YUU MIYAZAKI

ILLUSTRATION BY okiura

THE ASTERISK WAR

17. THE GRAND FINALE



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"What you consider a burden, I see as connection...! So that's why I'm going to finish this!"
"What nonsense...!"


I can do this now.
She would pay the price for it,
but that was okay.
If it meant winning this match,
the sacrifice would be worth it.
"Bloom—"

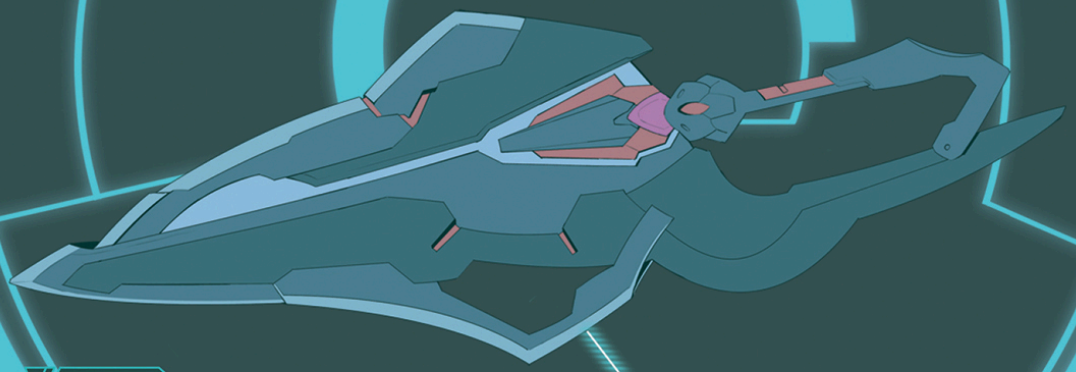

"HI, JULIS. IT'S BEEN A WHILE."
She heard a voice, nostalgic and familiar. Then she opened her eyes, and there he was.
"AYATO... LOOKS LIKE YOU'RE MAKING A HABIT OF TRESPASSING."

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17. THE GRAND FINALE

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ILLUSTRATION: OKIURA

YEN ON

NEW YORK

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Yen Newsletter



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CHAPTER 1

THE FINAL BATTLE I

Haruka drew back just in time to avoid a huge hammer swinging down at her, and then, with a single stroke of her sword-type Lux, she unleashed a blinding strike of her own.

The Valiant, its body sliced clean in two, crumpled to the ground—only for yet more units to step over the wreckage in pursuit.

"Haah… Just how many of these things are there?"

She was on a small airship landing strip not far from the commercial area in Asterisk's central district. Most of its facilities, used for things like tourist flights, commutes to and from the lakeside cities, and commercial transport, had already been destroyed. They now lay burned and ruined around her.

An army of autonomous puppets—of Valiants—had popped up seemingly out of nowhere, sowing chaos and destruction.

Haruka and her team were already in the area to deal with another matter, and had rushed to the scene, but they didn't have enough manpower to deal with everything alone. Most of the Stjarnagarm officers in her unit were busy rescuing the injured and directing evacuations, so she was left to hold off the Valiants by herself, at least until backup arrived. She might have been a rookie officer, but her fighting ability was still the best on her team.

At least there doesn't seem to be a lot of injuries, considering the scale of the destruction…

The Valiants appeared to be focused on destroying public facilities and transportation infrastructure rather than directly attacking people. That said, as soon as someone tried to interfere, the machines would designate them as additional targets, summoning fresh units to lash out.

…Just like right now.

"Seriously…? Bind and seal!" Haruka murmured under her breath. A huge chain emerged from a void, binding the Valiants before they could reach her, and snagging ten more farther off in her line of sight.

The next moment, the machines exploded, pieces of metal raining all around.

The Amagiri Shinmei Style, Hidden Technique—*Captive Carnage*.

The Valiants seemed to be capable of deploying defensive fields, but unfortunately for them, the targets of Haruka's chains were quickly drained of their power, and so posed little threat.

At that moment, an air-window snapped open before her.

It was a compulsory transmission from headquarters. It opened automatically with no opportunity to decline the call.

"*Amagiri, report*," urged Helga Lindwall, Stjarnagarm's commander. Judging from her tense expression, it was clear that the situation was desperate.

"Casualties have been kept to a minimum, but the airships here are almost totally destroyed. There might be one or two that can still fly…but we don't have enough manpower to secure them, let alone deal with the Valiants. How about on your end?"

"The Valiants have launched simultaneous attacks throughout the city. They've taken out most of the ferries in the harbor, too. Looks like they're trying to rob those in the city of any means of escape."

"…If they're trying to close off Asterisk, they must have some end goal in mind."

"I agree. I've contacted the authorities in the lakeside cities, and it sounds like they're dealing with the same kind of attacks. Not on the same scale, mind you, but we can't expect any relief from them for now. That being the case, we need to secure a means of escape —a route to leave the city—even if we can only keep it open for a short period. Even just one or two airships could make a world of difference. Do whatever you can to protect them, Amagiri."

"I'll do my best…," Haruka murmured as she brought her blade around to cut down a nearby Valiant.

But beyond the flames, she could see the silhouettes of countless

more.

"How are there so many…? If they're rampaging all over the city, there's *got* to be more than a thousand of them…"

After all, she had already defeated several dozen units.

If the other attacks were on a similar scale, the number reported earlier had to be considerably off the mark.

"Oh, about that—"

"*Yes indeed! Allow me to explain!*" exclaimed a different woman, pushing Helga out of the frame of the air-window. The newcomer spoke with an alacrity that felt wholly out of place.

"…Ernesta."

Haruka had met the woman on the other side of the air-window only once, back when she had first appeared at Stjarnagarm's headquarters claiming to have valuable information. But this was her first time speaking to her directly. Apparently she was being kept at headquarters for protection and surveillance…

"As you know, I've got a whole lot of free time on my hands, so I'm happy to help out. Judging from the data I've received from your officers, it looks like other Valiants that I didn't develop have been thrown into the mix."

"Meaning?"

"*Well, to put it simply, they're copies. We used the facility provided by the client for the Valiants' development and production, but naturally, we refrained from sharing any design data. It's not an easy feat to replicate a completed product. I wonder if someone from Pygmalion or the like is giving them a hand. Nya-ha-ha-ha.*"

Ernesta finished with a nonchalant laugh, but Haruka knew such a thing was more than possible with the power of the Varda-Vaos.

"Anyway, they aren't up to the specs of the genuine product made by yours truly. Most importantly, they've got fairly low durability. From the looks of it, they're disposable, only meant to see action this once. If left alone…let's see, they'll probably wear themselves out and self-destruct in a couple of days."

"We don't have that long to wait!" Haruka cried while summoning up fresh chains to block the attacks of yet more Valiants.

"No, of course not. Which is why, well, I'd like you to accept a

small present from me.”

“A present…?”

Just then—

“Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

—she heard a loud, raucous bale of laughter.

“Wooolniiir Haaammmeeerrr!”

Out of nowhere, a mass of light burst into being, smashing the next Valiant as it prepared to strike Haruka.

“Ruinsharif Mode Wolkenbruch—maximum output!”

At the same moment, more bullets of light than she could possibly count poured down like rain, stopping the swarm of Valiants already encircling her.

“It can’t be…”

Haruka watched, stunned, as two autonomous puppets landed before her with a deafening thud.

The first was a beautiful female-bodied puppet; the other had a large build and was almost identical in design to the Valiants, except for its white-and-blue armor—the opposite of the mass-produced units’ red and black.

“Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!” The larger of the two laughed. “My brothers, so pitifully devoid of ego! It pains me to destroy you this way, but if this is my master’s command, then so be it!”

“Oh?” the other said. “There’s no conflict in *my* heart as I lay waste to these dim-witted idiots made in *your* image! No, this is a wonderful form of stress relief!”

“…I wish you felt a shred of remorse, at least.”

“That would be physiologically impossible.”

Haruka, of course, easily recognized the two bantering puppets.

“Um…Ardy, right? And Rimcy?”

They were the very same machines that her brother Ayato had fought during the championship match of the Phoenix.

“Precisely!”

“That’s us. On our master’s orders, we’re here to help.”

The puppets were quick to answer, maintaining a state of heightened alert as they checked their surroundings.

At that moment, Ernesta’s voice sounded through the air-window

once more: "*Well, what do you know? I just got a call from the student council president. He was furious when he heard the news. Anyway, he asked me to cooperate with the city guard and to gather as much intel as possible to prove our innocence.*"

That was little wonder.

No matter how you looked at it, Allekant Académie was in dire straits. Not only would Ernesta be held personally responsible, but the whole school would undoubtedly be placed under heavy scrutiny. No matter how many excuses the school council president made, it wouldn't be enough.

"So that's how it is. Use these two to your heart's content. Oh, and I had Ardy's external armor replaced so he won't be mistaken for a Valiant, but it might still be a bit hard to tell from his silhouette, so be careful, please."

"…I see. In that case, I'll put them straight to work. Ardy and I will block the main gate to stop more Valiants from breaking in! Rimcy, you're to clean up any remaining units still in the area!"

"Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha! On it!"

"Understood."

It was unlikely that she would receive any more support from headquarters, so Haruka had no choice but to make do with the forces she had.

Just as she was about to lead Ardy to the main gate, Helga whispered through the minimized air-window: "*Right, Amagiri. One more thing.*"





"Yes?"

"I can't reach them*."*

"…Tch."

Needless to say, by *them*, Helga meant Ayato and the others.

With one hand, Haruka motioned for Ardy to keep going, while she came to a stop.

"I just heard from Isabella. The leaders of the integrated enterprise foundations have been moved to a saferoom accessible from the special viewing lounges in the Sirius Dome. The Valiants don't seem to be very active near the stadium, but considering the amount of personal security those executives have, they're probably the safest ones in all of Asterisk right now… And Isabella doesn't seem to have heard from them, either."

"…I…see," Haruka muttered, biting her lip.

Her brother, Ayato, was more important to her than anything else. The same went for his friends—though strictly speaking, with the exception of Saya, she still didn't know them particularly well. To be perfectly honest, she wanted nothing more than to go and make sure they were all okay.

But she had responsibilities as an officer of Stjarnagarm, and she didn't have the faintest idea where any of them were or what they were doing…

Suddenly, she noticed a message on her mobile. She hadn't thought to check it before, as she tried not to use her personal device while on duty.

The sender was Ayato, the timestamp just before all this began.

She hurried to open it, and a short message of only a few words popped up on the screen: *Pulling out the weeds by their roots, no need to worry.*

"…Heh-heh!"

"*What's wrong, Amagiri?*" Helga asked with a suspicious frown.

Only then did Haruka realize that her sour expression had given way to a broad grin. "Oh. No, it's nothing," she answered hurriedly before closing the air-window.

Yes, Ayato and the others were nothing if not reliable.

Her younger brother, who had always tagged along behind her as

a kid, was now standing on his own two feet.

But that was exactly why she'd passed her family's hidden techniques on to him, wasn't it?

If her brother said he was going to eliminate the source of this calamity, and that she didn't need to worry, then it was her duty as his elder sister to trust and support him.

"Hang in there, Ayato," Haruka murmured as she ran after Ardy to do her part.

*

"*You, me, Varda, Ayato Amagiri, the integrated enterprise foundations, everyone in this whole shitty world. I hope we all end up dragging each other down into an ugly, miserable pile, none of us ever winning… That would make me feel ever so slightly better about everything*," Dirk Eberwein said, spitting the words out like a curse as the air-window snapped shut.

"Dear me. Looks like we have more trouble on our hands," Madiath Mesa said with an exaggerated sigh. He'd been betrayed at the last minute. "I thought he was a little more sensible than this, but I suppose there's no acting against your own nature. Well, I'm not one to speak, so I can't honestly say I blame him."

His voice rang hollowly amid the deserted ruins of the Eclipse arena.

"…What's the meaning of this?" Ayato demanded.

"Hmm? You mean *him*?" Madiath grinned as he shook his head. "Who's to say? His gambit has played off splendidly. You've already reached me and Varda, and *I*, at least, have no means of killing him."

With those words, he activated the Raksha-Nada. The atmosphere turned suddenly tense.

"But you all are partly responsible for this, wouldn't you say?"

"…Why are you dragging *us* into it?" Saya called back with an angry glare.

"You're the one who had the city guard unearth my past

wrongdoings, no? Thanks to you, I had to leave the public eye sooner than anticipated. I was forced to entrust him with total command of the plan. This is the result."

It was true that Ayato and Haruka were the ones who precipitated Stjarnagarm's investigation after Minato gave them her father's old diary. Though it was unfortunate that they had been used by Dirk, their efforts hadn't been in vain.

"But there's no point moping about it now. Besides, our plan isn't ruined yet. Once I dispose of you here and Varda eliminates Enfield and her lot, everything will be back on track… Though I have to admit, I'm a little worried about Varda. That Orga Lux is prone to underestimating her opponents. Probably because she's always looking down her nose at those from this side of the world." Beneath his mask, Madiath visibly knitted his brows. "Well, in that case, we'll just chalk it up to bad luck. It's a pity, but it can't be helped. It doesn't particularly affect *my* goals."

"You say one thing, the Tyrant another… Are you all working toward different objectives? What exactly are *you* hoping to achieve after Erenshkigal destroys the city?"

Ayato wasn't surprised that the Golden Bough Alliance's members had disagreements, but he hadn't imagined that its members were this at odds with one another. After all, they had been advancing such a grandiose plan in complete secrecy for ages. Even with the abilities of the Varda-Vaos, that would have been nigh impossible without some degree of unity.

"Hmm. You haven't worked it out?" Madiath said, his body filling with prana. "Well, there's no point keeping you in suspense at this late hour. Yes, the three of us do have different goals. But none of them are particularly elaborate."

Suddenly, the countless air-windows scattered around them slid shut one by one.

"Miss Orphelia will slaughter every human here, and in response, Genestella supremacists, carefully indoctrinated using Varda's powers, will launch a series of terrorist attacks all across the world. In other words, it will be a decisive showdown between Genestella and the common man—*that* is our shared objective."

"…!"

Ayato knew what they planned to make Orphelia do, but this was the first he was hearing about simultaneous terrorist strikes. His body stiffened, and Saya gasped beside him.

"The Varda-Vaos wants to create a world ruled by Genestella, a world fueled by conflict between them and regular humans, with the former emerging victorious," Madiath continued. "As for Dirk Eberwein, the Tyrant…as you just heard for yourselves, he wants to turn society upside down, to turn those who have always been winners into losers. I'm guessing he means the integrated enterprise foundations specifically. I'm sure they both have their own plans for whatever comes next, but it's not my place to get involved."

"…What exactly is *your* goal, then?"

The air-windows continued to snap shut, one after the other, until only a single window was left—a live video feed showing Julis struggling against Orphelia.

"Haven't I already answered that question? To accelerate things!"

The next moment, Madiath's figure swayed.

"…!"

The slash was lightning fast.

Ayato's body responded to the wave of bloodlust, moving reflexively at the last minute to block the Raksha-Nada with the Ser Veresta.

That speed…! And the strength behind his strike!

Ayato felt the impact deep in the core of his body. He braced his legs and clenched his teeth.

"Hmm. I didn't hold back with that one. A young man's growth and development truly is something to behold."

Percival, whom they had encountered en route to Madiath's location, had also been unusually strong. But in terms of agility and physical prowess, Madiath was even stronger, almost monstrously so.

Ayato had anticipated this, however.

During their last encounter, he hadn't been able to hold his own against Madiath—even fighting alongside Haruka. Ayato was confident he had improved considerably since then, and was proud

of his accomplishments, but he had to admit that Madiath's fighting ability was still head and shoulders above his own in almost every respect.

…But Julis was even better!

Using her Queen of the Night ability, Julis's power had been like something from another dimension. Just as she had boasted, for a full twelve seconds, she had indeed been the strongest entity in the world. In terms of speed alone, Ayato could barely keep up with her.

Madiath, as he was now, might have been close to that level, but he hadn't quite reached it.

If Ayato hadn't faced Julis back then, he probably would have fallen to Madiath's last attack.

"Unfortunately for you, I've faced someone even faster…!"

He pushed back against the Raksha-Nada with all his strength, but the opposing blade refused to budge.

"Ah, I see. That semifinals match…! How about this, then?"

Madiath suddenly withdrew his sword, disrupting Ayato's stance.

Uh-oh!

Just like their previous encounter, Madiath was adept at throwing off Ayato's timing.

In fact, it was difficult to read his moves at all—there seemed to be no pattern behind them.

What's more, a human fighter ought to have a unique tempo and rhythm to their actions—but there was no sign of one here.

Madiath broke into a leisurely grin just as the Raksha-Nada gleamed eerily.

This was bad. Given his current position, there was no way that Ayato could dodge this.

And yet—

"Ba-doom!"

"Ah!"

Instead of plunging into Ayato's neck, the Raksha-Nada changed trajectory, slicing through the huge bullet of light coming in from behind him.

"…Don't forget about me," Saya called out to their foe, her Helnekraum at the ready.

“Saya!”

Ayato took advantage of the brief lull to fall back. Under normal circumstances, it would have been pointless to put distance between himself and the Raksha-Nada, as it was fully capable of long-range attacks—but since he couldn’t read Madiath’s movements, he figured close combat to be even riskier.

If he could observe his foe a little more, maybe he could grasp just enough of his fighting style to—

“I haven’t forgotten you. You’re simply beneath my notice,” Madiath said with a sideways glance as he swung his weapon at Saya.

“Ack!”

A crimson shimmer passed through the air, headed straight for her.

It was a cloud of fragments from the Raksha-Nada, launched toward Saya at blinding speed. One of the Four Colored Runeswords, the Raksha-Nada was said to be impossible to defend against. Its user had the ability to divide the blade into smaller pieces and manipulate them at will. It could be broken up into the tiniest fragments, such as the one Madiath had previously planted in Haruka’s abdomen, and when the whole sword was broken up like this, it could be made to rain down on its target like an eviscerating hail.

Saya swiftly dodged the onslaught, but the airborne shards changed direction, following her like a school of tiny red fish.

She sped over a field of rubble, climbing up a huge collapsed pillar that lay diagonally across her path, but the pieces of the Raksha-Nada continued their pursuit.

“I won’t let you!”

Saya had saved him from a close call earlier, so now it was Ayato’s turn to come to her aid.

Without wasting a second, he poured his prana into the Ser Veresta to activate his Meteor Arts techniques. Then, once the weapon had extended to a full ten meters in length, he swung it around, ploughing through the battlefield.

If he could distract their foe for even a split second, it might be

enough to slow the shards chasing after Saya.

"Ha-ha-ha! There's no need to rush! I'll take care of you, too, in due course!"

Madiath leaped away from Ayato's blow, then turned the hand gripping the Raksha-Nada his way. The remaining blade, reduced to half its normal size, split into myriad pieces, coursing straight for him.

"What?!"

How on earth could Madiath divide the weapon into two separate plumes and freely manipulate the both of them?

Ayato returned the Ser Veresta to its original size, spinning around to dodge the fragments streaking down from above and piercing the ground like a heavy rain. The area where he had just been standing was left covered with holes.

Then, as soon as Ayato landed, the fragments rose up once more in pursuit, though he managed to avoid this strike, too, by reflexively leaping backward. The shards must have dug their way back to the surface after penetrating the ground beneath him.

They weren't so fast that he couldn't avoid them if he focused on evasion, but that last attack would certainly have ensnared a less capable fighter.

At this rate—

"Saya!"

A bad feeling coming over him, Ayato glanced around to his friend—just as she leaped from atop the fallen pillar and a swarm of crimson blades struck her in midair.

"Ngh…!"

Using the Helnekraum as a shield, she only barely managed to avoid a direct hit.

But while her Luxes were equipped with high-powered defensive fields, they weren't designed to hold up against the likes of an Orga Lux.

The next moment, the core of the Helnekraum burst into flames. Saya was thrown violently backward by the force of the blast.

"Saya!"

CHAPTER 2

THE FINAL BATTLE II

"Lindvolus Championship Match—battle start!"

No sooner had the mechanical voice announced the beginning of the match than Julis concentrated her prana and started manipulating her mana.

"Bloom—*Impatiens Balsamina!*"

The second she uttered those words, petals of flame opened up above her head, morphing into a cocoon-like shape in the blink of an eye—and then bursting.

Droplets of fire fell in a torrential downpour, covering the stage.

"Riessfeld makes the first move! Flames are scattering across the battlefield like a veritable hailstorm!"

"That technique…is probably based on a balsam plant. If I'm right, she must have further developed her abilities."

"Oh? What do you mean?"

"Riessfeld materializes flames in the form of flowers. In principle, her moves have always been styled after petals and the like. Well, there do seem to be a few exceptions, but even then, there's no mistaking that her attacks all took after flowers in one way or another. But this one seems to be based on a balsam—the way the fruit pops open to disperse its seeds. So the central motif has changed from flowers to seeds. As such, we should probably expect more diversity in her techniques."

Zaharoula, the commentator, was spot on. After emerging from her match against Xiaohui Wu, Julis could tell that her abilities had improved dramatically.

This omnidirectional burst of flaming projectiles would last for well over ten seconds.

It wasn't as potent as Saya's Neunfairdelph, but the range was quite wide—impossible to dodge.

Well, in theory, anyway…

After the billowing smoke cleared, there stood Orphelia, looking exactly the same as she had a moment ago.

"But would you look at that! Landlufen doesn't seem fazed in the slightest!"

"Of course not. Orphelia Landlufen possesses immense reserves of prana, surpassing even Ayato Amagiri. To her, that would have been no more than a light rain."

Julis was well aware of that, naturally.

There probably wasn't anyone on the face of this earth who understood Orphelia's power as well as Julis did. And that was precisely why she needed to use a move like this in the opening seconds of the match.

"…"

As Orphelia wordlessly raised the Gravisheath, its urm-manadite core began to emit a threatening light.

The next moment, Julis was helplessly crushed by a tremendous gravitational force.

"U-ugh…!"

Orphelia's attack was undodgeable. Its area of effect covered almost the entire stage.

Of course. She was responding to a wide-range technique with one of equal scope.

"Here it is! A ruthless and overwhelming area attack from the Gravisheath! Will this technique, which not even Saya Sasamiya could escape, usher in an early end to today's match?!"

Several gravitational spheres appeared around Orphelia, each aimed right for Julis.

Reduced to crawling on the ground, Julis could neither defend nor evade.

Nonetheless, she endured the pain and flashed her foe a fearless grin.

"Ah!"

Just then, a fresh flower of fire exploded beneath Orphelia's feet.

Of course, this attack, too, was unlikely to inflict any damage on its target.

But that was fine. Because that wasn't what Julis was aiming for.

"…?!"

Orphelia, thrown back by the force of the blast, collapsed to her knees like she'd been knocked hard to the ground.

This was exactly as Julis had intended. The Gravisheath had two weaknesses: The first was the tremendous cost of using it; the second was that its user wasn't immune to its effects. The only thing that could resist its immense gravity was the body of the Gravisheath itself; its user remained fully vulnerable.

In other words, if Orphelia had activated the attack over the entire stage, leaving only a narrow gap around herself, then all Julis had to do was make her leave the safety of her original position.

That last explosion was meant solely to knock her into the area of effect.

As Julis had expected, not even Orphelia could resist the crushing output of her own Orga Lux. And sure enough, she swiftly neutralized it.

"Bloom—*Strelitzia Petty!*"

Julis had been waiting for this moment, and she hurried to activate her next ability.

Accelerating in the blink of an eye on wings of flame, she brandished a gleaming sword, charging straight for the school crest on Orphelia's chest as her opponent struggled to recover.

…The attack, however, was repelled at the last minute.

"Whoa! That was a close call! But Landlufen has blocked Riessfeld's attack with her bare hands!"

Orphelia rose slowly to her feet, looking completely unbothered.

Julis had gone all out with that strike just now, hoping to snatch victory in one fell swoop.

Of course, her top priority in this match was to buy time. She hadn't forgotten that.

However, she also understood how difficult that would be when

facing a foe like Orphelia. If she tried half-heartedly to lead her across the stage, she would quickly wind up cornered with no means of escape.

The only way to keep this match from ending was to go all out.

"But that attack just now required prior setup, right? When did she have time to lay the trap?"

"Probably during that initial scatter bomb. That must have been the medium. I wonder if she planted it by visualizing a seed sprouting."

"Are you saying Riessfeld anticipated this turn of events?"

"Well, I'm not sure about that. She must have prepared for it, though, as one of several possibilities."

At the very least, this would make it difficult for Orphelia to use the Gravisheath's powers. The *seeds* from her Impatiens Balsamina technique were scattered all over the stage. If her foe tried to create another wide-ranging high-gravity zone, she would risk falling victim to the same ploy that she had a moment ago.

Orphelia wouldn't cut corners or let her guard down no matter what kind of opponent she was facing.

Nor would she allow herself to overreach.

After all, the power of the earth was overwhelming. She would no doubt determine that she could win through other, less risky, means.

In that case, I'll just have to overcome everything she tries…!

Renewing her resolve, Julis began to weave her prana once more.

"Bloom—*Stargazer Pollen!*"

With that, a giant lily of roiling flame blossomed above her head before once again bursting.

This time, however, no pellets of fire scattered over the stage—instead, a mist of fine, shining crimson particles covered the area like a haze. It wasn't dense enough to block one's vision. It was more like miniature stars twinkling in midair.

"…"

Orphelia's eyebrows furrowed ever so slightly, and she raised the sleeve of her uniform to her mouth to keep from inhaling any of the particles. They were harmless to the human body, but Julis was under no obligation to tell her opponent that.

Then, under her breath, Orphelia murmured: "*Kur nu Gia.*"

Plumes of miasma welled up under her feet, coming together to form a huge undead arm.

The red particles drifting through the air stuck to it, as though being sucked in.

"Oh? Those red sparkling things are sticking to Landlufen's miasma… What's going on here, Zaharoula…?"

"Hmm… I wonder if the motif is pollen this time around."

Orphelia paid this no heed, swinging down at Julis with the arm made of deadly miasma that would corrode and consume anything it touched.

"Bloom—*Amaryllis!*"

Julis responded with a fresh technique, but the firepower of her Amaryllis wasn't enough to counter Orphelia's ability. Normally, the difference in power output would have pushed her back.

And yet—

A moment after the Amaryllis made contact, a huge explosion erupted. The stormlike blast was followed by a deafening roar.

The miasmic arm crumbled like a giant tree burning into cinders before her very eyes.

"Wh-what incredible firepower! H-hold on! Since when does Riessfeld have a technique like that?! Is this the move she showed off during the semifinals…?"

"…No, I don't think so. This is probably…combustion fuel."

Precisely.

The red particles scattered by her Amaryllis were essentially a kind of fuel, designed to react to mana converted by someone other than Julis and cling to it, then increase the power of any mana she herself released. While not quite as potent as her Queen of the Night ability, it still had the effect of magnifying her firepower several times over.

"Lily pollen is incredibly difficult to remove. I used to have such a hard time getting it off my clothes in the greenhouse. Do you remember, Orphelia?"

"…I've long since forgotten."

Orphelia's response was curt, but Julis could sense that

something was amiss.

Her foe's remarks just now had been a lie. She could see it in her eyes.

Not too long ago, Orphelia wouldn't have denied her past—she would have simply dismissed it with an air of resignation.

And yet now she was lying.

Julis didn't know what exactly had changed within her, but whatever it was, she felt it was a positive development.

"Whoa! Right from the get-go, we're seeing a tremendous back-and-forth—two Stregas at the top of their game lashing out in a heated exchange! It's no wonder they both made it to the championship match!"

"I have to admit, I underestimated Riessfeld. Orphelia may be off the charts in terms of her abilities, but Riessfeld, as a Strega, is certainly on par with the likes of Sylvia Lyyneheym, at least. And her moves have a natural advantage against Orphelia Landlufen."

"An advantage, you say?"

"There are basically two ways to deal with poisons, especially chemical weapons… The first is by neutralizing them; the second is through combustion—in other words, burning them up. Riessfeld's ability to manipulate fire gives her an inherent advantage over Orphelia's miasma. There have been other flame-users who faced Orphelia in the past, but their overall lack of strength and fighting ability rendered that advantage meaningless. Riessfeld, however, has managed to close the gap, thanks to a combination of keen tactics and expert abilities… She might even…"

As she spoke, Zaharoula almost sounded excited.

While she was grateful to receive such high praise, Julis couldn't afford to get complacent.

Her tactics, no matter how diligently prepared, could quickly be rendered meaningless, depending on the flow of the match. And while it was fair to say that her own abilities had a natural advantage over Orphelia's, they still required a lot of steps and time to pull off. One attack from her opponent would require two or three of her own to counter, making it difficult for her to keep up.

