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THE ASTERISK WAR

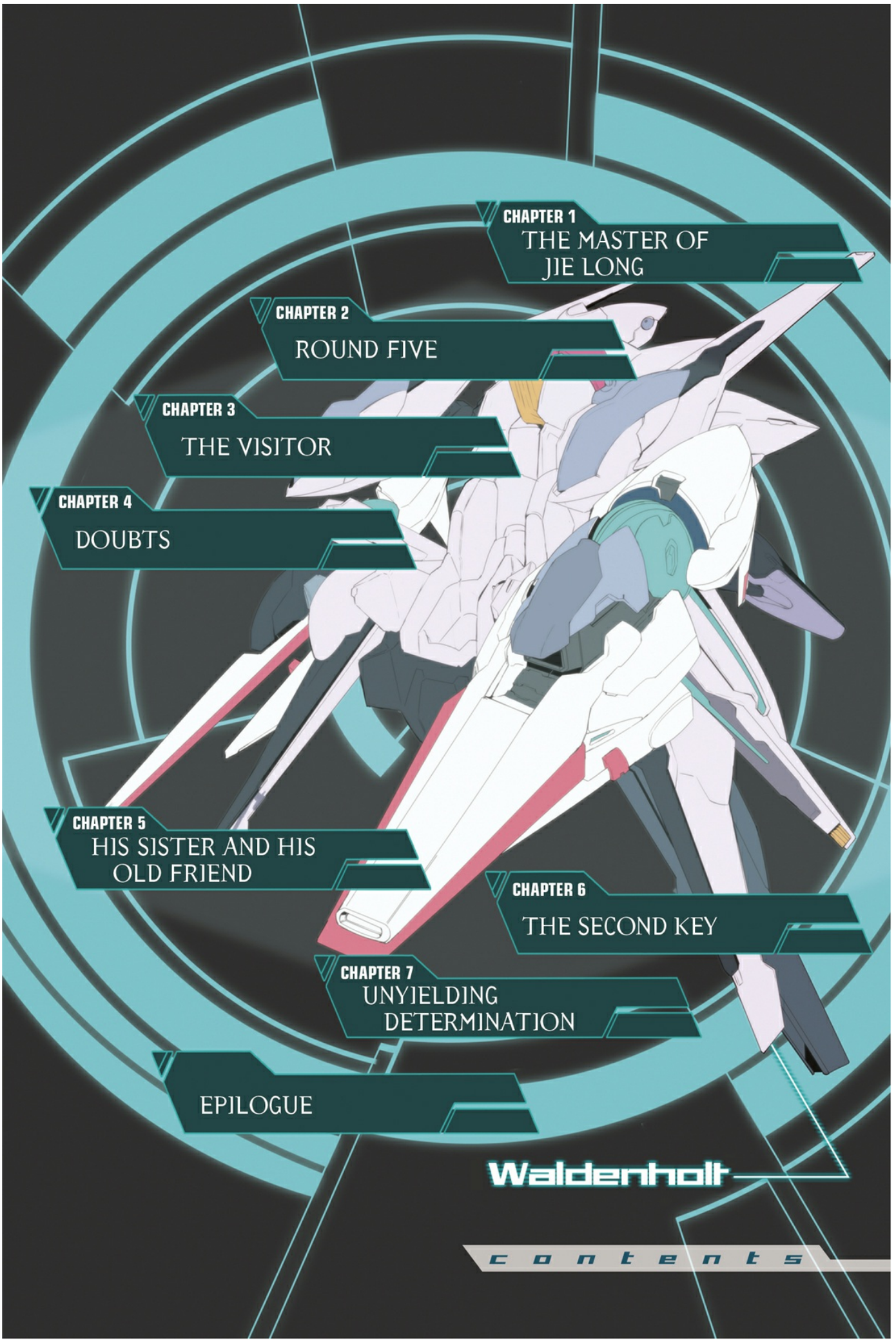
04. QUEST FOR DAYS LOST


YUU
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THE ASTERISK WAR
04. QUEST FOR DAYS LOST


BAN' YUU TENRA
Immanent Heaven
XINGLU FAN
Xinglu Fan
Shenyun Li
GEN' EI SOUKI
The Phantom Builder
SHENYUN LI
GEN' EI MUSAN
The Phantom Vanisher
SHENHUA LI
Shenhua Li


Flora Klemm
A girl from the orphanage in Lieseltania.
Flora Klemm
"BUT, BUT— I WANT TO HELP EVERYONE, LIKE YOU!"


