!"

"I can't do that. Dirk won't be happy if we get disqualified."

"You think I care about that swine?!"

"…In other words, you would make President Liberio lose face. Do you want that to happen, woman?"

Roverica lowered her searing eyes at the force of his words. *"Tch!"*

"You've been in a foul mood ever since we came here. Or was it that meeting with Minerville and that girl, Minato Wakayama, that set you off?"

"Hmph! They've got nothing to do with it," Roverica growled. "I'm just—"

At that moment, Tuulia ran past Ayato, gripping her guitar-shaped Lux by its

neck. A trident-shaped beam of light emerged from its body. “You think I’m gonna let you get away with that?!”

“Ha-ha! So you do have some backbone?” Roverica, blocking the attack with the Vershe-Velun, let out a venomous laugh.

“Everyone, get ready to support!”

“…Got it!”

“Okay!”

When Ayato turned around, the other members of Rusalka had all activated their Orga Luxes, standing ready for battle.

“H-hold on, everyone! Didn’t you hear what Mr. Amagiri said?! If we fight here, we’ll be disqualified!” Mahulena was calling for restraint, but her protestations seemed to fall on deaf ears.

“Be quiet, Mahulena! *They* attacked one of *us*! We can’t let that go!” Miluše’s gaze burned with anger, and as she held up her own guitar-shaped Orga Lux, a glowing sword emerged from its body.

“…These people are crazy, Ayato,” Saya murmured as she readied her gun, clearly astonished by the scene unfolding before them.

The fact that even she thought so was proof that things had truly gotten out of hand.

“I’m with you there, but we can’t just leave them alone…”

Looking at it objectively, the best option would obviously have been to let them fight among themselves and benefit from the outcome—one team being eliminated outside the tournament, with the other being disqualified. But seeing that they were already involved in the situation, it would be irresponsible, he felt, to leave now.

Moreover—

“Don’t you even think about running off, Amagiri! You look like the strongest here!” Roverica, exchanging blows with Tuulia, called out after him.

It didn’t look like they would be able to leave even if they wanted to.

“Good grief, first one thing, then another…” Nevilleworth sighed, his expression unchanging, as mana began to swirl around him with tremendous force.

“What?! He’s a Dante?!”

They hadn’t seen him use anything that even resembled an ability in any of the preliminary matches. He must have hidden that fact well.

“Try to dodge it. I don’t want to be disqualified just yet.” Nevilleworth raised his right hand—a huge boulder coming into shape above him. It had to be more than thirty yards in diameter, enough to block out the light of the setting sun, its shadow engulfing everyone present.

“H-h-hold on! Everyone, retreat, retreat!” Miluše called out in a panic just as Nevilleworth lowered his arm.

At that moment, the huge boulder plunged into the ground.

“Ha-ha-ha! You’re the ones who’ve bitten off more than you can chew!” Roverica called out before her voice was drowned out by the sound of the colossal impact.

Ayato barely had enough time to cover his face with his arms to shield himself from the violent burst of wind.

*

“…They really are out of their minds, those people…”

Ayato, waiting for the whirling dust to settle, deactivated the Ser Veresta, returning it to the holder at his waist.

In front of him lay a gaping pit, at least the size of a full city block. Nevilleworth’s ability must have torn a hole in the surface layer of the earth.

The ground in this part of the redevelopment area was undoubtedly more brittle than in other areas of the city due to its long neglect, but it still shouldn’t have been destroyed so easily. The power behind that ability must have been beyond comprehension.

On the other side of the abyss, Nevilleworth, along with the other members of Team Hellion, stood watching them. They were too far away to reach. Not

even a Genestella would have been able to leap that distance.

Nevilleworth had probably intended to separate the two groups so they couldn't attack each other—although, it was certainly an unorthodox approach.

Finally, the mercenaries turned and disappeared into the mass of abandoned buildings. Roverica alone paused to look over her shoulder, glaring in their direction, but she, too, soon left to catch up with her teammates.

"Phew… I hope we don't end up having to face them," he muttered as he wiped the sweat from his brow.

"Hey, everyone! Are you all right…?!" Tuulia called out from a distance behind him.

Several faint voices could be heard from somewhere in the distance.

Many of the buildings around them had collapsed due to the force of the impact, making the redevelopment area look bleaker still.

"Well, we had better get going, too… Huh? Saya?" But when he looked around, his childhood friend was nowhere to be seen.

Saya's skills were good enough that she should have had no difficulty evading the attack.

But even so, Ayato, worried, entered the state of *shiki* to stretch out his senses— When his mobile began to ring.

"…Ayato, are you okay?"

As he opened the air-window, Saya's face appeared before him, although the picture was unexpectedly dark and distorted. "Ah, Saya. Thank goodness… What about you? No, wait, where are you?"

"I'm not sure… Probably somewhere underground."

"Underground…?"

He approached the edge of the pit and peered in, but it didn't look particularly deep, probably only around twenty yards or so.

When he and Kirin had fallen through Asterisk's surface, they had made it all the way down to the ballast area, the lowest section of the city's

superstructure. This time, however, the collapse looked to have stopped at an underground passage—or else at the drainage channels.

The boulder created through Nevilleworth's ability had already dissipated into raw mana, leaving not a trace of its existence.

However, there looked to be countless cracks in the rubble leading into underground passages, and the ground around them still hadn't stabilized.

"So you're trapped somewhere… This isn't good."

"…I don't think I can blast away this much rubble with my Luxes."

"Don't even try; that could cause even more of it to come down."

He had no idea where she was, but it would be better not to do anything that might end up worsening the situation.

"I see… Then let's find another way." Saya frowned. *"Oh, there's something else, too."*

"Huh? What?"

At that moment, Tuulia's voice echoed from behind him: "Whaaat?! You're trapped?!"

"…Team Rusalka's leader is here with me."

"Huh…?" Ayato turned to find four of Rusalka's members gathered in a circle around an air-window. Miluše, her face projected in the center of the display, looked as if she was about to break out in tears.

"So you're down there together…?"

"It looks like it."

The other members of Rusalka seemed to have realized that, too, turning to Ayato in unison.

"This is just getting more and more complicated…"

Deep in thought, he trailed off but still managed to flash them all a stiff smile.

"…Anyway, our top priority has to be getting you both out of there."

Everyone, Ayato included, nodded at Mahulena's suggestion.

The situation being what it was, now wasn't the time to quarrel, so Rusalka had consented to a temporary truce. That said, Ayato didn't really have anything against them to begin with.

"Maybe we should call Stjarnagarm and wait for help…?" he suggested cautiously.

"Impossible, absolutely impossible! If we do that, they'll find out there was a fight here!" Monica dismissed him flatly. She puffed her cheeks dramatically, but her eyes were serious.

"…It isn't like anyone else got caught up in it, though, so I don't think we would be disqualified for a one-off incident… The chairwoman will probably give us a scolding, though." Mahulena hung her head with a heavy sigh but then immediately looked up as if making up her mind. "But I agree with Mr. Amagiri. Their safety comes first, after all."

"Eh, wait a second, Mahulena, wait!" Monica pouted. "Come on, Tuulia, say something!"

But Tuulia looked back at them reluctantly. "…No, I'm with Amagiri here."

"What, why?"

"I didn't want to admit it, but he did save me. I owe him for that, so I can't be ungrateful," she said with a blush before hastily shooting a glare aside, into the distance.

"…In that case, I do, too."

"Argh…! You always just go along with everyone else, Päivi!" Monica stamped her feet like a child, her shoulders slumping in defeat. "Fine, I get it. Do whatever you want. I was only thinking about all of us, but now I look like the bad guy."

According to what Ayato had read, Monica was supposed to be the oldest member of the group, but her sulking figure, kicking at some lose debris, was unmistakably childish.

"*Um, that's all well and good, but…*," Miluše began.

"*…I don't think we can wait that long*," Saya finished for her in a flat voice.

“Eh? Wh-what do you mean?” Mahulena was unable to disguise her concern.

“There was a weird sound a little earlier…”

“…Basically, the ceiling might fall in.”

“You mean it might collapse again?” Ayato asked.

Saya nodded. *“…Yeah. But this passage looks like it leads somewhere, so we can try to go deeper in.”*

“Right…”

Asterisk’s underground blocks were different in each area and at each depth. The subway network, for example, was particularly dense in the central district, but it barely extended into the outer sections of the residential area. There should, however, have been at least one route connecting it to the central terminal.

On the other hand, the mazelike arrangement of underground passages and drainage tunnels crisscrossed the entire city.

For security reasons, however, such details weren’t available to the public. The underground blocks were under the jurisdiction of the Infrastructure and Maintenance Department and were out of range of normal means of communication. The fact that Saya and Miluše were able to maintain a mobile connection at all was no doubt because they were relatively close to the huge crater, but if they were to move farther into the underground labyrinth, they would probably lose contact with the surface.

In other words, Ayato and the others would have no means of contacting them and no means of knowing where they were.

“…I need to ask, how is Miluše’s sense of direction?

“You saw it for yourself when we were running away from that thing,” Tuulia remarked.

“…Right.”

In that case, they would have to consider that neither of them would have a good sense of their bearings.

“*Argh!*” a panicked voice from the other side of the air-window said.

Miluše, it seemed, had managed to dodge a falling fist-sized chunk of rubble by only a hair’s breadth.

“It doesn’t look good. We’ll try to do what we can—”

But the distortion soon became too intense to hear what Saya was saying, and after a short moment, the transmission cut out.

Ayato and the four girls could only glance at one another in worry.

*

Although pale lights lined the underground passage at regular intervals, it was wide enough that they did little to illuminate their surroundings.

Nothing echoed within the dim, damp space but the sounds of the two girls’ footsteps.

“…”

“Hey, hold up! You’re…you’re Sasamiya, right? Hey, stop walking so fast!” Miluše followed nervously, as if trying to keep out of her line of sight, looking like she was about to start crying.

“There’s no need for me to wait for you,” Saya answered coolly as she kept an eye out for anything that looked like it might lead back to the surface.

She had heard there were areas in the underground blocks equipped with communication terminals for use by those who found themselves lost, but she couldn’t see anything that even slightly resembled such a device.

“I’m not a *you*—call me by my name, *Miluše*! But I guess it *is* a stage name…”

“Fine. You can tag along if you want, but stop complaining,” Saya muttered.

“What…?! Y-you can’t mean that!” Miluše’s eyes moved to and fro like a terrified animal’s.

The two had, after all, been at odds with each other until just a short while ago, when Team Hellion showed up. Saya didn’t particularly want to return to that situation, but she didn’t care to start getting cozy with Rusalka, either.

And what was more…

“…I’ll tell you this.”

“Wh-what?”

Saya stopped there, glancing back at Miluše, who all but recoiled in fright under her gaze. “Ayato’s enemies are my enemies. I won’t forgive you if you do anything to him.”

Miluše hung her head. “But like we said, Ayato Amagiri is—”

“Fine. Why don’t I tell you just how good he is?”

“Huh?”

As she continued down the passage, Saya raised a finger. “This was when we were around seven years old. We were training with Haru on the hill behind our houses. I was careless, and—”

“Do I have to listen to this?”

“You can go on ahead if you like.”

Miluše glanced into the darkness, swallowing her breath. “…No, go on.”

“Good,” Saya said, nodding, before going on to explain Ayato’s many kindnesses for upward of an hour.

“…And then Ayato made it there in the nick of time, like a prince on a white horse… Huh?” Saya stopped, crouching down.

“…Hmm? Is it over?” Miluše asked, her expression bored, her voice sapped of energy.

Saya pointed at her feet. There were footprints—and recent ones at that.

“Footprints? But why would anyone be down here…?”

“…There’s dust.”

When Saya lifted her finger after tracing it against the ground, it was stained almost black.

But there was no dust anywhere else.

“Maybe…” Saya stood up and put her ear to the wall for a few seconds before giving it several loud knocks.

“Hmm…”

Something wasn’t right.

All at once, there was a sound of something heavy moving, and the wall slid open, revealing another pathway.

“A-a secret door…? Why would there be a secret door here…?”

That was no doubt where the dust had come from.

And if so, that secret door had probably not been used for a long time, until—

“Someone’s been here recently,” Saya murmured to no one in particular.

“Hey, look! There’s something inside!” Miluše exclaimed with excitement.

Indeed, ahead of them, there was a plain, silver-colored door shrouded in shadow only five yards or so from where they were standing.

They exchanged glances before cautiously approaching it.

“It’s… It’s an elevator, isn’t it?” Miluše asked, a hint of relief in her voice.

It certainly did look like an elevator at first glance.

If so, they might be able to use it to make it back to the surface.

“…But there’s something fishy about this.”

“Well… I guess it is a little unusual,” Miluše admitted quietly as she knit her brow.

She quickly pulled herself together, however, and put her finger on the button off to its side.

There was a dull, echoing sound, and the doors slid open, revealing a square space roughly two yards wide.

“See, it *is* an elevator!”

“…I don’t know whether you’re brave or just stupid.”

“I’m terrified of monsters! And I can never work out what I should do, but if we don’t do anything, we won’t get anywhere.”

It had been a careless thing to do, but Saya had to admit that there was some truth to what she was saying.

Even if they kept on wandering through the passage, there was no telling when, or even if, they would be able to find an exit.

“There’s another button inside… What should we do? Press it?”

“…We’re here now. Do whatever you want.” Saya stepped inside, preparing herself for the worst.

“All right, then,” Miluše said, putting her finger on the button.

The door slid shut, and with a frightening creak, the elevator began to move.

“…”

“…”

It took them a moment to realize what was going on.

“Th-this isn’t going down, is it?”

“…It’s going down.”

Saya didn’t have the energy to say any more than that.

Either it wasn’t moving particularly fast, or they were going particularly deep underground, because the elevator kept moving, on and on. They soon lost track of time, until finally it came to a halt, and the door opened.

“What on earth…?”

Saya and Miluše were left speechless by what lay before them.

They were in a space so wide that it was hard to imagine they were somewhere far underground.

Something that looked like a stage awaiting an upgrade was spread out before their eyes. Unlike standard stages, however, it was hexagonal in design, with pillars at each of its corners. The ceiling was unbelievably high, held up by the six towering pillars, which seemed to be carving straight through the pale light that filled the cavern.

The elevator was built into one of those six pillars.

Saya and Miluše, overwhelmed by what they had stumbled across, stepped out in silence.

At that moment, the elevator door snapped shut.

“Ah!”

By the time they thought to do anything, it was already too late. The door was locked tight.

And there was nothing nearby that even resembled a button.

“Wh-wh-what do we do now?!” Miluše cried out in panic.

Saya, silent, continued to survey their surroundings.