As she had known from the beginning, if she focused on evasion

and defense, she would inevitably be crushed. If she didn't press the attack when necessary, even if it was risky—if she didn't force Orphelia to defend herself, then this would turn into a very one-sided match. She couldn't afford to make even a single mistake.

It's like walking a tightrope…!

But Julis wouldn't be defeated so easily.

If push came to shove, she still had her trump card—her Queen of the Night ability.

While she wouldn't be able to use it until the very last minute because of its time limit, it had already helped her beat Ayato and brought her toe to toe with Xinglou Fan. It would also, she hoped, be effective against Orphelia. For a brief twelve seconds, that is.

Ayato asked me to buy more time, but he didn't say exactly how much. Probably not even he knows how long they need. They probably thought giving me a fixed limit would only cause me more stress…

In other words, she would just have to delay for as long as possible.

Festa matches tended to vary in duration—sometimes they were decided in an instant, and on other occasions, they dragged on and on. Group fights during the Gryps were usually the most time-consuming, but curiously, one-on-one bouts during the Lindvolus tended to last longer than the Phoenix's tag-team matches. Perhaps that was because teams in the Phoenix became unbalanced as soon as a member dropped out from either side, all but deciding the outcome. Lindvolus matches, on the other hand, when the competitors were evenly matched, lacked an easy deciding factor. When both fighters were skilled at evasion and defense, matches could go on for longer than an hour.

Of course, it would be unrealistic to expect to hold out for that long out against the likes of Orphelia.

Even just half an hour would be extremely difficult, but there was no point to this unless Julis set herself a high bar.

All right, then, thirty minutes. Let's see if I can hold out that long…!

"Bloom—*Nerium Oleander, Multiflos!*"

Julis summoned five double-flowered buds all at once, encircling her foe. She made no move to attack, however.

"…"

Orphelia, likewise, glanced around, but made no sudden moves.

"How unusual! Landlufen is taking in the situation!"

As to be expected.

"Yes. Even Erenshkigal, the Witch of Solitary Venom, must be wary of poisons not of her own making."

"Ah, so this is *the same poisonous flower technique Riessfeld used to drive Xiaohui Wu into a corner!"*

It would be difficult to break through Orphelia's defenses using firepower alone. A half-baked technique wouldn't even pose a threat to her.

But if there were accompanying side effects, that might alter the equation.

This technique used a flaming flower modeled on the poisonous oleander, and would scatter its toxic fires throughout the surrounding area when it exploded.

Orphelia might have resistance to her own toxins—the ones that she could freely manipulate—but Julis's remained unknown to her. She would have to approach them with caution.

"Poisons don't belong exclusively to you, Orphelia," Julis called out.

"No. I never said they were…though it *is* a little odious to have one used against me," Orphelia muttered, summoning up five gravitational spheres roughly the same size as Julis's oleander flowers in an effort to brush them aside.

"I thought you'd do that!"

Julis snapped her fingers and all five of the oleander flowers detonated. If she let those gravitational spheres touch them, Julis's flowers would only be swallowed up whole.

Poisonous sparks of flame fell like snowflakes all around Orphelia.

How's that? There's no way you can dodge this…!

The poison would be less effective now that it was dispersed, but if it could whittle away at Orphelia's strength, even if only a little, that would still be a win.

Unfazed, Orphelia merely glanced up slightly and murmured, "*Kur nu Anzu.*"

The miasma swirled rapidly around her, forming a gust of wind that easily blew away the surrounding sparks.

"Tch! So it won't be that easy…!"

Despite her disappointment, Julis concentrated her prana to prepare for her next move.

All of a sudden, Orphelia's gaze pierced clean through her.

"…I see. It's a clever little trick, but that, too, is a form of power. Your destiny seems to be gaining strength."

"Like I said earlier: This isn't destiny. It's ability," Julis said, correcting her.

"And didn't *I* tell *you*? To me, they're the same. Let me test your ability one last time."

A chill ran down Julis's spine.

The urm-manadite core of the Gravisheath in Orphelia's hands let out an ominous purple glow, just as an anguished gasp tore through the air.

It was the same move Orphelia had used back in the fifth round.

"Geshti Nanna."

*

"Saya! Are you okay?! Saya?!"

Ayato's voice echoed from beyond the fog clouding her consciousness.

Saya shook her head slightly, waking up to find herself in a space narrower than she had expected, filled with what looked like old benches. Rising to her feet, she realized that she was looking down on the Eclipse stage. Ayato was staring up at her with a worried look.

She appeared to be in the spectators' area above the stage. When the Helnekraum had exploded, the force of the blast must

have thrown her up here.

"I—I'm okay… No probs."

She gave Ayato a thumbs-up, though she still felt a bit wobbly.

That being said, it was frankly a miracle how little damage she had sustained. If she had taken a direct hit from the Raksha-Nada, she could have easily been completely dismembered.

Seeing the broken pieces of the Helnekraum scattered beside her, Saya gritted her teeth. She had only survived relatively unscathed because her weapon had taken the brunt of that last attack for her.

"Tch! Ayato! Watch out!"

At that moment, a second barrage of Raksha-Nada shards lashed out at Ayato like a passing meteor shower.

Ayato quickly leaped back to dodge the strike, but the fragments chasing after Saya joined the others to create an impressive mass, pursuing him as he fled. He managed to avoid them by darting across the stage, but if he had slipped up even for a second, it would have been the end of him.

Saya wanted to help in some way, but she had almost exhausted her supply of armaments. With only a handgun or two left, it would be reckless to go after Madiath Mesa directly. She gritted her teeth in frustration—she simply wasn't on his level. If she had been fully armed, she might have stood a chance. But as she was now, rushing in carelessly would only serve to hamstring Ayato.

So what could she do? She glanced around and spotted something in the aisle between the audience seats.

"No way…?!"

She rushed over to make sure, but there could be no mistaking it.

This was—

"Ayato! A bomb! There's a military-use manadite composite explosive here!"

"What?!" Ayato cried out in astonishment.

Just then Madiath, who had been leisurely directing the shards of the Raksha-Nada from afar, turned his gaze on Saya.

"Oh, did you notice? Perhaps I should have camouflaged them a little better."

Indeed, the device was installed haphazardly, with most of the

mechanism out in the open.

A quick look across the audience seating revealed six identical devices placed at intervals around the stage.

They were roughly half Saya's height in size. Even one would have been immensely powerful, but six in combination? If they all went off at once, they would have enormous destructive power.

"What are you playing at, Madiath Mesa?!" Ayato demanded while dodging the fragments of the Raksha-Nada.

Something about his movements seemed confident—casual, even—like he was beginning to see through his opponent's attacks. The more fragments Madiath Mesa divided the Raksha-Nada into, the more difficult they would be to control, and the less precise his attacks would become. That said, Saya would never have been able to see through an opponent of his level in such a short span of time. Ayato's talents really were amazing.

"Hmm… Well, I don't suppose there's any way you could have known. This venue serves a hidden purpose."

Madiath must have sensed that his attacks were losing potency, and he recalled the fragments of his weapon, letting them recombine into a sword blade.

"A hidden purpose…?"

"As you know, the city of Asterisk is often called a miniature garden, designed to contain Genestella. And when you're containing something, it's prudent to have a way to dispose of it, should the time come. That goes without saying, don't you think?"

Dispose of…?

That turn of phrase sent a shiver down Saya's spine.

"Why are you so surprised? As you can see from its construction, the stage for the Eclipse has been part of the city's design since its very inception. You couldn't possibly add a space like this once everything was finished. Even during large-scale renovations, it was left completely untouched. Do you think it was intended from the outset to be an arena for illegal matches? Of course not! The Eclipse is nothing more than a sideshow, a distraction from the structure's original purpose… No, this is a safety device, in case of emergency… A switch." Madiath paused there for a moment. Then he continued,

his tone relaxed. “The foundations of this floating city are remarkably robust. Hardly anything can shake it. But it was designed with a certain inherent weakness from the very beginning. Yes, if this area were to be destroyed and flood with water…well, the base structure supporting Asterisk would collapse. In other words, the entire city would sink to the bottom of the lake.”

“No…!”

Saya found it hard to believe, but if true—if Asterisk itself were destroyed, they would be doomed even if they succeeded in stopping Orphelia.

She couldn’t even imagine how many lives would be lost.

“But of course, that’s no easy feat. The walls here are multilayered, the sturdiest in the whole city. You’d need to focus on certain points and destroy them simultaneously. Without such safeguards, you would hardly want to hold an event as dangerous as the Eclipse down here, would you?”

Madiath’s voice was laced with scorn—but Saya couldn’t begin to guess who it was directed at.

“Why do such a thing…?! If Erenshkigal carries out your plan and slaughters everyone, there shouldn’t be any need to destroy the city itself!”

“Even if Miss Orphelia should succeed in her task, it would all come to naught if the integrated enterprise foundations’ investigations uncovered the truth, no? There are those with delving abilities capable of seeing into the past. This is me destroying the evidence, just in case.”

Just in case.

He would go to such extremes simply because of a possibility?

Once again, the madness of the Golden Bough Alliance, the degree to which they were all out of touch with the world, was brought home to her.

“Saya, can you disarm them?” Ayato called out.

“Huh…?”

She was taken aback by the abrupt question, but she quickly pulled herself together and started examining the bomb. Compound explosives incorporating manadite were much more powerful than

conventional ones, but like Luxes, they required a control device to function. Perhaps she would be able to stop it by overwriting its programming.

"I don't know…but I'll try!"

Saya pulled out her mobile device and connected it to the control unit, then she began to analyze it.

"Hey, hey. Do you think I'm just going to sit here and watch?" Madiath said, readying the Raksha-Nada once more—but not before Ayato lashed out from above.

"Ngh…!"

Ayato's attack was much sharper than before, forcing Madiath to fall back a step.

Following through, Ayato attacked again, unleashing an upward diagonal swing, his blade gleaming in the air.

"Oh…!" Madiath exclaimed. "You've adapted to my moves, I see… Well, this is our third time crossing swords. I'd be disappointed if you couldn't pull off that much!"

After falling back, he placed a hand on his shoulder and glanced around.

"Very well. I can't risk you getting the better of me while I'm distracted. I'll deal with Miss Sasamiya after I kill you."

At that moment, an incredible bloodlust seemed to emanate from Madiath's body.

Even from a distance, Saya felt as though her internal organs were being crushed into a pulp. The temperature seemed to drop below freezing, and the air around them weighed heavy as if it had turned to lead. Before she knew it, her hands were trembling.

Is this the real Madiath Mesa…?!

Just how much pressure did Ayato feel facing this murderous aura head on?

But with a slight shake of her head, Saya turned her focus back to the task in front of her.

She had work to do.

This must be the reason she was here.

In that case, she would just have to do a perfect job.

She activated the encryption-cracking tool that Eishirou had

provided her with—incidentally, the same one he had used while searching for Flora in the Rotlicht—and started rewriting the control device's programming.

*

"Amagiri Shinmei Style, Hidden Technique—*Hornet Fang!*"

Ayato twisted around, throwing his blade with one hand. It was a strike of unparalleled precision, aimed not at his opponent but at the activation handle of the Raksha-Nada—yet Madiath deflected it with ease.

"Tch…!"

But Ayato didn't stop there. Leaning into his momentum, he switched his blade to his left hand and, holding it in an underhand grip, he spun around once more, cleaving to the side with all his strength.

This was the Amagiri Shinmei Style, Intermediate Technique—*Ten Thistles*.

Madiath raised an eyebrow in mild surprise, but still managed to dodge the attack with a simple turn of his head. The tip of the Ser Veresta passed right in front of him, but he hardly seemed to move at all. He had seen straight through Ayato's move.

And then, despite his unstable position, he lashed out with the Raksha-Nada.

"Hngh!"

Ayato concentrated his strength into his right leg, desperately tilting his body to evade as the huge sword tore through his uniform.

At first glance, Madiath appeared to be swinging his weapon with an unsteady arm, almost as at the mercy of his own blade—but he quickly shifted trajectory, twisting around and unleashing an upward diagonal strike.

Ayato countered, deflecting his foe's weapon and instantly following it with a downward slash of his own.

"Amagiri Shinmei Style, Middle Technique—*Carved-Out Shell!*"

"Whoa…!"

Madiath turned to avoid the blow, launching a kick into Ayato's abdomen with his left leg.

"Ngh…!"

Though only a kick, it carried extraordinary force.

Unable to brace himself, Ayato was blown back, slamming into a huge, half-collapsed pillar.

"Gah!"

The air was forced out of his lungs, and his vision darkened briefly.

The next moment, shards from the Raksha-Nada tore his way, completely decimating the collapsed pillar. Ayato rolled desperately to safety.

"Haaah… Haaah… Haaah…!"

Catching his breath, he rose back to his feet and readied the Ser Veresta

"Ha-ha-ha!" Madiath laughed. "You're much like your sister, I see. The Amagiri Shinmei style, was it? What a joke."

"What…?!" Ayato growled, letting his anger show.

"Oh, don't misunderstand me," Madiath said with a feigned shrug of his shoulders. "I acknowledge your strength, Haruka's, too. And I'm not just making fun of *your* school of fighting. No, it's swordsmanship itself that I consider a joke. That goes for the Amagiri Shinmei style, the Toudou style, and even just bringing techniques and sword forms into a fight. What foolishness to think you can reduce a duel to fixed movement patterns."

He paused there and sighed.

"Contests are about defeating and slaughtering your opponent. That's all. If they give you an opening, you take it—if they don't, you manipulate them until they do. It's simple, really. And free. As far as I'm concerned, your techniques only serve to restrict the range of your actions."

These were reckless, unreserved comments—but Madiath had the skill and power to back them up.

His attacks weren't bound by patterns—his formless, serene movements were impossible to predict, and they never dropped a beat. Those two qualities were the essence of martial arts, and he

had mastered them.

According to Claudia's data, Madiath got his start at an illegal entertainment tournament called the Vigridhr, or Infinity Arena. For a full eight years, he had fought there. Surviving hundreds and thousands of life-or-death contests must have honed his innate talent into this abstract, unpredictable style.

In terms of swordsmanship, Kirin was the very top—but when it came to fundamental fighting skill, Madiath surpassed everyone else whom Ayato had ever met.

"Theory is, of course, important. It's right to want to understand the basics. But I fail to see the point of tying it into forms. It's like you're playing a game. Though I suppose that is an appropriate analogy for this ugly spectacle of a city…"

With that, Madiath surged forward, suddenly closing the gap between them.

Despite the heightened state of awareness afforded by his *shiki* ability, Ayato still found his foe's unique, unpredictable gait impossible to read.

Just before his opponent's red blade could decapitate him, Ayato parried it with the Ser Veresta.

But Mathias's heavy, powerful strike pushed him down, weapon and all.

"Gah…!"

"That's why I like the Amagiri Shinmei style's ultimate techniques. They're not based on forms—you fight based on core principles alone, no?" Madiath grinned as their blades continued to push against each other.

Ayato waited for the right timing and disentangled the two weapons, but Madiath held his stance as he swung the Raksha-Nada yet again.

After another few exchanges, they each fell back, Madiath arrogantly holding out his hand as if to say, *Come at me.*

He wants me to use my ultimate techniques…? Fine!

Ayato would accept the invitation.

Ayato could respond to his foe's movements, but Madiath still had an overwhelming advantage. He was superior in practically every

metric, so that was only natural. Ayato couldn't afford to hold back his trump card, his ultimate techniques.

His only concern was that two of his ultimate techniques had already been exposed during the Lindvolus. Of course, these were the final secret teachings of the Amagiri Shinmei style and weren't easily countered even after seeing them once or twice. Rodolfo Zoppo might have succeeded in blocking his Tsugomori move, but it would be more accurate to say that the Ser Veresta had been parried rather than the technique itself. Besides, it should have been impossible for anyone else to replicate what he had done.

But Ayato's current opponent was Madiath Mesa. And since he'd practically asked Ayato to use his ultimate techniques, he must have some strategy in mind.

Still, I don't have time to hesitate…!

He had to settle this before Julis's match against Orphelia was over.

Ayato closed his eyes, deepening his *shiki* state to further enhance his perception.

He wouldn't be able to maintain this for long, but if he was attacked now, he should at least be able to respond appropriately.

He built himself a world of *silence*, bringing every *motion* into sharp relief.

And in the midst of it, he began to sense the origin of Madiath's movement.

"Amagiri Shinmei Style, Ultimate Technique I—*Tsugomori*."

Ayato swayed—and countered Madiath's strike quietly and smoothly, like flowing water.

Or at least he should have.

"What…?!"

But his blow was repelled by a patch of empty air, altering its trajectory.

While Ayato watched in wide-eyed shock, Madiath brought the Raksha-Nada down with a flash of light, piercing through the right side of his body.

"Ngh…!"

Rather than pain, burning heat passed through him—the feeling

of raw, warm blood pouring out.

He managed to take a step back in retreat, but dropped helplessly to one knee. Thanks to his quick reflexes, the wound wasn't fatal, but it was still quite deep.

But more importantly—

"Just now…!"

It wasn't empty air that had deflected his blade.

Looking closely, he could see fragments of the Raksha-Nada hovering brightly around Madiath. The moment Ayato launched his attack, he had sensed his opponent bringing them together.

In other words—

"Oh? You're quick on the uptake. As to be expected," Madiath said with a stroke of his chin. His tone wasn't sarcastic—it held honest admiration.

"…You used an automatic defense?"

"Precisely. I'm surrounded by floating pieces of the Raksha-Nada. They react to my thoughts and gather together instantly to form a defensive blade."

Ayato's *shiki* technique gave him perfect sensory perception, but ultimately, it indicated only the result of his target's movements. It couldn't sense the outcome of thoughts, nor could it prepare him to respond to a blade that formed instantly in midair.

"The Raksha-Nada is mostly known for its ferocity in combat, but when wielded by the right user, it becomes an incredible tool. It can be used for defense, as you just saw, and is capable of a whole plethora of offensive variations. Like this…"

As Madiath swung the Raksha-Nada, the huge blade broke into smaller and smaller pieces, surrounding Ayato in a multilayered dome. It had to be made of more than a hundred fragments.

"…!"

Its deployment was orderly and swift—Ayato couldn't possibly have evaded it. Even if he had been able to read Madiath's next moves, he wouldn't have had much chance of defending himself. If he'd retreated to keep himself from being encircled, the shards would simply have pursued him across the battlefield before finding another way to surround him.

"As you know, the smaller the fragments are, the more difficult they are to control. You need to group them together into masses of a certain size when attacking. If you make them a little bigger still, you can send them in multiple directions, though that restricts more intricate movement."

Madiath's words sent a cold sweat down Ayato's spine.

It wasn't unusual to find oneself in a siege-like situation.

Many skilled Dantes or Stregas would no doubt be able to carry out similar attacks with their abilities.

But coming from an Orga Lux, the danger was on a whole other level.

When it came to regular attacks, Ayato's abundant prana could limit the damage to some extent. But that wasn't the case for Orga Luxes. All the more so if slashing or thrusting attacks were involved.

"So how will you get out of this?"

The next moment, the shards surrounding Ayato lashed out all at once.

The attack came at high-speed and from all directions—even from above—without leaving the slightest opening. What's more, each strike possessed the full destructive power of an Orga Lux.

Ayato hurried to adjust the range and intensity of his *shiki* ability, focusing his awareness.

"Amagiri Shinmei Style, Ultimate Technique II—*Wazaogi*."

He swung the Ser Veresta in all directions, repelling the clumped shards of the Raksha-Nada.

Of course, no matter how fast he moved, there was no way that he could keep up with this simultaneous attack from all directions.

And yet—

"Wow…!" Madiath exclaimed—even louder than before. "Wonderful! Each shard you deflect blocks another, which in turn blocks yet another…! A superhuman feat!"

This level of half-reflexive defense was possible only when his *shiki* state was pushed to its absolute limits while employing his Wazaogi technique.

Nonetheless, it was impossible for him to deflect all the projectiles.

He kept standing after the red storm blew through, but his body was covered with countless lacerations and puncture wounds.

He had managed, albeit only barely, to protect his vitals during the onslaught, but he was bleeding from almost every other part of his body.

"Gah…!"

"I see, I see. A great display indeed. I salute you," Madiath said with a grin as he raised the Raksha-Nada into the air.

Then, just like before, Ayato was again surrounded by fragments of the blade from all sides.

"Though imperfect, my last attack was effective enough. So there's no need for me to bother trying anything new, is there? Let's just keep doing the same thing over and over until we're finished. Good idea, right?" Madiath laughed as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

"Now then—how many more can you endure?"





CHAPTER 3

THE FINAL BATTLE III

"Geshti Nanna."

As Orphelia murmured those words, huge treelike plumes of miasma burst out all over the stage.

"Whoa! This is how Landlufen defeated Hilda Jane Rowlands in the fifth round…!"

"This is a formidable move, all right, combining the Gravisheath's powers with Orphelia's own abilities…!"

With that thought, Julis fled into the air using her Strelitzia wings—but of course, this onslaught wasn't so easily dodged. The huge, treelike masses continued to stretch their branches upward and diagonally, binding her in an ever-shrinking cage.

"It's like a primordial jungle has just engulfed the stage! Every one of those mammoth trees has to be over twenty meters high! And they just keep coming, one after the other!"

Even Hilda, the great Magnum Opus, who should have been Orphelia's equal, had been unable to withstand this. Julis, however, had witnessed it before, and she had prepared a countermeasure.

"Bloom!"

As Julis's order boomed over the stage, the ground began to explode, one area after the next—the seeds of the Impatiens Balsamina technique that she had deployed earlier.

Of course, a few explosions wouldn't be enough to dispel this miasma—but with the Stargazer Pollen acting as combustion fuel, their power was greatly enhanced.

She wasn't aiming to wholly incinerate the trees. They were

growing out of the ground, so if she could just burn their roots…

"All right…!"

Several of the huge trees closing in on her broke off at the base, collapsing into a heap.

But not all of them fell. Though Julis had boosted her attacks with the help of the pollen, Orphelia's power output was on another dimension. The trees that had managed to withstand the explosions at their base continued to aim for her, hoping to knock her around like billiard cues hitting a ball.

"Ngh…!"

Far more had survived her counterattack than she had anticipated.

With a flap of her flaming wings, she flew around the stage in an attempt to avoid the strikes, but they grazed by her countless times, dangerously close. Having to continuously dodge these attacks—any one of which would mean immediate defeat if it connected—was a test of endurance both physically and mentally.

That she was able to dodge them at all was half thanks to the success of her preparation and countermeasures. The other half was pure luck—as several of the giant trees collapsed, they pushed others out of the way, momentarily keeping them at a safe distance.

"Phew… Phew…!"

Even so, she only barely made it through.

When the chaos finally stopped, the huge trees filling the stage slowly disintegrated into gaseous miasma.

"Bloom—*Rafflesia!*"

Julis thrust her Rect Lux into the ground from midair, immediately activating a preprepared move, which incinerated the surrounding miasma and gave her space to land.

"Sh-she pulled through! Riessfeld just managed to survive Landlufen's incredible assault!"

"Only narrowly, mind you. I doubt she'll be able to withstand it a second time."

It might not be impossible, but Zaharoula was probably right that Julis would have a hard time if Orphelia tried the same move again. And knowing Orphelia, she might very well do just that.

Julis activated her Stargazer Pollen ability a second time, littering the battlefield with a fresh coating of the combustion fuel.

Whatever happened, she had to be ready.

"…"

But contrary to her expectations, Orphelia merely stared back at her.

"Ahhh…," she said at last with a soft sigh. "Yes. Yes, I see. Very well, I acknowledge it."

"Huh? You're acknowledging my ability?"

"Yes."

It was a simple, lighthearted remark. But Julis was considerably taken aback by the praise.

"…That's an honor."

"So from here on, I'll go all out."

"…!"

Julis's eyes went wide.

"Oh…? I'm surprised you'd make light of your opponent like that. You're saying you've been slacking off all this time?"

That was impossible.

No matter who she fought, Orphelia wasn't the type to let her guard down. No, she would seek to utterly destroy them from the very outset.

"No. I would never cut corners. It's just…I wasn't able to give it my true all before, even if I'd wanted to."

With those words, Orphelia gripped the Gravisheath tightly in her right hand and stroked its urm-manadite core. Her movements were quiet and gentle, and at first glance, they might have seemed affectionate. But they weren't. There was nothing but grief and resignation in her demeanor. Perhaps the Gravisheath itself understood that, as looking closely, Julis could see it trembling ever so slightly.

And then—

"Gyaaaaaarrrrrgggggghhhhh!"

All of a sudden, a pained scream echoed across the stage.

An enormous quantity of miasma was flowing straight from Orphelia's hand directly into the Gravisheath's core—an infusion so

potent, it would probably have killed a person in a split second.

The urm-manadite flickered with frenzied purple light, illuminating the stage. Its death scream dragged on, slowly weakening as the light of its core dimmed…until finally it was extinguished, and the Gravisheath ceased to function.

The next moment, Orphelia casually tossed the Orga Lux away, sending it rolling across the stage with a dry, metallic sound.

"Huh…? Eh? Whaaaaat?! Wh-what's going on here? Landlufen just destroyed her own Gravisheath, and with her bare hands…?!"

"…What's the meaning of this, Orphelia?" Julis asked, glaring at her opponent.

"You already know, don't you?" she replied, staring back. "My miasma is so strong that it eats away at my own body. That's why Dirk Eberwein has been controlling it with medication, to suppress its effects as much as possible."

"Yes, I've heard."

"But it will take my full power to fully implement the plan. It might be possible for me to carry it out under the medication's influence, but it would be difficult to spread my miasma to every corner of Asterisk. A good number of people would no doubt survive. Which is why I stopped taking the drugs a good while back." Orphelia spoke nonchalantly, as though none of this concerned her. "But if I self-destruct before the plan is carried out, it will all have been for nothing. So…"

"…!"

Having heard this much, Julis finally understood.

"I see… So the Gravisheath was basically functioning like a limiter on your abilities."

One might wonder why Orphelia, who already possessed such overwhelming power, had gone to the trouble of acquiring a new one in the form of the Gravisheath—but that would be to misunderstand her situation. The Orga Lux's functions as a weapon were merely a bonus. From the very beginning, she had needed it to weaken and regulate her powers by absorbing her toxic blood.

"…"

Orphelia nodded. "Hilda Jane Rowlands said that, for me, the

Gravisheath was the worst possible partner… But the truth is the opposite. For regulating my powers and inhibiting my full strength, there was nothing better.”

As she spoke, an enormous quantity of prana seeped from Orphelia’s body, transforming the mana around her into toxic miasma.

“Wh-what…?!”

In Julis’s head, alarm bells were already ringing at maximum volume.

Driven by instinct, she leaped backward to a safe distance.

“Huh…? Wh-what’s going on…? Orphelia Landlufen’s powers are increasing at an accelerated rate… No… No one could possibly handle all that…”

Zaharoula’s voice betrayed her confusion.

And then—

“Eh?! U-um, h-hold on…! Right! Um, sorry for interrupting, but we’ve got breaking news! Large-scale terrorist attacks seem to be taking place all across Asterisk! The Rikka Administrative Authority and Stjarnagarm have issued a mandatory evacuation order! All residents and visitors are to seek safety indoors!”

“Terrorist attacks…?!”

When she heard this shocking announcement, Julis glanced around.

After a short pause, a wave of anxiety and confusion spread through the crowd as the audience forgot its excitement.

Air-windows began to snap open throughout the audience seating, lighting up one after the other as though in a chain reaction. Everyone must be trying to get a handle on the devastation outside.

There was no way to know the extent of the damage, but a mandatory evacuation order was the highest level of alert that the Rikka Administrative Authority and Stjarnagarm were capable of issuing. Things must have been in an awful state.

“U-um! For now, it’s safest for everyone here to stay inside the building. All visitors to the Sirius Dome, please remain calm and—”

Uh-oh.

This was going to cause a panic.

It was one thing to tell the audience that they were safest staying put, but with this many people in one place, there would always be some narrow-minded individuals who would refuse to trust that advice. Once they began to sow confusion, the chaos would quickly multiply and spread.

And if a large-scale panic were to break out here, with more than a hundred thousand people crammed into the venue…

"Kur nu Gia."

But at that moment, the stadium fell silent.

Miasmic arms that Orphelia had woven together towered over the audience, more ominous and incomparably larger than anything she had unleashed up until now. The audience gaped at this spectacle—this overwhelming mass of power.

This heinous, violent force captured their attention and took hold of their hearts.

And this wasn't just a pair of arms.