RIMCY
R M - C
"Ruinous Might" Cannon model
"Ruinous Might"
Cannon model
"THIS IS MOST DISPLEASING."
"IT IS OF NO AVAIL!"
"Absolute Refusal"
Defended model
ARDY
A R - D
"Absolute Refusal" Defended model



CHAPTER 1
THE MASTER OF JIE LONG

CHAPTER 2
ROUND FIVE

CHAPTER 3
THE VISITOR

CHAPTER 4
DOUBTS

CHAPTER 5
HIS SISTER AND HIS OLD FRIEND

CHAPTER 6
THE SECOND KEY

CHAPTER 7
UNYIELDING DETERMINATION

EPILOGUE

Waldenholt

contents

THE ASTERISK WAR

04. QUEST FOR DAYS LOST

YUU MIYAZAKI

ILLUSTRATION: OKIURA

YEN ON

NEW YORK

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THE ASTERISK WAR, Vol. 4

YUU MIYAZAKI

Translation by Melissa Tanaka

Cover art by okiura

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Contents

Cover

Insert

Title Page

Copyright

Map

Chapter 1: The Master of Jie Long

Chapter 2: Round Five

Chapter 3: The Visitor

Chapter 4: Doubts

Chapter 5: His Sister and His Old Friend

Chapter 6: The Second Key

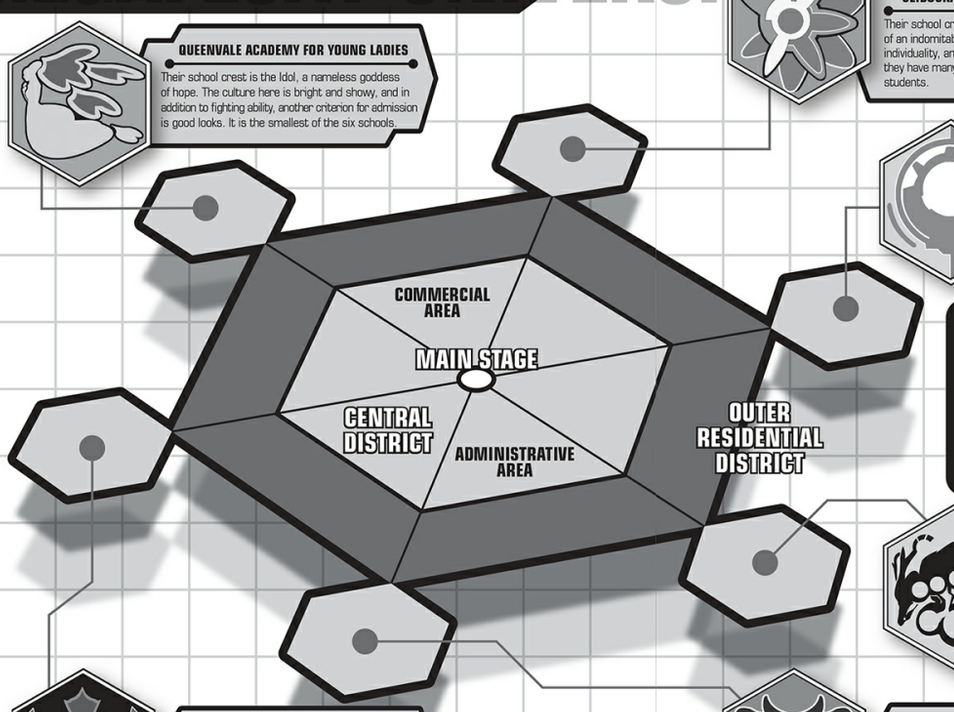
Chapter 7: Unyielding Determination

Epilogue

Afterword

Yen Newsletter

RIKKA: THE ACADEMY CITY ON THE WATER



QUEENVALE ACADEMY FOR YOUNG LADIES

Their school crest is the Idol, a nameless goddess of hope. The culture here is bright and showy, and in addition to fighting ability, another criterion for admission is good looks. It is the smallest of the six schools.