On second glance, the stage looked to have fallen into disrepair, and the pillars themselves looked as if they might come crashing down at any moment. Debris of every size imaginable lay scattered across the stage. Judging both by the state that it was in and the stagnant air, it must have been abandoned long ago.

“It can’t be…” But when she glanced up, the stage was indeed surrounded by what looked like audience galleries—all but confirming her premonition. “…The Eclipse.”

She tried to remember what Ayato had told her about it as she stepped onto the stage.

The Eclipse—a secret, illegal tournament formerly held *somewhere deep in Asterisk*, in which there were no formal rules, and contestants practically fought to the death.

Ayato’s sister, Haruka Amagiri, had participated in it—and been defeated.

Almost as if urged on by some invisible force, Saya continued forward, until her eyes came across something lodged in the debris.

It was an eyeglass frame, fitted with broken lenses.

“…”

She fixed her gaze on it for a moment—before dusting it off, wrapping it carefully in a handkerchief, and putting it in her pocket.

“H-hey! Don’t leave me alone down here…!” Miluše called out, running after her. “…Huh? What’s wrong?”

Saya slowly shook her head. “…It’s nothing. Let’s try to find a way out.”

It was impossible to tell how long they had been down there.

Miluše was the first to break the silence. “Argh, I’m sick of this!” she complained, slumping down on a nearby clump of debris. “There’s no way out!”

Indeed, they had checked practically every square inch of the cavern, but they hadn’t found anything that looked like it might lead them back to the surface. On top of that, there was a deep groove between the stage and the galleries, too wide for either of them to jump across. The only places they could reach were the stage itself and the six supporting pillars surrounding it.

“…Panicking won’t do any good. Let’s wait for help,” Saya said, leaning against the same pile of debris.

She had reached the same conclusion as Miluše. There was nothing they could do.

“…How did we end up like this?”

“Because you all started meddling in other people’s business.”

“I told you—”

“Fine. Let me finish what I was telling you before. How about the time I got lost in town during summer vacation? It was the middle of the night, and it was raining, and I was just walking around, without knowing where I was going—”

“I’m sorry! I get it! You’ve already told me just how great Amagiri is—I know!”

“Good.”

Miluše let out an exhausted sigh. “I’m hungry… Oh, right!” Her expression suddenly brightened, and she took something out of her uniform pocket. “Ta-daa! I was planning to take them home! Pretty lucky, huh?” She was holding two packaged cookies in her hands.

“…I see. Good for you.” Saya let the words flow over her without paying them any attention.

Miluše, however, wasn’t finished. “Hey, for you,” she said.

“Huh?”

“Here,” she said, putting one of the packets in her hand.

“…Why are you giving it to me?” Saya stared at her suspiciously.

Miluše was under no obligation to share it with her.

“Well, I did mean to keep them to myself at first…”

She certainly seemed to have that sort of personality.

“But then I thought, that kind of person pops up in movies all the time, right? They’re so uncool. I don’t want to be like that.”

“Oh…” Saya seemed startled by the unexpectedly simple answer. “Well, then. I’ll take it. Thank you,” she replied, bowing her head.

It didn’t take long for them to finish eating. After that, they went back to waiting.

Eventually, Miluše, her chin resting in her hand and her expression bored, turned to Saya. “You take everything about Amagiri really seriously, you know. Is he really that important to you?”

“Of course.”



“So… Uh… Do you, like, l-l-*like*…him…?”

“…I guess you could say that.” Saya nodded.

“In that case…” Miluše’s face had turned red. “Why don’t you…you know… uh…take hold of him?”

“That’s…”

…none of your business, she wanted to say but thought better of it.

“I don’t want to tie him down.”

She herself didn’t really know why she said the words—they just seemed to slip out of her mouth.

“Huh? I don’t get it.” Miluše rested her hands behind her head, all but screaming out that she didn’t understand. “When there’s something *I* want, I’d do anything to get my hands on it.”

“…So what *do* you want?”

“To be the world’s number one, of course!” Miluše said, jumping to her feet with her fists clenched.

“The world’s number one?” Saya tilted her head uncertainly.

“I’ve come this far! All that’s left is to outdo Sylvia, and I’ll have reached the summit! The top of the world!”

“Ah… Music.” Saya hadn’t fully understood what she had meant until she heard Sylvia’s name.

Another question came to mind.

“But… In that case, why were you harassing Ayato about her?”

“Ah… I—I mean, you know…,” Miluše stammered, looking away.

They remained that way for a short while, and when she finally turned back, her expression was serious. “…For us, Sylvia’s like an idol. We all want to be like her. No, not just us—everyone at Queenvale.”

“…”

Saya said nothing, merely urging her to continue with a meaningful look.

“Three years ago, nobody knew our names. We were total nobodies. But Sylvia was already the world’s most popular songstress… That’s why we promised to beat her one day. Back then, I would have done anything to beat her.” Miluše’s voice was the calmest it had been since they had found themselves trapped together. She took a deep breath before continuing. “But if she’s being tricked by someone—if she’s just being played around with—that’s too sad. So we thought we had to do something.”

“…You aren’t making any sense.”

Or perhaps, Saya wondered, she was simply being honest about her inconsistent feelings.

“What’s wrong with that? Back then, I would have done anything to get to the top! And I’m still going to get what I want! And then there won’t be any more problems!” she declared before returning to her earlier composed tone of voice. “I mean, if I try to deny my feelings, I’ll just end up regretting it one day, right?”

“…!”

At those words, Saya’s eyes opened wide in realization.

Without even noticing it, her hand had found its way toward what she always kept hidden in her pocket.

“…Regret it, huh?”

“Exactly. I mean, that’s what they say, right, that it’s better to do something and regret it than not do something and regret it.” At this, Miluše flashed her teeth in a broad smile.

Saya could answer only with a forced smile. “…So you’re going to put everything into surpassing Sylvia Lyyneheym?”

“That’s easier said than done, though.” Miluše’s shoulders fell dejectedly. “I’d be happy to beat her in either music or battle. Just one of those would be enough…”

Saya let out yet another small sigh. “The way I see it, you’re fighting in the exact same arena as she is. If you want to win no matter what, it isn’t like there

aren't other options available to you."

"Huh? R-really? L-like what?" Miluše jumped up, clutching Saya firmly by the shoulders.

Saya pushed her away gently and cleared her throat. "…Like in the Festa."

"In the Festa…?"

"Sylvia Lyyneheym hasn't been able to win one yet."

"Well, she had to go up against that monster in the Lindvolus."

"That monster"—the Witch of Solitary Venom, Erenshkigal.

"Exactly. She's only focusing on the Lindvolus, and the odds of winning that are pretty slim. That means you have an advantage that she doesn't."

"I see!" Miluše's expression suddenly brightened. "If we can win the Gryps—"

"But not this time. Maybe the next one."

"What do you mean?!"

"We're going to win this time," Saya said matter-of-factly.

Miluše startled. "Wha—?! Th-that's my line! We're the ones who are going to win!"

"…That's not going to happen."

Their gazes clashed—the sheer intensity all but enough to send sparks flying across the room.

"Good grief…," a voice from behind them said. "To think that you both managed to find your way down here."

They spun around to find an instantly recognizable, dignified woman emerging from the elevator in the nearest pillar.

"…Commander Lindwall?"

Both Saya and Miluše stared at her in amazement.

Behind her stood Ayato and the other members of Rusalka.

"Ayato!"

“Miluše!”

They all rushed over, their faces filled with relief.

“It’s good to see you both safe and well.” Helga’s smile was genuine, but her voice soon changed in tone. “This place is off-limits—or rather, you shouldn’t even have been able to access it in the first place. You’re going to have to tell me how you got down here.”

CHAPTER 6

THE LYRE-POROS

A melancholic evening sky. Familiar streets lined with houses. The sound of crows cawing in the distance.

She recognized it all immediately—she was dreaming, reliving a memory from long ago.

“Oh my, what is it, Saya?” Haruka, a shopping bag in her hands, had called out to her gently.

“…I had a fight with Ayato,” she’d responded, sitting on the veranda with her hands on her knees.

“…I see.” Haruka had glanced at the building behind her.

They could hear Ayato absorbed in practice inside the principal dojo of the Amagiri Shinmei style. Saya could count on a single hand the number of times she and Ayato had fought, and after each and every one of them, he had secluded himself inside that building.

“I guess he isn’t in a good mood, either. His center of gravity is off.”

The fact that Haruka could tell that through sound alone never failed to impress Saya.

Standing there, her hand on her waist, she’d looked less like Ayato’s elder sister, and more like a confident dojo instructor.

“So what happened?” she’d asked, her usual, gentle smile at once coming back.

“…He wanted to know why I hadn’t told him. That we’re moving away.”

“Ah, I see.” Haruka had nodded in understanding.

She'd seemed to already know.

"I didn't say anything to him because I thought it would be better for him to hear it directly from you. But I guess he found out on his own first."

"…Yeah."

"So why didn't you tell him?"

Saya had looked away in embarrassment at the characteristically blunt question but answered honestly: "I thought that if I told him…he'd definitely worry about me."

"…Well, that's the kind of person he is."

"I just wanted things to stay the way they were."

That was all that she had wanted. She couldn't understand why Ayato had reacted the way he did.

"I see… You're always too thoughtful, Saya," Haruka had said, pulling her close in a tight embrace.

"…Haruka, I can't breathe."

"Ah, sorry… You know, Saya, I understand how you feel, but I don't think it would have worked out."

"Why not?" Saya had asked, confused.

Haruka had reached out to stroke Saya's head. "Even if Ayato had kept on acting normally, it still would have been different for you, wouldn't it? Were you able to play with him like you normally do, keeping it all to yourself?"

Saya had slowly shaken her head.

"Right? There are things you should keep to yourself—and things you shouldn't, but if it's someone like Ayato, it's best to say it all up-front, don't you think? That doesn't mean it would have gone well. But at least you wouldn't have regretted it so much afterward, would you?"

"…I don't know," Saya had replied sullenly.

Haruka had let out an awkward laugh. "Well, that's that, I guess. Why don't you go and make up with him? You wouldn't want to leave without first having

set things right, would you?”

“…No.” Saya had shaken her head in agreement.

“It’s best to be honest. And it just so happens that I’ve got a secret weapon for you. It will definitely help.”

“…Thank you, Haru.”

Saya had bowed her head in gratitude for the two ice cream bars and then ran off toward the dojo.

*

“Saya,” Ayato called out as he shook her shoulders. “Saya, wake up. The commander’s here.”

“Ngh…?” Finally, his childhood friend awoke from her restful sleep, rubbing at tired eyes as she glanced at her surroundings. “…Where am I?”

“The headquarters of the city guard.”

“The city guard…?” Saya remained motionless for a long moment, as if frozen in place, before finally clapping her hands together in realization. “Ah, right.”

Stjarnagarm’s headquarters was located almost in the center of the administrative area, right next to City Hall.

Looked at from outside, the building was unremarkable, but to those who knew what to identify, the austere atmosphere reflected the police force’s supreme confidence in their abilities.

After all, the city guard had to deal with students from Asterisk’s six schools. They would have little hope of being able to carry out their job if they weren’t sufficiently skilled. Indeed, many members of Stjarnagarm were former students themselves—the most noteworthy among them former Page Ones.

It was in a room deep in the organization’s headquarters—a simple room, outfitted only with a businesslike desk, chairs, and a sofa—that Ayato and Saya had been waiting for Helga Lindwall.

“So you’re finally awake?” she asked as she took a seat across from them. “Let me start by apologizing for the delay. My interview with Team Rusalka went on for longer than I had expected.”

“No, it’s all right…,” Saya replied.

The night sky could be seen outside the window, and in the distance, the dazzling lights of the commercial area—a stark contrast to the peaceful quietude of the administrative one.

“It sounds like you two just managed to get caught up in the middle of that fight in the redevelopment area. It shouldn’t be a problem for either of you.”

“That’s good…,” Saya said softly.

Ayato had expected as much as well, but hearing it officially was a great relief. The last thing he wanted was to cause any difficulties for his other team members.

“…But what about them?”

“Team Rusalka and Team Hellion will have to face some kind of disciplinary action, but I doubt it will be too severe.” Based on her tone of voice, Helga didn’t seem particularly satisfied by that state of affairs.

Any punitive measures issued in relation to the Festa were at the sole discretion of the Executive Committee. Stjarnagarm’s role was only to oversee their implementation—not to issue any sentences themselves. Ayato could only imagine what Helga would have to say about that.

The commander, it seemed, had guessed what he was thinking. “Of course, I would prefer a more severe punishment—especially for a team as dangerous as Hellion. However, I need to abide by the city’s rules. Although this mercenary system is—” She stopped herself there, shaking her head. “No, I shouldn’t get off topic. Let’s return to the issue at hand. You’ve no doubt realized this already, but that place where you managed to wind up used to be where the Eclipse was held.”

“…So I was right,” Saya murmured.

Ayato had guessed as much when they’d found Saya and Miluše, but he hadn’t given it much thought.

After all, they’d had a busy evening. Shortly after Ayato and the four members of Rusalka contacted the city guard, Helga had come to meet them along with

several other officers, and one had been able to use their seeking abilities to locate the two girls almost immediately. No sooner had they found them down there than they were all rushed back up to the surface and taken straight to the city guard's headquarters. There hadn't been much time to really think about it.

Now that he had heard it directly from the person who had brought the illegal tournament to an end, however, there could be no doubting it.

"To begin with, that place is in the lowest levels of the city's superstructure, at the bottom of the ballast area—in other words, underwater."

"The ballast area…?" Hearing this, Saya's eyes opened wide in surprise.

If one thought about it, however, there was probably no better hiding place anywhere in the city. Ayato himself had once entered the ballast area—albeit unintentionally—and so knew just how impossible it would be to find anything down there.

"There are three different types of entrances," Helga continued. "Those for the audience, those for the organizers, and those for the contestants. There are six of these last ones, each connected directly to the stage. They can only be accessed through hidden passages in the underground blocks, like the one you found."

"…But someone must have opened that door before us. That's how we found it."

"Yes…" Helga took a deep breath, her posture seeming to shed some of its usual dignity. "Well, there's no point hiding it. That was Le Wolfe's mercenaries…Team Hellion."

"*They* were there?" Saya frowned in discomfort.

"They didn't try to hide it when we interviewed them. They said that they just went to take a look and then left."

"…They went to take a look? Why?"

"Their boss at HRMS, Liberio Pareto, was a winner of the Lindvolus, but he also took part in the Eclipse. We've had several people testify to that over the years. He's pretty recognizable, after all. And was quite a handful for us, too."

Her tone was bitter, no doubt just like her memories from that time. “Scheming isn’t his style, but he’s unusually charismatic, and it sounds like those mercenaries in Hellion are completely devoted to him. It was probably a kind of pilgrimage for them.”

“But in that case…how did they get out?” Saya asked.