The number increased every few seconds. There were already five—no, six of them…

"Ha… Ha-ha-ha… Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Wow! Wow! Awesome! Orphelia Landlufen! Erenshkigal! No way! No way!"

Amid the confusion, Zaharoula's joy-filled laugh resonated throughout the stadium.

"Z-Zaharoula…?"

"Mico Yanase. Did the bulletin just now say anything about the championship match?"

"Huh? Er, no, not really…"

"That means the match will keep going, right? In that case, it doesn't matter. I don't know anything about these terrorist attacks, and I don't care. I don't want to miss a single second of what's playing out down there!"

Mico was at a loss for words.

"You all out in the audience! Those of you who want to flee, do

as you please. But ask yourselves—what are you doing here? You came to see the greatest tournament in the history of the Lindvolus—no, of the entire Festa. Right? Then you'd better sit back and keep your eyes peeled. Even if you wait out the rest of your boring lives, you'll never have another chance to witness this miracle. I'm *not going anywhere! Come rain or shine—even if the entire Sirius Dome is laid to waste—I'm staying right here!"*

Zaharoula's remarks were categorically insane.

But the passion in her voice was unmistakably real.

That passion soon rippled through the audience, painting over their anxiety and confusion and driving them into a whirlwind more frenzied and enthusiastic than ever before.

Hushed murmurs soon gave way to the scattered cheers—and from there, into louder cries and shouts. Soon screams and roars engulfed the Sirius Dome.

"Are you kidding me? The audience is just as crazy as she is…"

Julis smiled wryly. What else could she do?

"…Go."

Orphelia, unperturbed by the crowd's enthusiasm, gently raised her right arm.

That arm—covered in miasma and more terrifying than a demon risen from hell—swung down at Julis.

"Burst into bloom—*Antirrhinum Majus!*"

Julis released a flaming flower dragon, then boosted its strength with her remote Rect Lux.

After adding some pollen fuel to the mix, its power ought to have been close to ten times that of the regular version.

And yet the blow succeeded only in holding back one of the miasmic arms, while a second and third rushed in to crush her.

"What?!"

They were also considerably faster than before.

Th-this… I can't…! I have to fall back!

Carried by the wings of her Strelitzia Petty, Julis glided across the stage—but even with her increased acceleration ability, the miasmic arms quickly caught up to her. She tried to escape by suddenly accelerating and decelerating and making sharp turns, but she

managed only to buy herself a short reprieve.

In no time at all, she had reached the edge of the stage and was left with nowhere else to run.

Then, without the faintest hesitation, the miasmic arms hit her like a tidal wave.

"Wh-whoa! Riessfeld has been hit! Is it over?!"

"…No, not yet!"

Zaharoula wasn't even trying to hide her excitement.

…It looked like Julis had no other choice.

Giving in, she squeezed her eyes shut.

This was her only option. She had hoped to hold out another five minutes…but at this rate, that was out of the question. She'd only die in vain, and there was no point in that.

And so with a mental apology, she resolved to fight only for herself from here on out.

"Bloom—*Queen of the Night*."

As Julis opened her eyes, a series of huge six-petaled flowers erupted around her, their explosive flames pushing the miasmic arms back and burning them to cinders.

Her rose-colored hair paled in the light, her body itself blazing with roiling flames.

"Th-there it is! The move that overwhelmed Ayato Amagiri!"

The audience broke out into rapturous cheers.

…They really were stupid, the whole lot of them.

Large-scale terrorist attacks were taking place outside, their own lives were being threatened, and yet all they wanted to do was watch a couple of students fight? They were a vile, despicable, wretched bunch.

But even as she cursed them in the depths of her heart, a small smile spread across Julis's face.

That's right. Burn this sight into your eyes.

This battle is between Julis-Alexia von Riessfeld and Orphelia Landlufen.

This will be our final contest.

*

"He's gone, Leo!"

"Leave it to me!"

Kevin Holst—the Black Shield, Gareth—knocked an autonomous puppet down with a hard shield bash, while Lionel Karsch—the Royal Spear, Rhongomiant—cut it in two.

The pair might have retired from professional competition, but their brilliant teamwork remained undiminished.

"Good job, you two," Ernest Fairclough said, casting a sideways glance at his former teammates as he himself laid low another two puppets.

They were in a corner of the commercial area, in a square in front of a large shopping facility equipped with an oversized air-window display.

Until just a few minutes ago, a great crowd had been gathered here to watch the championship match live, but they had all been evacuated into the facility. The only figures left were the three former members of the Life Rhodes who happened to be in the area, and the countless autonomous puppets that seemed to have popped up out of nowhere.

"Well, I know it's a little late for this…," Kevin grumbled while attacking a puppet with his massive shield, "but wouldn't it have been better not to get involved?"

"Are you saying we should just stand by and do nothing? There's a whole lot of people in there!" Lionel scolded him.

"But these things don't attack until you get in their way… And there's no end to them!"

As Kevin had just pointed out, the puppets weren't actively attacking bystanders. Or rather, that didn't seem to be their priority. Of course, once Ernest and the others tried to stop them from entering the facility en masse, they had launched a full-scale assault.

Judging from the mandatory evacuation order that had just been

issued, it was probably safe to assume that similar attacks were taking place throughout Asterisk.

In that case, the goal of these puppets probably isn't to kill or injure people, but to sabotage the city—specifically the transportation infrastructure, if the smoke rising from the port block is any indication.

The roof of this large commercial complex served double duty as a landing site for airships. If that was the puppets' target, they could arguably leave them alone.

That said, a great many people from the local area were now inside, so letting the machines in would undoubtedly place them in great danger.

"I know what you're saying, Kevin, but we should stand our ground. As knights of Gallardworth!"

Ernest changed the direction of his thrust, skewering an oncoming puppet through the head.

"Then again, I'm afraid we can only do so much!"

Lionel's mighty spear tore through a group of several puppets all at once, but it was unable to break past their defensive barriers to completely destroy them.

These puppets were by no means weak. In make and appearance, they were very similar to Allekant's autonomous puppet Ardy, which had gone on a rampage during the Phoenix. While not as strong as that unit, anyone other than a Page One from one of the six schools—or at least, anyone not on one of the Named Cults—would no doubt have a hard time facing them down.

Of course, this wasn't the only entrance into the shopping facility. Considering the number of puppets, even if they went all out here, it wouldn't hold them back for long.

Some support from Stjarnagarm would have been nice, but the city guard was likely short on manpower given the extent of the turmoil.

Now then, what to do…? I could contact Elliot and get him to send support, but they have their own problems to deal with, and I doubt they'd make it in time…

Just then—

"Pah!"

A deafening voice burst through the air, and the puppets in front of Ernest were shattered into countless pieces.

"YO, ERNEST. IT'S BEEN A WHILE, HUH?"

Standing before him was a woman dressed in the uniform of Jie Long, her face covered with a wolf mask.

"Well, well, well, Seiten Taisei. How long has it been since I last heard that voice?"

"HEE-HEE. WELL, XINGLOU GAVE ME THE ALL-CLEAR TO HEAD OUT," the woman said, removing her wolf mask to reveal countless scars crisscrossing her face.

Alema Seiyang—the former number one at Jie Long before handing that title over to Xinglou Fan, and a current member of the school's intelligence organization, Gaishi.

Alema raised a hand into the air, and a dozen other individuals each wearing similar wolf masks appeared around her, falling down on one knee.

"PROTECT THE ENTRANCES AND EXITS IN TEAMS OF THREE. SOME PUPPETS MIGHT TRY TO BREAK THROUGH THE WALLS OR WINDOWS, SO DON'T FORGET TO KEEP THEM OCCUPIED."

At Alema's orders, the masked operatives disappeared just as quickly as they had arrived. They were fast, but they were clearly using covert concealment techniques—which meant that they, too, had to be agents of the intelligence organization.

"I never thought Gaishi would come to our rescue," Lionel murmured with a conflicted look.

It was common knowledge among those who had been part of the student council that Gaishi was the most belligerent and rabid among the six academies' intelligence agencies. This was almost certainly because it was under the direct control of Jie Long's student council president, whereas the majority of the other agencies were heavily influenced by their school's integrated enterprise foundation.

"So is Her Highness doing us a favor?"

"NO. LI'L XINGLOU JUST SAID WE COULD DO AS WE PLEASE. WE'RE ACTING ON OUR

OWN AUTHORITY," Alema said with a grin. "WE'VE GOT TO PUNISH THESE IDIOTS, THINKING THEY CAN DO WHATEVER THE HELL THEY WANT IN *OUR* BACKYARD. WE JUST BUMPED INTO YOU GUYS BY CHANCE. BUT HEY, IF YOU DON'T WANT OUR HELP, WE'LL GO ELSEWHERE."

"No. Thank you." Ernest bowed his head.

It was precisely because Alema and her colleagues belonged to Gaishi that they were so light on their feet. The other academies would have prioritized protecting their own students and evaluating the situation before taking action.

"HAH! IT'S BEEN TOO LONG SINCE I LAST WENT ALL OUT! TIME TO HAVE A LITTLE FUN!" Alema burst into a maniacal smile, holding her right hand out in front of her as she regulated her breathing.

Her movements, which should have been slow, were fluid and seamless.

"Yargh!"

With a roar even louder than before, Alema stepped forward, her leg piercing the earth as she attacked with the flat of her hand, penetrating the defensive barrier of a nearby puppet and obliterating its head.

She turned her right hand upward. It moved like flowing water as it hit the neck of another oncoming puppet.

Then, fending off the hammer of a third machine with her left hand, she spun around and tore off its head with her right.

She took out three of them all at once…?! And with her bare hands…?!

"Whew! You're good, lady!" Kevin cried despite himself.

Alema's movements really were brilliant.

"I'M JUST GETTING WARMED UP!" she declared, plunging alone into the throng of oncoming puppets.

She's certainly leveled up compared to last time…

According to information Ernest had received from Sinodomius while student council president, when Alema was defeated by Xinglou and lost her position as number one in Jie Long's hierarchy, she had been given the right to challenge her successor whenever she saw fit. At the time, Xinglou had forbidden her from speaking

while performing her duties. This was ostensibly because speaking aloud wasn't required to fulfill one's tasks as an intelligence operative, but perhaps it also served as a valuable training exercise.

In martial arts, vocalizing was one of the main components of demonstrating power. In particular, some Chinese schools passed down special methods known as *thunder voices*, which Alema had mastered. Xinglou must have had her suppress her voice in order to improve her basic abilities.

Indeed, Alema now seemed much more capable than Ernest remembered.

It was obvious that she had surpassed Hufeng Zhao, the current head of the Wood sect, in every metric barring speed. In terms of raw martial arts ability, she was right up there with Xiaohui Wu.

Uh-oh… If she keeps this up, I'm going to lose control again.

Ernest felt a ferocious beast awakening inside him.

"HAH! WHAT DO YOU KNOW? I THOUGHT I SENSED A DEMONIC PRESENCE BEHIND ME… I LIKE HOW YOU THINK, ERNEST. SEEING AS WE'RE BOTH HERE, WHY DON'T WE HAVE A GO AT EACH OTHER?" Alema laughed, glancing his way as she took out more puppets with a single blow.

Their eyes locked, filling the space with a dangerous tension, when—

"…!"

Both he and Alema felt goose bumps rise on their skin.

They both turned to see the figure of a young girl below the oversized air-window. She seemed to be watching the match.

"…OH, COME ON, SERIOUSLY? WHAT ARE *YOU* DOING HERE, APEIRON?"

When he heard Alema call out that name, Ernest swallowed heavily.

Apeiron, the Witch of Foundational Principles, alias of Fevroniya Ignatovich. She was Allekant's semi-legendary Page One, who hardly ever ventured out into public view. In fact, this was the first time Ernest had ever seen her in person.

"…You two. You're getting on my nerves, you know?"

As if in response to Alema's remark, Fevroniya, holding an open book in one hand, turned her sleepy eyes their way.

The next moment, all the puppets in their immediate vicinity twisted violently, their torsos tearing off and exploding in all directions.

"…"

Her display of overwhelming power left everyone speechless.

Meanwhile, Fevroniya turned her gaze back to the overhead screen as though nothing had happened.

"Ah, there you are…! I thought I told you not to run off by yourself… Huh?"

All of a sudden, someone familiar came running over, gasping for breath—Shuuma Sakon, Allekant's student council president.

"Well, this is an unusual group…"

"President Sakon, what are you doing here?"

Shuuma had practically zero fighting ability and was in no position to be hanging around such a dangerous area. His situation was completely different from that of Ernest, who had already retired as his school's student council president.

"It would take too long to explain… To put it simply, we—Fevroniya and I—were caught up in these terrorist attacks while out in the city. We tried to make our way back to the school, but the lakeside district is swarming with puppets, so we decided to go through the commercial area. Then all of a sudden, Fevroniya started running this way…" Shuuma explained all this with an embarrassed look, his shoulders slumping as he glanced at his companion. "As ashamed as I am to admit it, I don't think I'll be able to get back to Allekant without her help."

Fevroniya, the girl in question, kept staring at the overhead air-window.

"It looks like she's really keen on the match…," Ernest remarked.

"Oh…that's unusual. She doesn't normally take any interest in the Festa."

Following her lead, Ernest and the others looked at the display.

Ernest had come to the commercial area with Kevin and Lionel to watch the match. If he had asked Elliot, he could probably have reserved seats in the special viewing room, or else picked up some general admission tickets, but having already left the student

council, he didn't want special treatment. Besides, it was more fun to watch the match in the city streets without having to worry about everyone's expectations. In the end, however, other matters had taken precedence.

"I probably shouldn't say this, but the Glühen Rose is really something, huh? To be honest, I thought the match would have been decided by now," Kevin remarked.

"She's on a whole other level from the likes of us. Who knows? She might even manage to come out on top," Lionel added.

The two of them had finally found time to catch a breather.

But more puppets could show up at any moment. They had to remain on their toes.

"A DECISIVE BATTLE BETWEEN TWO STREGAS… WHAT ABOUT YOU, APEIRON?" Alema asked lightly, turning to Fevroniya. "COULD YOU BEAT THOSE TWO?"

"…Against the Glühen Rose, I'm not sure. But Erenshkigal would probably be too much."

"OH?" Alema's eyes widened in surprise—either at Fevroniya's answer, or at the frankness of her admission.

"I haven't trained to fight, so against Erenshkigal, it would come down to our abilities. In that case, there's no way I could keep up, given the difference in our power outputs. Right?"

"H-hold on, Fevroniya!" Shuuma interrupted in panic. "What are you doing, telling outsiders about your weaknesses?! And intelligence agents from other schools, no less!"

"Oh…" Fevroniya fell silent.

It was true that she didn't seem to have any specialist fighting knowledge or skills. According to intel from Sinodomius, she had an unbelievable ability that involved rewriting the laws of physics, but she had to carry a book on her at all times to use as a catalyst. If that was true, it was one more weakness that an opponent might take advantage of.

"B-but what a surprise…! Up till now, Fevroniya has only ever recognized two opponents she couldn't defeat. That's Erenshkigal for you," Shuuma interjected, obviously trying to change the subject.

"Oh? Who might those two be?" Ernest asked, choosing to go

along with the diversion.

Shuuma's face relaxed in visible relief. "The first is a certain someone from Jie Long who goes without saying. But the other one might surprise you."

Indeed, the name that rolled from Shuuma's lips came as a shock even to Ernest.

"The chairman of the Festa Executive Committee—oh, right, I guess he's technically the *former* chairman now. Madiath Mesa."

*

"…Well, you're a tenacious one, I'll give you that. I wouldn't have expected you to last through five attacks," Madiath said, looking astonished.

"Haaah… Haaah… Haaah…!"

Ayato could only pant in response.

He'd just endured five encirclement attacks from pieces of the Raksha-Nada.

Thanks to his *shiki* state, he had managed, albeit barely, to protect his head, his vitals, and the tendons in his limbs necessary to move freely, but the rest of his body was completely shredded.

The pain was already mind-numbing, and the bleeding was even worse. It wouldn't be long before he couldn't move at all.

Before that happened, he had to—

"Well then, let's try it a sixth time."

Once again, a cloud of shimmering crimson shards appeared all around him.

The fragments maintained their distance at first, but the net they formed around him slowly closed in, and no matter how he moved, they simply shifted along with him, trapping him.

"It would really help me out if you just gave up now," said Madiath in a calm, emotionless voice, just as the fragments dove toward Ayato. Their movement now felt less like an attack and more like a rote task.

Ayato desperately countered with the Ser Veresta. At times, he

deflected them with the edge of his blade, while at others, he twisted his body to evade their attacks. All the while, he withstood the storm, his dance-like movements scattering drops of blood.

Throughout it all, Ayato continued to observe Madiath.

This feat was only possible thanks to the fact that he had given his body over to his *shiki* state, allowing it to reflexively perform a variety of automatic maneuvers.

"Dear me, what a waste. You're only prolonging your suffering," Madiath said with a sigh.

Had he noticed?

Of course, Madiath was by no means complacent. He had the overwhelming advantage here, but if Ayato was the type to let his guard down, this fight would have already been over.

Though he was one-sidedly toying with Ayato, it was clear that Madiath remained firmly vigilant, ready to deal with any unforeseen possibilities. Above all, he wasn't devoting the entirety of the Raksha-Nada to his encirclement attacks. Small crimson pieces continued to glimmer in midair, ready to protect him from any unexpected counters.

That was why Ayato had to time his move perfectly.

No opportunity had presented itself during the first five attacks.

If he had been fighting anyone else, anyone besides this man with his formless, patternless combat style, he would have long since seized his chance.

Just because he had managed to withstand his opponent's strikes so far didn't mean that he was able to conquer them. In fact, Madiath's style of fighting was impossible to conquer.

Ayato just had to take his time, probing for a weakness.

Monitoring Madiath's breathing, the direction of his gaze, his every movement.

…And finally, a chance presented itself.

"Oh? Did Riessfeld use her special technique? In that case, the match will soon be settled—"

At that moment, Ayato dashed forward, closing the distance between them in a single breath—charging like a blinding sword flash.

"Amagiri Shinmei Style, Ultimate Technique III—*Uwabami*."

Without warning, blood gushed from Madiath's chest as his left arm fell limply to the ground, separated at the elbow.

"What…?"

For the first time, he looked surprised.

At the same moment, Ayato collapsed to the floor.

He managed to catch himself with his hands, but if he dropped his guard even for a moment, he risked slipping out of consciousness. Gritting his teeth, he fell back, putting some distance between himself and his opponent, and leaned against the wreckage of a fallen pillar, readying the Ser Veresta in front of him.

He had brute-forced his way through the Raksha-Nada's encirclement attacks, and the fragments had torn through his body, leaving considerable damage to some of his vital areas.

"…So you pulled it off," Madiath said with a glare as he called the fragments back to his sword.

Several other shards locked together to form a tourniquet, wrapping around the stump of his arm to stem the bleeding. It was a convenient tool, that was for sure.

"I didn't think you had another ultimate technique up your sleeve. So what kind of trick was that, then? I never would have expected you to pull off something I couldn't respond to."

"…I'll leave you guessing," Ayato replied, brushing the question off with a forced smile.

The Amagiri Shinmei style had three ultimate techniques. Among them, the Tsugomori was the perfect counter, the Wazaogi the perfect defense, and the Uwabami the perfect move for taking the initiative.

Precisely what it meant to *take the initiative* when countering and attacking tended to differ from one martial arts school to another, but in the Amagiri Shinmei style, it went beyond simply attacking before the enemy—it meant striking before they were even aware of the attack.

In other words, to deal an utterly inescapable blow.

However, it went without saying that once a battle was underway, pulling off such a feat was extremely difficult. After all, it was folly to

let yourself get distracted in such a situation.

But people weren't machines. No matter how skilled they were, complete control over every detail of one's physical and mental self was beyond the realm of possibility. The human body isn't controlled solely by the conscious mind, just as one's heart doesn't stop beating when one goes to sleep. No one can consciously process every iota of information that they take in.

No matter how vigilant and prepared one might be, there were always fluctuations. The blink of an eye, for example, or a momentary distraction caused by a piece of debris falling behind you. Small details, out of one's control.

Of course, you would need more than just one such distraction if you hoped to *take the initiative*. But when they piled up—when those details came together, they created gaps in one's awareness that even the person in question wouldn't notice.

But such moments tended to last less than a thousandth of a second, and with the individual themselves unaware of them, it was well-nigh impossible for others to catch on. Even if they could, by the time they thought to launch an attack, the opportunity would have already passed. It should have been impossible to exploit such an opening.

…Unless one was in the state of *shiki*, that is.

By maximizing and deepening the enhanced perception afforded by the state of *shiki*—the very essence of the Amagiri Shinmei style's various perception enhancement techniques—he could read fluctuations lasting only the briefest of moments. Through his understanding of the overall situation, he could even predict the moment they would overlap.

The heavy blow that he had unleashed with that perfect timing was his Uwabami technique.

Since it took advantage of his opponent's lapse in awareness, not only would Madiath be unable to evade, but he wouldn't be able to defend himself with the Raksha-Nada, either.

Or at least that was how it was supposed to play out.

That blow just now…it didn't feel quite strong enough. The moment my blade reached him, did he reflexively twist his body to

avoid it…?!

The speed required would have been superhuman.

Was it due to the transformation of his prana?

"Well, an arm is a small price to pay if it means seeing the plan to completion. I'll just get a healer to reattach it. After I kill you, that is."

Madiath was now frowning slightly, his earlier surprise nowhere to be seen.

"The fact that you waited so long to use that technique must mean you can't easily repeat it, no?"

"…"

Madiath had guessed right.

It took a considerable amount of time to establish the right conditions to use Ayato's Uwabami technique. It wasn't the kind of move that could be performed on a whim. Given his physical state, he would have difficulty pulling it off again.

"Ha-ha-ha. Looks like I hit the mark. And now you've revealed another weakness for me to abuse."

"Another weakness…?" Ayato repeated as he brought his breathing under control.

Madiath arced an eyebrow. "…Even now, you still haven't tried to kill me, have you?"

"…!"

"A swordsman can train to conceal his killing intent, but if you had actually intended to slay me, you would have cut a little deeper. Though a fatal blow may well have been out of reach."

"I…"

He was right again.

It was true that Ayato hated Madiath, after everything that he had done to his sister—but even now, he had no intention of taking the man's life.

"You're a fool. A true fool. I'm under no obligation to tell you this, but as someone who fought his way through this boring, insipid city, just as you have, I'll give you one piece of advice. You control your inner bloodlust well, but doing so keeps you from reaching me. Cultivate it, that savagery of yours. When need be, release your

inner anger, your hatred, your desire to kill. If you don't come at me with the intent to end my life, you'll never win."

Bloodlust was a negative emotion—a harrowing spirit that filled one's opponent with fear.

It could be found in everyone's heart, and it was certainly a source of strength in a fight.

And yet—

"…No," Ayato said quietly.

"Oh? And why not?"

"I don't want to be like you."

"Hah…!"

Madiath brought the Raksha-Nada around, the blade's small fragments assembling into long, thin chains. The result was a serpentine, whiplike weapon, similar in shape to the Serpent Blade Ororomunt. Five of those chains spread out like the feathers of a peacock, attacking as if they had minds of their own.

Ayato ran across the stage, leaping, slashing, and parrying with the Ser Veresta to dodge the blades as they came at him from above and below. Every time he put weight on his legs, blood spurted from the wounds crisscrossing his body, and he could feel his strength seeping out second by second. But if he stopped moving, it would all be over.

The crimson serpentine blades cut though everything in their path, pillars and ground alike, pursuing him as he fled. They refused to let up, giving him no time to catch his breath, but he continued to dodge all the same, assessing the logic of their movements.

On careful inspection, the links at the very end of the chains consisted of fragments more than twice as large as the rest. Since it was difficult to control small pieces, his opponent was probably only freely manipulating those larger ones, letting them drag the rest of the chain behind them.

In that case—

Ayato dove between two of the whiplike blades, then spun around and darted for Madiath.

"Hmm?"

Naturally, his foe was ready to intercept him with the Raksha-

Nada, while the remaining three whips pursued him from behind—a textbook pincer attack.

But just before Ayato could reach Madiath, he slammed on the brakes, his blade slashing through the first link of the oncoming whiplike blades as he spun around.

Having lost control, the serpentine swords careened straight for Madiath—but defeating him wouldn't be quite so easy. Just before they reached him, they froze in midair.

With his focus on manipulating the Raksha-Nada, however, his opponent had left himself open.

"Hah!"

"Tch…!"

But Ayato's blow, struck at the most opportune moment, passed through naught but thin air.

Madiath had managed to dodge Ayato's blade.

"That was close… Your ability to respond to attacks is not to be underestimated," he said, before lowering his voice dangerously. "I can't let you get the better of me because I kept teasing you for too long. I think it's about time. Let's finish this head-on."

Madiath's bloodlust swelled up from within, the prana filling his body shining with a blinding radiance. His vicious will was clear—he wanted to overturn, crush, and destroy everything in front of him.

Ayato, fighting not to get swallowed up by it, held the Ser Veresta ready in front of him.

A head-to-head duel was exactly what he wanted. After all, he didn't have much time left.

"…Come!"

At that word, Ayato and Madiath lunged for each other.

Madiath's strange gait confused Ayato's sense of distance, but he managed to block the oncoming blow with Ser Veresta.

His opponent was just as fast as before, but with his left arm gone, his physical strength was noticeably diminished.

Ayato slashed at his foe's feet as they changed places, but Madiath's blade instantly repelled him.

His automatic defenses, it seemed, were still alive and well.

And just as his own Ser Veresta was repelled, something slashed

at him from behind.

"…?!"

Though he dodged the attack thanks to his heightened senses, if he had been even a half-second slower, he would have been cut in half.

Glancing around, he spotted a red battle-ax floating in midair.

And that wasn't all.

Following behind the battle-ax, a cross spear lunged for his throat, while the blade of the Raksha-Nada itself, gripped firmly in Madiath's right hand, shot toward his thigh.

"Gah…!"

A Rect Lux…?! No, this is something else…!

Before he knew it, the Raksha-Nada had changed in size to match Ayato's own Ser Veresta, from that of a huge longsword to a standard blade.

He must have used the remaining material to forge that battle-ax and cross spear.

"Well, I *am* missing one arm. I need something to even things out, no? Think of this as the ace up my sleeve."

Madiath laughed breezily—but this battle had already taught Ayato just how much danger this posed.

With the fragments combined into weapons of these sizes, he could probably control them just as accurately as if he were holding them in his hand. He was essentially wielding three different weapons freely, each with different stances and attack methods, while keeping Ayato surrounded. On top of that, as a combat genius, Madiath was just as skilled at fighting with axes and spears as he was with swords.

Ayato, too, had learned all the different martial arts while training in the Amagiri Shinmei style, but he probably fell short of Madiath's ability, with his formless, unpredictable style.

And to top it all off, Madiath had his automatic defense system.

In terms of both offense and defense, Ayato's opponent was clearly superior.

"Now then, are you having second thoughts? Do you still think you can extricate yourself from this situation without slaying me?

Don’t be shy, unleash your inner savagery…!” Madiath demanded again as he lashed out at Ayato, now completely on the defensive.

“…I refuse!”

Ayato was shocked by the weight of the battle-ax’s strike.

Its output was completely different from a Rect Lux. The oversized Rect Lux wielded by Rodolfo Zoppo had also packed considerable power, but its speed and accuracy fell far short of what Ayato was fighting now.

“You fool! You ignorant fool! You’re so crippled by your naïveté that even I feel sorry for you! Your body is constrained by the Amagiri Shinmei style, your soul shackled by petty human morality! You’re bound hand and foot!”

The truth was, Ayato wasn’t refusing out of moral conviction.

But if he was to overcome Madiath Mesa here, it wouldn’t be by stooping to his opponent’s level. He knew that intuitively, in his gut.

Ayato had never killed anyone before. He had once resolved to take down Orphelia for Julis if it became absolutely necessary, but he realized now just how naive, how shallow, how foolish his thinking had been back then.

Madiath’s very existence was a denial of this whole city—of Asterisk. For that reason, Ayato felt that if he was going to oppose him, he had to work within Asterisk’s framework, and the Stella Carta that governed the Festa didn’t permit intentional killing.

Even Ayato didn’t fully approve of everything Asterisk stood for. In fact, in his own way, he was rather critical of it. But the truth was, there were things that could be accomplished only in this city, and he was where he was today thanks to this place.

It was wrong for those who had left that framework to try to crush it.

That was why Ayato had no intention of killing Madiath.

“So…! You…! Are you claiming you’re *free*?!”

Ayato barely avoided a string of three sword, ax, and spear strikes. Their timing was irregular yet unsparing.