SEIDOUKAN ACADEMY

Their school crest is the Red Lotus, the emblem of an indomitable spirit. The school culture values individuality, and rules are fairly relaxed. Traditionally, they have many Stregas and Dantes among the students.

SAINT GALLARDWORTH ACADEMY

Their school crest is the Ring of Light, symbolizing order. Their rigid culture values discipline and loyalty above all else and, in principle, even duels are forbidden. This puts them on poor terms with Le Wolfe.

An academic metropolis, floating atop the Northern Kanto mass impact crater lake. Its overall shape is a regular hexagon, and from each vertex, a school campus protrudes like a bastion. A main avenue runs from each school straight to the center, giving rise to the nickname the Asterisk.

This city is the site of the world's largest fighting event, the Festa, and is a major tourist destination.

Although the Asterisk is technically a part of Japan, it is governed directly by multiple integrated enterprise foundations and has complete extraterritoriality.

JIE LONG SEVENTH INSTITUTE

Their school crest is the Yellow Dragon, the mightiest of the four gods, signifying sovereignty. Bureaucracy clashes with a laissez-faire attitude, making the school culture rather chaotic. The largest of the six schools, they incorporate a Far-Eastern atmosphere into almost everything.

LE WOLFE BLACK INSTITUTE

Their school crest of Crossed Swords signifies military might. They have a tremendously belligerent school culture that actually encourages their students to duel. Owing to this, their relationship with Gallardworth is strained.

ALLEKANT ACADÉMIE

Their school crest is the Dark Owl, a symbol of wisdom and the messenger of Minerva. Their guiding principle is absolute mentocracy, and students are divided into research and practical classes. They are unparalleled in meteoric engineering technology.

characters

SEIDOUKAN ACADEMY

AYATO AMAGIRI



Transferred to the high school division of Seidoukan Academy on a special scholarship. Though easygoing to a fault, he possesses an enormous amount of prana, as well as extraordinary skills with a sword.

ALIAS: Gathering Clouds, Murakumo
ORGA LUX: Ser Veresta

JULIS-ALEXIA VON RIESSFELD



A princess of Lieseltania and Seidoukan Academy's fifth-ranked fighter. With Ayato as her tag team partner, she has her mind set on winning the Festa.

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

CLAUDIA ENFIELD



The student council president of Seidoukan Academy and the person responsible for bringing Ayato to the school. She always has a gentle smile but describes herself as "blackhearted." She's the second-ranked fighter in the school.

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

SAYA SASAMIYA



Ayato's childhood friend who lived next door to him when they were young. Perpetually sleepy and inexpressive, and a firm believer that the bigger the gun, the better. She switches between several enormous Lux firearms in a fight.

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

KIRIN TOUDOU



A first-year student in Seidoukan Academy's middle school. She became the academy's top-ranked fighter at the age of thirteen. The heir to the Toudou School, which boasts over ten thousand pupils worldwide, she has tremendous natural gifts as a swordsman.

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

EISHIROU YABUKI

A young man in Seidoukan Academy's newspaper club, he seems to know everything about everything. Ayato's roommate, and a member of the special ops organization Shadowstar.

LESTER MACPHAIL

Seidoukan's ninth-ranked fighter.
ALIAS: the Ax of the Roaring Distance, Kornephoros

RANDY HOOKE

Lester's partner for the Phoenix.

KYOUKO YATSUZAKI

Ayato's homeroom teacher. A former champion of the Gryps tournament.

PREVIOUSLY IN *THE ASTERISK WAR...*

The Phoenix Tournament has begun!

After Ayato and Julis advanced easily through the preliminary matches, Irene Urzaiz, the Vampire Princess, came after them with a vengeance. They were at the brink of defeat when Irene lost control of her Orga Lux, the Gravisheath.

Thanks in part to a new special attack by Julis, they barely managed to win—but at great cost.

Now the whole world knows Ayato's weakness: His strength in battle has a time limit.

A dark cloud of uncertainty hovers over him and Julis as they advance to Round Five of the Phoenix...

CHAPTER 1

THE MASTER OF JIE LONG

At the southeastern point of Asterisk stood Jie Long Seventh Institute. A network of buildings and covered walkways crisscrossed its grounds, and gardens and plazas were situated around the edifices, designed in the style of traditional Chinese architecture. Overall, the layout resembled a single sprawling palace rather than a school.