According to Saya, the elevator closed behind them automatically, and they hadn’t been able to use it to get back to the surface.

“Those elevators are a one-way ride. Only the winners were allowed to come back… But I’ve heard that certain participants, like Liberio, were given special ID cards so they could use them whenever they liked. They probably had one of them.”

“Can I ask a question?” Ayato asked. There was something that had been bothering him for a while now. “The Eclipse has been brought to an end, right? Then why is that place still there? And why are the elevators and lights and everything still working?”

At this, Helga’s normally stolid expression grew clouded. Her next words were uncharacteristically tinged with emotion. “Do you remember what I told you a while back, that our investigation into Danilo was brought to a halt under pressure from the foundations? The Eclipse is the worst example of that. We received a request—meaning an order—not to lay so much as a hand on that arena. We haven’t even been able to bring back a single piece of evidence.”

Before Helga had finished speaking, Ayato noticed Saya, sitting beside him, visibly stiffen.

“What is it?” Helga, who noticed it as well, turned toward her sharply.

“…It’s nothing,” Saya replied, feigning ignorance.

Helga continued to stare at her for a long moment, clearly seeing through the lie, but then shook her head before taking a deep breath. “Very well. There *was* a protective field installed to prevent people from entering the elevator, but Team Hellion must have broken it on their way in.”

“There wasn’t anything like that when we were there.”

There was no questioning Team Hellion's strength. Ayato had his doubts whether even a protective field like what Ardy had used would have been able to stop them.

"Well, that's all I can say. Do you have any other questions?"

"No, I'm fine," Ayato answered.

"…Me too," Saya added.

Helga nodded, standing up. "My apologies again for taking up so much of your time, especially in the middle of the Festa, but this is our job. Don't take it the wrong way." She stepped toward the door before glancing back. "Oh, I can have someone take you back to Seidoukan, if you like."

"There's no need," Saya answered flatly before Ayato could have a chance to accept.

With that, she bowed politely to the commander, then took Ayato by the hand and began to lead him away.

"S-Saya…?"

"Come with me."

Saya all but dragged him down the dull corridor. When he glanced behind him, Helga was watching them go with an amused smile.

"Phew… We should be able to talk now," Saya stated, finally coming to a stop at the side of a dark street. They'd put a considerable distance between themselves and the headquarters.

They were still in the administrative area, but there were few buildings with any lights on. The hour being what it was, the streets were practically deserted.

Even so, Saya made sure to carefully check their surroundings before turning to face him.

"Ayato, here," she whispered, pulling a handkerchief-wrapped item from her breast pocket.

"What is it?"

It was surprisingly light. No sooner had he put his hand around it than a shock

like an electric current coursed through his body.

He slowly unfolded the handkerchief and caught his breath.

“I found them down there,” he heard Saya say as if from some great distance.

The lenses were broken and the frame twisted out of shape, but there was no mistaking that these glasses had belonged to his elder sister, Haruka Amagiri.

“I didn’t want to tell the commander. She said they couldn’t take anything back.”

“Ah, right…”

Based on how she had acted, however, she had probably guessed that Saya had taken something.

But even so…

“…Thank you, Saya,” he whispered.

“Don’t worry about it,” she replied with a bashful smile.

*

It was the fourth round of the Gryps.

“Haah!”

The young man whose hair was done up in a queue caused a small crater to erupt in the middle of the stage as his openhanded strike missed Ayato by only a fraction of an inch.

He might have dodged that blow, but within a split second, a short-statured girl with braided hair attacked from the right with her elbow. He swung the Ser Veresta with one hand to try to block her, but he was too late.

“Ngh…!”

He concentrated his prana on his abdomen to lessen the effects of the strike, grabbing her by the arm and flinging her across the stage.

The move was the opening part of one of the Amagiri Shinmei style’s grappling techniques, but the man with the queue launched another attack at the same time. Ayato was forced to interrupt the technique before he could finish, letting the girl land safely some distance away.

These two always kept Ayato at a distance, attacking out of nowhere with minimal movements. Striking at those areas where its user was weakest in maneuvering was one of the most common ways of countering the Ser Veresta, but such a strategy nonetheless required a consummate degree of skill.

“Jie Long isn’t just the Ban’yuu Tenra’s disciples!” the girl boasted with unyielding determination.

Team Taotie consisted of representative members from several schools of martial arts independent of the Ban’yuu Tenra, and while there were no Page Ones among them, they were all in Jie Long’s top twenty.

That said, Ayato had already known what to expect, and he’d only found himself cornered like this due to the abilities of Team Taotie’s leader, a young man with unsettlingly large eyes.

“That’s right!” a voice behind him said with a burst of laughter. “And Jie Long’s Dantes aren’t all *daoshi*!”

Ayato could all but feel a thirst for blood emanating from behind, and he quickly leaped out of the way.

At that instant, the gaping maw of some terrible beast shot through the area where he’d been standing—its jaws clamping shut like a giant bear trap. It dissipated almost immediately, but because its user was able to summon it without any warning, and because even his *shiki* senses were little help detecting it, Ayato was unable to fully concentrate on the two people before him.

No sooner had he touched the ground than the young man with the queue and the girl rushed toward him, and then the beast’s head began to emerge once again at his feet. Its piercing fangs had been waiting for him even before he could attempt to dodge. His other two opponents, fully aware of his blunder, flowed right into their next moves.

The team leader wasn’t as versatile as Jie Long’s *daoshi* and probably specialized in just this unique ability. That was the only explanation Ayato could think of to explain how he was able to use it so quickly.

Ayato, trying to dodge the three-pronged attack, lost his balance, striking his

head again and again as he rolled across the ground.

“All right! This is it! First, we’ll bring down the Murakumo, and then… What?!” the team leader cut off mid-sentence as his eyes opened even more in shock.

“…Our turn.” Ayato leaped up with a grin.

The leader with large eyes had been keeping Julis and Saya in check with his ability until just a short moment ago, while the two members of his team’s vanguard protected him from Kirin and Claudia. The fact that they had been able to do this much, even if not for long, was a testament to their skills and teamwork.

However, just as Ayato had suspected—and indeed, lured them into—they had focused too much on taking him down.

And now—

“Hah!”

“You’re mine now!”

Kirin and Claudia had taken advantage of that opening to take down their opponents, slicing clean through their school crests.

“D-damn it…!”

The two girls had been superior in one-on-one combat to Team Taotie’s vanguard from the very beginning, and because they had focused not on winning but merely on keeping their opponents on their toes, those opponents, without support from their team leader, had been unable to defend themselves against the intensified attack.

“Now, Ayato!” Julis called out as she used her Rect Lux to distract the pair attacking him.

“Glühen Rose…!” the girl growled in vexation, but with Julis’s Rect Lux attacking from every angle, she had no choice but to let Ayato go.

“Thanks, Julis!”

Ayato took full advantage of the opening, quickly shortening the distance between himself and Team Taotie’s leader.

“It’s not over yet!” the leader grunted, the huge beast’s head manifesting in front of him, when— *“…Boom.”*

An explosion of pure light from Saya’s Helnekraum engulfed it in flames.

“Argh!” the leader grunted, but he still wasn’t going to give up.

Though smaller than the ones he’d faced up till now, the heads of seven more beasts appeared all at once around Ayato.

“Amagiri Shinmei Style, Middle Technique—*Defilement of the Night!*”

Ayato grasped the Ser Veresta in both hands, twisting his body as he ran straight through them in a flash.

“I-impossible…!” The man gaped, his eyes bulging.

But in a single stroke, Ayato had already cut through not only the seven heads, but the team leader’s own school crest.

“End of battle! Winners: Team Enfield!”

Ayato heaved a sigh of relief as the automated announcement sounded throughout the arena.

*

“Phew… The teams in the main tournament really are at another level, huh?” Ayato said with a sigh as he sunk into the sofa once they had all returned to their prep room after the winners’ interview.

When it came to combat ability, there weren’t many teams stronger than Team Enfield, but that didn’t mean they could afford to underestimate their opponents. They were, after all, one of the favorites, so they could expect that any team they faced would have devised some kind of strategy to counter their advantage.

“We put too much pressure on Ayato this time,” Claudia remarked. “We should have thought more about their abilities in close combat. That *is* Jie Long’s forte.”

“Well, even if I did get eliminated, that would have been fine with me as long as it gave you all the advantage you needed to win.”

It was a team battle, after all.

“Maybe as a last resort, but we would be in trouble if you were to get hurt. So if you do have to lose, try to make it happen by having your school crest get destroyed—not anything else.” Claudia’s tone was light, but it was nonetheless a reasonable request.

Even if they were to win, if he got injured in the process, that would prove to be a problem for the next match. The Executive Committee disliked giving victories by default, so teams were still allowed to participate even if short of up to two of their members, but it was undeniable that such teams were at a significant disadvantage.

“Still, aren’t we in a relatively good bracket?” Julis asked.

“R-right… At the very least, we won’t have to face Team Lancelot until the finals.” Kirin nodded in agreement.

The bracket for the main tournament had been drawn the previous day. Fortunately, among the thirty-two teams that had made it that far, Gallardworth’s Team Lancelot, still the team most favored to take the championship, had been allocated to a different block.

“…That goes for that crazy team, too,” Saya added.

She was referring, of course, to Team Hellion, whose brutality, just as much as their strength, made them an undesirable opponent.

“The one that we’re probably going to need to deal with first, based on what happened in the preliminaries, is Team Yellow Dragon,” Ayato said. “Hagun Seikun in particular.”

“As expected from the Ban’yuu Tenra’s top disciple,” Claudia agreed.

It was no understatement to say that Hagun Seikun’s overwhelming performance in the second round had far exceeded any of their expectations.

It was hard to tell from that battle alone, but his close-combat abilities probably excelled those of both Ayato and Kirin.

“Ayato…?” Kirin asked worriedly. She had no doubt guessed what he was thinking.

“…No, let’s not worry about that now,” he said, changing the topic as he

opened the prep room's largest air-window. "We need to start preparing for the next match."

They certainly would need a strategy to deal with Hagun Seikun, but for now, they would be better off focusing on the problem at hand.

"Looks like it's already started."

They turned in tandem to the live broadcast just as five familiar white-uniformed figures entered the frame.

"From the east gate, we have the second half of Saint Gallardworth Academy's Silverwinged Knights, and the runners-up from the last Gryps! Well, their members might be completely different, but anyway! Elliot Forster, the Claíomh Solais, is leading Team Tristan onto the stage!"

The surge of cheers echoing throughout the arena seemed to pour into the prep room itself.

"And now, from the west gate, we have one of the teams that made the top eight during the last tournament! Queenvale Academy for Young Ladies' renowned all-girl rock band, Team Rusalka!"

Another wave of cheers, no less than what had greeted Team Tristan, erupted from the crowds. In the center of the screen, Miluše and the others were all waving to the galleries as if about to open a live performance—a stark contrast to Team Tristan's somber entrance.

"Who do you suppose will win?" Claudia asked with her usual mysterious smile.

Julis was the first to answer. "…I'll go with Team Tristan. They're too different in strength. Rusalka might have unparalleled coordination, but Miluše is probably the only one among them who can keep up with Elliot Forster."

"I agree. To be perfectly honest, I doubt they'll be able to keep up with him…"

Indeed, based on what Ayato had seen from the preliminaries, Elliot Forster's swordsmanship had improved dramatically since the previous year.

And not just his swordsmanship. His physical abilities had undergone a complete transformation as well.

Team Rusalka, on the other hand, didn't look to have changed much since the last Gryps. Of course, it was to be expected that they would have undergone incremental improvement, and their coordination did seem to be more involved, but that by itself was unlikely to be enough to take down Team Tristan.

And when it came to coordination, Gallardworth's Team Tristan had always prided itself in that area, too.

"And then there's Perceforêt. Her ability won't be easy to deal with."

"It *is* a very team-oriented ability," Claudia nodded.

It was a very rare kind of ability, Ayato thought. If they had to fight against them themselves, they would have a hard time countering it.

"What do you think, Ayato?"

"Hmm…"

The conditions being what they were, everything did look to be in Team Tristan's favor.

But still, he found himself unable to respond.

There was something nagging at him—something seemingly just out of sight.

"I think it will be Rusalka."

The one who finally spoke up was Saya.

"Oh? What makes you say that?" asked Julis, suddenly interested.

Saya, expressionless, shook her head. "Just my intuition."

"…I see." Julis gave her an amused shrug but said nothing more.

After a moment, Claudia clapped her hands together as if to announce the end of discussion. "It's about to begin. Now, everyone, let's watch carefully. After all, we'll be facing the winners."

*

As soon as the match was underway, Elliot Forster rushed ahead of the vanguard.

Without him having to say anything, two more of his team's knights followed

after him.

Gallardworth's teams had no formations. They were able to coordinate organically, no matter the situation, using collective judgment to build on individual decisions. Embodying such contradiction, having emerged through strict discipline and continuous training, were Gallardworth's finest teams, in which the whole functioned as one.

With an effortless swing of his sword, Elliot brushed aside the barrage of bullets of light that had shot out from Mahulena's keyboard-shaped Orga Lux.

"It'll take more than that to stop me!" Elliot muttered under his breath.

He had been enduring his humiliation from the Phoenix for more than a year now.

In fact, it was fair to say that, if not for that humiliation, he wouldn't be where he was today.

"But your sword…is still too light."

With his defeat, Elliot had accepted those words that Ayato Amagiri had whispered to him—and ground them between his teeth until there was nothing left.

I don't need a heavier sword. If that's how it is, I'll just make my sword lighter and faster!

"No, you don't!"

"…That's as far as you go!"

Blocking his path were Tuulia and Päivi.

But Elliot merely slowed his speed, letting two fellow knights overtake him to engage the girls, thus giving him an opening to keep pressing forward.

At Gallardworth, team coordination went beyond words. After all, what he wanted was what his team wanted.

"…I was wondering how long you'd take. I thought I'd have to reach out to you myself," Miluše goaded, readying her guitar-shaped Orga Lux, the Lyre-Poros Calliope.

“I’m not so uncouth as to force a lady to come to me!” he called back, tightening his grip on his own sword Lux and correcting his stance.

They were both the leaders of their respective teams, meaning that whoever won this duel would win the match.

The first one to make a move was Miluše. “Here I come!”

That was fine. Elliot’s specialty had always been harmonizing with his opponent’s attacks in order to deliver a crushing counterstrike.

The point of his sword shimmered as if a mirage, moving to pierce through Miluše’s school crest faster than her overhead attack could reach him, when—
“Wha—?!”

But he stopped in mid-strike, spinning around.

At that moment, a high-pitched burst of sound, the reverberations from Miluše’s overpowered guitar, struck him like a wave, pressing him low to the ground.