“More than you, at least!”

In fact, Madiath’s fighting style didn’t seem to be bound by anything. It was truly without form or rhythm. His weapons moved

seamlessly, imbued with a heavenly beauty that any martial artist would aspire to.

And yet—

Just then, a question popped into Ayato's mind.

"…You said your goal was to accelerate progress, right?" he asked.

Madiath's eyebrows twitched. "Yes, indeed! To accelerate the flow of time! To sweep away the dregs of this bygone age!"

The Raksha-Nada crashed into Ayato's torso, knocking him back.

He was bleeding so badly that he could barely stay on his feet, but he clenched his teeth and managed, somehow, to keep going.

Then, fully cognizant of the distance between himself and his opponent, Ayato regulated his breathing.

"You know what they say about people who encounter misfortune or tragedy?" Madiath said as though he was making small talk. "*They were born in the wrong era. They were ahead of their time.* Whenever I hear some flippant excuse like that, I think to myself…" He paused there, lowering his head as he took a long, deep breath. "What a joke."

Ayato shivered at the deep hatred and immeasurable rage that lay behind those words.

"Their time? The wrong era? Don't try to cover it up with some vague, hackneyed cliché!" Madiath's roar reverberated through the chill underground air. "Yes, if Akari had been born earlier, she wouldn't have had so many worries. There would have been no room for that. For a while after Genestella came into the world, they didn't even think about things like discrimination. They were too few in number, and their lives were completely controlled. If she had been born a little later, no doubt she would have lived more freely. In the not-too-distant future, I'm sure regular people will have to fundamentally rethink the way they relate to Genestella."

Though Madiath was speaking aloud, Ayato got the feeling that his words were directed inward.

"No, she suffered only because she was born in the dim twilight of this hazy in-between time, neither day nor night. I can still see her bitter smile. Neither laughing nor crying. That smile was like a

symbol of Akari Yachigusa's situation in life—and the city of Asterisk itself… It's utterly repulsive."

"…So that's what you meant by acceleration."

Ayato finally understood.

What Madiath hated so bitterly was the present age itself.

"Yes, that's right. Right indeed. I will force change on this undefined era. If regular people and Genestella part ways and clash, the world will be forced to evolve. Whether the two sides will reconcile as equals once it's all over, or whether one will subjugate the other, doesn't matter to me. Either way, society will reach a decisive conclusion."

Madiath spoke with a devil-may-care attitude, but he must have meant every word of it. For him, the outcome was unimportant.

It wasn't even a wish, this desire of his—just pure tyranny.

"You think you have the right to decide that all by yourself?!"

In a single breath, Ayato closed the distance between them and lashed out with the Ser Veresta.

"When people say they were born into the wrong era," Madiath bellowed, "it's because they don't have the power to change it. *I* had the power to change it, and the position, too. So there's no reason not to make it happen!"

Instead of relying on his automatic defenses, Madiath parried Ayato's attack with the Raksha-Nada itself.

As their blades locked together, the battle-ax and cross spear rushed at him from behind.

"It's over!" Madiath declared, assured of his victory.

But Ayato parried the battle-ax approaching from overhead with the Ser Veresta in his right hand, and without even turning around, he used his left arm to swat away the tip of the cross spear about to pierce him from behind.

"How?!"

"I understand now. You're not free. You're bound by the past."

As Ayato said this, Madiath's expression gave way to rage.

No—this anger had likely always been seething inside him and was only now rising to the surface.

…Perhaps he had always been consumed by hatred and fury, long

before he'd ever met Ayato or Haruka.

"Don't assume to know me!" he fumed, lashing out with a three-step thrust like an oncoming thunderbolt.

Ayato, however, dodged the strike with a bare minimum of movement.

"Impossible! You saw through me?!"

No.

What Ayato had seen was the source of Madiath Mesa's strength.

His anger.

For him, it was stronger, more intense, more powerful than any other emotion—and it was the basis of his bloodlust.

But in the Amagiri Shinmei style—as in a great many martial arts—the first thing one learned was this:

Never let your anger get the better of you.

"Hah!"

Ayato slashed diagonally to the right with the Ser Veresta.

Just like before, pieces of the Raksha-Nada came together, forming a blade in midair to catch the blow.

This time, however, the outcome was different.

The urm-manadite within the Ser Veresta shone even brighter than before and burned clean through the opposing blade.

"Ngh?!"

Madiath leaped backward to dodge the slash, but his expression now betrayed a hint of agitation alongside his fury.

It made perfect sense, if you stopped to think about it.

The Ser Veresta and the Raksha-Nada were Orga Luxes of the same rank, so under normal circumstances, it should have been impossible for mere fragments of the latter to block a strike from the former. The Raksha-Nada's defense was effective only because it suddenly formed new blades in a space where none should exist—in effect, catching Ayato off guard. But if the wielder of the Ser Veresta knew from the beginning precisely when and where his attack would be blocked, there was no way that the strike could be deflected.

As though the Ser Veresta itself now understood this, it trembled in Ayato's hand.

Perhaps, in its own way, it was proud to have proven itself a

match for the Raksha-Nada.

"…Hah! I see, I see. I'll admit it, I'm bound by the past… By Akari. That's right. But that doesn't mean I'm about to lose to *you*!"

Rushing forward with blinding speed, Madiath unleashed a simultaneous attack from three directions.

As expected, Ayato couldn't handle all three of them, and he winced as the Raksha-Nada tore through his side.

"Ugh…!"

The truth was, Ayato may have seen through Madiath's true nature and breached his automatic defenses, but he still hadn't gained the upper hand. His foe's formless fighting style was tremendously powerful—the real deal—and in physical terms, Madiath remained overwhelmingly superior.

But most of all, the wear and tear that Ayato had suffered throughout their encounter was proving too much. Madiath may have taken a fair amount of damage, too, but Ayato could barely keep himself standing. At this rate, he would probably pass out within minutes.

And yet—

"There's still one advantage I have over you," Ayato murmured with a faint smile as he coughed up blood.

"…?!"

"What you consider a burden, I see as connection…!"

That's right.

There was no way he was about to lose to a man who saw his bonds with others as constraints holding him back.

Ayato had formed bonds with a great many people during his time here.

Saya, Claudia, Kirin, Sylvia, Eishirou, Lester, Irene, Priscilla, Flora, Ernesta, Camilla, Ardy, Rimcy, Ernest, Elliot, Xinglou, Hufeng, Minato, Yuzuhi, Helga, Kyouko… The list was endless.

For that reason alone, this city held a special place in his heart.

And above all else—

For a brief second, he glanced at the air-window showing the ongoing match.

Seeing his most valuable partner on the screen, he recalled what

he had told her the other day.

"…So that's why I'm going to finish this!"

"What nonsense…!"

As Ayato stepped forward, Madiath plunged the Raksha-Nada deep into his side, then pulled it out.

Madiath had been a step faster, recovering his battle stance before Ayato could swing his blade.

And yet—

"Amagiri Shinmei Style, First Technique—*Twin Serpents!*"

Ayato's blade slipped past his foe's weapon, carving a cross into his body.

"Wh-what…?"

Madiath watched, incredulous, as the Raksha-Nada fell from his hands.

The move Ayato had just used wasn't one of the Amagiri Shinmei style's ultimate or hidden techniques, but one of its most basic battle forms. One that he had practiced thousands, no, tens of thousands of times.

This, too, was a kind of bond—that between Ayato and his sword.

CHAPTER 4

THE FINAL BATTLE IV

Dirk Eberwein, the Tyrant, was staring at several air-windows inside his airship cabin.

He was, of course, keeping an eye on the plan. Like Madiath, he was equipped to monitor every section of Asterisk in real time using the cameras installed in the Valiant puppets.

At the moment, everything was going smoothly and yet falling apart at the same time. That was because Dirk had betrayed the Golden Bough Alliance. If the situation continued like this, it would end half-accomplished, half-failed.

And that was precisely what Dirk wanted.

A world without winners.

He didn't believe that such a thing would ever be truly realized, but he could strive to get as close to that ideal as possible.

That was why he had intentionally passed on valuable intel to Eishirou and encouraged Ayato and the others to go after Varda and Madiath.

"…Well, it's not like they'll get the drop on Madiath and Varda."

So long as Ayato and his comrades were forced to act in small groups, their odds of victory remained slim.

Varda aside, they would never defeat Madiath. He had the highest affinity with the Raksha-Nada Dirk had ever seen.

Ayato and his friends had already fulfilled their role.

At this point, the sooner they were dead and out of the picture, the better.

"If there's a problem here, it's Orphelia," Dirk grumbled as he expanded the air-window showing the ongoing championship match. "She's having a harder time than I expected…"

He had to admit that not even he had anticipated the princess's raw tenacity.

Nonetheless, the difference in strength between the two was clear as day. Orphelia's victory was inevitable. It wouldn't be long before she snatched it.

And that would mark the end of Asterisk.

Dirk snorted as he gazed at the skyscrapers towering outside his window.

Soon, everyone who called this place home would perish, and the city itself would sink beneath the waves.

Oh, how good it felt.

If he could witness its destruction from beginning to end, perhaps it would ease the disgust and loathing that burned within him, if only a fraction.

But such thoughts were pointless. He clicked his tongue, just as the airship suddenly jolted to one side.

"…I don't like that shaking. That's no air current."

Snapping his fingers, he called for his bodyguards—but as time passed, they failed to appear.

In addition to Dirk, there were two others aboard the airship. Both guards were his protégés, each exceptionally skilled and unaffiliated with Grimalkin. One was responsible for piloting the airship, the other for security.

Out of options, Dirk clicked his tongue again and stepped out of the room.

He was well aware that Ayato and his buddies were tailing him, but it would be practically impossible for them to reach him here. In which case—

He headed for the cockpit, mulling over this possibility. And there he found the first of his bodyguards lying in a pool of blood. Should he assume that the other had been eliminated as well?

Even after Dirk realized that he, a regular human, was the only one left standing, he kept his calm.

If he was going to die no matter what, there was no need to disgrace himself with an act of cowardice.

"Tch! Useless bastards…!" he cursed, pushing his bodyguard aside

to sit in the pilot's seat.

For a man of his skills, controlling an aircraft like this was child's play.

Whatever he did, he first had to land the vessel safely.

But just then—

"Huh…?"

The chair's shadow coalesced into a blade, piercing him through the abdomen.

"This ability…Gold Eye Number Seven?"

Grimacing in pain, he glanced around and spotted the figure of a man slowly coming into view by the door, as though seeping out from the shadows themselves. When he was an agent at Grimalkin, Gold Eye Number Seven, Wernher, had worked for him.

Several years ago, Dirk had ordered Wernher to execute a strategy to entrap Ayato during the Phoenix. Ultimately, the operation had failed, and Wernher was supposed to have been killed in action…

"You survived? Why didn't you come back?" he demanded.

Wernher offered no answers.

Well, he was an agent in an intelligence organization, so that made sense. But Dirk soon realized that there was another reason for his silence.

His eyes were as empty as glass beads. There was no sign of human will or independent thought behind them.

I know that look. Varda must have completely brainwashed him… Which I guess means Madiath sent him here.

Not that he had been dispatched per se. This was probably a contingency plan in case Dirk ever betrayed the alliance or started acting against its interests. Varda would never have come up with a ploy like this, which meant that it was obviously Madiath's doing.





“Hmph! So you’re the one who scooped him up, Madiath… No wonder he never made it back to base.”

A fresh blade appeared in Wernher’s hand, aimed for Dirk’s throat.

Slumped back in his chair as he was, Dirk had no interest in trying to dodge it—though, of course, it would have been impossible anyway. But the weapon stopped just before it could slice through his throat. Wernher suddenly clutched his head in apparent pain.

“Ah… So Varda lost, then?”

If Varda was destroyed, her brainwashing would lose all effect.

The timing was ironic, but this didn’t yet mean that he was in the clear.

The blood loss from his gut wound was already blurring his vision.

In this state, there was no way that he would be able to fly an airship. Heck, he would probably soon lose consciousness.

“Damn it…! To think I’d die before I could see this wretched city fall…!”

Without a pilot, the airship slowly lost altitude, approaching the surface of the lake.

*

In simple terms, Julis’s Queen of the Night move was a special technique for converting mana into prana.

Prana and mana were elements with a high degree of affinity. Dantes and Stregas used prana as an intermediary to manipulate mana, so it went without saying that the two operated hand in hand. This was what Julis believed, but it wasn’t simply her opinion—mainstream theories held that prana was an adapted form of mana, made to operate more effectively within the human body.

If that was the case, Julis thought it stood to reason that one might be able to lean on their commonalities to wield mana as though it were prana. However, that would require a device to convert the former into the latter. When it came to exerting fine

control over prana and also functioning as an excellent medium, there was only one entity that came to mind—the human body.

That's right: Julis's Queen of the Night technique used her own body as a conversion device—which was precisely why Xinglou had described her as the biggest fool in the last several hundred years. Should the conversion process fail and worse come to worst, her physical body could very well disintegrate. Even if it succeeded, there was a good chance that she would burn herself during the process, since her power took the form of flames. In fact, she had come within a hair's breadth of losing her life several times just perfecting this move. If not for her time at the Liangshan and the presence of Xinglou Fan as her teacher, she would probably have wound up dead long before ever working out how to perform it.

And despite the huge risk, the technique's effects lasted for only twelve seconds. She had tried to extend that limit through trial and error, but found it impossible. A flower that bloomed for one night only would inevitably wilt come morning.

Its effect, however, was enormous.

Like this, for example:

"Burst into bloom—*Longiflorum, Multiflos!*"

After activating her Queen of the Night, Julis immediately deployed her Strelitzia wings and soared into the air, then summoned countless spears of bluish-white flames, each one of them longer than her own body. There must have been more than fifty of them in total.

Those spears, in the shape of Easter lilies, launched like missiles, burning through everything in their path.

Orphelia moved to block them with her arms of ominous miasma, but the flaming white flower spears tore straight through them, blowing them away.

"Ngh!"

Orphelia didn't attempt to block them with her bare hands, as she usually would, instead falling backward. She must have realized the extent of Julis's power the moment she saw it. In fact, with her current firepower, she ought to be strong enough to break through all of Orphelia's defenses.

Practically pursuing her, spears of white flame rained down one after another, pillars of fire bursting across the stage. But Orphelia's physical abilities were astonishing, and Julis was unable to corner her.

And then—

"Burst into bloom—*Anemone Coronaria!*"

More than a dozen huge flaming flowers, each of which could easily be mistaken for a miniature sun, appeared suddenly in midair.

In this state, Julis could easily perform countless large-scale moves in rapid succession, and even execute them simultaneously.

This was because she could use all the mana around her as her own prana. In essence, Queen of the Night gave Julis the same unlimited store of prana available to Orphelia.

That also meant Julis could pour as much prana as she liked into each technique—so long as she didn't overload them to the point of collapse, that is. The potency of her moves was now on a totally different level.

A solar flower of roiling flame, its diameter well over ten meters wide, attacked Orphelia, surrounding her. The heat alone would probably have rendered any ordinary Genestella unconscious.

With a time limit of only twelve seconds, Julis could probably pull off only three moves. Half of the Queen of the Night flowers shining behind her had already withered.

If possible, she wanted to finish Orphelia off with her next move.

"Nim a Jimuna."

"…?!"

Right then, like a geyser erupting, a huge mass of black liquid spewed out around Orphelia—completely vaporizing the fireball that threatened to burn everything away.

A liquefied gas…!

The miasma must have been compressed to liquefy it, and once in that state, its density was completely different. Even with Julis's current firepower, she didn't think she could break through it.

If this had been the Orphelia of a few moments ago, the match would already have been decided. It seemed that, at full power, Orphelia was a monster beyond Julis's wildest imagination.

Julis, however, was the same.

Three seconds left! One more move!

Julis's fireball and Orphelia's liquefied gas annihilated each other, and as the resulting steam enveloped them, Julis dashed as quickly as she could straight for her opponent.

Right now, she possessed unparalleled physical strength, since her body was imbued with inexhaustible prana. She could even move her broken right arm without any difficulty.

Orphelia was clearly taken by surprise. She probably hadn't expected this speed.

"Burst into bloom—*Magnolia Grandiflora!*"

She put her hands together, aiming straight for Orphelia's chest, and no sooner had she called out the words than a bright flash of white engulfed her vision, followed by a blinding explosion.

A superpowered attack delivered at close range.

The explosion, which would usually have swallowed the whole stage, had been compressed down to the size of a few petals—producing a technique of absolute destructive potential, only possible while her Queen of the Night was deployed.

Immediately after releasing it, the flowers behind Julis's back withered away, and the strength quickly drained from her body. Her hair, which the technique had paled, returned to a rosy pink, while her body stung with a lattice of burns.

After using Queen of the Night, her prana was almost totally depleted. The aftereffects were a little less severe each time she used it, though she couldn't pin down precisely why. This time, too, she seemed to have slightly more prana left over than on the last occasion, though it was still less than one tenth of the usual amount.

"…Wh-whoa! S-sorry, everyone! Watching all that unfold so quickly, I guess I was at a loss for words! But enough about me dropping the ball on the live commentary…er, what do you think, Zaharoula?"

"Assuming it actually made contact, even Orphelia Landlufen should have taken damage from that last attack. The fact that the match still hasn't been decided must mean that her school crest hasn't been damaged and she hasn't lost consciousness… But I

wouldn't be surprised if she's been downed."

As the voices of the commentator and analyst washed over her, Julis suppressed the urge to collapse and trained her eyes on the roiling dust cloud, trying to see past it.

And sure enough, she could see the faint silhouette of Orphelia, her knees on the ground.

"Whoa! Orphelia is still alive and well, though she's taken considerable damage! She's down on her knees!"

Her Le Wolfe uniform was torn apart here and there, her exposed skin red and swollen.

Even so, her expression betrayed neither anger nor pain nor frustration. Rather, it was dominated by quiet resignation and sorrow. But for the briefest of moments, a glimmer of faint, unvanquished desire seemed to flash across her face, contradicting her usual emotions.

"…That was good, Julis," she began in a calm, slightly hoarse voice. "I'm impressed. The strength of your destiny…and its opposition to mine here and now…there must be some meaning behind it. So please…don't let this be the end."

"…?!"

Julis was speechless.

"You, your destiny—they've pushed me to this. So you'll have to take responsibility until the very end. Now, shall we continue?"

Orphelia stood up unsteadily, fixing Julis with her crimson gaze.

"H-hmph…! You're in no state to talk like that," Julis said. "I'm well aware this applies to both of us, but I think you've already reached your limit. There's no need to keep pushing yourself, right…?"

"Limit…? You say the strangest things, Julis. There is no limit to my—to Orphelia Landlufen's destiny."

No sooner had she finished speaking than a thin miasmic tendril rose from Orphelia's feet, gently grazing her neck.

"Ga ra Tuul."

Orphelia's body trembled, tensing up.

"Ah… Ah… Aaah…!"

Her eyes widened, and she glanced overhead, sobs spilling from

her mouth as blood foamed up from her throat.

"What…? What are you doing, Orphelia?!"

Without responding, Orphelia seemed to grow weak, before turning bloodshot eyes on Julis. Blood vessels and veins were visible all across her body, pulsing violently.

"Orphelia! What *was* that?!" Julis cried again. Orphelia merely shook her head weakly.

"…You know what they say," she began at last. "How something can be both poison and medicine? Just like how toxic plants have been used to make healing tonics. That was a technique to force my body to keep moving, even if it kills me."

By the time she finished speaking, Orphelia was no longer staggering. By all appearances, the damage that she had sustained earlier was gone—in fact, she seemed to be gaining yet more strength.

"…Th-that's insane! Cut it out, Orphelia! Why are you…?!"

Julis cried out as rage welled up inside her, but she shut her mouth as soon as she saw Orphelia's face. Swallowing her words, she bit her lip so hard that she drew blood.

To anyone else watching, Orphelia's expression must have looked the same as ever. Resignation, grief, lamentation were all there, covering it.

But to Julis, and only her, there was something more.

"If you want to stop my destiny—"

"…Yeah, I know. I know."

How many times had she heard those words?

But now she understood.

All this time, Orphelia had been telling her to stop this.

The tears in Julis's eyes were the result of her own ineptitude. She looked down, wiped them away with the back of her hand, and reaffirmed her resolve.

"I'll stop you, Orphelia. I'll crush that stupid destiny of yours."

"Do it, Julis. If you can," Orphelia responded quietly.

Julis was already covered in wounds.

Her injuries wouldn't keep her from moving, but crucially, her prana was running out.

What should she do?

She didn't need to think very hard to know she had only one option.

I'll have to use my Queen of the Night again…!

But that was something Xinglou had expressly forbidden.

"Do you hear me? Once you've used that technique, you need to give yourself at least a full day's rest before trying it again. Otherwise, your body won't be able to endure it. If you don't obey this warning, that one-night flower of yours will wither without ever opening its bud."

In other words, if she tried to use it again right away, it would inevitably fail.

And if it failed, that would mean certain death for Julis.

But I can't give up now…!

Julis took a deep breath, made up her mind, and drew on her prana.

Even if it meant crumbling to dust, if she couldn't save her friend, what else would she ever accomplish?

Her most treasured partner—that day, he had told her that he would do anything in his power to protect her, to be her strength.

Julis wanted to do the same for Orphelia.

"Bloom—"

But just as she was about to convert the prana coursing within her, her body was enveloped in raging hellfire.

"Gaaarrrggghhh!"

She hadn't activated Queen of the Night—a breakdown had occurred in the conversion process.

"Wh-what's going on here?! Riessfeld's burning up, literally!"

"…Her prana is out of control. This is bad…"

While the scorching flames burned her body, Julis fought desperately to bring her prana under control, but nothing was working. Her fire resistance seemed to be doing nothing, and she had to stop breathing to keep from inhaling the flames.

A-at this rate…!

"I'm sorry, Julis… But I won't show you any mercy…"

Staring at her opponent, Orphelia solemnly wove her miasma into

a potent arm and swung it down. If she let herself get crushed, Julis knew it would be the end of the line.

"Gah… Argh…!"

Even so, she focused her attention exclusively on her prana. She would fight it until the very end.

And then—

Wh-what…?

All of a sudden, her consciousness was flung into a void.

Below her was a huge blue planet.

And around it, innumerable stars.

She was floating, she realized, in distant space.

No… It can't be… This place…

She understood at once.

This was the world known as *the other side*.

A galaxy overflowing with mana.

A universe in which gods existed.

…!

And she could tell that a being of incomparable immensity had sensed her, despite how tiny she felt.

But before the entity could touch her consciousness, Julis was dragged back to her own reality.

She gazed at the miasmic arm about to drop down and crush her, as though time had stopped.

Her thoughts were still in chaos.

She vaguely comprehended that a *hole* had opened up in her mind for the briefest of moments, connecting her to the other side. The hole had been quickly closed, but thanks to that, her consciousness was safe.

And through that momentary encounter, she had reached an intuitive understanding of the true nature of mana and prana. She knew the breath of God, the essence of all things.

I can do this now.

She would pay the price for it, but that was okay.

If it meant winning this match, the sacrifice would be worth it.

"Bloom—*Queen of the Night, Multiflos*."

The second she murmured those words, time started moving again.

Behind her, twelve queen of the night flowers unfurled their petals like in a mandala.

Twelve seconds and twelve flowers—in other words, she had been afforded a hundred and forty-four seconds. She didn't know what would come afterward, nor did she care.

As Julis became one with the pale flames, the miasmic arm approached to crush her, only to be instantly sliced in half by a huge blazing sword.

"Burst into bloom—*Gladiolus.*"

Swinging the blood from her sword, Julis murmured the name of her next technique.

"…I see. So you've seen the other side…!"

Orphelia was visibly surprised, but she seemed to understand everything.

A slight smile appeared on her face.

Without responding, Julis rose up into the sky and called out at the top of her voice: "Burst into bloom—*Antirrhinum Majus, Multiflos!*"

The flaming dragon, infused with enormous prana thanks to her Queen of the Night, swooped down on Orphelia, rearing its seven heads.

"Ku gar ilulu yankashiw."

The next moment, a jet-black dragon forged from Orphelia's miasma rose to meet it head on.

Pure white flames and pitch-black miasma collided, beginning a fierce struggle.

"Wh-what a contest! This is incredible! I have no words except to say this is totally incredible!"

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Yes! I've always, always *wanted to see a fight like this!"*

But neither Mico's nor Zaharoula's voice reached Julis's ears.

At that moment, everything but Orphelia had faded from her consciousness.

The dragons' duel ended in a draw, and both exploded like a barrage of fireworks, leaving behind scattered sparks and wisps of miasma.

"Burst into bloom—*Saururus Gregarious!*"

With a wave of her arm, countless white lizard's tail flowers rose up across the stage then exploded all at once.

This attack had an enormous range, and it obliterated the battlefield.

Orphelia leaped up into the air to evade, and Julis took aim at her, unleashing another attack: "Burst into bloom—*Erythrina!*"

With that, hundreds of flaming swords appeared overhead, surrounding Orphelia in midair.

Julis had surmised that Orphelia lacked the ability to fly. If she could, she wouldn't have waited this long to reveal it.

In which case, it should be impossible for her to dodge this next strike.

"…Ningishzida."

But Orphelia ensnared the fiery blades with a barrage of tentacles emerging from empty air—no doubt made up of the same liquefied gas that she had employed earlier.

Not only that, but the space around Julis began to distort, too, and more tentacles lashed out at her.

"Tch!"

In her current state, Julis had the speed to deal with them—but the fact that they had appeared suddenly and out of nowhere was a bad sign. She managed to pull away with a flap of her wings, but then— "Uh-oh…!"

By the time Julis realized what was happening, Orphelia was already using the tentacles as a foothold, her right arm stretched out toward the sky.

This will be a big one…!

"…Gugalanna!"

A huge amount of miasma formed a dark cloud near the top of the stage, falling directly toward Julis in a terrifying torrent, as

though several huge waterfalls had been bundled together.

"Burst into bloom—*Redcrown Breeding!*"

Julis's next technique's pentagonal petals, strengthened in the nick of time, shielded her like an umbrella, holding the miasma at bay.

The world lost all color as a terrifying roar filled the air.

Even now, Julis continued to manipulate her prana, pushing it ever wider, ever deeper.

Her opponent, it seemed, was doing the same.

As soon as the cascading miasma subsided, both fighters' voices overlapped, echoing across the stage.

"Burst into bloom—*Rose Odysseia Garden!*"

"…Erragal!"

Julis's technique summoned small flaming roses, the same type that had won her match against Xiaohui Wu. They were around the size of small fists, but with the added effects of her Queen of the Night, they were powerful enough to break through all of Orphelia's defenses.

These flowers contained the memories that the two of them had nurtured in the orphanage's greenhouse together.

The same precious flower was embroidered on her handkerchief, the one that had set everything in motion.

And those roses—thousands of them, sparkling like stars—began to fill the stage.

Meanwhile, a huge quantity of miasma engulfed Orphelia, taking on the appearance of a malevolent god. It had to be over thirty meters tall, with a skeletal head and a horrifying, wraithlike body.

"Burn!"

Julis issued her order, and the roses flew straight for the underworld titan as more explosions than could possibly be counted lit up across the stage. But the giant paid them no heed, reaching out to crush her.

Julis quickly sped up to dodge it, but the titan pursued her with a speed unthinkable for something so huge. Meanwhile, roses of flame continued to burst in every direction, chipping away at the giant's body, though they seemed no more effective than a volley of

cannonballs fired at a mountain.

"In that case…!"

Julis concentrated her fire on the titan's abdomen.

At last, the figure's miasmic body was wearing away.

The titan writhed in agony and turned its gaping eyes—or rather, its empty sockets—toward her.

A chill ran down Julis's spine and she raced to fall back, when a ray of super-compressed miasma shot out from the creature's eye, carving the stage in two.

She had dodged the beam in the nick of time, but it had severed her wings, and she lost control. She crashed into the stage, which was now reduced to rubble.

At the same time, the hellish titan disintegrated, melting away from the stomach as Orphelia crawled out.

Julis had less than thirty seconds left before her Queen of the Night reached its limit.

She would have to settle this.

Both she and Orphelia staggered to their feet, panting, and locked eyes.

They had both realized it.

No technique would be enough to decide this contest.

In stoic silence, the two approached each other—and then, in the blink of an eye, they kicked the ground and struck out with their fists, using all their strength.

Julis's punch landed in the pit of Orphelia's stomach.

Orphelia's struck her in the face.

Both of them now had inexhaustible prana, and they lashed out at each other with fully charged strikes.

Before either could so much as groan, they were both blown away, rolling and tumbling over the ground.