At one corner of the campus, there was a building known as the Hall of the Yellow Dragon. Its three stories, red pillars, and yellow tiled roofing did little to set it apart from the other campus buildings at first glance. However, every student at Jie Long knew its special significance.

Though to be precise, it was not the building that was special so much as the person to whom it belonged.

The inheritor of the alias Ban'yuu Tenra—Immanent Heaven.

The ruler of Jie Long.

The one who, at the tender age of six, had ascended to this position three years ago. Her name was Xinglou Fan.

"Master, it is almost time for the regular meeting." At the entrance to the great hall, Zhao Hufeng placed his right fist in his left palm in a gesture of obeisance.

Hufeng was the fifth-ranked fighter at Jie Long Seventh Institute, with a well-honed physique, if a little on the short side. He was a young man of seventeen, though his soft, shapely features and his long hair often led people to mistake him for a girl. Once known as a child prodigy, he had taken second place in the previous Phoenix Tournament in a splendid performance.

Although remembering himself from those days made him dizzy with agony

over how little he had known.

“Ah, has it grown so late already?” The little girl, who had been standing in the center of the room, turned with a childish smile.

With her long black hair styled in loops like butterfly wings, and the old-fashioned Jie Long uniform that suited her well, she was an adorable child—and still quite small, barely reaching Hufeng’s chest.

For those who did not already know, it would be all but impossible to believe that this girl was none other than Xinglou Fan, the Ban’yuu Tenra, the top-ranked fighter of Asterisk’s largest school.

“Well then, let us conclude here. Good work, all. Challenge me again whenever you like,” Xinglou said, surveying the room. Several dozen out-of-breath students lay collapsed on the floor.

They were all students who had tried to become disciples of Xinglou herself.

Currently, Xinglou had some fifty pupils training directly under her. Considering that some martial arts instructors at Jie Long had several hundred pupils, this was not an extraordinary number. However, all fifty were members of Jie Long’s Named Cult, and of the twelve members of its Page One, eleven trained under Xinglou.

Which was to say, most of the notable fighters at Jie Long were Xinglou’s pupils.

“No one passed your test again?” Hufeng asked.

“No—most unfortunate.”

The two left the room and walked along the gallery overlooking the courtyard.

To become Xinglou’s pupil, one needed to pass only a simple test: Make contact with Xinglou within the allotted time. That was all.



But Hufeng knew all too well how difficult that task was. Dozens of students, confident in their abilities and attempting the test at the same time, were still completely unable to lay a single finger on her small body. Xinglou did nothing besides evade them, not even deflecting their hands, never mind attacking.

“By the way, Hufeng. Did you happen to see the matches today?”

“The matches? Do you mean the Phoenix?”

Of course Hufeng watched his peers battle. Nine teams from Jie Long had advanced to the main tournament, and after the conclusion of the fourth round today, five had made it to the final bracket of sixteen—the most teams among the six schools. All the fighters had studied under Xinglou.

“There was one intriguing lad. Seidoukan’s first-ranked student—Ayato Amagiri, was it? Those automatons from Allekant weren’t bad, but in terms of raw ability that boy stood out from the rest. Very interesting, indeed.”

“Oh, yes, in the eleventh match.”

Hufeng realized she was referring to the battle pitting Seidoukan’s first-ranked against Le Wolfe’s third. A fight involving two skilled Orga Lux wielders.

However…

“It seems his powers are restricted,” Hufeng said.

It was still only speculation, but the Jie Long intelligence organization had already gathered a significant amount of data. According to their information, the student in question could only maintain his full strength for a short period.

On top of that, it was rumored that once he released his power, he could not do so again for a set amount of time. But this last bit of intel had leaked from Le Wolfe, which made its veracity questionable.

“Likely the doing of a Strega or a Dante.” Xinglou let out a small laugh. “I’d say that only makes things more interesting.”

“I believe his next opponents are Song and Luo…”

Song and Luo were students of Xinglou, junior to Hufeng, and formidable fighters listed in the Named Cult.

“Yes. I’m looking forward to seeing how they approach the fight.”

Under ordinary circumstances, the first-ranked fighter of any school would by definition be a difficult opponent. And by all appearances, Ayato had the skills to back up his rank.

A time limit to his abilities, however, would be a critical weakness. There were countless ways to exploit it for victory.