“*Ngh…!* That was close… So that’s your acoustic crush, is it?”

“Grrr! You weren’t supposed to dodge it!” Miluše seethed childishly. “I’ll just have to try again!”

But before she could finish speaking, Elliot had already lunged out with a counterattack.

“Wha—?!”

Miluše dodged the attack by a fraction of an inch, but Elliot immediately continued into a large circular slash with overwhelming speed. Nonetheless, she hastily managed to activate a glowing blade of light from her Orga Lux to meet it head-on.

Her ability to parry his attacks was beyond Elliot’s wildest expectations. Queenvale might have been the weakest of Asterisk’s six schools, but it looked like her rank as its number three wasn’t undeserved. Perhaps she wouldn’t be taken down quickly with a full-frontal assault after all.

But that didn’t matter. Sensing that Noelle’s preparations were complete, Elliot was already half assured of victory.

“Uh-oh! Th-that’s…!” Miluše seemed to have realized it, too, leaping back to join Mahulena in their rearguard.

Elliot didn’t pursue her.

After a moment, the other members of Rusalka also quickly retreated in alarm.

An innumerable mass of tentacle-like thorns lay writhing on the ground, surrounding them from every side. They had sprung from Team Tristan’s rearguard, at the feet of Noelle Messmer, alias Perceforêt, who knelt with her staff-shaped Lux in front of her as if deep in prayer. The thorns already covered more than half of the stage and had begun to intertwine with one another into powerful chains.

Put simply, it was an incredibly rare ability highly effective over large areas, and while it took some time to properly deploy, it gave its user complete control over the affected space.

Team Rusalka, it seemed, was piling every move at their disposal into the writhing thorns, but they were unable to keep pace with their regeneration. Their efforts were having no real effect whatsoever.

Before long, the thorns had confined them to a corner of the stage, like princesses trapped in a fairy-tale castle.

“Now then, how about you surrender and save us all the trouble?” Elliot called out, pointing his sword toward them.

They were confined like rats, but they didn’t look ready to give up just yet.

“Don’t be stupid!” Miluše shouted back. “There’s no way we’d do that!”

“Oh? That’s a real shame. You leave me no choice, then.” Elliot raised his sword and began to edge his way toward them.

He couldn’t afford to take any chances now. Their next opponents would be Team Enfield. His long awaited chance to repay Ayato Amagiri in full for their last encounter was practically before him.

Miluše and the others stood back-to-back, preparing to launch their own attack, but the thorns wound themselves through an unseen opening, coiling

around their feet.

“Wha—?! W-wait, no!”

They squirmed wildly, trying to break free, but it wasn’t enough to shake off the writhing thorns.

Elliot wasn’t about to let such an opportunity go.

“I’ve got you now!” he cried out, when— “Argh! It’s not going to work like this!”

It must have been Miluše, her gaze cast downward, who had murmured the words, but before he could properly process what was going on, an earsplitting explosion of sound blasted across the stage like a hurricane.

“Guaaaaah?!”

Elliot and the other members of Team Tristan found themselves thrown across the stage, and the thorns that until now had been keeping Team Rusalka pinned down disappeared without a trace.

After landing on his feet, albeit with some difficulty, Elliot glanced back toward the five girls. They hadn’t moved but now stood there flamboyantly, their eyes dazzling, holding their Orga Luxes as if in the middle of a live performance.

“And now,” announced Miluše, “it’s time for our next session!”

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“Th-that’s…” Kirin, her eyes fixed on the air-window, was at a loss for words.

The same thing went for Ayato and Julis. Even Saya, who had predicted that Rusalka would win, was completely speechless.

The two teams had undergone a sudden and total reversal of fortunes.

No sooner had Rusalka eradicated the thorns than they effectively switched places with Team Tristan. The five girls in Rusalka were suddenly moving quickly and nimbly, while the Gallardworth’s knights seemed to have become lethargic and disoriented. The change was a dramatic one, and it clearly wasn’t the result of fatigue or injury.

Which meant…

“They’ve strengthened themselves and weakened their opponents,” Ayato murmured under his breath.

“So they were able to do it after all,” Claudia whispered. “This must be the true power of the Lyre-Poros…”

She, perhaps, was the only one who had anticipated this outcome, as she didn’t seem particularly surprised—about the match, at least.

Julis looked to her sharply. “Do you know something about it, Claudia?”

“Nothing that will be useful in devising a counterstrategy, I’m afraid. I was just able to get a little information on how it works; that’s all.”

“And…?”

“Like the Pan-Dora, the Lyre-Poros was developed by Ladislav Bartošik, so I wondered whether their abilities might also be similar,” Claudia said, removing her own Orga Lux from the holder at her waist. “The Lyre-Poros was originally just one Orga Lux, but *its urm-manadite core proved to be so strong that no compatible users could be found*. As such, on the assumption that the burden of wielding it could be shared, it was divided into five pieces. And yet…” She paused there in order to take a long breath. “It looks like they mustn’t have been able to realize its full potential during the last Gryps.”

While Claudia had been speaking, Team Tristan’s members had been defeated one by one, with only Elliot Forster still standing, until— *“End of battle! Winners: Team Rusalka!”*

The automated announcement sounded over the silence.

CHAPTER 7

A BUSY NIGHT

"Beneath the ballast area…? No wonder I couldn't find it." Sylvia, leaning against the wall in the corridor, let out a faint laugh.

"If you're thinking about going down there, you can't come back the same way without some kind of special ID card. So be careful."

Sylvia hadn't opened an air-window for the call. Rather, she'd sent the audio stream directly to her headphones. The voice on the other end belonged to Ayato.

"I see. Are you sure it's okay, telling me this?"

"*You'd do the same if our situations were reversed, right?*" Ayato said half-teasingly, but his voiced seemed emboldened with conviction.

"…Yes. Thank you. This will be a great help." She closed her eyes, clenching a hand at her chest.

"Ah, I know it's a bit late now, but I wanted to thank you for lunch the other day, too. It was delicious."

"Oh, that? Thanks. I did say I was confident in it, but to be honest, I still wasn't sure if it was the kind of thing you'd like…"

"…It's just a shame I wasn't able to savor it properly, the time and place being what they were…"

"Huh? Oh, before the match. Well, there's no helping that, I guess."

"*Ha-ha…*," Ayato said, but he seemed to be holding back—as if he wanted to add something but wasn't quite sure how.

"By the way, round five starts tomorrow, right? Do your best! I'll be cheering for you!"

“Shouldn’t you be supporting Rusalka? You know, given your position?”

“Of course, I’ll be cheering for them, too. They *are* my cute little juniors, after all.”

She genuinely believed that.

It was precisely because Sylvia could judge situations appropriately—though in her own way—and differentiate between concerns and responsibilities that she was able to do so. No matter what kind of problem lay in front of her, that was her basic approach for dealing with things.

This wasn’t to say that she had the wisdom of a saint. There were, of course, things she wasn’t able to look at objectively, just as there were times when she found herself unable to clear her mind from worry.

But she didn’t have any particular dislike for that side of herself.

“Ah, sorry, Ayato. It looks like it’s time.”

“Right. See you later, then.”

With that, Sylvia ended the call before once again confirming everything and heading down the freshly cleaned corridor.

She was on the top floor of the east wing of the Twin Hall at Queenvale Academy for Young Ladies.

She knocked lightly at the large double door at the end of the corridor, and when there was no response, she decided to go inside.

“…Oh?”

With the exception of the space left over for the entrance and a window at the far end, every wall in the room was fitted with panes of glass. It was a sterile, bleak room, outfitted with nothing else but a desk and chair situated directly across from the door. A woman wearing a visor-like pair of glasses sat behind the desk, surrounded by several open air-windows.

It was a familiar enough sight, but to Sylvia’s surprise, there were already five other visitors.

“Good work, everyone,” she said in greeting.

“—! Sylvia…!”

The group standing at attention in front of her was Rusalka, who had just managed to make it through to the quarterfinals.

“What is it, Petra? Not another lecture?” Sylvia quipped.

The woman—Petra Kivilehto, the executive chairwoman of Queenvale Academy for Young Ladies—merely pursed her lips.

Petra was herself a Strega who’d participated in the Festa as a student at Queenvale, and she had since risen to the ranks of an executive position in Queenvale’s governing IEF, W&W. On top of that, she was both Sylvia’s and Rusalka’s producer. In short, she was a particularly colorful and talented woman—and highly entrenched in their lives.

“Yes, but I was also congratulating them for their performance today,” Petra replied. The black visor covering her eyes made it all but impossible to gauge her mood.

“I see. So the lecture was about yesterday, I take it?”

“Ugh…”

At these words, the expressions of the five girls underwent a sudden and drastic change.

As student council president, Sylvia had already heard about what had happened, and Ayato had given her his account of events, too.

“Trying to pick a fight with another team right in the middle of the Festa—and then brawling with another one… And not only that, but one of you went missing afterward. I guess there’s no avoiding a lecture after all that.”

“…Yes,” the five replied in unison, their faces downcast.

“…But I suppose I should thank you.”

“Huh?” Miluše glanced up at her, puzzled.

“You were upset with Ayato because you were worried about me, weren’t you?”

“N-no, we…,” Miluše began before falling silent, her eyes dashing to and fro.

Sylvia shrugged. “What did you think of him? Did Ayato Amagiri seem like the kind of person to go around tricking people?”

“…No.” The initial one to respond was, much to Sylvia’s surprise, Tuulia, who was usually the first to start picking fights.

The others all nodded in agreement.

“I see. That’s good to hear.” Sylvia smiled back at them.

Miluše, however, was unable to keep holding herself back. “B-but tomorrow’s different! We’re not going to go easy on him during the match! We’ll crush him!”

“I would expect nothing less. You *are* representing Queenvale, after all. You should put everything you have into it. But, you know, Ayato—all of Team Enfield for that matter—is quite strong. Will you be okay?” Sylvia asked jokingly.

“Of course! We’re aiming for the championship!” Miluše cried out in all earnest before pointing toward Sylvia zealously. “And then, one day, we’ll overtake you as the world’s top artist!”

“…Exactly.”

“Yep!”

“You said it, Miluše!”

The other members nodded in agreement as they followed Miluše out of the room. Mahulena, however, glancing first at her teammates and then at Sylvia and Petra in turn, kept apologizing to them both, over and over.

“You should stop teasing them like that, Sylvie,” Petra grumbled after waiting for the door to close behind them. “They’re already unstable thanks to the Lyre-Poros.”

The Orga Lux used by Rusalka, the Lyre-Poros, had an urm-manadite core so overwhelming in power that it could only be controlled by dividing it into five pieces. The cost of using it was generally referred to as mental corrosion. It was said that before it had been divided into five separate pieces, it had corrupted the minds of every single one of its users, plunging them straight into the depths of madness.

Even in its current form, the higher their compatibility rating, the more impulsive and unable to keep their emotions in check its users seemed to become. That was no doubt why Mahulena, who had the lowest compatibility rating among the five, could maintain a comparatively normal state of mind.

However…

“They were like that even before they were selected to use it, though, right?”

“…” Petra merely cleared her throat before changing the topic. “Have you realized that they initially wanted to use your relationship with Ayato Amagiri to bring you down?”

“Ha-ha-ha, well, that *is* the kind of thing they would do.” Sylvia couldn’t keep a grin from curling her lips.

The fact that they had then managed to convince themselves that Ayato was deceiving her—and ended up taking the exact opposite course of action—was, to her way of thinking, indescribably adorable.

“Is it true? You can’t really be serious about him, are you?”

“And if I am?”

Petra let out a long sigh, raising a hand to her forehead. “You, those girls, Chloe… Why does everyone I set my eyes on end up like this…?”

“Goodness, I thought you’d be more upset about it.”

“I might be, if I thought it would do any good.” With that, she rose to her feet, her lips pursed into a faint smile. “Very well. I’ll overlook it, at least to some extent. Because I trust you.”

That’s not true, Sylvia thought, mentally sticking out her tongue.

Petra Kivilehto was by nature a cold and calculating individual. However, there was no mistaking that she also loved the students of her academy in her role as chairwoman. Her way of compensating for that discrepancy was by never allowing herself to trust others.

“And please do show some care with regard to that other matter.”

“What do you mean?”

By *other matter*, she was referring, no doubt, to Sylvia's quest to find Ursula's whereabouts.

"Have you ever heard about an organization called the Golden Bough Alliance?" she continued.

"Hmm… No, I don't think so."

"Neither had I."

"…What are you trying to say?" Sylvia eyed her suspiciously.

Petra placed her hands on the desk, leaning forward slightly. "Don't you understand? I'm saying that I, an executive at an IEF, have never heard of them."

Sylvia said nothing.

"Recently, however, our intelligence networks have caught wind of it. And only after you began to dig deeper into all of this."

Meaning after she had begun to look into Orga Luxes, too.

"We don't have any details on them, and, of course, I haven't had any direct interaction with them…but they're dangerous. I'm sure of it."

"So this is just your intuition?"

"Do you disagree?"

Petra truly was outstanding. Her conclusions this time were undoubtedly right on the mark, as always.

But even so, Sylvia wasn't the kind of person who could accept a warning so easily.

To begin with, she and Petra were practically equal in position, and so there was no need for her to simply accept whatever orders the woman handed down to her. Sylvia used Petra, and Petra used Sylvia. That relationship had remained unchanged ever since the producer had first reached out to her and contracted her to become a songstress.

"I understand. I'll limit my inquiries. And I'll be more cautious, too."

That was the best compromise she could offer.

"…Very well," Petra said finally, after a long silence.

*

"—!"

When Claudia returned to her quarters, she startled at the sight of a woman with an overly perfect smile relaxing on the sofa in the middle of the dimly lit room.

"It's been too long, Claudia."

"…Mother. It *has* been a long time."

She had been taken by surprise for a moment but soon stared back at her mother—Isabella Enfield—with the same flawless smile.

There was no need to ask her how she had entered the room.

After all, as one of the highest executives at Galaxy, the parent body of Seidoukan Academy, Isabella had free reign to go wherever she pleased.

Moreover, if she—or more precisely, she and the other executives—were to seriously consider eliminating her, they would have no difficulty doing so.

It would be trivial, for instance, to force her to drop out of Seidoukan, or imprison her, or even take her life if they so decided. The reason they hadn't taken such a course of action was due to the meddling of the other foundations, just as Claudia had planned with her announcement—and perhaps more significantly, because *moving forward with such a course of action would be all too easy*.

No, there were countless ways of dealing with her, but from Galaxy's perspective, it would be deleterious to give their competitors an opening that could be taken advantage of. They would want to avoid that at all costs, and so they would put off making a real decision until the very last moment.

In fact, Claudia was counting on that.

"And what business do you have with me today?"

"Is it so strange for a mother to want to visit her daughter?"