But they quickly rose back to their feet, Julis wiping the blood from her battered nose, Orphelia spitting up blood as she fixed her opponent with a glare.

Both hits had hurt. Of course they had.

Both of them would have concentrated their prana to maximize their defenses, but those boosts wouldn't be able to match their

increased attack power.

In all likelihood, neither would be able to withstand the next blow.

Julis understood. This was a fight—a fight between two children.

"Juuuuuliiiiisssss!"

"Orpheliaaaaa!"

Screaming out each other's names, they let their fists fly once more.

This time, they both dealt heavy blows to each other's flank.

Their voices were replaced with airy pants as they each buckled at the knees, leaning against the other.

"…Hey, Orphelia?" Julis asked.

"…What, Julis?" Orphelia's voice was so hoarse it was almost inaudible.

"Don't you think…this is getting ridiculous?"

"…I agree."

"Then we'd better wrap things up," Julis said, summoning the last of her strength.

"…"

As Orphelia knelt, staring up at her, Julis raised her hand high into the air.

"This is payback…Orphelia."

The next moment, she slapped her hard across the cheek.

A soft, audible smack reverberated across the stage.

Orphelia curled up in surprise, then opened her eyes as though on the verge of tears. Just like that, she fell flat on her back as the tears began to spill out, joined by the sound of laughter.





“You win, Julis.”

“Orphelia Landlufen—forfeit.”
“End of battle! Winner: Julis-Alexia von Riessfeld!”

CHAPTER 5

DREAM'S END

"Haha… Oh dear…"

Madiath bent down to retrieve the Raksha-Nada, then collapsed to his knees. Blood poured endlessly from the cross-shaped wound in his chest, rapidly pooling beneath him.

It looked like he didn't have the strength to keep standing.

"Hah…hah…!"

With his side cut open, Ayato, on the other hand, was on the verge of losing consciousness at any moment. His hands and feet were numb, his vision blurring from the blood loss.

Despite all this, he was able to make out the end of the championship match displayed in the air-window—to see the moment that Julis won the Lindvolus.

"I never thought Miss Orphelia would lose…," Madiath murmured.

His voice held regret, but at the same time, it sounded as though a burden had been lifted from his shoulders.

Ayato summoned what little strength he had left and pointed the Ser Veresta at the older man.

"If you want to keep going…"

But before he could finish those words, Madiath closed his eyes and shook his head.

"As much as I would like to…unfortunately, I doubt Miss Orphelia will heed our instructions any longer."

Ayato was of the same opinion.

Orphelia's expression in the air-window was missing its usual resignation. Already, she was a different woman from the person she had been at the start of the match.

Julis had done it.

Ayato couldn't be prouder of her.

"Ayato, I'm done here."

The next moment, Saya stepped out from the audience seating, flashing him a peace sign.

It looked like she had disarmed the bombs in time.

"…! Ayato?!"

Perhaps it was the relief, or maybe he'd just reached his limit, but Ayato fell to the ground, the world spinning around him.

Saya leaped out from the audience stands in a panic and rushed over.

"Your wounds…!"

She held him up, visibly swallowing as she looked over his injuries.

"I'm okay… More importantly, you have to let everyone know…"

"You idiot!" Saya cried with tears in her eyes, slapping him on the forehead. "There's no way you're okay!"

"She's right," Madiath interjected, feigning innocence. "You've suffered damage to your internal organs. Get him to a hospital as quickly as you can. See that he's treated by a healer. Otherwise, it'll be too late."

"And who do you think did this to him…?!" Filled with anger, Saya whipped her handgun in his direction.

But Ayato reached out, gently lowering her hand along with the gun clutched tightly in her palm.

"…Same to you, Madiath Mesa. You're in better shape than me, but that wound will kill you if you don't get it treated. Let's go to the hospital together."

"Oh dear, are you trying to *save* me now?" Madiath said with an astonished smile. "You really are hopelessly naive."

"We'll be handing you over to Stjarnagarm, too, of course."

"Ha-ha-ha. That will be a problem. I don't think I'll be able to stand one of the good commander's lectures. I'm sorry, but I'll have to decline."

With those words, Madiath pulled out a mobile and activated a small air-window.

"…!"

Saya's expression stiffened.

"Saya?"

"…Ayato… That's probably the detonation switch."

"What…?! But I thought you'd defused all the bombs… Ngh!"

Ayato tried to pull himself up, but the pain dragged him back to the ground.

"There's no way you could have known this, but there's a basement level beneath the stage—a waiting area for full-time fighters. Back in the day, I made use of it quite often. As it happens, I placed one more bomb down there."

He wasn't joking.

Madiath Mesa wasn't the kind of man to bluff at a time like this.

"Oh, don't worry. Even if it goes off, all it will do is destroy this stage. It isn't powerful enough to take down the walls. Things would be different if the manadite-infused bombs in the audience galleries were to go off, but there's no chance of that now, is there?"

Ayato glanced at Saya, who confirmed this with a small nod.

"In that case, why…?"

"I'll take care of myself, at least."

"…You don't mean to take us with you?" Saya asked.

"What kind of person do you think I am?" Madiath responded, dismayed.

"A villain," Saya answered at once.

"I won't deny that… But I hate putting good potential to waste. There's no point getting you both caught up in any more of this."

"…"

Ayato's gaze met Madiath's for a short, yet seemingly endless moment. Try as he might to discern the other man's true thoughts, he couldn't work him out.

Madiath was the first to avert his gaze, glancing down to one side and heaving a deep sigh.

"Come on now, get going," he said. "Given all the commotion up there, the hospitals must be in quite a mess. If you don't hurry, you really will lose your life. Or do you want to end it here with me?"

"…Let's go, Ayato," Saya said, lifting him by the shoulders and dragging him to the elevator within one of the pillars.

Just before they stepped inside, Ayato glanced back once more.

Madiath had already turned away.

He was probably looking toward the past—letting it consume him to the very end.

He had no need for the future.

That was what Madiath decided the day he lost Akari.

He could see no value in a future without her.

Even now, his feelings remained unchanged.

"Well, I suppose this is a fitting end for a pathetic man unable to let go of his regrets…," Madiath murmured to himself, alone on the Eclipse stage.

Taking revenge against the era itself might have sounded like a good idea, but in the end, it had all been to satisfy his own ego. Even if the plan had succeeded, it wouldn't have brought him any comfort. He had known that from the beginning.

Still, he hadn't had any choice but to press on.

No one could possibly understand him, nor did he want them to.

No. He would have liked for Haruka to understand, if only a little. But in the end, that was just another selfish wish. She wasn't Akari.

"…Now then."

Madiath removed his mask, tossing it away before casually reaching out to tap the air-window.

The events of that day flashed once more before his vision.

"My wish—"

Oh, Akari… I really did want to hear what came next.



*

"Gah! Ga-hah…! Ugh…!"

Dirk coughed, gasping for air—and when he opened his eyes, he found himself staring at a familiar face.

"Th-thank goodness…! Are you all right, Mr. President? N-no, right, I know you're not okay, but anyway…!" she stammered, hurriedly moving her hands as large teardrops spilled from her eyes.

Dirk was about to give her the usual tongue-lashing, but he stopped himself and grimaced, clenching his teeth at the intense pain in his stomach. All the fat down there had kept Wernher's knife from hitting anything vital, and the bleeding had already stopped, so the wound wasn't immediately life-threatening, at least. If he had taken another blow, however, there was no way he would have survived.

Still enduring the pain, he glanced around and realized that he was on the shore of a lake. Looking farther ahead, he spotted the city of Asterisk in the distance and the wreckage of a half-destroyed airship partly submerged in the water nearby.

After Wernher's attack, he must have lost control of the airship and crashed into the lake. If so, it was hard to believe he'd survived. Maybe his luck hadn't entirely abandoned him.

"…And? What are *you* doing here, Korona?"

Dirk had ordered his secretary, Korona Kashimaru, to leave for a business trip to Solnage's headquarters two days ago. A regular student would have had to undergo various cumbersome official procedures, but as Korona was a member of the student council, she could cut past all that red tape. She should have left the city the previous day at the latest.

"Oh, well… Actually, um, er… You gave me the assignment so suddenly, and it took me a while to get ready… N-no! I—I'm sorry! I *did* get ready in time! But then, probably because I was so busy preparing…I ended up oversleeping… By the time I woke up, the plane had already left…"

Her voice grew softer and softer as she made her excuses, but Dirk couldn't muster the energy to yell at her. Asterisk's floating international airport had connections to major cities all across the world, but it was by no means large. There were usually only one or two nonstop flights to Solnage's headquarters each day. If a passenger were to miss one, their departure would usually be delayed until the following day—in other words, today.

Which meant…

"W-well, I was going to catch the flight today…but, er, there were all these terrorist incidents. So in the end, I couldn't leave…"

"I get it, I get it. That's enough. Anyway—*who brought you here?*" he asked sharply.

The next moment, two more figures emerged, as though oozing from the shadows of a nearby tree.

"Heh, that's the Tyrant for you. Shrewd."

"This wouldn't be much fun any other way."

The first was a small young man wearing a hood over his eyes. Dirk couldn't read his expression, but from his manner of speaking, he seemed like the kind who looked down on people, making fun of them.

The other was a large, dark-skinned, dark-haired young man. At first glance, his stubble and gentle features might have made him seem friendly, but Dirk wasn't so stupid as to miss the dark emotions lurking inside.

"You're… Gose Kevut, right?"

"Heh, so you know me. I'm honored."

The young man—Gose—was the user of the Lost Lux, with which he had fought Ayato in the opening round of the Lindvolus.

He was also a member of Azdaja, an organization formed from the remnants of the defunct integrated enterprise foundations Samandal and Severclara.

First things first, if Korona had been left behind in Asterisk, there was no way she could have escaped the city alone. It was also beyond her skills to rescue him from a crashed airship. Someone had to have helped her.

And there was no way that agents from Azdaja would offer that

help out of the goodness of their hearts. They had to have some hidden agenda.

"Oh, right! These two helped me save you, Mr. President! Asterisk was a mess, what with all the terrorist attacks, and I was running to and fro not knowing what to do when we ran into each other…"

Korona, who probably lacked the faintest inkling of anything going on beneath the surface, bowed her head to them innocently. Of course, this was no coincidence. The two men knew that Korona was Dirk's secretary, and they had deliberately sought her out.

"…Hmm. Well, good job tracking me down. I thought you Azdaja lot were a bunch of losers, but here you are."

In the end, even Eishirou and Melchior, both of whom had been desperately pursuing him, had been unable to pin him down.

The two men, however, merely exchanged glances and shrugged.

"I'm afraid you overestimate us."

"Yeah. We didn't have a clue where to find you. That's why we asked her."

"Eh…? What's that now?" Dirk raised an eyebrow. "There's no way she could've known where I was."

Korona may have been his secretary, but he entrusted her with little more than simple chores. The other members helped out with policymaking and implementation, but Dirk had never allowed them to handle any of the truly important matters. Since he didn't trust anyone but himself, after all. With Korona's Strega abilities, it wasn't impossible for her to locate him, but seeing as her divination techniques relied on very strict conditions, it should have been fairly difficult for her to get the exact information she needed.

And yet…

"Eh? Um, I'm not sure what they're talking about… I mean, I *was* the one to find you, but, er…"

"…What?" Dirk asked with a glare.

Korona let out a little shriek and cowered before him.

The small airship that he had flown in this time was different from the one he used for meetings with the Golden Bough Alliance. It was registered in the name of someone unrelated to Dirk, with no connection to Solnage, either. It should have been impossible for

anyone to tie him to it.

"I—I mean, I kept calling you, but you wouldn't pick up…and given the situation, I thought something might have happened…so I read your fortune."

"You read my fortune?"

"Y-yes! So I worked out your situation, your whereabouts, and a bunch of other things… That you'd be up in the sky at the worst possible timing… And when I looked up, I saw an airship about to crash into the lake! I thought, 'Oh my God, the president must be up there…' Huh? Mr. President?"

Falling silent, Korona tilted her head to one side in wonderment.

It was true that Korona's ability was based on divination and fortune-telling, though she herself seemed unaware of it. Predictions that would never come true. And she could activate it once a day, and only in the evenings. If he was to believe her now, this wasn't the result of said ability, but simply the regular fortune-telling that she tinkered with for fun.

In other words, it really was just a coincidence that she had managed to work out his location.

At that moment, the young, robed man with the low hood quietly approached Dirk. "We were impressed, too," he whispered in his ear. "We knew your secretary had some amazing talents, but even we didn't know her full capabilities. She's amazing."

For a second, Dirk thought the boy was mocking him—but apparently not.

This kid was under the mistaken impression that Korona really *had* tracked him down with that innocuous fortune-telling ability of hers.

"Bah… Hah-hah! Hah-hah! Ha-ha-ha-ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

He couldn't hold it in any longer.

"Eh? M-Mr. President?"

"Wh-what?"

Korona, the boy, and Gose were all watching him, dumbfounded.

No way.

Seriously?

This combination of coincidence and shallow misunderstanding had triumphed over all Dirk's elaborate strategies and schemes; the efforts of Eishirou, Melchior, and all the others; and the plans and ambitions of Varda and Madiath? *These people* had arrived at the truth? What was that if not utterly absurd?

How could he *not* laugh in the face of this farce?

It was truly ridiculous—preposterous even.

Once he had finished laughing, he pointed his mobile at Korona.

"Hey, Korona. I'm not gonna be coming back for a while. So you're acting student council president at Le Wolfe for the time being. I've already authorized you to carry out my duties and sent you all the necessary data. Check it out."

"Huh…?" Korona blinked, not fully comprehending his words. "Eh?! Eeeeehhhhh?!"

Finally understanding what he had just said, she cried out in a panicked voice, "I-i-impossible! Impossible! M-m-me?! Student council president…?"

"Just shut up already! Hey, kid. Put her to sleep, would ya?"

"I don't take orders from you," the boy muttered. Nevertheless, he lightly tapped Korona on the neck.

"Ngh?! *Yawn*…"

And just like that, Korona fell limp, sound asleep.

"Hmm… I don't really care, but are you lot sure you're fine with this?" Dirk asked.

Gose looked at him questioningly, and Dirk clicked his tongue.

"You know what? Let's cut right to the chase. You've come here to scout me, haven't you, you Azdaja dogs?"

All at once, he could feel the temperature drop sharply as both Gose and the boy revealed their true colors.

"Heh… You're quick on the uptake."

The world Dirk had found himself in was dark, miserable, and cold.

No matter how far you went, there was no escape—not that he had any intention of running away from it.

"Fine. I don't really like it, but we're all losers here. Let's join forces."

That day was the first and only time in his relatively short life that Dirk Eberwein laughed out loud.

*

The week after the championship match at the Lindvolus—and the wave of terrorist attacks that swept over Asterisk—was turbulent.

From the outcome alone, it seemed safe to say that the Golden Bough Alliance's plans had been successfully thwarted.

Despite the scale of the destruction, the series of disturbances—which had since come to be known as the Golden Noontide in reference to the Jade Twilight Incident—had miraculously ended without a single fatality. This was due in large part to Stjarnagarm's quick response and to the active efforts of students from the city's six schools to bring the situation under control. By the evening of the championship match, all the puppets rampaging throughout the city had ceased functioning. Nonetheless, it had been a tragic affair—the number of injured was in excess of ten thousand, and several individuals were still missing, Madiath Mesa and Dirk Eberwein among them.

The fact that the Golden Noontide coincided with several other terrorist attacks taking place throughout the world also left a lasting impact on people's memories. There had been several large-scale attacks, along with dozens of small-to medium-sized ones, which had unfortunately resulted in more than a few deaths.

While this information was withheld from the public, there was a strong possibility that those attacks had been instigated by the Varda-Vaos. The fact that they had continued to take place even after the Varda-Vaos's destruction suggested that, just as the Orga Lux had said, once a train was set in motion, there was very little that could be done to stop it. Or perhaps there was something inside the terrorists themselves that spurred them on even after they were freed… That said, if the Orga Lux had survived, the number of attacks would surely have been several orders of magnitude higher—perhaps even several dozen orders of magnitude. Credit for

preventing that lay with Claudia and her team, even if the matter had been handled in secret.

While Stjarnagarm had dealt with the incidents in the field, disclosure of information was ultimately the joint responsibility of the integrated enterprise foundations. For that reason, only the most general of outlines had been made public.

The instigators were a terrorist organization going by the name the Golden Bough Alliance, though their motives remained unclear, since no statement of responsibility had been issued either before or after. (There *were* several statements of dubious authenticity which surfaced, presumably hoping to take advantage of the situation, but there was little need to discuss them.)

However, it was difficult to believe that the incident in Asterisk was unrelated to the others taking place around the globe. So the public was left to assume that, like those, it had been a call for the liberation of Genestella and the expansion of their rights. The members of the Golden Bough Alliance were presently under investigation, with the likeliest suspects identified. Several had already been successfully neutralized. As such, there was little likelihood of further attacks… That was the gist of the information released by the integrated enterprise foundations. It was vague and lacking in substance, to put it mildly.

In reality, the integrated enterprise foundations had a fairly accurate picture of what the Golden Bough Alliance had been hoping to carry out. This was based on testimony from Orphelia, who had been responsible for executing their plan, and Ayato and the others, who had learned it directly from the individuals involved.

The only exception was the Varda-Vaos. Despite numerous testimonies, the existence of this unbelievable Orga Lux, possessed of its own free will and capable of hijacking people's bodies and rewriting their personalities, had never been proven. In the end, there was no physical evidence. The integrated enterprise foundations could confirm that its victims had been subjected to brainwashing, and they were willing to acknowledge the existence of *someone* wielding such abilities, but that was as far as they would go. Galaxy, which had made its top priority the covert eradication of

all records of the Varda-Vaos's actions, must have been relieved by this outcome. Nonetheless, according to Claudia, the other integrated enterprise foundations were aware of the true situation, which was why she had taken care of the shattered remnants of the Orga Lux herself.

"This way, we have a hidden ace up our sleeves should we ever need it, don't you think?" she had told the others.

It was true that they all knew too much. While Claudia had made a deal with Isabella to guarantee their safety, she was only one of the top executives, and there was no telling if the integrated enterprise foundations might end up changing their mind about Ayato and everyone else who knew the truth about the Varda-Vaos—just as they had already tried to eliminate Claudia once before. In that respect, the fact that Claudia was holding on to all the physical evidence should act as a decent deterrent.

But back to the topic at hand…

According to Claudia, the integrated enterprise foundations insisting on keeping things vague despite knowing the full truth was the result of what she called a "high-level political deal." Madiath Mesa, one of the ringleaders, had been affiliated with Seidoukan; Dirk Eberwein, another ringleader, along with Orphelia Landlufen, who had been stopped in the act, had hailed from Le Wolfe; Ursula Svend, physically the third ringleader, though controlled by the Varda-Vaos, had been affiliated with Queenvale; Percival Gardner, an active perpetrator, though brainwashed, was a student at Gallardworth; while Ernesta Kühne, who provided the autonomous puppets that carried out the attacks, was from Allekant. A full five of Asterisk's six schools and their parent integrated enterprise foundations were involved to one degree or another. Any attempt to hold the other organizations to account would quickly lead to finger-pointing. Of course, Galaxy and Solnage, from whom the masterminds hailed, were more to blame than the others, but that was only a matter of degree. And besides, the very fact of their involvement couldn't be publicly revealed. So for the mutual benefit of all parties, it was agreed that details regarding the suspects and individuals involved would be withheld. The only party that held any

real advantage was Jie Long, which had nothing to do with the Golden Bough Alliance—but if they were to oppose the decision, it would be five against one, and their protests would be easily quashed. From their perspective, it was better to put their competitors in their debt.

As a result, Ayato and the others, who had effectively thwarted the Golden Bough Alliance, received no praise for their achievements. But then again, they hadn't done it for recognition. In fact, Isabella, Helga, and Haruka had each given them a sound scolding for taking action on their own.

On the other hand, there were benefits to handling everything with the utmost secrecy, and the fact that those involved in the Golden Bough Alliance hadn't been publicly exposed meant that there was room for compromise. In particular, there was a strong sense that the two individuals most affected by the Varda-Vaos's brainwashing—Ursula and Percival—were ultimately victims, and thanks to Claudia's intercessions, their punishment was considerably lessened. Ayato and the others had to sign multiple nondisclosure agreements with the integrated enterprise foundations, but all in all, that was probably a small price to pay.

Next, moving on to more personal matters…

Ayato was unconscious when Saya pulled him from the Eclipse stage, carrying him on her back. He wasn't particularly large physically, but if she hadn't been a Genestella, it would have been difficult indeed.

However, shortly after leaving the arena, Saya found Kirin, who had also lost consciousness. One can only imagine the extraordinary hardship she must have endured carrying two people both larger than herself with her small frame, sometimes being forced to drag them along the ground. It was unlikely that a Genestella without her experience wielding powerful oversized Luxes would have managed.

But for Saya, the most difficult part was what came next.

"…I don't know the way."

Yes. Saya Sasamiya had always had a poor sense of direction,

and with the underground block's labyrinthine layout, it was virtually impossible for her to escape alone. Since normal means of communication didn't reach this far underground, Ayato might well have breathed his last as she wandered aimlessly about.

But someone unexpected came to her assistance—Eishirou Yabuki.

Eishirou was supposed to be out tracking down Dirk Eberwein, and while he claimed to have come within spitting distance of him, apparently his quarry took off in an airship before he could catch him. After that, he received fresh instructions from Claudia to assist Ayato and their group. Dirk's escape could have proven fatal to their efforts, but thankfully, Julis managed to save the day by bringing Orphelia around at the conclusion of their match.

However, by that time, Saya had already left the Eclipse arena and was wandering the passages of the underground block. Under normal circumstances, Eishirou wouldn't have had an easy time finding her.

When she asked him as much, he averted his gaze. "Well…you know that hacking tool I gave you…? I made a few modifications to it…"

In short, it seemed that he had left in some embedded code that could be used to detect the device's location. The fact that it could transmit even from within the nearly impenetrable underground block meant it probably contained special advanced technology. And it wasn't only Saya whom he was keeping tabs on—apparently, Ayato, Julis, Kirin, and Claudia were all being monitored through different means. No wonder Eishirou had always seemed to know where they were.

Naturally, Saya was furious. But since it was also the only reason they had been saved, she bit her tongue and kept her complaints to a minimum for the time being.

"I've really grown up. Well done, me," she said with a satisfied nod.

Incidentally, she sent Eishirou flying with a well-aimed full burst the very next day.

The hospital was overflowing with people injured in the terrorist

attacks, but Ayato, who was mortally wounded, was given the highest priority for treatment—and miraculously, he narrowly survived. Kirin, not as badly injured as Ayato, was given first aid and likewise seen to by a healer.

Around the same time, Sylvia and Minato were also brought into the hospital. While seriously injured, their wounds weren't life-threatening, and so they received only normal treatment.

Sylvia had fallen into a temporary coma after being possessed by the Varda-Vaos, and a full day passed before she awoke. Ursula, whose body had been hijacked by the Orga Lux for some time, was in an even deeper coma—it took her a full five days to open her eyes, and Sylvia waited attentively by her bedside the whole time. When she finally awoke, Sylvia literally leaped for joy, tears rolling down her cheeks. Ursula, however, seemed to have little memory of her time under the influence of the Varda-Vaos and was visibly confused.

However—

"Oh, but I think I heard your song in my dreams," she said, causing Sylvia to break into a fresh round of tears.

And so today, one week after the incident—that is, one week after the championship match of the Lindvolus—the previously postponed award ceremony was finally due to be held.

*

"Cheers!"

The reception took place at Hotel Elnath after the award ceremony and was an unusually grand affair.

That was due in part to the great success of this year's Lindvolus, but perhaps more importantly, the executive committee was seeking to distract attention from the Golden Noontide incident and show proof of the city's recovery.

Under regular circumstances, only the Festa participants

themselves—and of course, the student council presidents of the six schools—would be permitted to attend. This time, however, each participant was permitted to bring along one guest. Thanks to that, Kirin and the others were able to join.

"Well, now. Isn't it a little bold of the executive committee to hold a big event like this right after such a huge incident? Or maybe they just have no sense of crisis." Saya looked amazed as she glanced around the boisterous hall, filled to bursting with more than five hundred guests.

"I understand your concern, as both Madiath Mesa and Dirk Eberwein are still considered missing. But the executive committee wants to move past the incident as soon as possible, so they're offering up fresh distractions," Claudia explained. "And of course, they can't let the Lindvolus end without a bang. The vice-chairman—no, the chairman now—is desperate for a change of mood." With that, she brought her glass of nonalcoholic champagne to her lips with a hint of a smile.

Stjarnagarm had dispatched a team to the Eclipse arena immediately after hearing from Ayato's group, but by then, the stage had already collapsed. Subsequent investigations revealed that the destruction was caused by a large explosion, but Madiath's body was never found. Given the scale of the explosion, however, it was highly unlikely that any physical remains had been left behind. Officially, Madiath Mesa was listed as missing, but in all likelihood, he would eventually be declared deceased.

"If he survived, he'd have a hard time getting away from the integrated enterprise foundations. Especially without the Varda-Vaos," Sylvia added, picking up some of the baked sweets on the table and throwing them into her mouth.

"B-but I'm glad we can meet again like this…!" Kirin said, still looking nervous and a little out of place.

Over the course of the past week, Helga had interrogated Ayato and the others one-by-one, and so they hadn't had an opportunity to talk things over as a group. But even though they had all been instrumental in thwarting the Golden Bough Alliance, that hadn't necessarily put them in a good position. Ultimately, it was Claudia's

impeccable negotiating prowess and Helga's sincere and steadfast statements on their behalf that brought their predicament to an end.

"Yes, it's nice to be back together." Ayato nodded. "So let me say it once more—congratulations on winning the Lindvolus, Julis," he said, raising his glass.

"…O-oh. Thank you, Ayato." Julis, embarrassed, averted her gaze.

"…Well, I guess I should say it, too. Congrats, Julis," Saya offered.

"Yes, yes, congratulations, Julis," Claudia chimed in. "And thank you. I never thought we would see a grand slam during my time as student council president. And it's been so long since we last won the season."

"Oh, well," said Sylvia. "And I was sure I'd be the one to show Orphelia what's what… Anyway, congratulations!"

"I'm really, *really* happy for you!" added Kirin. "It's a shame I couldn't watch it in person, but it truly was a wonderful match!"

With that out of the way, everyone raised their glasses once more.

"Ha-ha… I mean, I caused you all such a headache, all because of my own selfishness… I feel a little guilty being congratulated like this—"

"No one here thinks that," Ayato interrupted.

Julis glanced up, mild surprise in her eyes. Then, slowly, she shifted her gaze to take in the others.

They all wore gentle smiles.

"Right… Right. In that case, let me say this: Thank you, everyone. It's because of you that I managed to save Orphelia."

Her words were straightforward and to the point—typical Julis.

And that was why everyone understood her feelings perfectly.

"It would have been nice if Orphelia had dropped by, too… But I wasn't really expecting it."

Orphelia had collapsed with a fever immediately after the end of the match and was now being looked after in the hospital's isolation ward. After all, her body was constantly emitting toxic miasma, and it was thought at first that a dedicated room would be needed to house her. It seemed, however, that both the amount and the

concentration of her toxins were rapidly diminishing. Stjarnagarm had conducted several interrogations with her as she was treated, and she had responded honestly and earnestly to all inquiries.

While their plans hadn't come to fruition, Orphelia was still a core member of the Golden Bough Alliance and the linchpin of their scheme. Even if she hadn't been hospitalized, she probably couldn't have joined them at the reception.

"I wish I could have brought Ursula, too," Sylvia pouted.

While Ursula remained under supervision by the integrated enterprise foundations, her treatment was less severe than Orphelia's. It had been medically confirmed that she was subjected to such extensive brainwashing that her free will had been completely suppressed. The real reason she hadn't been able to join them was that Director Korbel hadn't given her permission to leave the hospital.

"Excuse me for interrupting."

At that moment, several figures in the uniform of Saint Gallardworth Academy approached.

"Allow me to express our gratitude for everything you've done for a valued member of our school, and to apologize on her behalf for all the trouble she's caused you," Elliot Forster, at the front of the group, said with a deep bow of his head.

Needless to say, he was referring to Percival. She was apparently still in a coma at the hospital. Her psychological trauma from the Varda-Vaos's mental interference was more extensive even than Ursula's.

The leaders of the various schools had largely been kept in the dark about the Golden Bough Alliance, but they must have pieced together at least a basic outline of events on their own.

"There's no need to go that far. She's a victim, too…," Ayato began.