"Unfortunately, I have no memory of you ever showing any motherly concern for my well-being," Claudia, her smile unwavering, all but spat out. "But don't

misunderstand me. I still love you, in spite of all that. Father, too."

"How fortunate. I feel the same way."

They were both telling the truth. As the top executive of an integrated enterprise foundation, her mother had undergone several series of mental adjustment programs, but she still wasn't a machine.

There would be no point in even having human executives if they functioned no differently from machines.

As such, Claudia had no doubt that Isabella did indeed love her. That love, however, paled in comparison to what she felt toward Galaxy.

"You didn't come here to ask me to give up, did you?"

"Of course not. You and I are very similar in that respect. I understand all too well how meaningless that would be."

At this, Claudia couldn't help but frown.

Claudia had hated hearing that ever since she had been a young child, but she understood that the woman in front of her was simply *incompatible*, at a deep, fundamental level, with her own way of being. Isabella was the kind of person who had devoted everything she had to something greater than she was—her foundation—while Claudia was the kind of person who lived only for herself.

"In that case, what did you want with me?" she asked again.

"I came here to ask you something."

"Did you now?"

"I wanted to ask you for myself just what it is that's driven you to this folly—your motive, if you will… We don't understand, so our only option is to speak with you directly."

"And you expect me to give you an honest answer?"

Isabella seemed unconcerned by the obvious diversion. "Of course. You need to, don't you, in order to achieve your goal?"

"…"

Claudia remained silent, reminded of just how difficult her mother could be to

deal with. Isabella had always been able to see through the actions of others.

“We don’t know what you hope to achieve. However, we do know that you have been trying to force us into taking certain actions, to keep us from making others, and to direct us down a certain path. In order to do that, you will have to give us some more information. So why don’t you tell me now?”

“…Very well.”

It was happening sooner than Claudia had hoped, but that *had* been her intention.

In any event, she did have to take a few more steps to prepare for the final act. She might as well get it over and done with now.

“I can’t tell you my motive, or my goal, but I am willing to show you some of my cards. Let’s see… How about I start with why you and the rest of Galaxy have to stop me at any cost?”

“…Go on,” Isabella replied, her eyebrow twitching.

“You’re currently detaining the person with whom I want to meet, Professor Ladislav Bartošik. You’re holding him because he was the spiritual leader of the Jade Twilight Incident, and it would be a huge scandal if people were to find out that the person who instigated that incident once belonged to Seidoukan. The reputation of the Academy, not to mention Galaxy itself, would be irreparably spoiled. Which is why you made significant concessions to the other integrated enterprise foundations so they would agree to suspend his trial… Or at least, that’s what everyone believes.” She paused there, taking a seat on the sofa across from Isabella. “However, what you really wanted to bury wasn’t the professor himself, but an Orga Lux he created half by chance—the Varda-Vaos, an Orga Lux with a clear sense of self-awareness and the power to control its own abilities. Or am I mistaken?”

“…And how do you know all this?” Isabella asked, her expression betraying not the slightest hint of surprise or discomposure.

However, Claudia couldn’t mistake the presence of a slight tremor in her voice.

Her mother was human, after all—not a machine.

“The Jade Twilight Incident was caused by students influenced by the Varda-Vaos’s eugenic ideology regarding Genestella. That, more than the possibility of the professor having been involved with it, if handled poorly, could prove to be a far more damaging—perhaps even fatal—revelation. After all, you haven’t even been able to pin down the whereabouts of the Orga Lux, have you? With its ability to brainwash people at large into committing terrorist attacks, who knows, perhaps it might have been involved in any or all of these many incidents taking place throughout the world? And if, after all, it was created by someone at Galaxy, who can say how much responsibility for that will fall onto your shoulders? At the very least, the other integrated enterprise foundations wouldn’t pass up the opportunities offered by such a revelation.”

“…”

Isabella merely stared at her daughter in silence for a long moment.

“Allow me to answer the questions that you’re thinking. How do I know all this? How do I know these things that only Galaxy’s highest executives have access to? It’s simple, I’m afraid. I know because you told me.”

“…*I* told you?” At this, Isabella’s eyes widened in surprise.

It was an expression Claudia had never before seen on her in her life.

A meaningless, unnecessary sense of joy rose up in her heart before quickly dissipating.

“Or more accurately, I know because you gave me this one when I was little,” Claudia corrected herself, taking the Pan-Dora from its holder at her waist.

“…! No, that’s…”

But her mother, it seemed, had connected the dots.

She truly was outstanding.

“The cost that the Pan-Dora demands of its user is that they continuously experience their own death in their dreams. The dreams fade away and disappear when I wake up—but I can still pick up information from them, even if only in fragments. Of course, the future is always changing, so no matter how many fragments I put together, there’s no way to get an accurate image of

things to come. However, it *is* possible to *put together an image of the past*."

"…I see." Isabella let out a long, deep sigh before rising to her feet. "I understand. It looks like you are far more dangerous than we had imagined."

"Hee-hee, oh, so you've finally realized?" Claudia said with a soft laugh.

For a brief moment, their gazes met with a violent clash, but they both quickly looked away.

"I hope Galaxy will come to the right conclusion," Claudia said as Isabella headed for the door.

"For my part, I hope you lose tomorrow," her mother responded without looking back, before leaving the room.

"Hee-hee, hee-hee-hee…! I'm afraid that won't happen, Mother. I've come this far. There's no room for mistakes now," Claudia muttered to herself as she tried to suppress the quiet laughter building up in her throat.

*

In the dimly lit workshop of the Society for the Study of Meteoric Engineering, the silence was disturbed only by the sounds of Saya working at an old, physical keyboard and the hum of countless machines in operation.

"…Hey, Saya. We *do* have a match tomorrow, you know?" Ayato, sitting on a chair a short distance away from her, said with exasperation.

Saya continued to stare into the air-window in front of her. "That's why I'm in such a hurry."

"That's not what I meant…," he began, but then he fell silent as he realized there would be little point debating it with her.

The night was already late. Their fifth-round match began at two o'clock the following afternoon, and if they didn't get any rest now, it would take a toll on them when they needed to be at their best.

Even so, Saya showed no sign of meaning to take a break from her work customizing her Lux. She seemed to have reached the final stage of the process and had put its activator onto a stand from which extended countless electronic cables.

“…It’s my fault it wasn’t ready in time for the main tournament. I don’t want to cause any more problems for the team, so I need to have it ready for the next one.”

“I think not getting enough sleep will be more likely to cause a problem…”

The incident with Team Hellion had taken up a large amount of her time, throwing her planned schedule into disarray, but there was nothing they could have done about that. Claudia and the others understood and would never blame her for something that was out of her control.

Ayato, however, could see that that wasn’t what she was worried about.

“You should get some rest yourself, Ayato.”

“I’m fine. I’ve already taken a short nap… But if I’m distracting you, I’ll go.”

“…No, that’s okay.” Saya put down what she was doing for a moment to shake out her hands.

Silence descended on them yet again, broken only by the sound of her fingers hitting the keyboard as she resumed her work—and of the endless hum of the machines.

Ayato remained silent, simply watching her from behind.

“…Ayato,” she began at last, her hands still working away.

“Yeah?”

“Have you thought about what you’ll do next?”

“About the future, you mean?”

“What you’ll do after we win, and Haru wakes up.”

“Ah… I haven’t really put much thought into it,” he answered truthfully.

Saya’s shoulders lifted with a chuckle. “Yeah, I thought so.”

“What about you? Is there anything you want to do?”

One of Saya’s reasons for coming to Asterisk had been to show off her father’s Luxes to the world, but she had already accomplished that.

“…It isn’t really something I *want* to do,” she murmured. She fell silent for a

moment, deep in thought, before continuing: “But I’ve come to a decision.”

“A decision?”

That’s pretty vague, Ayato thought.

“Anyway, that won’t be until after tomorrow… Here, done!” Saya exclaimed as she stood up, her voice buoyant. Her work, it seemed, was finally complete.

She took the Lux activator from the pedestal and, after checking it over one last time, activated it.

“…! That’s…!” Ayato, his eyes round with astonishment, was at a loss for words.

“…Heh-heh-heh.”

Saya merely puffed out her chest in pride.

CHAPTER 8

BATTLE OF THE IDOLS

“And here we are; the fifth round of the twenty-fourth Gryps is about to begin! Our first match features Seidoukan Academy’s Team Enfield, who have so far effortlessly defeated every opponent to come their way!”

Ayato and the others entered the arena to Mico’s announcement and were all but bombarded by a surge of cheers that seemed to shake the very foundations of the complex. The enthusiasm seemed to reach new heights with every passing match.

“And their opponents today are the world-famous rock band, Team Rusalka, who in their last match managed to completely turn the tables on Team Tristan!”

The five girls emerged from the gate on the other side of the stage, smiling to the crowds. Their composure was so complete that it was hard to imagine they were about to take part in a match that would decide whether they continued into the next round or were eliminated from the tournament.

As Shizuna gave commentary on both team’s members, they all continued down the stage, past their designated starting positions.

“I’m going to apologize to you all in advance because we’re going to turn the odds around, just like we did last time!” Miluše declared with a grin, her guitar-like Orga Lux strung over her shoulder.

“I’m afraid your last match may have led to a reappraisal of your skills, but the odds are still fifty-fifty,” Claudia replied cattily.

“Hmm, right. Well anyway, we’re going to win!”

“…I don’t think so,” Saya shot back. She stepped in front of Claudia and stared up at Miluše with a heated, piercing gaze.

Miluše's eyes opened wide as her gaze settled on the school crest pinned to her chest.

"…And what's more, Team Enfield has passed the role of team leader from Claudia Enfield, who has held it in every match thus far, to Saya Sasamiya."

"Heh, so you're the leader today. This is going to be interesting."

"…I don't have anything against you." Saya's voice was cool, even though her gaze burned. "But we're going to win. Defeat isn't an option."

"Hmph! Not for us, either!"

For a long moment, Saya and Miluše met each other's gazes with a force that seemed powerful enough to throw off sparks, until finally they each spun around at the exact same moment, returning to their starting positions.

Team Enfield's vanguard consisted of Ayato, Kirin, and Claudia, with Julis offering support behind them, and Saya, the team leader, in the rear.

Team Rusalka, on the other hand, deployed a different kind of battle formation: Miluše and Tuulia, both wielding guitar Orga Luxes, were the vanguard; followed by Päivi, with her drum, Erato; Monica, with her bass, Melpomene; and finally, in the back, Mahulena, with her keyboard, Thalia.

"It's almost time! It looks like both teams are ready to go! Which one will take victory and proceed to the semifinals?!"

Mico's voice, so giddy that it seemed even she was unable to contain her excitement, echoed throughout the arena.

"Gryps Round 5, Match 1—begin!"

No sooner had the automated voice announced the beginning of the match than an overpoweringly heavy bass sound descended upon the stage—so strong that it drowned out all other noise.

"—!" Ayato, who had been about to launch a preemptive attack of his own, sank to his knees.

His body felt heavy, almost as if trapped in a pit of tar. He was weighted down—the very air around him seemingly having turned to lead.

This… This is stronger that I was expecting…!

He lifted his gaze toward Monica—or rather, toward her Orga Lux. That bass instrument, its activated form like a glowing ax, had an unsettlingly ominous appearance.

Even more than the effect it was having on his body, that low-pitched sound was having a serious effect on his concentration. He had put himself into *shiki* at the beginning of the match, but it was quickly evaporating.

Concentration was required to perform the Amagiri Shinmei style's perception-expanding technique, not prana. However, Ayato, who had broken the seal that his sister had placed on him only incompletely, wasn't able to increase his prana to a level at which it would be able to overcome the auditory assault.

That meant also that he wouldn't be able to use the Amagiri Shinmei style's hidden techniques, for which being in the state of *shiki* was a necessity.

"This is bad!"

At that moment, Miluše and Tuulia released a crushing acoustic wave toward the vanguard. The air shook around them, and while they were all able to dodge the attack, the ground around them had been gouged out.

The two girls were both using guitar Orga Luxes with the same kind of ability. However, while Miluše's activated into a large sword-like form, Tuulia's was shaped like a trident.

"Sorry about this!" Miluše declared. "But we're going all-out right from the get-go this time!"

"Ha-ha! Enjoy the show!" Tuulia added.

Their eyes seemed to be glowing with the same blue light that was being emitted from the urm-manadite of their Orga Luxes.

Moreover, in the rear of their formation, Mahulena's fingers danced over her keyboard, firing countless bullets of light toward Ayato and the others at incredible speed.

"Burst into bloom—*Livingston Daisy!*"

Julis launched a volley of burning chakrams through the air to intercept them.

Her counterattack, however, seemed to lack momentum, and the flames of the chakrams burned weakly, until finally, to the sound of Päivi's drums, they vanished altogether.

It was an acoustic barrier, the ability possessed by her own Orga Lux. When Ayato looked carefully, he could make out a ripple around a yard wide distorting the air. It resembled the defensive barrier used by Ardy in the Phoenix, but unlike the autonomous puppet, Päivi seemed to be able to deploy multiple such barriers of varying sizes simultaneously. That probably meant, however, that they weren't as strong.

"Ugh…! I'm sorry about this, but I can't focus my prana properly…!" Julis ground out as she defended herself with her Rect Lux. "My timing is off…!"

There was little doubt that she would be having the most difficulty in their present situation. For a Strega, being unable to focus one's prana could be fatal.

"Got it! Let's continue as planned!" Ayato replied as he twisted through the air to dodge a barrage of light-bullets, now setting his sights on Monica.

Tuulia, however, launched a sideways attack at the very place where he was about to land.

"Oh, no, you don't!" she cried out.

"Ugh…!"

He managed to block it with the Ser Veresta, but it was an unexpectedly powerful blow.

Moreover, given that she was using an Orga Lux—albeit one-fifth of one—the Ser Veresta was unable to burn through the blade of light projecting from her guitar.

Tuulia launched into a chain of attacks, slicing down from above, advancing forward from in front, and whirling around with a spinning attack. Her swordsmanship was flowing and elegant, and unexpectedly stylish given her usual rough demeanor. She had clearly gone through considerable training.

Even though Ayato was able defend himself against the three consecutive

strikes, he couldn't deny that her skills were close to his own.

Which meant—

"Ngh…!"

He turned toward her for an instant—only to watch Kirin, blocking Miluše's glowing blade with the Senbakiri, get knocked down.

At that moment, Claudia closed in with the twin blades of the Pan-Dora, but Miluše swung her own Orga Lux around to repel her—before unleashing a forceful kick.

"Oh dear, this is rather intense!" Claudia exclaimed as she jumped back to dodge it, but Miluše leaped after her.

How is she managing to hold both Kirin and Claudia back all by herself…?!

"Hey! Pay attention!"

At the sound of that voice, Ayato felt a chill run down his spine.

He spun back to Tuulia, only to see that she had already placed a finger on one of the strings of her guitar.

Damn it…! I won't be able to dodge this…!

The acoustic wave that Tuulia unleashed had a wide radius—too wide for him to be able to leap to safety.

However—

"…Boom."

At that instant, a belt of six beams of light swept across the stage.

"Wha—?!"

One of those beams had been aimed squarely at the school crest on Tuulia's chest—but just before it could strike her, she managed to guard against it.

"Wh-what was that?!"

"…That was close!"

"How did she aim at our crests like that…?!"

The flustered voices of Rusalka's members murmured across the stage.

If it had been able to eliminate even just one, that would have made the match so much more bearable, but it looked like that had been too much to hope for. It was, however, enough to give Ayato, Kirin, and Claudia an opening to rebuild their defenses.

"Hey, what was that you just did…?" Miluše called out, she and the others having turned toward the far end of the stage.

Standing there, strapped into an enormous Lux blaster complete with an oversized back unit, was Saya. It was the same weapon that she had used in the battle against Ardy and Rimcy in the semifinals of the Phoenix.

It was clear, however, that it had since undergone several changes, perhaps the most noteworthy of which was the recoil-control vernier that had been added to the back unit.

"…Type 41 Lux homing blaster, Waldenholt Mark II," Saya murmured softly as she readied the six-muzzled weapon.

*

In the team's last strategy meeting several hours before the match, Claudia had told them, "Just to confirm, the Lyre-Poros's most troublesome techniques are Monica's weakening ability and Mahulena's strengthening one. We'll probably need to take out at least one of those two before we'll even have a chance at victory."

Based on the recording of their performance in the fourth round, it seemed that Monica's Lyre-Poros Melpomene had weakened Team Tristan, while Mahulena's Lyre-Poros Thalia had strengthened Team Rusalka. The latter weapon seemed to have the ability to fire projectiles as well, but that paled in comparison to its support role.

"As such, our primary targets must be these two. Monica is stronger than Mahulena when it comes to individual combat, but she's also closer to the front of their formation. She will no doubt be the easier one to aim for. Mahulena might be weaker, but she's always in the rearguard, focusing on support. Given Päivi's defensive ability, any long-range attacks would be unlikely to reach her. That said, I do think we'll be able to handle her."

Ayato, Julis, Saya, and Kirin each listened on in silence.

"…Given these factors, I propose a two-stage strategy," Claudia said, lifting two fingers. "You are essential to both of these, Miss Sasamiya. That's part of the reason why we need you to be the team leader."

"…" Saya nodded, meeting her gaze head-on.

"We need to plan on the assumption that, being a Strega, Julis won't be able to provide her usual support due to Monica's ability," Claudia continued, turning to Julis. "As such, I've left you out of the strategy, leaving you free to attack whenever an opportunity arises. Of course, I hope that you'll still provide us with as much help as you can, but the vanguard won't be able to rely on you."

"…I can't say I like it, but I suppose it makes sense," Julis admitted, though she was clearly displeased.

"I also intend to use the Pan-Dora's precognition this time," Claudia added, reaching down to the Lux holder at her waist. "Given that we still have two more matches to go, I won't be able to rely on it too much, but like Miss Yatsuzaki said, there's no point having it at all if we end up losing anyway. I *would* like to limit myself to no more than sixty seconds, however…"

Claudia's precognition stock was, at present, around three hundred and sixty seconds. The match against Team Lancelot would, she argued, require at least two hundred of those, and given that they had to consider the semifinals as well, it was understandable that she didn't want to use any more than that.

"Now then, allow me to explain the strategy," she began in a low voice, glancing around at each of them.

*

"A h-homing laser?!" Miluše exclaimed, pulling away defensively at the sight of Saya's oversized Lux.

Monica's weakening ability was unable to extend to Luxes. As such, Saya was Team Enfield's most important factor in this match.

"It's okay, it's okay!" she said, trying to soothe her teammates. "We can deal with this!"

“…Right. She might have good aim, but it isn’t all that powerful. I should be able to use my acoustic barrier to block it,” Päivi added.

“And besides, with that huge thing on her back, her movements will be limited. We should use this as an opportunity,” Monica said.

“Hmm… You’re right.” It was Miluše, it seemed, who most needed comforting.

The division of roles among their team members was well thought-out, at least as far as Claudia could see, monitoring their movements as she held the Pan-Dora low.

Monica and Päivi, both of whom seemed to put considerably more thought into their actions, were responsible for support, ensuring that Miluše and Tuulia, who had roles to take advantage of situations as they arose, didn’t fall into trouble.

And Mahulena—

“U-um, Tuulia, you rushed in too quickly! And Päivi, you’ve got a blind spot where you won’t be able to use your acoustic barrier—please come back!”

Yes, she was the most troublesome one of them all.

She wasn’t able to control the team, but she was the fastest when it came to finding fatal openings—and in closing them when they appeared.

But Julis, too, was good at finding gaps.

“I won’t let you!” she cried.

“Uh-oh…!”

The six swords of Julis’s Rect Lux swept past Päivi’s acoustic barrier, attacking Monica from behind.

“A-argh! What’s— What’s this?!” Monica swung her glowing ax in an attempt to brush them off, but Julis’s aim was better.

The remote blades of the Rect Lux circled around her, lunging forward at regular intervals.

“Blossom—*Gloriosa!*” Julis cried out, and a magic circle began to unfold at

Monica's feet, six pillars of flame soaring upward like the claws of some hellish monster.

"What?!" Monica stood stock-still, surrounded by those towering flames.

Julis hadn't demonstrated the shortened activation time of her Rect Lux during the preliminaries, so Monica, it seemed, hadn't thought to defend against it. The flames began to close in on her.

But before they could reach her, Päivi finally managed to summon up her acoustic barrier, halting them just in time.

"Th-that was too close!" Monica called out before trying to break loose of the flames, now surrounding her like a cage.

Julis, however, knew better than to let her escape. If they could bring her down here, that would bring them one step closer to victory.

"Monica!" Miluše cried out, leaping to her aid.

Kirin, however, was one step faster. "No, you don't!" she whispered under her breath, lunging out with her katana.

Across the stage, Tuulia had similarly made to move to Monica's defense, but Ayato was deftly holding her back.

Which meant that their strategy for victory began now, Claudia decided. She dashed forward toward Monica, the Pan-Dora ready.

"…I won't let you."

Blocking her way stood Päivi, her large drum Orga Lux activated in front of her like a shield.

"I'm terribly sorry—," Claudia began saying with a smile, focusing her mind on the Pan-Dora.

At that instant, her surroundings appeared drained of color, everything standing motionless in place.

—First, she dodged Päivi's attack by moving to the right. Mahulena then fired twelve light-bullets from behind Päivi—six of them reaching her if she continued toward Monica. She went back half a second. She dodged the attack by rolling.

Even so, two hit her. She went back half a second. She leaped up to avoid it. One struck her foot. She concentrated her prana on defense. But Päivi took advantage of her lost balance to use her acoustic barrier to push her away. She went back one second. She used the Pan-Dora to deflect six of the bullets. It was impossible to deflect them all at full speed; two reached her. She went back half a second. She slowed down, deflecting them all. Next, she stepped sideward to dodge Päivi's acoustic barrier. That didn't work. She went back one second—

After exhausting sixteen seconds of her stock, the world around her burst into motion.

"—but you won't be able to stop me."

She feinted to the left, rotating her body as she all but danced around Päivi's attack, before swinging the twin blades of the Pan-Dora in separate arcs, repelling Mahulena's projectiles. Next, she feinted again toward Päivi, taking advantage of her momentary confusion to slip past her acoustic barrier and within range of Monica, who had just managed to break out of Julis's fiery cage.

"I-impossible!" Päivi sputtered, her eyes wide in shock.

"This must be the Pan-Dora's precognition!" Mahulena murmured in consternation.

Everything's going fine so far. Now for the hard part…

She swung downward with the Pan-Dora, aiming straight for Monica's school crest.

Monica let out a cry of distress.

Fortunately for Claudia, she had yet to recover her fighting posture.

Before the blades could reach her, however, Miluše leaped to her defense.

"Not so easy!" she broke in, her eyes glowing with the eerily beautiful azure light of the Lyre-Poros.

"Oh dear, you're faster than I thought!"

She had known that it would be beyond Kirin's abilities to hold her back for long, but she had been hoping for just a little more time.

That meant, however, that it would also be beyond her own abilities to outsmart Miluše to reach Monica.

Unless she overextended herself, that was.

I guess I have no choice.

She focused her mind on the Pan-Dora once more.

Having the opposing team's leader standing right in front of her was an unprecedented opportunity, and she had to fight against herself not to aim at Miluše's own school crest. With her physical abilities still being brought down by Monica's Orga Lux, however, she would be unlikely to find the perfect move, no matter how much stock she spent. Which left only one course of action available to her.

Thirty seconds… Forty seconds… Fifty seconds…

Not enough…

Sixty seconds… Seventy seconds… Eighty seconds…

Not yet.

Ninety seconds… One hundred seconds…

I guess this is my limit.

She flashed Miluše a bright smile as her surroundings burst into motion.

Claudia swung the blade in her right hand down toward her with a cry, but Miluše parried it effortlessly. At the same time, she thrust the blade in her left hand toward her school crest, but she blocked that, too, by deflecting the angle of her strike with her elbow, and followed through to swing her own glowing blade toward Claudia's school crest. Claudia twisted around, then unleashed a ferocious spinning attack toward her opponent. Miluše blocked it, but the blow was so heavy that even she was left momentarily stunned.

The combination of attacks had left Claudia off-balance, but she nonetheless stepped forward, swinging her blade toward Monica's school crest, when—
"Don't underestimate me!" Monica cried out, having regained her fighting stance, as she deflected each of her attacks one after the other.

Claudia tried to regain her balance, but before she had a chance to move, Miluše delivered a powerful kick to her abdomen.

“—!”

She had concentrated her prana into her stomach to limit the damage, but the blow was enough to send her falling to the ground.

“Hah! You’re mine now!” Monica howled as she leaped after her, swinging her ax down to carve her school crest in two. “I’ve done it!” she cried out elatedly. “I’ve taken down their champion!”

“…Boom.”

At that exact moment, however, a torrent of light surged out from behind Claudia, smashing into Monica’s own school crest.

“…Huh?”

It was Saya’s homing blaster.

“Claudia Enfield—crest broken.”

“Monica—crest broken.”

The two automated announcements rang out on top of each other.

They had defeated each other simultaneously.

After running through close to two hundred different courses of action with her precognition, this was the best outcome Claudia had found. Her opponent, having defeated her enemy and let down her guard—that was what she had focused on.

In a team battle, defeated players were, of course, not allowed to interfere with the remainder of the match in any way.

Which meant that Monica’s weakening ability, which had caused Claudia and the other so much trouble, was now taken care of.

“N-no way…” Monica sank to the ground, looking as if she was about to burst into tears.

Claudia, on the other hand, let out a sigh of relief.

The first stage of the strategy was complete.

“It’s up to the rest of you now,” she said to herself as she withdrew to the edge of the stage. There was nothing she could do now but watch as her team members fought on.

*

“Everyone, fall back! We need to reset our formation!”

“It’s not that easy…!” Tuulia grunted as she blocked Ayato’s renewed attacks.

With Monica eliminated, the tides of the battle had undergone a sudden change. Ayato and the others had been fighting on the defensive, but now, despite the numbers still being equal, they had managed to take the upper hand.

The only reason he wasn’t able to finish his opponent off then and there was because Päivi kept using her acoustic barrier to block his attacks before they could reach their target.

“Burst into bloom—*Antirrhinum Majus!*”

Julis’s Strega abilities had undergone the most dramatic transformation. As he corrected his grip on the Ser Veresta, Ayato could feel the heat pulsing from the flames that she had summoned up all across the stage.

Now, Päivi would no doubt have to focus entirely on keeping her in check, which meant he was free to go after Tuulia.

Glancing across the stage, Kirin looked to have regained her composure as well and was pushing against Miluše with her Conjoined Cranes.

“You’d better not be making light of me, Murakumo!”

“—!”

Tuulia, however, stepped forward with a well-aimed lunge. Ayato couldn’t help but fall back at the strength of her determination. Maybe, he thought, it still wouldn’t go as smoothly as he had been hoping.

“I might not be a match for you in raw strength or skill, and the fact that we’re exchanging blows at all might be thanks to Mahulena, but I’m not going down so easily!”

She certainly did seem to have a strong will.

“Argh, fine!” Miluše called out all of a sudden. “We can’t afford to hold back anymore! Everyone, resonance!”

Resonance…?

There were a lot of mysteries swirling around the Lyre-Poros, so it should have come as little surprise that they were hiding some sort of ace precisely for times like these.

Ayato stepped back, just in case, when Tuulia began to strike violently at the strings of her guitar.

At that moment, a heavy bass sound rushed toward him—the powerful shock throwing him to the rear of the stage.

“Nngh—?!” He reflexively twisted his body as he flew through the air and somehow managed to land on his knees.

“…Ayato, are you all right?” Saya, who was standing nearby, began to move toward him, but he raised a hand to tell her to stay where she was.

“I think so. But that…”

It wasn’t an acoustic wave. If it had been, as fast as it was, he should have had enough time to dodge it.

Right. It must have been Päivi, he thought as he stared across the stage.

Before him, there was a distortion moving through the air, at least a dozen yards in width.

“That’s…not her acoustic barrier, is it?” Kirin asked, holding a hand up to her head. She, too, had been thrown across the stage by the force of the blast.

“That’s impossible. It has to be ten times bigger than what she’s been doing up till now…,” Julis muttered.

It didn’t take long for the acoustic barrier to dissipate, and when it did, the four remaining members were waiting for them on the other side of the stage.

“Hah! What do you think? Surprised?” Miluše asked with a boldly confident smile as she pointed her guitar in their direction. “It’s our ultimate move! We

draw out the Lyre-Poros's original power by making each of our Orga Luxes resonate with one another! You don't have a one in a million chance now!"

"…You seem to be having a hard time of it, though," Saya pointed out.

"What…?!" Miluše squawked.

Saya was right. The four were all sweating heavily as if in considerable pain.

That, Ayato realized, was no doubt the cost of using the Orga Lux's resonance technique.

"H-hmph! That doesn't matter. This is the end for you!" Miluše declared, lifting her hand to her guitar.

At that instant, a chill ran down Ayato's spine.

"It can't be…!"

The others seemed to have felt it, too.

If Päivi used her acoustic barrier now, at its current size— "You won't get away from this!" Tuulia shouted, her arm raised toward them.

"Everyone, behind me!" Julis cried, rushing forward as mana swirled around her.