"No, please!" Laetitia Blanchard interrupted, appearing before them. "Allow us to thank you! If you ever need anything, all you have to do is ask!"

Despite her words, her attitude wasn't exactly that of someone humbly offering gratitude.

“Oh dear… Even when saying thank you, you’re as pushy as ever, Laetitia.”

“Claudia. Weren’t you the one acting recklessly this time? Of course, I can only imagine, seeing as you won’t offer up any details.”

“Heh-heh. I’ll leave it to your imagination.”

With that, the two exchanged friendly smiles.

In addition to Laetitia, Noelle Messmer, Ernest Fairclough, and the former members of the Life Rhodes all seemed to be present.

“Well…from what I hear, it was Miss Toudou who stopped her. We can’t thank you enough,” Elliot said, bowing his head once more.

“N-not at all! I did what I could, that’s all…!” Kirin answered, shaking her head in embarrassment.

“…You defeated our very own Percival Gardner, after she activated the Holy Lance, no less.”

“I suppose I was just lucky… To tell the truth, I really thought I might lose.”

She wasn’t being humble—that was a simple fact. Kirin wasn’t the type to quibble over the details of a fight.

Elliot stared firmly into her eyes in apparent understanding, before turning to leave. “I would like to cross swords with you myself one day,” he said, and then he was gone.

“Ha-ha. It’s good to be young, isn’t it? Thanks to you all, my protégés are growing up fast.” Ernest—though still young himself—offered them a polite bow before following after Elliot. “Perhaps I’ve still got work to do before I leave the center stage…,” he whispered to himself. Ayato couldn’t miss the sharp glint of an expert swordsman in his eyes as he made his way out.

“What are you talking about? Aren’t you still relishing the limelight?” Sylvia murmured after them.

Ayato and Kirin were in complete agreement.

“Nya-ha-ha! How is everybody?!”

“Oh no, Ernesta! Quiet down, please! You’re embarrassing us.”

The next group to arrive was from Allekant, and its members were as lively as ever.

Among them were Ernesta Kühne, Camilla Pareto, and the autonomous puppets Ardy, Rimcy, and Lenaty.

"Saya! Let's play! Come on, let's play!"

As soon as she saw her face, Lenaty jumped for joy like an excited puppy.

"Not here," Saya complained, trying in vain to push Lenaty away. "Besides, I don't have any working Luxes left. It'll probably take me a full week to fix them all."

The young puppet remained particularly fond of Saya.

"Ha-ha-ha! Our little sister is lovely as always!"

"Yes indeed. If the incompetent tinhead standing beside me was even one millionth as cute, my days would be so much more peaceful."

This kind of exchange between Ardy and Rimcy was also business as usual.

"My sister told me you were both a great help during the incident. Thank you," Ayato said.

He had heard directly from Haruka about how the two puppets had given their all to help defend the airship landing during the attack.

"Don't mention it! We were just following our master's orders!"

"That's right. There's no need for thanks. If you really want to show your gratitude, it's our master who deserves it."

If that was how they saw it, he wouldn't argue.

Ayato turned to Ernesta. Camilla was holding her in place by the scruff of the neck like she was a stray cat.

"Ah, don't worry about it, really," she said, waving her hands. "I just did it to protect myself."

Yep, leave it to Ernesta to come right out with her hidden agenda. Come to think of it, she had been this way from the moment they met.

"That's right. The fact that she can even show herself in public like this is thanks to her desperate efforts to protect herself."





"Though it hasn't put her above criticism, it would seem," Claudia remarked.

Indeed, even now, people all around the room were watching Ardy with disquieting looks.

That was inevitable, of course, seeing as he looked exactly like the puppets that had rampaged throughout the city during the Golden Noontide incident. No matter how hard the integrated enterprise foundations fought to suppress the details, they couldn't hide that. The precise connection hadn't been made public, but both Ernesta and Allekant had been the subject of intense criticism. There could be no doubting that Allekant was taking the majority of the heat this time around.

"It's all right. I knew this would happen," Ernesta stated.

"…What do you mean?" Saya, still clinging to Lenaty, looked up at her probingly.

"Nya-ha-ha! That's…*a secret!* All I'll say is I'm taking a long-term view!"

Ernesta was ever bright and cheerful, yet never hesitated to launch into a new scheme. That was a core part of her personality.

"Oh, right, Saya," Camilla cut in. "Won't you drop by my lab at Allekant sometime? Your S-Module…it inspired me. I've been working on something interesting myself. It's not even at the prototype stage yet, but…"

"Oh. That sounds interesting."

Once Camilla and Saya promised to meet up again soon, the Allekant party took their leave.

"Ho-ho-ho. What a lively gathering. So many guests and visitors."

"…!"

The next to arrive was a group of Jie Long's fierce fighters, led by the Ban'yuu Tenra Xinglou Fan.

Among them were the members of Team Yellow Dragon, which had fought so well during the Gryps—Xiaohui Wu, Hufeng Zhao, Cecily Wong and the twins Shenyun Li and Shenhua Li, who had also

done so well during the Phoenix.

"Dear me, it's rare for Your Highness to drop by a place like this."

"Indeed. I'm a little surprised."

Both Sylvia and Claudia, acquainted with Xinglou Fan as student council presidents, wore looks of mild astonishment.

"Oh? This Lindvolus was special. And it gave my students from the Liangshan a good workout," the figure with the face of a young girl answered with a laugh.

The Liangshan was where Xinglou had given students from other schools special training to prepare them to fight in the Lindvolus. Among these students, the most noteworthy was— "Especially Julis. You showed me a better fight than I was expecting in the final match. You've truly reached new heights."

"…It's all thanks to you. I wouldn't have been able to achieve such good results by myself, no matter how much I trained. Thank you," Julis answered, extending her hand.

With a grin, Xinglou reached out to give it a firm shake—but then her expression clouded over. "Hmm… *I thought it might be. It seems I was right.*"

"There's no fooling you, is there?" Julis answered, lowering her gaze as a forlorn smile spread across her face. "Well, that's how it is. Apologies, but I don't think I can keep my promise. Of course, if you don't mind facing me as I am now, I'd be happy to oblige…"

"No, you are released." Xinglou let out a deep sigh, giving her head a small shake. "I saw quite a lot in the match. That should be enough."

…What on earth are they talking about?

Ayato, unsure what was going on between the two of them, was about to speak up, when— "U-um, Sylvia!" Hufeng called out, unable to contain his excitement any longer. He was a huge fan of Sylvia's. "Those new songs you performed during the Lindvolus, they were wonderful! Especially the ones from the quarterfinals! That one about friendship was amazing…! Are you going to perform them live sometime?!"

"Really, Hufeng…?" Cecily's gaze was warm, as though she was watching over a younger brother, but at the same time sulky, with a

hint of something more.

"Kirin Toudou. As I told you before, I owe you a debt. If possible, I would like to face you again at some point."

Xiaohui, on the other hand, was hoping to get Kirin to commit to a rematch.

"I—I'd like to…but I wonder if I can give you what you want right now…"

Kirin had exhausted the stored energy of her Orga Lux, the Fudaraku. If Xiaohui would be satisfied with a contest of pure ability, she might be able to give him that, but what he really wanted was to fight her at her full strength.

"I don't mean now. It can wait until we're both in top form." Xiaohui must have realized her predicament, too.

"First the Claíomh Solais, now the Celestial Warrior. You sure are popular, Kirin," Saya teased.

"I-it isn't like that…!" Kirin blushed, turning to look up at Ayato.

Yes. Now that everything was over, Ayato had to give his answer. Not just to Kirin, but to everyone.

"Really, you guys?"

"Why are you two acting like such good pals all of a sudden?"

A short distance away, the twins were looking on, their displeasure evident as they helped themselves to small plates of food. Ayato was relieved to see that they, at least, hadn't changed at all. He couldn't imagine them any other way.

"We've found them! There they are! This place is way too crowded!"

"Hey, Yabuki! Don't wander off on your own! Hold on, how are you not bumping into people?! Hey!"

The next to appear were Eishirou and Lester. Followed by—

"So this is where you've been hiding! I've been looking all over for you!"

"S-sis! Wait for me!"

The sisters, Irene Urzaiz and Priscilla Urzaiz.

The two groups reached Ayato and the others at almost the exact

same moment.

"…Yo, Irene Urzaiz."

"Oh, it's you…Lester MacPhail."

Lester and Irene exchanged hostile glances.

They had met before, during the Phoenix and again at this latest Lindvolus. Irene had won the former, Lester the latter. One win, one loss each, with both matches lasting five minutes. As a result, neither of them had conceded to the other.

"Sis! Do I need to remind you that fighting is off-limits here?" Priscilla said, stepping forward, unintimidated by the explosive atmosphere.

"Ugh…! I—I get it, Priscilla. It's not like I came here to pick a fight."

Despite appearances, it was the younger sister, Priscilla, who was the stronger of the two. Irene reluctantly withdrew, while Priscilla turned to Ayato and the others with a bow.

"I apologize for the sudden interruption. And MacPhail, please excuse my sister's behavior."

"S-sure …"

There was nothing Lester could say to that, and he likewise fell back.

"Um, congratulations again, to all of you," said Priscilla. "It really is amazing scoring both a grand slam and winning the entire season."

It was a simple compliment, offered with no jealousy or calculation.

That was probably why Julis simply took it in stride. "Oh, thanks," she answered.

"You were incredible, too, Priscilla," Ayato said, nodding. "In your match against Sylvie."

"Yep. It was a good match." Saya nodded firmly.

"What?! You were watching…?"

"Of course. You've gotten much stronger, Priscilla."

"…"

Priscilla clasped her hands in front of her chest and closed her eyes for a moment, savoring the words.

"Thank you…!" she whispered.

Irene reached out and silently put her arm around Priscilla's shoulder.

While Priscilla may have been a Genestella, until just a few short years ago, she had been an amateur with no combat experience. Ayato had nothing but admiration for the rapid growth that had allowed her to take on Sylvia so capably—even if it was largely thanks to the irregular training she had received at the Liangshan. It must have taken extraordinary effort.

"I can't rely on my sister to protect me forever."

Ayato remembered the day she said those words at the school fair. And she really had made good on them.

"So, Julis. You'd better not forget your promise to me," Lester said, stepping forward after dutifully waiting for the Urzaiz sisters to finish.

"Right… Yeah. Call me whenever you feel up to it. I'll fight you, as promised."

"All right! Looking forward to it!" Lester slapped his fist, positively beaming with joy.

"Huh? You challenging the Glühen Rose to a duel, Lester MacPhail?" said Irene. "Didn't you watch that final match? This is the woman who beat Orphelia Landlufen. What makes you think you can keep up with her?"

"Shut up! We've got our own thing here! Quit butting in!"

"Huh? You mouthin' off to me now?!"

Once more, Lester and Irene exchanged fierce looks.

"Really, there's never a dull moment with you guys. You're always causing trouble," Eishirou said with a grin, hands clasped behind his head as he shot Ayato a sideways glance.

"Are you talking as a Shadowstar agent? Or as part of the newspaper club?"

"Nah, just sharing my impressions as your friend," he answered, still smiling.

After that, an endless stream of acquaintances and friends

stopped by to chat with Ayato and the others.

There were Helga and Haruka, patrolling the venue as part of its security contingent; Minato and Yuzuhi, along with their teammates; Violet Weinberg; their teacher Kyouko Yatsuzaki; Saya's junior Nueko Kuzukara; Fuyuka Umenokouji, who had left Xinglou's group to greet them personally; the various members of Rusalka (though how they managed to enter the venue was anyone's guess); and even Zaharoula, the chief commentator at the Lindvolus.

After chatting with everyone, Ayato and the others finally found time to catch their breath and sneaked out into the garden adjoining the main hall. Not only friends and acquaintances, but even strangers had begun to seek them out, which meant that it was time for them to leave.

"Whew. Finally free," Julis said with a yawn as she stretched her arms.

"Ha-ha. Good work today," Claudia said with a mischievous smile. "Keep in mind that this is the fate that awaits anyone who pulls off a grand slam."

"I'm already sick of it…," Julis replied.

"Don't say that! We at Seidoukan plan to lean on your accomplishments to the best of our ability—for publicity purposes."

The midwinter air was bitingly cold, and their breath became white clouds of mist before their eyes.

A large moon hovered above the lights of the hotel.

"Come to think of it," said Saya, "there was so much food inside, but I didn't have time to sample any of it… Talk about unfair."

"Oh, in that case, sh-should we make something for dinner once we get back to the dormitory, then?" suggested Kirin.

"Oh, that would be great."

"It won't be very fancy, though…"

Saya, no doubt starved, continued to hold her stomach with a sorrowful expression, while Kirin tried to soothe her, a wry smile on her face.

As they continued their casual conversation and slowly made their way through the dimly lit garden, Sylvia, who had been trailing near the end of the group, deep in thought, came to a sudden stop.

"…Sylvie?" Ayato called out.

Turning away for a moment, she let out a long, deep breath before looking back up. "Well, I wasn't sure about this, but seeing as we won't have many more opportunities… Heck, let's do it."

Then, looking directly into his eyes with a bashful smile, she said: "I love you, Ayato. Do you think we could be special partners, maybe?"

"…!"

Caught off guard, Ayato's body stiffened involuntarily.

Sylvia's figure was breathtakingly beautiful in the soft light of the garden path—it was almost as if she were floating.

"…Oh, a c-confession? Now?"

"In front of all of us? I'm impressed."

"…You've really done it this time."

"W-w-wow…!"

Everyone else seemed just as surprised, and all of them had stopped cold where they were.

"I mean, you've all already confessed your feelings, right? I can tell that much. I don't want to be the only one here who hasn't even reached the starting line."

Sylvia's words were straightforward and sincere—so Ayato had no choice but to accept them earnestly.

Indeed, now that everything had been settled, it was time to give them his answer.

In fact, he had already made up his mind long ago.

But when it came to actually saying it out loud, his voice caught in his throat, and a strange sensation took hold of him.

He looked deep into the eyes of Julis, Claudia, Saya, Kirin, then Sylvia, and slowly opened his mouth.

"I…"

CHAPTER 6

NEW DAYS

Three years later, in Asterisk's *redeveloped* district…

Kyouko Yatsuzaki was making her way down the main street, overcome with raw emotion as she took in the brand-new cityscape.

"Things really do change, huh?"

The place that had once been known as the redevelopment area, littered with abandoned buildings, a den of criminals and thugs, had been completely transformed. Now it was filled with orderly structures and populated by friendly tourists and students. It was difficult to imagine the bloodthirsty and violent city of old.

Kyouko, with her unique background as a former student at Le Wolfe and a teacher at Seidoukan, had been wild herself during her school days. Her Ladies Team had been infamous in the redevelopment area back then.

"Sure, sentimentality aside, it's clearly a change for the better…"

It did make her feel a touch lonely, but she was an educator now. She should be happy that the city's security was improving.

The redevelopment area was originally the precinct devastated in the Jade Twilight Incident, and while various interests had established themselves there in the aftermath, students from Le Wolfe and dropouts from the various other schools wound up turning it into their stronghold. Eventually, a street called the Rotlicht came into being, lined with illegal shops that gangsters used as a source of funds. Before long, they had established special relationships with the upper echelons of the city, and by then, nobody could touch them.

The reason for this area's transformation was, of all things, the Golden Noontide incident three years ago. The city council, under pressure to dispel the dark shadow cast by the terrorist attacks, took advantage of the restoration efforts targeting the heavily damaged port facilities and public transport system to announce the revitalization of the redevelopment area as the centerpiece of a new project. To an outside observer, this might have sounded like a pipe dream, but it ended up being the first step in the city's renewal.

Of course, the illegal organizations that had established themselves in the redevelopment area weren't happy with this proposal and had been prepared to fight it until the bitter end. They had probably assumed their authority was absolute. After all, though there had been many efforts to rejuvenate the area in the past, none had come to fruition.

This time, however, the situation was different. Le Wolfe, the entity that benefited most from the area's lawlessness, was in favor of the project. It all began with a public comment from the school's acting student council president, Korona Kashimaru, filling in for the missing Dirk Eberwein:

"Huh? Well, wouldn't it be a good thing to get rid of dangerous places? I think it's a great idea, redeveloping it."

Her head must have been in the clouds. Without the slightest hesitation, she had let her true feelings show, without any consideration for her responsibilities or position.

In fact, Korona was largely a figurehead in her capacity as student council president, and she had no real political ability to speak of. Because of that, she was also completely in the dark about Solnage's real intentions. No one expected her to do anything, nor did they think her capable of it. The right to appoint the student council president belonged to the school's number one, but with Orphelia in the hospital at the time, there had been a power vacuum, so to speak. Besides, why would anyone care about a mere figurehead who was about to be replaced? And so she had been able to speak her mind without anyone to hold her back.

The Rikka city council, having received the go-ahead from the person who should have been their biggest opponent, proceeded to

employ Stjarnagarm's full force to seize control of the redevelopment area. And that was the end of that criminal's paradise.

The leader of the criminal group that put up the greatest resistance, Rodolfo Zoppo of the Omo Nero, was captured by Haruka Amagiri after a fierce battle, a topic that occupied the news headlines for quite some time.

"…So this is it."

Kyouko stopped in front of a small café on the corner of the main street. The walls facing outside were made of glass, giving an impression of openness, with a metal door of chic and striking design.

"Welcome! Huh…?! Ms. Yatsuzaki…?!"

After opening the door, Kyouko was greeted by a large, bearded man standing behind the counter who quickly broke into an undisguised grimace.

"Wow, some greeting, Lester MacPhail. And after I came all this way to celebrate your opening."

"Oh… No, I didn't mean… Er, thank you."

"Hmm. That beard doesn't suit you," she said, taking a seat in front of him.

There wasn't much seating inside, and each chair was surrounded by plenty of empty space, so while the building wasn't particularly large, it still felt roomy. The tables and furnishings were a perfect match for the overall atmosphere—so much so that even Kyouko, who knew nothing about restaurants, was impressed.

"I wouldn't have expected a guy like you to have such good taste."

"…*She* picked it all out."

"I thought as much." Kyouko chuckled, leaning against the counter and resting her chin on her hands.

"Come to think of it… Er, the Urzaiz sisters, wasn't it? Don't they have a store around here, too?"

"Yep. Apparently they've got a pretty good reputation, too. Not that I'd know," Lester snorted, unamused.

Given their shared past, it must be difficult for him to offer honest praise.

She had heard the sisters ran a cozy restaurant offering cuisine from their home country, famous enough that even Kyouko, who had never shown much interest in such places, had heard about it. People were saying it had a homey ambience, with cheap and tasty food.

"Well, it *was* pretty funny seeing Irene Urzaiz serving customers like that," Lester remarked.

Apparently, the two sisters worked at the restaurant together, the younger one in charge of the kitchen, and the infamous elder sister serving customers. Kyouko had to admit that it sounded like a curious sight.

"What's that? You just said you didn't know much about it, but you've been there?"

"E-er… Well, we're friends, I guess, so I had to…!"

"*You're* not exactly the kind of person I'd expect to see serving tables, either, ya know?"

"Ugh…!"

Lester must have sensed as much. He offered no response, and his huge shoulders shrank back dejectedly.

Kyouko flashed him a wry grin, her expression turning more serious. "I know it's a bit late for this…but you don't regret it, do you? You're still perfectly qualified to enter the Festa. If you went on to university, you could have done a whole lot more."

"No…I've done the best I can."

"What are you saying? You were ranked fifth on the Named Cult."

"That's because…Julis…!"

Lester had been suppressing his emotions up to that point, and now he slammed his fist down on the counter in a fit of anger, causing the cups lined neatly along the edge to clatter loudly.

Lester had won against Julis in their last official ranked match while studying at Seidoukan. It was a huge commotion, of course, what with his defeating a grand slam winner, but he still wasn't satisfied with the win.

"It's not like Julis cut corners or anything, right? A win's a win. You should be proud of yourself," Kyouko said.

"…I know, but still…" Lester averted his gaze, his face glum.

“Oho…? It’s getting pretty lively in here, huh?”

At that moment, a listless-looking woman with long black hair emerged from the back of the restaurant—a bewitching beauty with sloping eyes and an air of fragility.

“Yo, Melissa.”

“Oh…? It’s you, Kyouko.”

This was Melissa Strauch—or technically, Melissa MacPhail, now that she had married Lester. A former member of Team Irrlicht, the only team in the history of Le Wolfe to win at the Gryps—and a close friend of Kyouko’s.

“Well, I thought I’d better drop by sooner or later. I mean, my buddy’s a mom now.”

Cradled in the woman’s arms, an adorable baby was sleeping peacefully.

“Oh, he looks just like his mom. He’s so cute, eh?”

“…He’s my kid, too, you know,” Lester murmured, but the dark cast to his face lightened as soon as Melissa handed him the child.

“The usual, Kyouko?”

“Yeah. Thanks.”

Melissa wrapped an apron around her waist and set about grinding some coffee beans.

Melissa used to run a café in the Rotlicht. Kyouko, a frequent customer in those days, could clearly remember the delicious taste of her coffee. Even here, Melissa was the manager, and Lester was merely an employee.

“So, back to what we were talking about…,” said Kyouko. “You got yours, too, right? Julis’s invitation?”

“Oh. Yeah.”

New to fatherhood, Lester still seemed a little nervous cradling the baby in his arms.

“Are you going?”

“You must be kidding. Between running a new shop and looking after this little guy, there’s no way I’m going to Lieseltania.”

“It doesn’t bother me,” Melissa interjected. “Quit worrying and go. We don’t have much work to do here anyway.”

“Ugh…”

Lester's shoulders slumped again at the caustic comments coming from behind his back. Melissa certainly had a sharp tongue, though she unleashed it only on those she cared about. Not that Kyouko was going to tell Lester that.

"Here you go," Melissa said.

A rich aroma wafted up from the cup of coffee handed to her, tickling Kyouko's nose.

She sipped the beverage, with its subdued bitter flavor and strong acidity—the same taste that she had always relished.

"Yep, it's delicious. You'd think a flavor this good would bring in more customers…," Kyouko said, glancing around at the empty tables and chairs.

"We're having a bad day today," said Melissa. "It isn't usually this quiet, you know."

"That's right," Lester added. "Everyone's probably at the stadium or watching one of the big screens set out on the corner of the next street over. Hold on, aren't you supposed to be there, too, Teach?"

"Well, it's not like I'm her homeroom teacher or anything. I did give her a few pointers back when she fought in the Gryps, though."

At that moment, the door swung open, and a plump student entered the café.

"Brr, it's cold out there… The usual, Lester… Oh! Ms. Yatsuzaki?!"

"Well, if it isn't Randy Hooke."

Lester's former crony was apparently still hanging around.

"Why do my old students always scream when they see me?" Kyouko murmured.

"Doesn't that just go to show what kind of teacher you are?" Melissa shot back, tongue sharp as always.

"Ugh…"

Lester and Randy both nodded, as if they couldn't have said it better themselves.

*

"That's all we have to report on Elliott-Pound for now," Eishirou said

in Seidoukan Academy's special viewing lounge at the Sirius Dome.

His master—Claudia Enfield—smiled calmly and recrossed her long legs. "Thank you, Eishirou. That must mean Ernest and Diana's engagement has been finalized. In that case, there's little doubt that those favoring Genestella will gain the upper hand in the organization… It would probably be wise to liaise with Elliot as soon as possible. I'll see what Laetitia can do…"

She paused there, resting her hand on her chin and lowering her gaze in thought.

Claudia had matured after she entered the university at Seidoukan Academy, but she'd never lost her gentle temperament. To those students who didn't know her true nature, she must have seemed like the ideal elder sister, which explained her impressive support from men and women alike. That said, she'd also refined her sinister streak, and as far as Eishirou was concerned, she was a veritable demon.

Nonetheless, her abilities and shrewd judgment were beyond question, and she continued to serve as student council president. She was the longest-serving leader in the academy's history, and even counting the other five schools, the only administration that had lasted longer than hers was probably that of the Ban'yuu Tenra at Jie Long.

Aside from her role as student council president, she was also a student, and secretary to her mother, Isabella. She wasn't only wearing two hats—she was juggling three. Moreover, she wasn't just analyzing information from within Asterisk pertaining to the city's six schools; she was also monitoring intel on the integrated enterprise foundations that governed them. In all likelihood, she was planning for her graduation when she would move up to Galaxy.

As such, the work she entrusted to Eishirou was much more challenging than before, and to be honest, he wished that she would cut him some slack.

"Now then, for your next task…"

"Um, Prez? Isn't it gonna be a little hard for Shadowstar without me? I heard there aren't a whole lot of new recruits. We're low on manpower, right?"

Strictly speaking, Eishirou was more Claudia's personal spy than a Shadowstar agent these days.

His missions snooping around the integrated enterprise foundations were getting too hard to manage, and to be perfectly honest, he wanted to take a break and do something a little easier.

"Don't worry about that. Silas Norman's abilities are a good match for the current situation. He's very excited, I believe, to be so close to paying off his debt."

"Ngh…!"

With the transformation of the redevelopment area, Asterisk's underworld had similarly undergone a drastic change. In short, espionage had increased, while direct confrontations between rival organizations were rarer. As a result, the power of the more militant factions, namely Grimalkin and Gaishi, had been diminished, while those more geared toward intelligence gathering, such as Sinodomius and Benetnasch, had come to dominate. Silas's ability was puppet manipulation, but it also allowed him to obtain information from his foes, so he was highly suited to this new kind of work.

"Well, if you really don't want to, I can take that into consideration…," Claudia began. "But the mission I have in mind *will* be rewarding. Given the current offerings over at Shadowstar, I think you would get bored fairly quickly."

"Well…" Eishirou didn't know how to answer.

His motto was to live life lightheartedly. He didn't want to be constrained by anything, but at the same time, he wanted to observe interesting events and people up close. He knew full well how difficult it was to balance those two desires. Claudia was well aware of his nature—probably even more than Eishirou himself—and was therefore good at handling him.

"But yes, I must give you some time off as well. You'll want to spend some time with your girlfriend, I'm sure."

"What?!" Eishirou froze.

"The former head of the newspaper club…," Claudia began with a grin. "She's now a reporter for…ABC, was it? How romantic that your relationship started with a chance reunion."

“Hey, h-how did you…?!”

It was certainly true that Eishirou had met his former boss by chance at the scene of an incident a little while ago—their first encounter in several years. But no one else should have known about that. He had made sure not to let even his underlings at Shadowstar tail him.

“Oh-ho. You’re not my only source of information, Yabuki,” Claudia responded with a flawless smile.

There was no doubt about it—she’d soon rise to the upper echelons in Galaxy.

At that moment, an air-window snapped open between them, announcing the arrival of a new visitor.

“Oh, is it already time?” Claudia murmured as she pushed a button to open the door, revealing a girl with short green hair.

“Thanks for inviting me, Ms. President!” she said energetically.

The girl was the image of naïveté and cheer, without the faintest hint of negativity.

“Welcome, Flora.”

“Hiya!”

Flora Klemm. Formerly a maid at the royal palace in Lieseltania, dispatched to Asterisk by Julis’s brother—and once kidnapped by Grimalkin. She had still been a child back then, but she had since grown considerably taller, her supple and toned physique the proof of her training.

She had entered Seidoukan Academy just this spring.

“You invited her, Prez? Why?”

“Why? So she can watch the match from the best seat in the house, of course,” Claudia answered, motioning to a nearby chair.





Flora offered her a polite bow as she sat down.

"Flora—Thaleia, I should say—is one of our most promising rookies. She carries Seidoukan's future on her shoulders. We need to make sure she sees every moment of this match."

"I—I'll do my best!" Flora answered, staring down at the empty stage as she squeezed her hands together in her lap.

There was still a little time left before the match got underway, and she was waiting in eager anticipation.

"Heh. Sounds like the prez thinks pretty highly of you," Eishirou remarked.

"Of course," Claudia answered. "*She's the first new user of the Ser Veresta* since Ayato."

Flora had entered the Named Cult shortly after starting at Seidoukan, and had attracted considerable attention with her flamboyant style of swordsmanship, reminiscent in some ways of several of Gallardworth's fighters. But most noteworthy of all was that she had been chosen to wield the Ser Veresta.

Since Ayato graduated, many students had tried to wield the Orga Lux, but none had been able to earn a decent compatibility rating. Until Flora got her hands on it, that is.

"B-but…I still haven't quite mastered it…," she said, her shoulders drooping.

That was no surprise. It had taken Ayato Amagiri himself close to three years to master the weapon. And of course, its use required immense quantities of prana. Without Ayato's considerable reserves, you wouldn't be able to use it for long.

Flora seemed to be above average when it came to prana, but she couldn't compare to Ayato. For that reason, she activated the Ser Veresta only when she absolutely needed to use it.

"Yep, I remember him well, even after all this time…," Flora murmured. "Mr. Amagiri really was amazing."

Eishirou couldn't fail to notice a look of pride briefly pass over Claudia's features.

It's a good thing she's still as cute as always…

“What’s that, Yabuki?” Claudia asked, as though she’d read his mind.

“No, no, it’s nothing.” Eishirou looked away to escape her intimidating smile.

“Oh, right…,” Flora began, putting her hands together as though she’d just remembered something. She glanced between the two of them. “You two both received an invitation from Her Highness, didn’t you? Will you be attending?”

“Yes, of course. It’s been a long time since I last saw Julis in person.”

“So long as I’m not on a mission, I’d be happy to go. Right, Prez?” Eishirou said with a sideways glance.

Claudia let out a deliberate sigh. “Understood. I won’t assign you any work during that period, Yabuki.”

“All right!”

He had finally secured himself a real vacation. In his line of work, you never knew when missions would come flooding in, so a guaranteed day off was something to treasure.

“I wish I could get a response from Mr. Amagiri…but I don’t even know how to get the invitation to him.”

“Indeed… But he *does* know about it, yes?”

“Oh, of course. Her Highness told me she mentioned it to him the last time he called.”

“Then there shouldn’t be any problems. Ayato isn’t the kind to betray a friend’s trust. I’ll be sure to bring it up next time I hear from him as well,” Claudia reassured her.

“Thank you!” Flora exclaimed, her face lighting up as she dipped her head.

“Well, it looks like it’s about to start down there.”

Fueled by the live commentary, the audience around the stage was positively electric, their excitement palpable.

Flora leaned forward in concentration, while Claudia’s eyes narrowed in anticipation.

The next moment, Mico Yanase’s clear voice rang out:

"Now then, it's finally time for the deciding match of this year's Lindvolus! Which one of our contestants will carve themselves a place in the annals of history?!"

*

A figure walked by herself down the dimly lit passageway leading up to the stage.

The first time she had come this way, she had been with a partner.

The second time, with all her friends.

Several years had passed since then—and now, Kirin Toudou walked alone, her shoes clacking against the hard floor.

She would be lying if she said that she didn't feel a little lonely. She felt helpless at times, too.

No matter how much she grew, no matter how strong she became, she was still the same old Kirin.

But that was fine. So long as she remained herself, so long as *he* could see her, wherever he was, that was enough.

Passing through the entrance gate, she came to a halt and caught her breath.

Then, breaking into a run and leaping down from the bridge onto the stage, she heard the audience cry out in excitement. Her long, untied silver hair fluttered down her back, sparkling in the light.

"Dashing through the east gate is Seidoukan Academy's number one! She made it into the top four in the last season's Phoenix and triumphed in the Gryps together with the Glühen Rose, Julis-Alexia von Riessfeld! The sixth-generation Sword Saint! The Keen-Edged Tempest herself! Often called the greatest swordsman in the history of Asterisk, Kirin Toudou!

She was overflowing with energy.

She had sustained several injuries so far, but none were so serious as to hinder her ability to move around the stage.

That said, she wasn't confident that she could prevail over this next opponent.

"…"

Here she came.

On reflex, Kirin's body tightened, and she gulped.

Her opponent had only just passed through the gate, and though she was still out of sight, the sense of overwhelming power emanating from her froze Kirin to the core.

Her foe today was the third-generation Ban'yuu Tenra, Xinglou Fan.

"And now! Appearing from the west gate, Jie Long Seventh Institute's reigning number one! The girl who inherited the legendary title of Ban'yuu Tenra! She's long been said to possess absolute power! Though due to age restrictions, this is her first time actively participating in a Festa! She was rarely seen on the stage until now! Dominating in all her matches, proving the rumors true, it's Xinglou Fan!"

Xinglou descended from the bridge without making so much as a sound, breaking into a satisfied grin as she laid eyes on Kirin.

"Mm-hmm… Good, good. You've developed well, just as I had hoped."

The last time Kirin had seen Xinglou in person had been at the reception after the last Lindvolus, three years ago. In that time, she had grown into a beautiful girl. Of course, Kirin had made sure to watch recordings of each of her matches, so she was familiar with her appearance. But seeing her up close like this made the differences obvious.

She was small and delicate, not particularly tall, her limbs slender and her body still developing, though obviously well toned. Her hair had the iridescence of a butterfly's wings, and while it looked much the same as before, she now wore it cut considerably shorter.

"Your duel against Xiaohui Wu in the semifinals of the Gryps, and your rematch against him six months ago—both were superb."

"…I wasn't strong enough back then."

As promised, Kirin had given Xiaohui a rematch six months ago, and she had lost by only a hair's breadth.

"Ho-ho-ho! Xiaohui aims high indeed. But…if you had used the Orga Lux you wear at your waist, I expect the outcome would have

been very different."

"Well…"

It was true that she hadn't used the Fudaraku. Or rather, that she hadn't been able to use it.

After all, she had been saving it for today.

"Good, good. Xiaohui told me you gave it your all. He told me the reason, too, though he wasn't at all pleased about it." Having said that much, Xinglou's shoulders began to tremble in quiet laughter. "He's left Jie Long again, embarking on a journey of training and discovery. Thanks to that, Hufeng and Cecily are stirring up all kinds of trouble. Now that the twins have moved up to headquarters, we're lacking in good leadership."

"Huh?! Xiaohui's taken another leave of absence…?"

This was the first Kirin had heard of that. She would hardly be able to live with herself if she was to blame.

"Don't fret. It's a good thing. You know what they say: 'If you love your children, send them out into the world.'"

"I guess so… So where has he gone on this training trip?"

"I do not know. But perhaps he will bump into the Murakumo somewhere."

That was within the realm of possibility.

Kirin broke into a soft smile as she imagined that encounter.

"Well…you've kept that Orga Lux of yours sheathed ever since I announced my intention to participate in this year's Lindvolus, yes?"

"That's right."

Kirin had decided to use her final opportunity to participate in the Festa to enter this year's Lindvolus. She had known from the beginning that should the Ban'yuu Tenra choose to enter, she would inevitably run into her sooner or later. For that reason, Claudia had forbidden her from using the Fudaraku.

"Oh-ho, I'm pleased to hear that. But I never thought the sixth-generation Sword Saint would be so wary of me."

"…There's no need to be self-effacing. I've heard just how strong you are. And someone else at Seidoukan once faced the Ban'yuu Tenra at full power."

"Oh, I see, I see. Julis, you mean? Yes, she has a meticulous

sense of duty, that one. She even went out of her way to send me an invitation the other day."

Before Xinglou could say any more, a mechanical voice sounded out to announce the pending start of the match.

"Dear me, we've let ourselves get carried away with idle chatter. This is a place where fists and blades do the talking. Isn't that right, Keen-Edged Tempest?"

"…Yes," Kirin answered with a nod.

Xinglou flashed her a wry grin as she made for her starting position.

Kirin felt a weight lift from her shoulders. Perhaps this conversation was Xinglou's way of helping her alleviate her anxieties.

But even if it was, she doubted it was for her sake.

She probably wants to enjoy this fight to the fullest…

In that case, she would give her opponent everything she wanted.

"Lindvolus, Championship Match—battle start."

With the match underway, Kirin unsheathed the Fudaraku. A gush of purple electricity shot out, scorching the air around her.

As she pulled the blade out, it resisted like a giant dragon raging in her hands. Kirin clenched her teeth and held it in check—otherwise, the weapon might have gone on a rampage at the slightest opportunity.

After all, the Fudaraku was an Orga Lux in the shape of a Japanese sword, whose ability was to store energy while the blade remained sheathed in its scabbard. And the more energy the weapon had stored in it, the more difficult it was to control. A month's worth of energy was said to bestow a level of power similar to any of the Four Colored Runeswords. Back when she had fought Percival Gardner during the Golden Noontide, she had defeated the Holy Grail with four months' worth of accumulated energy.

Right now, the Fudaraku had a full year of energy stored inside it.

And Kirin was strong enough now to control it.

“Haaaaaaaaaah!”

She drew her sword with a heated cry as a gust of wind swept across the stage.

“Hah… Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Wonderful! What majesty! Such fierce spirit! I can’t hold back any longer! Let’s go!”

Xinglou’s cheeks were red with excitement. She cracked her knuckles and—

…! She’s gone?! Kirin wondered in a panic. *No, she’s behind me!*

There was no way that the Ban’yuu Tenra, as capable as she was, could have moved faster than Kirin’s clairvoyant eyes could discern—which meant that she must have used some teleportation ability.

Kirin leaped forward, twisting her body in midair, and unleashed the Fudaraku in a blinding flash.

“Oh-ho! So you can respond to my *shukuchi* techniques on the first try?!”

In an instant, Xinglou appeared behind Kirin, attacking with a powerful kick and quickly countering when she lashed out with her Orga Lux to meet it. But Xinglou still managed to dodge the strike in an unbelievable display of martial arts.

Xinglou jumped into close range, unleashing a palm strike with her right hand, which Kirin caught with the Fudaraku. While not on the level of the Ser Veresta, the Fudaraku should have had more than enough stored energy to cut through practically anything. A direct hit on one’s bare hands should have caused injury, yet Xinglou brushed the blade aside with a simple flick of her wrist, then delivered a fresh strike with her left hand.

“Huh?!”

Kirin circled around to the right and attacked with a downward slash while falling back a half step—but it wasn’t enough. She sliced clean through the sleeve of her opponent’s Jie Long uniform, but at the same time, Xinglou’s elbow punch landed square in her gut.

“…!”

“Ngh!”

Kirin was thrown backward by the force of the strike as her next slash made a shallow cut into Xinglou’s upper arm.

And then—

Spitting out bloody phlegm, Kirin unleashed another strike.

"Hmm!"

The slash, unleashed with her full strength, bisected the stage in a straight line, and while Xinglou ducked low to dodge it, it still sent a tuft of her hair fluttering like the wings of a butterfly as it landed softly on the ground.

"…Impressive. With swordsmanship like that, you're truly unsurpassed. In that case…"

The space around Xinglou distorted, three *vajras* emerging from the void—Dokkosho, Sankosho, and Gokosho.

"Sage tools, left behind by the first Ban'yuu Tenra. Now then, let's go."

The three *vajras* floated around Xinglou like satellites—until they were suddenly launched at her.

The ground beneath Kirin's feet was blown away as the first *vajra* sailed toward her like a missile, followed quickly by the second and third.

They did indeed possess frightening destructive power, but Kirin found them easier to respond to than when Xinglou had attacked at short range a moment ago.

Most of all—

"Pah!"

Kirin slashed down with the Fudaraku, right for the Dokkosho as it rose up again before her.

"…! What?"

The blow split the *vajra* clean in two, releasing a cloud of shattered fragments into the air behind her as she came to a halt, then dispatched the Sankosho and the Gokosho the same way.

"…I wouldn't have expected you to so easily destroy my sage tools. You're more than I imagined."

"Physical martial arts might be a different story, but when it comes to a contest between weapons, I won't lose," Kirin declared as she braced herself for more.

Xinglou fixed her with a look of genuine contentment. "Oh-ho…! I underestimated you. Then let's have another taste!"

The grin on Xinglou's face lost its magnanimity and gained a

dangerous edge.

"Rejoice. I didn't even let Helga Lindwall taste my next technique."

Once again, the space around Xinglou warped—but this time, she extended her hand into the distortion.

She remained that way for a brief moment, as though rummaging through a drawer. When she pulled it out, she was gripping a stick-shaped black object.

"Is that…?"

"Hmm, not so familiar an item in the world of today, is it? An old Chinese hard whip."

Like that, Xinglou casually brought it swinging down.

"Its name is Dashenbian."

"…?!"

The next moment, some huge, invisible force came bearing down on Kirin from above, crushing her under its weight.

"Ughhhhh!"

Though she tried to catch the blow by raising the Fudaraku, it was too heavy, too strong. Unable to deflect it, she was forced to endure, bracing herself with both feet while the weight pushed her back, carving a crater into the ground beneath her.

Until finally—

"Hah… Hah… Hah…!"

Kirin just barely survived the blow. Xinglou, watching from her perch at the edge of the crater, put her hands together in a slow clap.

"Well done. You are deserving of high praise."

"…No way… That was real…?"

Dashenbian.

Even Kirin knew that name. The God-Striking Whip, a magical weapon known as a baobei, wielded by Jiang Ziya, the protagonist of the old Chinese novel *The Investiture of the Gods*.

There were countless Orga Luxes in Asterisk bestowed with names tying them to legendary weapons from all eras and cultures, but those were ultimately nothing more than borrowed motifs.

…But this was Xinglou Fan, so just maybe…

“Of course, I’d like to say it’s real…but that isn’t the case. It’s a replica of a relic left in the Immortal Lands long, long ago.”

As she spoke, Xinglou reached into the distortion over her shoulder.

“Now then, the next one… Yes, the Huaxue Shendao should do nicely.”

Appearing from the warped space was a bright red blade dripping with a bloodlike liquid.

“Now, the match has only just begun. Don’t let this be the end, you hear?”

Kirin rose to her feet and caught her breath, then, wiping the sweat from her forehead, looked up at Xinglou. “…Before we started, I didn’t feel like I stood much of a chance against you. I still feel the same way.”

“Oh?” There was unmistakable disappointment in Xinglou’s eyes.

“But I’ll say this… I don’t have any intention of losing.”

“…”

It wasn’t that Kirin was unable to accept defeat with good grace. Yes, Xinglou Fan’s strength was formidable, and Kirin had yet to reach that realm herself—but that didn’t mean she had already been defeated.

Pulling the Hiinamaru from her waist, she repositioned herself, brandishing two blades.

Xinglou’s eyes opened wide, and with her hair bristling wildly, she broke out into a laugh. “Heh-heh-heh…! Well said! That’s the best rebuke I’ve heard in centuries!”

Then, Kirin and Xinglou moved simultaneously, lashing out toward one another.

As their blades clashed amid the fury, the frenzied cheers of the audience filled the stadium.





*

“A stowaway?”

Percival Gardner looked up to see that her immediate superior, Haruka Amagiri, seemed slightly troubled.

The Lindvolus was over, and the officers at Stjarnagarm finally had a chance to take a breather. But that wasn’t to say that Asterisk was free of trouble. Percival was still a rookie officer, but she was sent out into the field seemingly every day and had returned to headquarters now only for a quick meal.

But as far as Percival was concerned, the busier she was, the less time she had to be worried by stray thoughts.

“Right, a stowaway. This kind of thing’s pretty rare, but, well, we’re dealing with a minor here. She wasn’t carrying any form of ID, and she won’t tell us her name or what happened to her, either.”

Haruka was now considered the second most capable officer in the force after Helga Lindwall, though you wouldn’t guess it at first glance due to her calm and gentle demeanor. Of course, anyone with the right training would recognize her for what she was. In any event, she was always relaxed—a sight that made Percival realize what it meant to possess real strength.

Calm, gentle, direct, and strong—the polar opposite of herself.

“But…there was a number, tattooed into her right shoulder.”

“…!”

At these next words, Percival leaped up with a jolt, almost falling from her chair.

That sounded just like the serial number that had once emblazoned Percival’s right shoulder, proof that she had formerly belonged to the Institute.

“…I understand. I’ll take her statement.”

“Thank you. I’ll inform the commander and have her leave this in your hands.”

“Understood.”

Normally, such serial numbers were erased at the time of

shipment. And besides *shipment*, there was only one other way out of the Institute.

Disposal.

Percival clenched her teeth as she marched briskly through the corridors of Stjarnagarm's headquarters.

After the Golden Noontide, Percival had been required to undergo an extensive period of hospitalization. Her mind, manipulated by the Varda-Vaos, had needed considerable time to recover, and even now, she still occasionally had flashbacks to the days she'd spent under its influence.

Yes, unlike with Ursula Svend, whose consciousness had been completely hijacked by the Varda-Vaos, Percival's memories remained intact. As if she would never be permitted to escape the truth of what she had been trying to accomplish, nor the gravity of her sins.

Thanks to the integrated enterprise foundations' desire to keep everything secret, the strong evidence of intense brainwashing, and some personal intervention from Claudia Enfield at Seidoukan Academy, Percival had been conditionally exempted from any form of punishment. But that wasn't to say that she had been forgiven for her actions. And more importantly, she couldn't forgive herself.

Unable to stay at Gallardworth, she decided to drop out, though her friends did everything they could to stop her. That was when Helga, the commander at Stjarnagarm, reached out to her.

If, Helga told her, she wanted to atone for her sins, what better way could there be than to protect this city and its people? Those words had brought Percival to Stjarnagarm, and she had remained with the police force ever since.

In retrospect, the integrated enterprise foundations were probably happy with this arrangement, as it would enable them to keep a close eye on her future activities. While Helga's dislike of the IEFs was well known, the organizations themselves seemed to think highly of her, though they were sometimes frustrated by her actions.

Still, no matter how hard she pushed herself as part of the city guard, Percival still hadn't been able to forgive herself. Perhaps she never would.

Even if—

"…"

As she turned over these thoughts in her mind, she realized that her feet had already delivered her to the door leading into the interrogation room.

Putting her mind in order, she knocked, then turned the handle.

"Oh…"

Inside was a young girl, standing in the middle of the room despite the supplied chair.

No sooner had she laid eyes on Percival than she cowered, retreating fearfully to the back of the room. Her dull gray hair was disheveled, her dress dirty. It was clear at first glance that she had no one else to defend her. She looked to be around twelve or thirteen years old.

"Hmm…?"

Percival felt a strange sense of incongruity as she watched her.

The girl stiffened, shrinking back.

What's this…?

She hadn't been able to believe it, but there could be no mistake.

"One-one-five-seven-three-three-nine-four," she began.

"…Huh?"

"That was my serial number, when I was there."

"…!"

The girl stared back at her, wide-eyed.

"Won't you talk to me for a minute?" Percival suggested, offering her a chair.

The girl hesitated for a moment before accepting the invitation. After that gesture, she seemed to open her heart ever so slightly.

"…So why did you come to this city?" Percival asked bluntly.

There was no point in asking her name or age. What she needed to know was her intentions.

"I—I… They didn't need me anymore… Th-they said I wasn't n-necessary anymore, that I couldn't be of any further use… So before they could dispose of me, I… I—I was desperate to escape…" The girl spoke falteringly, her voice thin and trembling. "I…I don't really know where it was…but I saw a city…with, er… A *Festa*? A *Lindvolus*?

Anyway, I saw a video of it…and it was so, so beautiful… I—I…I wanted to go there…! S-so…!”

Before Percival knew it, the girl was leaning forward in her chair, pouring her heart out.

“Oh…!”

Perhaps having noticed her own excitement, the girl blushed, looking down at the floor in embarrassment as she pulled back.

“…I see. In that case, I have one more question,” Percival asked quietly, her eyes narrowed. “Are you hiding your true strength?”

“…!”

The girl swallowed.

There could be no doubt about it. Percival’s eyes would have seen through any attempt at falsehood. The girl was concealing immense power. In all likelihood, she was just as strong as Percival herself. Otherwise, there was no way she would have been able to escape from the Institute.

And if she was that capable, there was no way that the Institute would have disposed of her. Deceiving the staff there would have required a great deal of determination and ingenuity.

In other words, she had chosen the path of disposal for herself.

“H-how…? N-no one ever saw through me before…” The girl was staring straight at Percival with a bewildered look.

“Why did you hide it?” Percival asked.

Then, staring at the ground, the girl answered in a small, mosquito-like voice: “B-because…I—I was scared…”

“Scared…? Of your own powers?”

The girl responded with a robotic nod.

There was clearly a contradiction here. Afraid of exercising her own abilities, yet longing for the stage of the Festa and wishing to enter it for herself.

But Percival understood her painfully well.

Not everyone was capable of coming to terms with their feelings and desires. There were those who found themselves unable to choose, never able to abandon one desire to pursue another.

“I understand. Now, for my last question.” Percival paused for a moment. “What do you want to do now?”

The girl looked away, her jaw clenched as though she was holding back her words. Finally, after a short silence, she shook her head and looked up, filled with determination. “I—I…I want to be in the Festa!” she said firmly.

“Very well. In that case, I can help you.”

“Huh…?”

As Percival held out her right hand, the girl’s eyes widened in surprise.

To her, Percival was little more than an officer of Stjarnagarm, a figure whom she had only just met. She didn’t even know her name.

Besides, Percival didn’t even have the authority to do this. While Haruka might have let her conduct the questioning here, the promise she’d just made clearly transcended the scope of her duties. Depending on how things ended up, she might earn herself more than just a simple rebuke or admonishment.

Maybe she was just compensating. Perhaps she was trying to make amends by helping this girl because she had been unable to save her own friends.

That said, this was the first step that she had taken on her own. It wasn’t Subject #11573394 at the Institute who was extending her hand here, nor Agrestia wielding the Holy Grail, nor even an officer of Stjarnagarm—it was Percival Gardner herself.

“…”

The girl stared at the proffered hand for a moment, then, timidly, she reached out to accept it.

Her hand was small, but warm.

As Percival held on with her right hand, she used her left one to open an air-window. The fact that the girl had escaped from the Institute meant that she had no name, nationality, or anything else. At this rate, she would probably end up in a facility where there was a ninety percent chance she would be preyed on by other children. There may have been plenty of good people in this world, but the kind who flocked to foundling children were usually the bad ones.

It would take a great deal of effort to keep that from happening.

What the girl needed wasn’t the power of an individual, but that of an organization.

"…This is *a surprise. I wouldn't have expected you to call me, Gardner."*

The face in the air-window was that of Elliot Forster, Gallardworth's highest-ranked pupil and student council president. It had been ages since Percival had last seen him, and he looked to have grown—he was taller now, an imposing representative of Saint Gallardworth Academy.

"It's been a while, Percival."

Standing by Elliot's side was his girlfriend, Noelle Messmer.

Just as the girl had, Percival made up her mind and bowed her head to the two figures in the air-window.

"I'm sorry for coming to you so suddenly, but I have a favor to ask… Will you help me?"

And so it was that the girl, who later took on the alias Hexametros, ushered in a new era together with Flora Klemm, alias Thaleia, and Xinglou Fan, the Ban'yuu Tenra, in what would come to be known as the Era of the Three Maidens—but that's a story for another time.

*

"Three beers for now, Gramps. And pickles and rolled omelets."

"Coming right up!"

The bustling Friday night pub was almost at capacity.

At the far end of the tatami-floored room, Saya, seated at an old table, sat cross-legged in her suit as she ordered several items without even looking at the menu. Given her childlike appearance, she was often asked to show ID at places like this, but since she was a regular here, that hadn't been necessary. In terms of looks, she had hardly changed over the past three years—or over the past six years, either, for that matter.

In those large cities that emerged from the Invertia relatively unscathed, there were still many shops and restaurants that

continued the traditions of centuries past. That was especially true here in Kyoto, where large-scale urban redevelopment was restricted. That said, the buildings themselves had no doubt been rebuilt or remodeled several times over.

"Here, the menu. Order whatever you like. Most of it's good."

"…"

Sitting across from her was Camilla, who looked vaguely uncomfortable, her expression difficult to read. Like Saya, she was wearing a suit, and her hair was notably shorter than before.

An international conference on meteoric engineering was taking place this weekend in Kyoto, and both Camilla and Saya were due to attend. After graduating, Saya had transferred to the meteoric engineering department at a university in Kyoto rather than continuing at Seidoukan's own higher education institute. Camilla and her guest, however, had to travel all the way from Asterisk to attend.

"What's wrong?" Saya asked.

"No, I just thought… I mean, I told you I wanted to talk about something, right?"

"Yep. Go ahead."

"…Here?" Camilla glanced around, her words barely audible.

"Is something wrong?"

"Well, er… It just doesn't feel like the best place for a private conversation."

"Your partner seems pretty into it, though," Saya observed, glancing to the next seat over.

Ernesta was looking curiously around the restaurant, her eyes positively sparkling.

"Yeah! I've always wanted to come to a place like this! Tatami! Look, the floors are tatami! This is so nice! I'll have to make a place like this in my lab!"

Ernesta was wearing a suit, too, but she was only accompanying Camilla. She wasn't attending the conference herself. Both had already graduated from Allekant Académie and were continuing their research with their own laboratories at Frauenlob.

"This place is actually pretty good for secret conversations," Saya

explained. “The noise makes it hard for anyone to listen in, and no one would bother to eavesdrop here anyway.”

“…Are you sure?” Camilla still looked suspicious, but she gave in, letting her shoulders droop.

“Ernesta Kühne. I wasn’t expecting to see you here, since you’re always holed up in your lab.”

Ernesta had hardly been seen in public since the Golden Noontide three years prior. Saya remained in regular contact with Camilla, but it had been a very long time since she had last spoken directly with Ernesta.

“Hmm? Well, I’m getting so close to my goal, I thought it would be nice to step outside a little, you know?”

“Are you talking about the *long-term vision* you mentioned?”

“Oh? So you remember?” Ernesta grinned as she helped herself to a piece of the newly arrived rolled omelets. “Actually, we’re planning to discuss a unified legal framework for autonomous puppets at the next Concordia. Yep, things are moving along quicker than I expected.”

“Legal framework…?”

“Uh-huh. Ever since the Golden Noontide, countries all over the world have been regulating what you can and can’t do. But those rules don’t really match reality, do they? So we’re working with the integrated enterprise foundations to smooth things out.”

The Golden Noontide incident. Naturally, regulations surrounding autonomous puppets were tightened afterward—but at the same time, rather than decreasing, demand for the machines had only gone up. The reason for this was simple—the whole world had seen that the only way ordinary people could hope to hold their own against Genestella was with the help of such puppets. As such, legal regulations and the situation on the ground had clashed, leading to a whole swathe of problems. All that being said, setting up a global framework would have been a tall order even if the situation wasn’t so complicated.

But after giving the issue a little thought, the pieces of the puzzle clicked into place.

“…So that’s why you used the Golden Bough Alliance. To involve

autonomous puppets in a global incident and force a discussion."

"Who knows…?" Ernesta replied vaguely. "But don't you think this is a much better outcome than having Genestella and regular people all hate each other?"

"…!"

The Golden Bough Alliance's objective had been to create an unbridgeable rift between ordinary humans and Genestella, an outcome thwarted only by stopping Orphelia. If the public had known that the Golden Noontide terrorist attacks were all a front for Genestella liberation, chaos would have inevitably ensued. The only reason it had been kept to a minimum was that the autonomous puppets, the entities that had actually implemented the attacks, had borne the brunt of the criticism.

"You're saying you had all this planned?" Saya asked.

"No way! It was all coincidence, or rather luck. If you hadn't stopped them, it would have all been meaningless. Besides, with puppets becoming more and more widespread, there would have been a similar incident sooner or later. So the sooner we get decent legislation in place, the better, right?" Ernesta, holding a beer in one hand, broke out into a grin.

"…I don't like you very much. But I do respect you," Saya remarked.

"Nya-ha-ha, don't worry about it. But I've always wondered… Why *do* you hate me? Was it something I did?"

At those words, Saya placed the mug in her hand down on the table. "Have you forgotten?"

"Eh?"

"The first time we met—you kissed Ayato on the cheek."

"Oh, that… You're still upset about that? Seriously, you're so petty! First of all, I thought that swordsman dumped you! So it should be fine, right?"

Saya downed what remained of her beer and then, fixing Ernesta with a glare, called out, "Another round, Gramps!"

"Coming right up!"

Leaning forward over the table, she said, "That doesn't mean I've given up yet."

That day three years ago, Saya and the others had all been rejected. Yes, not just Saya—but Julis, Kirin, Claudia, and Sylvia, too. All of them.

"*Sorry. But I want to see with my own eyes what the lives of Genestella and ordinary folk are like after I graduate from Seidoukan. I don't like admitting it, but I think Madiath Mesa saw more than I ever did, that he gave it all more thought, too. And that's what guided his conduct. I rejected his beliefs and actions, so I have a responsibility to him. To prove that I was right. To prove it to myself, at least… That's why I've made my decision*," Ayato had answered, his head bowed.

He said that he had no idea how long it would take, and that he couldn't drag them along as he sought out an answer.

Frankly, Saya had thought it was all rather stupid—and she still did. There was no need for any of that. There was no point. But at the same time, it was so very like him. So none of them had condemned Ayato's answer, *but none of them had given up on him, either*.

"Oh," Camilla interrupted. She had been silently sipping her beer all this time. "I guess I might as well get to the point, then?"

"Right. What did you want to talk about?" Saya asked, urging her to continue.

Camilla cleared her throat. "Ernesta and I are thinking of launching a new project together. We'd like you to join us."