But even if she was to use a defensive ability, she wouldn't make it in time.

And that was when Kirin leaped forward, too.

"Yaaah!" With a piercing, raw cry, she threw the Senbakiri across the stage like a javelin.

Ayato had only heard of the technique once before. The Devouring Beak. Like her sword-drawing technique, it was an unorthodox move created by the Toudou style.

The sliver blade carved through the air in a straight line before lodging itself into the center of Miluše's guitar.

"Huh?!"

"Burst into bloom—*Anthurium Multifluus!*"

Taking advantage of the brief window that Kirin had bought her, Julis

unleashed several shields of flame around them.

At that moment, Miluše's and Tuulia's guitars seemed to let out almighty screams, and a ferocious acoustic wave swept over them.

It was strong enough to shred their clothes, gnashing at their skin and all but grinding them into the ground.

"Nngh…!" Ayato had no choice but to cover his face with his arms and concentrate his prana into defense.

The storm continued unabated for a long moment, gouging into everything within its range and blasting at least half the stage into the protective barriers behind them.

When finally it abated, and Ayato was able to lift his face, the familiar, emotionless automated voice sounded.

"Julis-Alexia von Riessfeld—crest broken."

"Kirin Toudou—crest broken."

The two girls lay fallen on their knees where they had been standing.

"—! Julis! Kirin!" he cried out, about to rush toward them, when Julis stopped him with a pained look.

"…Sorry. I wasn't strong enough. But you're both safe, so there is still a chance. It's all up to you now."

"Ayato, Saya… We're counting on you," Kirin added, her face already beginning to swell from her injuries.

He and Saya were only safe because the two had used themselves as shields.

"Right, leave it to us."

"…" Saya gave them both a slight nod.

"Argh…! Why won't they give up?!" Miluše panted.

"It doesn't matter! We'll keep hitting them, no matter how many times it takes!" Tuulia answered as the two raised their guitars once again.

Ayato quickly surveyed his surroundings. There was too great a distance

between him and them. He wouldn't be able to reach them in time. That left only one option.

"Take thiiiiiiiiis!" Miluše and Tuulia cried in unison, the sound of their voices bleeding into the piercing scream that had begun to emerge once again from their guitars.

Ayato poured his prana into the Ser Veresta.

It was Meteor Arts.

"Haaaaaaaaaaaaah!" he yelled.

He swung the Orga Lux, which had undergone an explosive burst of growth, and with a piercing roar, brought it down on the coming deluge.

Its urm-manadite core emitted a brilliant crimson glow as it carved straight through the acoustic wave, parting it down the middle like Moses did the Red Sea.

"Saya!"

"…Full burst."

Behind him, the girl was ready to fire.

"…Boom!"

A long explosion of light passed through the path opened up by the Ser Veresta, coursing down upon Miluše—or rather, her school crest.

However—

"I don't think so!"

"No, you don't!"

Tuulia and Päivi put themselves between their team leader and the oncoming blast.

"Mahulena!" Miluše cried out.

"Right!" Mahulena called back, striking a powerful, beautiful note on her keyboard.

With that, the azure glow in Miluše's eyes began to burn fiercer still.

“No, they’re using this resonance technique on her strengthening ability…?!”

Ayato raced to stop her, but at the same time, Miluše came hurtling toward him—and after dodging his lunge with the Ser Veresta, she kept going.

She’s going for Saya…!

Her speed was incomprehensible. She was at least a match for Hufeng Zhao—possibly even faster still.

Ayato spun around to chase after her, but even he knew that he wouldn’t make it in time.

“It’s overrrrrrrrr!” she cried out, assured of victory, as she raised her guitar.

*

It happened in the blink of an eye.

In a flash of that azure light, Miluše, her guitar raised before her, had appeared in front of Saya. It was the perfect timing for taking her opponent off guard.

Saya, however, remained calm. Things were still going according to Claudia’s strategy, the second stage of which was for her to lure Miluše into close combat.

She deactivated the Waldenholt and dodged the strike at the very last moment. As Miluše’s glowing blade lodged into the Lux blaster’s modified back unit, *she reached for the Senbakiri*, still entrenched in the middle of the Orga Lux.

Miluše’s eyes changed color in shock.

Her breathing under control, Saya deftly swung the katana.

It was the Amagiri Shinmei style, which she had learned from Ayato so that she would be able to keep up with him during their practice.

She had watched Haruka do them so many times that the moves were all but carved into her memory.

“Amagiri Shinmei Sword Style, First Technique—*Twin Serpents*.”

Even she was surprised by how smoothly her blade crisscrossed over its

target.

“Miluše—crest broken.”

“End of battle! Winners: Team Enfield!”

With that, Miluše’s school crest shattered into four pieces, falling to the ground with a *clink*.

EPILOGUE

“Ah, we lost…” Miluše’s voice as she led her team members back to their prep room was rather indifferent.

“…Such a shame…”

“And we were this close…”

“It’s awful! We lost, *and* my hair got burned!”

The others all spoke regretfully, but their faces looked unusually refreshed. Not dwelling on their failures was one of their best characteristics, from Mahulena’s perspective, at least.

Her own readiness to accept defeat had surprised her, too. They had fought as best they could, so there was nothing for them to regret, even having lost. That was what she thought.

“Good work, everyone,” Sylvia called out to them.

Had she been waiting in front of their prep room the whole time?

“Sylvia… What are you doing here?” Miluše blinked in surprise.

Sylvia, her hands on her waist, smiled back at them all as if the answer was obvious. “Do you need to ask? After watching that, there’s something I wanted to tell you.”

“Oh…?”

“It was a good match. Really good.”

“…” The five girls, Mahulena included, caught their breath, standing stock-still.

Sylvia flashed them all an amused smile and let out a quiet sigh. “Well, to put

it bluntly, the Festa is really no more than a show, a stupid one at that, just like the system behind it… But even so, that doesn't mean that everything that happens during the Festa is stupid, too. Or rather, it might be stupid, but it isn't worthless. There's value in it." She glanced at each of them in turn, her eyes filled with kindness. "It doesn't matter the platform—having a strong desire and fighting with all your strength to fulfill that desire is an admirable thing, and it's worthy of respect. That's what I think."

She paused there, scratching at her cheek in embarrassment, as though aware that she was being uncharacteristically talkative. "Anyway, what I'm trying to say is this—you were really cool. Good work, Rusalka."

With that, she tapped Miluše on her chest with her fist before waving good-bye. "See you later."

The five members of Rusalka stood in mute astonishment for a long moment, until all at once they broke out into joyous laughter.

"This must mean she's finally recognized us!" Miluše exclaimed, her face brimming with relief.

"She said we were really cool! And worthy of respect!"

"Yep, yep! I think we've already won!"

"…Me too."

As usual, the four were only concerned with themselves, Mahulena thought, but even she couldn't stop herself from smiling.

And there was little wonder why. They had been praised by Sylvia Lyyneheym. There wouldn't be a single student at Queenvale who didn't regard that as an honor.

And with that thought, her mobile began to ring.

"*Good work, everyone*" came Petra's voice on the other side of the pitch-black air-window.

"*Ugh*, ch-chairwoman!" The five all hastily straightened their postures, standing at attention.

Strange as it was, they had almost forgotten that they had lost. Their

teamwork might have been perfect, but it went without saying that, as Queenvale's representatives, they would have to face consequences for their defeat.

"It's a shame it ended up that way. Well, there's no helping it, I guess, not against opponents like that."

"H-huh…?"

Instead of reprimanding them, Petra's words were unexpectedly gentle.

"Y-you're not angry…?" Miluše asked nervously.

"You performed to the best of your abilities—all of you. I wouldn't ask for any more of you than that. Your performance this time was sufficient."

"Ugh…" The five girls all frowned at this remark.

In other words, she had thought from the beginning that they wouldn't be able to claim victory. That might have turned out to be true, but it was still a disappointing assessment.

"That said, the next Gryps will be a different story."

"Huh…?"

"By the time the next tournament comes around, I'll make sure that you're all able to draw out the Lyre-Poros's power at a whole new level. Of course, you'll all have to improve your skills individually as well, so you'll be even busier than you are now."

"Y-yes!" they said in unison, their faces brightening at the extraordinary words.

She was right. They might have lost this time, but they still had the next Gryps. Next time, they would just have to do so well that there could be no room for complaint.

"…That said, I will *have to give you work more suited to your present status. We've already had five requests for appearances from news stations and TV programs related to the Festa, so you had better get ready to go."*

"Um…? N-now?"

They had only just left the stage, and they were so exhausted that all Mahulena wanted to do was take a shower and fall flat on her bed.

However—

“Is there a problem with that?”

“Um… N-not really…”

They didn’t really have room to negotiate.

“*Also, two of them are for performances, so you’ll need to get ready for that, too*,” she added before closing the air-window, throwing yet more onerous demands on them.

“…U-um… We’ll just have to do our best…right?” The heavy silence that fell upon them was broken only by Mahulena’s lackluster encouragement.

*

“Whew…” Having returned to his dormitory following the match, Ayato immediately collapsed onto his bed.

“Good job. I guess it’s hard work being the only guy for nine ladies, huh?” Eishirou joked from his desk across the room.

“They were from Queenvale, so it’s not like I had any choice. But that wasn’t the hard part.”

“I know, I know, I was kidding. But hey, the next one’s the semifinal, right? Looks like it’s going easier than the Phoenix, huh?”

“Well, a lot’s happened since then.”

He had no idea whether they would win, but he intended to focus solely on the tournament this time around.

He lifted himself up from his bed with a strained smile, about to go and get changed, when his mobile began to ring.

“Huh? Who would…? Ah, Saya.” Wondering what she could want, given that they had only just parted ways a short while ago, he opened an air-window.

“…Ayato, can you come here?”

“Right now? Today was pretty rough—wouldn’t it be better to get some

rest?”

There were no matches tomorrow, given that it had been set aside as a day of rest—which was precisely how Ayato planned to spend it. Saya would no doubt use it to finish customizing her Luxes.

On the other side of the air-window, Saya, however, merely shook her head.

“Has something urgent come up?”

“I just want to talk to you. And…I want to use my wish coupon.”

“Huh? Well… All right, then.”

If that was the case, he couldn’t turn her down.

He sat down on the side of his bed, scratching his head and flashing her a bemused smile. “I thought you said you wanted to hold on to it for a while, though.”

“…I’ve changed my mind.”

“I see. What is it?”

Saya nodded. *“I want…”*

*

“Are you sure you’re okay with this?”

“…Yes. Thank you,” Saya said, taking the ice cream bar from Ayato’s hand.

The low, setting sun sat behind the trees, casting long shadows over the promenade and painting their surroundings a brilliant red. Ayato, walking alongside Saya, studied her profile against the strangely unreal scenery.

“I want you to buy me an ice cream bar.”

That was how Saya had wanted to use her final wish coupon—on such a minor, simple request. Ayato had no idea why.

“…Rusalka was pretty interesting,” Saya said all of a sudden.

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t have anything against them.”

“You said something like that during the match.” Ayato laughed.

It was a rare thing, coming from her.

“I spoke with her—Miluše—when we were trapped together underground. She told me that if I don’t do what I want to do, that if I try to deny my feelings, I’ll end up regretting it one day.”

“Oh?”

“And I remembered Haru saying something similar.”

“Haruka did?” Ayato repeated, taken by surprise at the mention of his older sister.

“She said I should tell people like you what I’m really thinking,” Saya added, moving to stand in front of him. “So that’s what I’m going to do.” She looked up at him with a gentle smile, her eyes sparkling. “Ayato…I love you.”

“Huh…?”

Her words were more sincere, honest, and earnest than they had ever been—as if she was delivering them after safely crossing a chasm of hesitation and apprehension.

Even Ayato could see that much.

“If I can, I want to be by your side—forever.”

The bright-red sun was setting at her back.

In that world filled with shades of just red and black, only Saya’s brilliant smile stood out.

“It’s okay. You can give me your answer later… I just wanted to tell you,” Saya finished before hurrying off toward the setting sun.

Ayato, speechless, could do nothing but watch her go.



AFTERWORD

Hi there, Yuu Miyazaki here.

I'd like to start by apologizing for the delay in getting this volume to you all.

To the editorial department, of course, to everyone involved, and most of all, to you, my readers, who have been eagerly waiting to know what happens next, I truly am very sorry.

That said, I think that the extra time helped me to polish things up a good deal.

In addition to being centered around the Gryps, this volume also focuses on the dynamics of Ayato's relationships, so I hope that you all enjoyed it.

Now then.

The rock band Rusalka, which debuted in the last volume, is active again this time around—or perhaps I should say that they're out rampaging. I originally intended for them to be an enemy team in the first stage of the Gryps, but I moved things around because they had an interestingly comical quality quite different from the other characters. It was a lot of fun writing their scenes. Actually, I wanted to include a live performance, too, but I couldn't really weave it into the story. Sorry about that. I'd still like to try to work something in—in a different form.

Another main character in this volume is Saya.

There have been some nice scenes involving her in the story so far, but I've finally been able to bring her into the center. As Ayato's childhood friend, she's somewhat different from the other heroines, but in this volume their relationship begins to move in a new direction.

In the next volume, I'll finally be able to get around to telling Claudia's story.

Like Saya—or now that this volume has been released, *unlike* Saya—she still hasn't had a main scene yet, so I'd really like to be able to give her the attention that she deserves. As a matter of fact, I've been a little worried about revealing some secrets surrounding her, but she's a character both okiura and I are very fond of, so I hope that I'll be able to do her justice.

Now that that's out of the way!

You might have already heard, but *The Asterisk War* is being adapted into an anime! It'll be headed by a wonderful lineup including Manabu Ono and Kenji Seto as directors, with character and animation design by Tetsuya Kawakami, music by Rasmus Faber, and production by A-1 Pictures. It's so wonderful it's almost sinful! Really.

Seeing as it'll start airing in fall 2015, I've been attending screenwriting meetings and tried to offer what paltry advice I can. There should be new information made available from time to time, so please keep checking the official website.

On top of all that, okiura has given us another stylish cover! Like how both Julis and Sylvia appeared on the last one, this time it's Saya and Miluše. And as you might expect, the style of the cover has changed, too, seeing as we've entered the Gryps arc. I can't wait to see what the next volume will look like!

And what's more, the first volume of Ningen's manga adaptation of *The Asterisk War* serialized in *Monthly Comic Alive* has been completed, and it's about to plunge into the second volume! I can't wait to see how Ningen depicts Kirin!

Moreover, the first volume of Akane Shou's fantastic manga adaptation of *The Asterisk War: The Wings of Queenvale* in *Bessatsu Shōnen* magazine has been published in a separate volume. Some of the characters who popped up in this volume first appeared in that side story, so I think it will be more enjoyable if you read both of them. Please take a look at it!

Last but not least, I'd like to thank everyone who helped me out again this time around.

I'd really, really like to thank my editor, Mr. I. I know that it hasn't been easy this time. I have only gratitude for everything you've done. I'd also like to express my heartfelt thanks to Mr. O and everyone else in the editorial department, to everyone involved in the anime adaptation, and as always, to you, my readers, for your continued support.

I hope to see you all again next time!

Yuu Miyazaki

April 2015

characters

SEIDOUKAN ACADEMY

SILAS NORMAN
A former companion of Lester's. Attacked Ayato with Allekant's backing but was defeated.

ALLEKANT ACADÉMIE

SHUUMA SAKON
Student council president of Allekant Académie.

ERNESTA KÜHNE
Creator of Ardy and Rimcy.

CAMILLA PARETO
Ernesta's research partner.

ARDY (AR-D)—"ABSOLUTE REFUSAL" DEFENDED MODEL
Autonomous puppet. Fought alongside Rimcy during the Phoenix.

RIMCY (RM-C)—"RUINOUS MIGHT" CANNON MODEL
Autonomous puppet. Fought alongside Ardy during the Phoenix.

HILDA JANE ROWLANDS
One of the greatest geniuses in Allekant's history. Also known as the Great Scholar, Magnum Opus.

NARCISSE PERROY
Vice president of the Ferrovius faction. Architect of the Gran Colosseo.

LE WOLFE BLACK INSTITUTE

DIRK EBERWEIN
Student council president of Le Wolfe Black Institute.

KORONA KASHIMARU
Secretary to Le Wolfe's student council president.

ORPHELIA LANDLUFEN
Two-time champion of the Lindvolus and the most powerful Strega in Asterisk.

IRENE URZAIZ
Priscilla's elder sister. Under Dirk's control. Alias the Vampire Princess, Lamilexia.

PRISCILLA URZAIZ
Irene's younger sister. A regenerative.

WERNHER
A member of Grimalkin's Gold Eyes. Kidnapped Flora.

MORITZ
Appeared in the Phoenix, where he was miserably defeated by Ardy.

GERD
Moritz's tag partner. Defeated by Rimcy.

JIE LONG SEVENTH INSTITUTE

XINGLOU FAN
Jie Long's top-ranked fighter and student council president. Alias Immanent Heaven, Ban'yuu Tenra.

XIAOHUI WU
Jie Long's second-ranked fighter and Xinglou Fan's top disciple.

CECILY WONG
Hufeng Zhao's former tag partner, with whom she became a runner-up at the Phoenix.

HUFENG ZHAO
An exceptional martial artist often entrusted with secretarial tasks by Xinglou Fan, who always gives him something to worry about.

SHENYUN LI & SHENHUA LI
Twin brother and sister. Defeated by Ayato and Julis during the Phoenix.

SONG & LUO
Fought against Ayato and Julis in the fifth round of the Phoenix.

characters

SAINT GALLARDWORTH ACADEMY

ERNEST FAIRCLOUGH
Gallardworth's top-ranked fighter and student council president.

LAETITIA BLANCHARD
Gallardworth's second-ranked fighter and student council vice president.

PERCIVAL GARDNER
Gallardworth's fifth-ranked fighter and student council secretary.

ELLIOT FORSTER
Fought with Doroteo during the Phoenix, with whom he advanced to the semifinals.

DOROTEO LEMUS
Together with Elliot, defeated by Ayato and Julis during the semifinals of the Phoenix.

QUEENVALE ACADEMY FOR YOUNG LADIES

SYLVIA LYYNEHEYM
Queenvale's top-ranked fighter, student council president, and popular idol.

MILUŠE
Rusalka's leader. Vocalist and lead guitarist.

PÄIVI
Rusalka's drummer.

MONICA
Rusalka's bassist.

TUULIA
Rusalka's rhythm guitarist.

MAHULENA
Rusalka's keyboardist.

YUZUHI RENJOUJI
Studies the Amagiri Shinmei Style Archery Techniques. Acquainted with Ayato.

VIOLET WEINBERG
Alias the Witch of Demolition, Overliezel.

OTHERS

HARUKA AMAGIRI
Ayato's elder sister. Her whereabouts had been unaccounted for, but she was discovered in a deep sleep.

HELGA LINDWALL
Head of Stjarnagarm.

MADIATH MESA
Chairman of the Festa Executive Committee.

DANILO BERTONI
Former Chairman of the Festa Executive Committee. Died several years ago.

URSULA SVEND
Sylvia's teacher. Her body has been taken over by Varda.

JAN KORBEL
Director of the hospital treating Haruka.

GUSTAVE MALRAUX
One of seventy-seven individuals involved in the Jade Twilight Incident, an act of terrorism.

MICO YANASE
Announcer at the Phoenix.

PHAM THI TRAM
Commentator at the Phoenix.

FLORA KLEMM
A young girl from the orphanage Julis is supporting.

SISTER THERESE
The representative from the orphanage Julis is supporting.

JOLBERT
Julis's elder brother and the king of Lieseltania.

MARIA
Queen of Lieseltania.

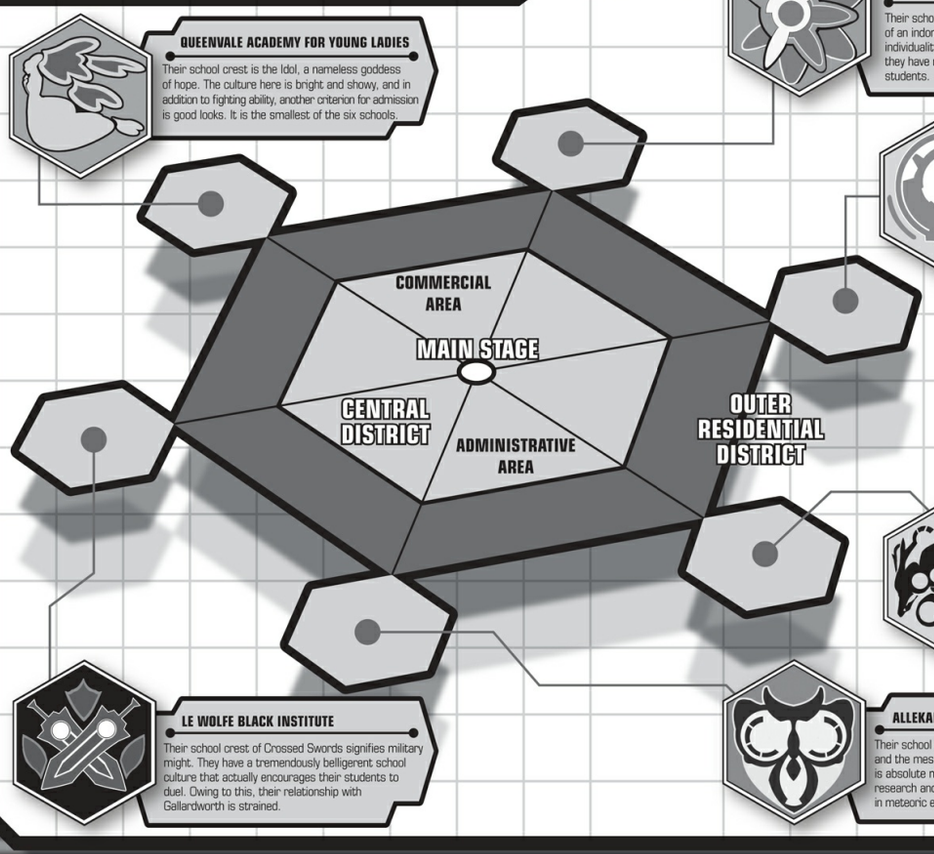
SOUICHI SASAMIYA
Saya's father. Lost most of his body in an accident and appears as a hologram.

KAYA SASAMIYA
Saya's mother.

NICHOLAS ENFIELD
Claudia's father.

KOUICHIROU TOUDOU
Kirin's uncle. Planned to use her to boost his career at his integrated enterprise foundation, but failed.

RIKKA: THE ACADEMY CITY ON THE WATER



QUEENVALE ACADEMY FOR YOUNG LADIES

Their school crest is the Idol, a nameless goddess of hope. The culture here is bright and showy, and in addition to fighting ability, another criterion for admission is good looks. It is the smallest of the six schools.

SEIDOUKAN ACADEMY

Their school crest is the Red Lotus, the emblem of an indomitable spirit. The school culture values individuality, and rules are fairly relaxed. Traditionally, they have many Stregas and Dantes among the students.

SAINT GALLARDWORTH ACADEMY

Their school crest is the Ring of Light, symbolizing order. Their rigid culture values discipline and loyalty above all else, and in principle, even duels are forbidden. This puts them on poor terms with Le Wolfe.

An academic metropolis, floating atop the North Kanto Mass-Impact Crater Lake. Its overall shape is a regular hexagon, and from each vertex, a school campus protrudes like a bastion. A main avenue runs from each school straight to the center, giving rise to the nickname Asterisk.

This city is the site of the world's largest fighting event, the Festa, and is a major tourist destination.

Although Asterisk is technically a part of Japan, it is governed directly by multiple integrated enterprise foundations and has complete extraterritoriality.

JIE LONG SEVENTH INSTITUTE

Their school crest is the Yellow Dragon, the mightiest of the four gods, signifying sovereignty. Bureaucracy clashes with a laissez-faire attitude, making the school culture rather chaotic. The largest of the six schools, they incorporate a Far Eastern atmosphere into almost everything.

LE WOLFE BLACK INSTITUTE

Their school crest of Crossed Swords signifies military might. They have a tremendously belligerent school culture that actually encourages their students to duel. Owing to this, their relationship with Gallardworth is strained.

ALLEKANT ACADÉMIE

Their school crest is the Dark Owl, a symbol of wisdom and the messenger of Minerva. Their guiding principle is absolute meritocracy, and students are divided into research and practical classes. They are unparalleled in meteoric engineering technology.

THE WORLD OF *THE ASTERISK WAR* GLOSSARY

THE INVERTIA

A mysterious disaster that befell Earth in the twentieth century. Meteors fell all over the world for three days and three nights, destroying many cities. As a result, the strength of existing nations declined considerably, and a new form of economic power known as "integrated enterprise foundations" took their place.

A previously unknown element called *mana* was extracted from the meteorites, leading to advances in scientific technology as well as a new type of human with extraordinary powers, called Genestella.

The Invertia was undetected by all the observatories in the world, and the destruction it caused was actually much less than ordinary meteors, so the pervading theory is that it did not consist of normal meteors.

INTEGRATED ENTERPRISE FOUNDATION

A new type of economic entity formed by corporations that merged to overcome the chaotic economic situation following the Invertia. Their power far surpasses that of the diminished nations.

There used to be eight IEFs, but there are currently six: Galaxy, EP (Elliott-Pound), Jie Long, Solnage, Frauenlob, and W&W (Warren & Warren). They vie for advantage over one another and effectively control the world. Each one sponsors an academy in Asterisk.

THE FESTA

A fighting tournament where students compete, held in Asterisk, and operated by the IEFs. Each cycle, or "season," consists of three events: the tag match (Phoenix) in the summer of the first year, the team battle (Gryps) in the fall of the second year, and the individual match (Lindvolus) in the winter of the third year. Victory is achieved by destroying the opponent's school crest, and the rules are set forth in the Stella Carta. As the event is held for entertainment, acts of deliberate cruelty and attacks intended to cause death or injury can be penalized.

The event is the most popular one in the world, with matches broadcast internationally. The IEFs prioritize economic success and growth above all else, so the direction of the Festa has always been driven by the majority demand of consumers. (This is why the fighters are students—viewers want to see beautiful boys and girls fight one another.) Some speak out against the Festa on ethical grounds, but under the rule of the IEFs, those voices have fallen from justified dissent to unpopular opinion.

The cultures of the different schools veer to extremes, which is also by design, for the sake of the Festa.

THE STELLA CARTA

Rules that apply strictly to all the students of Asterisk. Those who violate these rules are harshly penalized, sometimes by expulsion. If a school is found to have been involved, the administration can also be subject to penalty. The Stella Carta has been amended several times in the past. The most important items are as follows:

- Combat between students of Asterisk is permitted only insofar as the intent is to destroy the other's school crest.
- Each student of Asterisk shall be eligible to participate in the Festa between the ages of 13 and 22, a period spanning ten years.
- Each student of Asterisk shall participate in the Festa no more than three times.

MANA

A previously unknown element that was brought to Earth by the Invertia. By now, it can be found all over the world. It responds to the will of living beings who meet certain criteria, incorporating surrounding elements to form objects and create phenomena.

GENESTELLA

A new type of human being, born after regular human children were exposed to mana. With an aura known as *prana*, they possess physical abilities far beyond those of ordinary humans. Genestella who can tap into mana without special equipment are called Stregas (female) and Dantes (male).

Discrimination against Genestella is a pervasive social problem, and many students come to Asterisk to escape this. (The negative bias against Genestella is one reason why opposition to the Festa is in the minority.)

PRANA

A kind of aura unique to Genestella. Stregas and Dantes deplete prana as they use their powers. They lose consciousness if they run out of prana, but it can simply be replenished with time. The manipulation of prana is a basic skill among Genestella, and by focusing it, they can increase offensive or defensive strength. This is especially effective for defense, which explains why serious injuries among Asterisk students are rare despite the common use of weapons.

METEORIC ENGINEERING

A field of science that studies mana and the meteorites from the Invertia. Many mysteries remain pertaining to mana, but experimentation on manadite has advanced significantly. Fueled by the abundance of rare metals found in the meteorites, manadite research has yielded a large variety of practical applications.

MANADITE

A special ore made of crystallized mana. If stress is applied, it can store or retain specific elemental patterns. Before the Invertia, it did not exist on Earth, and it must be extracted from meteorites. Manadite is used in Lux activators, as well as manufactured products developed through meteoric engineering.

LUX

A type of weapon with a manadite core. Records of elemental patterns are stored in pieces of manadite and re-created using activators. By gathering mana from the surroundings, they can create blades or projectiles of light. Mana also acts as the energy source for Lux weapons.

URM-MANADITE

A name for exceptionally pure manadite, much rarer than ordinary manadite. Luxes using urm-manadite are known as Orga Luxes. Urm-manadite crystals come in myriad colors and shapes, and no two are the same. They are said to have minds of their own.

ORGA LUX

A weapon using urm-manadite as its core. Many of them have special powers, but using them takes a toll—a certain "cost." The weapons themselves have something akin to a sentient will, and unsuitable users cannot even touch the weapon. Suitability is measured by means of a compatibility rating.

Most Orga Luxes are owned by the IEFs and are entrusted to the schools of Asterisk for the purpose of lending them to students with high compatibility ratings.

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