"…What project?"

"It involves artificially creating *holes* to communicate with the other side."

"Huh…?"

This was even more outrageous than Saya had expected, leaving her utterly stunned.

"Magnum Opus already succeeded in creating artificial *holes*. However, her method isn't something we can reproduce. We need a different approach. Theoretically, we know a *hole* can be created by converging stable quantities of high-powered energy for a certain period of time. Which means…"

"In other words, you want to build a Lux to generate a *hole*?"

Saya finished for her.

"Precisely," Camilla answered with a satisfied nod.

Saya folded her arms, sinking into thought for a few minutes.

It was an interesting suggestion. More than interesting. And yet…

"I have two questions."

"I'll answer them."

"The first one. Why me? I'm not a genius like you two are."

Saya had attracted considerable attention thanks to the Luxes that she had designed and built during her time at Seidoukan. But most were actually designed by her father, Souichi, though she had added some personal flourishes of her own. She couldn't have made them by herself. After all, she had still been a student in the middle of her studies. Very different from Camilla and Ernesta.

"I'll answer that question!" a tipsy Ernesta began. "Sure, you might not be a bona fide genius. But you're gifted. And you've got precisely the kind of talent we need."

Ernesta, it seemed, wasn't a particularly strong drinker.

"…Okay. Then my second question. You're planning on communicating with the other side? How?"

"That's…"

"Using puppets, of course."

Saya had suspected as much. So long as Ernesta was involved, that had to be the answer.

"It seems that contact with the other side poses considerable risk for humans. So we're going to try opening communications through puppets first."

"Hmm…"

"If possible, we'd like to hear from someone who's actually come into contact with the other side. But that's not easy."

As far as Saya knew, there were only three individuals who were qualified. Orphelia Landlufen, Hilda Jane Rowlands, and—

"All right. I'll participate in your project," Saya said, downing her second beer in one long gulp.

*

The Secret Caravan.

This unusual music festival was held intermittently, its time, date, location, and the performers announced with little advance notice. Yet owing to the status of the artists that it attracted, it was so popular that tickets always sold out immediately.

This time, the festival was being held over three days in the Australian wilderness. It was currently on its second day.

"Heya! How's it going?"

"Whoa! Sylvia…?!"

As Sylvia stepped inside the tent serving as a waiting room, the members of Rusalka relaxing inside jumped to their feet in a flustered panic.

"S-Sylvia…?! What are *you* doing here?!"

"What am I doing here…? I'm the secret guest on the last day."

"Whoaaaaa! I—I had no idea…! I'll definitely have to watch…!"

Judging from Miluše's astonishment, the Secret Caravan's clandestine status extended even to its performing artists.

"Wow, that's big news! We've got to post this online…!" Tuulia exclaimed, pulling out her mobile.

"N-n-no, you can't! You'll upset the organizers, not to mention the chairwoman will be furious!" Mahulena, sitting nearby, hurried to stop her.

"Right! I'd better do it anonymously, so I don't get caught!"

"That's no good, either!"

This time, Mahulena snatched Tuulia's mobile from her hand in a brisk, flowing motion. Hers was a lonely battle, as usual.





"But…if you're on tomorrow, what are you doing here today? Heh-heh…" Suddenly, Päivi adopted a serious tone and quietly changed topics. "Is this about our reconnaissance activities?"

"No, no. I mean, you guys, Rusalka, are now the uncontested number ones at Queenvale. I just thought I'd drop in to say hello," Sylvia explained with a respectful bow.

At this, the faces of the five band members instantly relaxed.

"O-oh? Well, it's true. Th-thank you?"

"I-it feels good to hear that from you, Sylvia…"

Miluše and Tuulia both rubbed the bridges of their noses, looking away with embarrassment.

"…Hah, we only moved up because Sylvia graduated."

Mahulena was the only one who managed to maintain a cool demeanor, but even she looked pleased. It was adorable.

In fact, even after Sylvia and Neithnefer left Queenvale without going on to the academy's university, Rusalka's popularity had remained unshakable. Try as Mahulena might to explain away their success, the band had become increasingly popular—so much so that Sylvia couldn't afford to rest on her laurels.

"…All you need now is for your leader to take the top ranking at school."

"She got beaten to a pulp in her last official match…! Such a pity…," Monica said with a mean laugh.

"Ugh…! W-we promised not to talk about that!" Päivi butted in.

Miluše's shoulders visibly dropped.

Queenvale's current top-ranked student was Violet Weinberg, Overliezel. She'd received training at the Liangshan, and despite Queenvale's reputation as the weakest of Asterisk's schools, she was practically unbeatable.

"Keep it down, Rusalka. This tent isn't soundproofed, so try to be a little quieter… Huh? Sylvia?"

"Oh, Chloe."

Entering the tent with a sullen face was Chloe Flockhart, who had succeeded Sylvia as student council president at Queenvale Academy

for Young Ladies.

"The organizers have been looking out for me for a while, and they asked me to come this time, too."

"I see. How are Minato and the others doing?"

"Oh, everyone's fine. The space development plan has been restarted, so Minato's hard at work studying for the next round of astronaut recruitment. Yuzuhi's looking out for her, so I think she'll be fine."

It was no coincidence that space development programs, which until only recently had been relegated to the past, were being restarted in countries all across the world. Perhaps the integrated enterprise foundations had decided, following the Golden Noontide, that it was necessary to venture into space to acquire information on the massive reserves of mana and urm-manadite said to exist on the other side.

"Nina is very supportive as vice-president. It's only thanks to her that I'm able to set foot out of the academy like this. Sophia is the only one of us who's graduated, so we don't get to see each other as much as we'd like…"

"I heard she's modeling exclusively for Diana Pound's clothing brand. She seems to be doing exceptionally well for someone so new to the industry."

Most students at Queenvale involved in the performing arts continued to work professionally through one of the many firms affiliated with the integrated enterprise foundation Warren & Warren. Even Sylvia, despite having graduated, was still leaving all production and branding matters to Petra, just as before.

"But you're still active, too, right, Sylvia?" Chloe asked, arms crossed.

"Me?"

"Apologies for saying this, but I honestly didn't think you would stay popular after leaving Queenvale. Of course, your songs are wonderful, and as an idol and a diva, you're the best of the best. But I always thought the basis of your popularity was your charm as Sigrdrífa and as a student at Asterisk."

That analysis was probably spot on. In fact, Sylvia had often

thought of herself that way.

Sylvia Lyyneheym, an idol of both song and combat.

"But now that you've graduated…you keep rising to even greater heights simply as the diva Sylvia Lyyneheym. I admire that."

"It's not like I've stopped fighting, though. I mean, I was invited to the Rondo, and I'm keeping up with my training. But, well…if you ask me, it's all thanks to *her* that I've been able to advance to the next stage."

Chloe nodded in agreement. "I think so, too. Ursula Svend's songs really are wonderful. And most of all…they fit your voice and personality perfectly."

Ursula had been released after the Golden Noontide, albeit under the watchful eye of the integrated enterprise foundations. Though clearly a victim of the Varda-Vaos, she'd still found herself in a difficult position, though compared to Ladislav Bartošik, who had been placed under a prolonged period of house arrest, her treatment was fairly lenient.

As soon as she was discharged from the hospital, she said to Sylvia, "*This isn't meant as thanks for you saving my life, but I'd like to offer my songs to you. Will you take them?*"

Since then, Ursula had been actively working as a songwriter.

Sylvia had to perform her own songs when making use of her Strega abilities, but as an artist, she was happy to sing others written by professional composers and lyricists.

But no sooner had she started singing them than Ursula's songs had become unprecedented worldwide hits. Singing her friend's songs, Sylvia was more fulfilled than ever before.

That was how much they had captivated her heart.

…Just like the song she had overheard that rainy day years ago, whose name she still didn't know.

I wish I could hear her sing it again…

She had asked Ursula several times, but she had refused.

Even though she wasn't responsible for any of it, it seemed she was still upset about everything the Varda-Vaos had done. It was an undeniable fact that her body had been used to ruin countless people's lives.

That was why Sylvia hadn't said anything about it all this time.

Ursula was strong. Sylvia was sure she would be able to face her trauma, to overcome it.

After all, she was the mentor of the world's most popular diva, Sylvia Lyyneheym.

"Oh… By the way, Sylvia. I heard from the chairwoman that you got an invitation from Lieseltania, right?" Chloe, perhaps uncomfortable with the silence, moved to change the topic. "It's unusual for you to take on a request like this."

Sylvia wasn't particularly choosy about her work, but she did often turn down requests to perform at ceremonies and the like. She'd feel guilty if she upstaged the main event.

But this was a special occasion.

"I have to, right? I mean…my rival in love is going to be crowned queen. I have to be there to celebrate."

And of course, she had little doubt that *he* would be there.

So she would hold no punches. She would take the stage and sing to the best of her ability, hoping to attract as much attention to herself as she could.

After all, her opponent was the grand slam winner Julis-Alexia von Riessfeld.

There was no need to hold back this time.

EPILOGUE

In the Lieseltanian royal capital of Strell…

"Wow! Your Highness…no, Your *Majesty*! You're beautiful!"

Flora, dressed in her maid's uniform, clasped her hands together in front of her chest in astonishment as she stepped into the room.

"You are speaking to the queen. Conduct yourself accordingly," an elderly maid helping Julis dress chided Flora, but Julis raised a hand to stop her.

Looking in the mirror, she was struck by the pure white dress that had just been fitted for her in preparation for the evening's party. It was much more elegant than her ceremonial attire, and it made her long, lush rose-colored hair stand out even more than usual. People said that she looked much more beautiful than she once had. She'd been so desperate a few years back, maybe she had indeed lost her rugged edge.

"A-apologies…," Flora said, cringing.

Julis flashed her a soft smile as the older maid backed down. "Don't worry about it, Flora. I owe you an apology, keeping you so busy even though you've just returned."

"N-not at all! It's my duty to serve you, Your High—Your *Majesty*!"

"I'm relieved to hear you say that. Anyway, I'm just tired today."

Julis sat down on the sofa and sighed, careful not to wrinkle the dress that she had just changed into. After all, she had had a busy day—from setting out in a horse-drawn carriage around the lake to greet large crowds of people, to attending the rituals in the cathedral, where she had taken the oath of office in front of the archbishop. She'd been given a ring, a scepter, and a crown, and

consecrated with holy oil. Then she'd returned to the royal palace by carriage again and greeted the people once more from the building's balcony. The silk dress and velvet ceremonial attire that she had worn for the coronation ceremony had been difficult to move around in, and the long hem had to be carried by several servants. On top of that, her hair was done up elaborately, too. The whole thing had been unbearably stiff and formal.

But she was still only halfway through the day's schedule. After this, she had two more dinners to attend before delivering a speech to the nation. She had been waiting all day for this chance to catch her breath.

"So is everyone here?"

"Yes! They've all arrived. It's just…" Flora lowered her gaze with a pained look. "Everyone except Master Amagiri…"

"…I see."

After graduating from Seidoukan, Julis had moved to a two-year university in England to study comparative politics and other subjects and, upon returning to Lieseltania, had assisted her older brother Jolbert in ruling. During that time, she had often spoken with her friends from Seidoukan, with whom she had shared so much joy and hardship, and she had even continued to interact with Sylvia and those from the other schools. But she had rarely heard from Ayato. Or perhaps it was more accurate to say that she had hardly ever been able to reach him. Apparently, it was the same for the others, too. Once a month, sometimes once every few months, her mobile would ring, and they would speak for a few brief minutes. According to Saya, that was likely because he was supposed to keep his mobile switched off wherever he was, or else because there was no reception, or perhaps it was simply broken. But even so, Julis couldn't help worrying about where he was and what he was doing.

"I wanted to talk with him about something, too…," Julis mumbled, rising from the sofa to stare out over the gardens beyond the glass doors. "There's still a little time before the first dinner party. I'm going to get some fresh air," she announced.

"Yes, of course," Flora answered with a reverent bow.

Leaving her behind, Julis stepped out into the garden that stretched between the royal palace and the smaller detached palace. This was her favorite place, a garden that she still took time to tend to herself.

It was still a little too early for spring, but some buds were beginning to bloom in their flower beds, the first hints of their fragrances wafting through the air.

The sun was setting, but she could still feel the lingering traces of its warm light.

All of a sudden, a strong southerly wind blew through the garden.

On reflex, Julis reached out to keep her hair in place, closing her eyes.

And then—

"Hi, Julis. It's been a while."

She heard a voice, nostalgic and familiar. Then she opened her eyes, and there he was.

"Ayato…"

Before she knew it, the figure of a young man had appeared before her.

Did his face leave a stronger impression than before? Perhaps it was his slight tan that lent him a more mature look. He'd put on some muscle, but he'd also grown taller, which softened the impression. All in all, he retained the same gentle, calm atmosphere that she remembered. If she had to nitpick, the long hair tied tidily behind his head didn't suit him very well.

For a moment, Julis stood there stunned—but it wasn't long before she regained her composure, fixing him with a glare as a smile rose to her lips.

"Looks like you're making a habit of trespassing."

"Ha-ha… Sorry. Security took one look at me and tried to stop me from entering."

Ayato was dressed in a worn-out coat that hid his body, and his boots had clearly seen better days. It was a far cry from formal attire, and certainly not the kind of clothes that would allow one access into a royal palace.

"I'm not surprised… Still, you could have just called someone to

let you in. It wouldn't even have to be me. Claudia or one of the others would have been able to clear things up."

"Well…," he began, showing her his mobile device—it was completely destroyed.

No, not just destroyed. Those rough marks were unmistakably the work of a blade.

"Really… What on earth have you been doing?" she asked, half-worried, half-shocked, and more than a little angry.

Ayato averted his gaze and smiled. It looked like he had no intention of answering her.

"…At the very least, couldn't you have cleaned yourself up first? Don't you have any common sense?"

"Well, er… I'm ashamed to admit it, but I didn't have anything else on hand."

Julis was at a loss for words, but when she paused to think about it, he had been wandering from place to place for the past three years. Perhaps it was inevitable. Of course, with his ability and fame, he should have been able to earn as much money as he could ever want or need. The fact that he hadn't done so could only mean that he didn't feel like it.

"Actually, I was planning to simply watch from a distance… But when I saw your face, I couldn't resist the urge to see you again in person, Julis. And to congratulate you."

"…!"

He was as sly as ever. When he put it like that, how was she supposed to respond?

"…Fine, fine. I get it," she said, resting a hand in front of her eyes as she waved for him to stop. "…It looks like you've been busy, though."

From between her fingers, Julis's piercing gaze could make out his whole body.

It was easy to see from his mannerisms alone, but the tranquil state of his prana was extraordinary. It should have been impossible to hold that much power inside without showing the strain—not only physically, but mentally, too.

The Ayato in front of her was even stronger than before—

incomparably so when she thought back to who he had been three years earlier. He might even be a match for Xinglou now. At his current level, he would have had no trouble at all sneaking past the guards to enter the palace grounds.

"A lot of it was luck. Xiaohui introduced me to a venerable old sage who taught me the basics of *seisenjutsu*… Though it doesn't suit me all that well, and unfortunately, I wasn't able to master it."

"What…? You met Hagun Seikun?"

"During my martial arts training. I happened to bump into him, so he let me tag along for a while. He's become quite formidable, too."

"Oh? I heard he beat Kirin in their last duel…"

"Apparently he wasn't very satisfied with the outcome. Actually, speaking of Jie Long, I ran into Fuyuka at Mount Emei. She was having an issue with some people from Azdaja and—"

Ayato, talking lightly as though looking back on fond memories, suddenly raised a hand to his mouth to stop himself.

"Hold on… Did you just say Azdaja?" Julis gave him a probing look.

"Er…," Ayato responded with a wry, vague smile.

Azdaja, whose existence Julis had become aware of only after getting involved in governmental affairs, was, so to speak, the lingering ghost of various integrated enterprise foundations. Essentially, it consisted of the worst parts of two now-defunct organizations and was believed to have been involved in all manner of worrying incidents.

Any trouble with the likes of them was no small matter.

"…Just tell me one thing. You're not trying to get involved with the integrated enterprise foundations, are you?"

"Well…for the time being…I'm probably fine…I guess?"

Ayato's unconvincing response left Julis wanting to hold her head in her hands. If it came to that, her plans for the future would all have been for nothing.

"…Listen, Ayato. There's something I want to tell you," she started after regaining her composure.

Ayato straightened his back. "Oh, first things first—congrats, Julis. I didn't expect you to become queen so soon."

Julis flashed him an honest smile in response, even if the way he had cut her off just now had gotten a little on her nerves. "Hee-hee… Well, I suppose so. I didn't either."

Ayato blinked in surprise.

"Everything leading up to this, it was all my brother's plan. I know he might act like he doesn't know what's going on, but he's actually very astute. Frustratingly so, sometimes."

Originally, Julis had wanted to change the country by assisting her brother, Jolbert. She had always known that she might eventually succeed him on the throne, but that time, if it ever came, would be a long way off, she reasoned.

But one day, he simply offered to abdicate. When Julis had reacted with mute astonishment, Jolbert had fixed her with a helpless smile while his wife, Maria, cuddled him on her knees.

"*Julis*," he explained. "*You must have noticed it. Thanks to you, the crown's rights have been expanded considerably, and we've gained a certain amount of leeway. But unfortunately, I've reached my limit. I've been on friendly terms with the integrated enterprise foundations for a long time, so I can't garner enough support for more reforms. So…I'm going to expose all the corruption and scandals that have taken place up till now, and blow myself up along with the dogs who run those corporate behemoths. I'll need you to take care of things from now on.*"

His expression, as he said all this, was one of quiet acceptance.

Naturally, the political and business spheres in Lieseltania had been thrown into chaos, so as soon as Julis ascended to the throne, she laid the groundwork to bring the integrated enterprise foundations to heel and succeeded in passing several important pieces of legislation.

"One of them was a bill to abolish the monarchy, which will transform Lieseltania into a republic during my lifetime."

Lieseltania had been revived to serve as a puppet state for the integrated enterprise foundations, so it would have made perfect sense if it had simply ceased to exist. But so long as there were people who called the country their home, they ought to have the right to decide their own futures.

So Julis had become queen in order to prepare the state for that eventuality.

And that future couldn't be achieved simply by bowing down to the integrated enterprise foundations.

But while the crown might have more power, Lieseltania would never be able to compete with the IEFs themselves. The only organizations capable of contending with them on that scale would be other IEFs.

"My experiences in Asterisk were enlightening. Its six schools all compete for supremacy, but ultimately, they achieve a careful balance. So I thought maybe we could try to replicate something like that here—and in fact, I've already passed a bill to do just that."

Lieseltania would be no different from Asterisk—a playpen for the six integrated enterprise foundations to each seek supremacy in the form of profit.

The IEFs existed to pursue profit before all else, after all. To that end, they often joined together to cooperate on certain projects. They were like beasts seeking out ever-greater riches. Ultimately, their goals were to exterminate their competitor organizations and expand their own economic spheres to encompass every corner of the world. Instinctively, that was all that mattered to them, and any external cooperation or compromise was, as far as they were concerned, merely a means to an end.

Julis's role was to soothe the beasts, at times to coax them, and occasionally, when need be, to chastise them.

"Of course, it's a dangerous path to tread. One wrong step, and it could have serious repercussions for the whole country. And there's no telling what might become of me," she said with a sigh, turning back to Ayato, who had been listening in silence all this time. "By the way… Are you still… Are you still busy wandering the world?"

Ayato looked puzzled for a moment by this sudden change of topic, but he crossed his arms and fell deep into thought. "Hmm, yeah… Actually, I was thinking it might be time for me to settle down for a while…"

"W-well then…! Going back to what I wanted to talk to you about… Um… H-how about…you stay with me…?"

"Huh…?"

"N-n-no, not like that…! As a bodyguard! Right, I'm looking for a skilled bodyguard! Like I said, there's no guarantee that something bad won't happen to me or those I care about in the future… And as you know, I'm not a Strega anymore. It would be hard for me to protect myself, let alone anyone else."

"Oh…" Ayato looked up sadly. It seemed as though he was about to say something, when Julis interrupted.

"Th-that's fine, though. I'm not putting on a front here—I really don't have any regrets."

Ever since that day—since her championship match against Orphelia—Julis had lost her Strega abilities. The reason remained unclear. Maybe it was because she had pushed herself so far beyond her limits, or maybe it was because she had caught a glimpse of the other side. Her strength as a Genestella still remained, so she wasn't completely powerless, but her combat proficiency had dropped precariously.

And yet—

"It's true, I can't make my fire flowers bloom anymore. But I have a friend who's nurturing another kind of flower, one even more suited to me. That's enough."

With those words, Julis turned her gaze to the other side of the lake beyond the garden. There, tending to colorful flowers in a greenhouse by a small orphanage, lived a woman with white hair and red eyes—her best friend, and like Julis, a Strega who had also lost her powers. That was what Julis had wished for as the champion of the Lindvolus.

Noticing Ayato's warm gaze, Julis cleared her throat. "So, back to the main topic… What do you think? If you still want to learn more about Genestella and regular people, in a sense, this country might very well be the best place to do it. After all, you won't find anywhere else with a Genestella as the head of state," she said with both pride and a hint of self-deprecation.

"What you're saying is that you're starting a new battle here, this time as queen?" Ayato asked.

"…Well, I guess so. Something like that."

The enemy wasn't the integrated enterprise foundations.

They were behemoths, beasts—but they were also a system. They were inherently neither good nor bad, but could be either when the moment called for it. If there was really an enemy here in need of defeating, it was the current state of the world and the people who had made the system what it was. And that, no doubt, was the same exact thing that Ayato was trying to uncover.

"Then I can't say no," Ayato said, his smile unchanged from that day. "I swore to protect you, Julis."

"…!"

She could feel her face turning red, and she lifted a hand to hide her embarrassment.

"I'm queen, you know? Aren't you supposed to kneel and kiss the back of my hand?"

"Heh-heh, that's not a bad idea… But I can think of something else even more suitable."

Julis wanted to be on an equal footing with Ayato. This wouldn't make any sense otherwise.

"…Got it."

Ayato lifted his right fist and gently pressed it against hers. Then, their gazes met—and they both began to laugh.

Just then—

"Oh, Master Amagiri!"

Flora's high-pitched voice echoed through the garden as a group of familiar faces headed toward them.

"Oh, Ayato. You came."

"Oh dear, we can't have you holding a clandestine meeting with the queen, now, can we?"

"U-um, Ayato. You look really strong…"

"Ooh. No running off on your own, Your Majesty."

"…Goodness gracious, it's getting crowded all of a sudden," Julis said, placing a hand on her waist and breaking out into an unusually relaxed grin.

"Let's go, Julis," Ayato said as he tried to step forward.

Julis, however, was determined not to let him go ahead of her, and so she positioned herself by his side.

Standing next to him. Walking beside him.
That was her wish now—and she would surrender it to no one.





AFTERWORD

Hi there, Yuu Miyazaki here.

At long last, *The Asterisk War* has come to a successful conclusion. It's been ten years since the release of the first volume, and I have only gratitude for those of you who have supported me throughout this time. Since this is the final volume, this afterword is going to be slightly longer than usual, but as always, it contains spoilers, so be warned if you haven't read the main story yet.

First of all, since the series is now complete, we've put together a new promotional video ranking episodes cut from the overall story. The video is aimed at existing readers, so if you have time, please take a look. I'm pleased to announce that first place goes to "Christmas Date," an episode that was supposed to take place between Volumes 10 and 11. It was supposed to be an opportunity for Ayato to go on dates with Julis, Saya, Claudia, and Kirin around Christmastime, following on from his date with Sylvia during the school fair. There were many reasons why it was cut, but the main one was that I wanted to get the Lindvolus arc properly underway. But now that I look back on it, I think maybe we should have included it. After all, we hardly did any seasonal events in the main story, and it would have been nice to include Christmas at least…

The first half of this volume details Ayato's and Julis's final battles, while the second half is what you might call the follow-up to the main arc. Personally, I love reading a satisfying conclusion, and

my original plan was for the entire volume to serve as a denouement. But when I started writing about the Lindvolus tournament, the contents grew beyond my wildest expectations, and so the final battle was postponed. That being said, I had decided from early on that the final showdown would simultaneously be between Julis and Orphelia on the one hand, and Ayato and Madiath on the other, so I'm glad I was finally able to bring it to fruition. By the way, you probably noticed that Madiath scorns Ayato's fighting style and learned techniques. But as you can see from the fact that he gave the Golden Bough Alliance its name, he did have a fondness for such things at one time. He even had secret names for all of his Raksha-Nada moves. Since there wasn't an opportunity to reveal them in the story itself, I'll list them here: The one that automatically defends him using shards of the weapon is called Viscum, the technique that attacks its target from all sides is called Deserta, his whip-sword attack is called Aprilis, and his weapon-forging technique is known as Regicide.

I had planned to return to as many characters as possible in the conclusion, but once I started writing, I realized that there weren't enough pages to go around, so I had to narrow it down to just a few. There was so much that I wanted to include, such as why the Li twins moved up to Jie Long's headquarters, the current situation of everyone in Team Kaguya from the side story, what Fuyuka was doing over at Mount Emei, Eishirou and his love interest, Ardy and the autonomous puppets, and more, but I'm sorry to say that we ran out of space.

As for the love story, the last scene shows Ayato setting off down the Julis route. The other heroines haven't given up yet, and it's possible that they could turn the tables on each other, but I think it's fair to say that Julis has taken the lead. So long as the others don't interfere in some way, Ayato and Julis will probably end up tying the knot sooner or later. But of course, there's no way the others will just sit by and watch.

As the title suggests, *The Asterisk War* is based in the academic city of Asterisk. And of course, school is a place that everyone eventually leaves one day. Ayato and his friends have, for the most

part, completed everything they needed to do at school, so the curtain closes on them for the time being. But their stories will continue in a different setting. One example of this is Lieseltania. I touched on this briefly in our last scene with Percival, but a new generation of students will be taking the reins at Asterisk, too.

Personally, I'm really fond of the world of Asterisk, and I hope to be able to release another work connected to it in some way. When I do, I hope you'll pick up a copy.

Last of all, my thanks.

First, I'd like to thank Okiura for his illustrations and character designs. The cover art and artworks this time around are like a culmination of all his splendid work. Every time I look at them, they seem to sparkle with life. Without him, these works wouldn't have been possible. I can't thank him enough.

I'm truly grateful the series has been blessed with a wide mix of media formats. To Ningen, who was in charge of the manga adaptation of the main story, and Akane Sabi, who worked on the manga adaptation of *The Wings of Queenvale*, thank you for all your wonderful work.

In addition, I took a great deal of inspiration from the anime adaptation—so many elements from it fed back into the main work. I'd like to thank the chief director, Manabu Ono; Atsushi Tamaru for playing Ayato; Ai Kakuma as Julis; Shiori Izawa for voicing Saya; Nao Toyama as Claudia; Ari Ozawa as Kirin; Haruka Chisuga as Sylvia (and who also sang the ending song for the second season); Shiena Nishizawa, who sang the opening song; everyone at A-1 Pictures and Aniplex; everyone involved in the video game *The Asterisk War: Phoenix Festa* and the social game *The Asterisk War: Radiant Stella*; and the many staff and performers involved in the various productions.

I'd also like to thank everyone in the editorial department at M. F. Bunko for working so hard to bring this work to life. Some faces have now left, but here goes… S. was my editor when this project first launched; O. consulted with me until the first draft of the first

volume was ready for publication; I. worked with me and Okiura to essentially create Asterisk, helping us continue to develop the premise up till now, including the anime adaptation; O., my current editor-in-charge, staying the course patiently until the very end; S., for supervising Fuyuka's Kyoto dialect; and all the publishing and sales staff—thank you all so much.

In addition, I'd like to thank my family and friends for supporting me, including my creative mentors, manga artists Hekiru Kikawa and Minari Endoh, for helping me find an opening in the publishing world.

Above all, to all the readers of *The Asterisk War* who have supported Ayato, Julis, and the others to the very end, I cannot tell you how much your feedback has encouraged me over these past ten years. Once again, I'd like to thank you with all my heart.

I hope we meet again sometime in the future.

Yuu Miyazaki
May 2022

Afterword

It seems that we've all been sharing the world of Asterisk for ten whole years now. Excellent work all throughout, Miyazaki. I know I've caused you more than a few headaches myself, so thank you for letting me stick with you all the way through to the end.

And thank you so much to all the readers for your love of *The Asterisk War*. I hope you all know how much it means to me.

May 2022

And lastly, a picture of Kirin, who had a lot of cool appearances once she moved up a year and started looking like this.


Okiura

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