And if the rumors about Ayato requiring a period of rest were true, there was almost no way that Song and Luo could lose. His partner—Seidoukan’s fifth-ranked, Glühen Rose, the Witch of the Resplendent Flames—was not to be underestimated, either. Still, if they could corner her into a two on one fight at close quarters, they should be able to overwhelm her.

“Well, in any event, I’ve taken a liking to Ayato Amagiri. He has no shortage of talent, and seems to possess some mettle, too. I very much want him as a protégé. He would need only five—no, three years of training before becoming able to keep me entertained.”

“Are you dissatisfied with your pupils?” Hufeng asked glumly.

Xinglou burst into laughter. “Not at all. Think of it as a fine meal. The more flavors one can enjoy, the better.”

“If you say so…”

“Take the leader of Stjarnagarm—a delight indeed. Even blessed with abilities like hers, it is remarkable that only a few decades of devoted training have brought her to that level of skill. I should like to try her again, but she doesn’t seem to return the sentiment,” Xinglou mused, reflecting on the past with a distant gaze. “Ayato Amagiri could reach that level if only I could train him myself. Ah, what a shame. Why didn’t he come to our school…? Hufeng, isn’t there anything we can do?”

“As much as I’d like to…”

As a general rule, students were not allowed to transfer after matriculating into one of the six schools.

“Huh? Wait,” Hufeng said, realizing something. “When that match was going

on, weren't you in the middle of the test with your applicants…?"

"Yes. What of it?"

"What of…" Hufeng held a hand against his forehead at Xinglou's nonchalant response. "You were watching? While facing them all?"

"A good way to give them a fighting chance, don't you think?" Xinglou laughed heartily and took out her mobile device.

Hufeng sighed. "You might think of their feelings, too. That test is devastating for one's confidence as it is."

"Perhaps some will find it inspiring. Honestly, you are far too serious."

Xinglou had glossed over his admonition without so much as a moment's hesitation. Hufeng sighed again. "Forgive me for saying so, but…it's not that I'm too serious. Rather, you indulge yourself too much, master. Please practice a little restraint."

"That's an impossible request," Xinglou replied. "I am here for the sole purpose of amusing myself. No one has the power to stop me. What do you think the title of 'Immanent Heaven' is for?"

Her response was beyond selfish, but there was undisputable truth in it.

That title took precedence over all other authority within the Jie Long Seventh Institute—including its integrated enterprise foundation.

It occurred to Hufeng that they had walked a considerable distance since leaving the great hall, but the cloister seemed to continue on endlessly. And the number of rooms they had passed could not possibly fit inside this building. The Hall of the Yellow Dragon itself was unmistakably smaller than the space inside it.

No one but Xinglou knew what technology made this possible, or even how many rooms were in the Hall of the Yellow Dragon. Even Hufeng, her third pupil, was unable to reach any room in this palace without his master's permission.

The person who constructed this enormous hall was none other than the first Ban'yuu Tenra, and it was said she had done so alone in a single night.

Ever since, only the inheritor of that alias could open the gates of the Hall of the Yellow Dragon. Including Xinglou, only three people had ever held the title.

The first Ban'yuu Tenra, who came to Asterisk in its early days, had spread the mana-wielding technique of Seisenjutsu and was known as the founder of Jie Long. On one hand, this great individual had built the Hall of the Yellow Dragon, trained teachers of Seisenjutsu, and established the institute itself. On the other, she was said to have personally made numerous secret pacts with the integrated enterprise foundation. When she left Jie Long, she declared her successor to be "the one who can open the gates to the Hall of the Yellow Dragon." Many students attempted to do so, but a long time passed before one finally succeeded.

The second Ban'yuu Tenra appeared more than a decade later. She opened the gates to the Hall, which were built to respond only to a certain kind of prana, and won the first grand slam in the history of Asterisk. After graduating, she worked there as a teacher to continue mentoring her juniors, and now she was called the mother of Jie Long's renaissance. Upon leaving the institute, she left the same parting words as her predecessor.

And three years ago, the third Ban'yuu Tenra, Xinglou, had appeared at this school. The small child opened the gates to the Hall of the Yellow Dragon with effortless ease—gates that had remained shut for more than a decade since the second Ban'yuu Tenra had left. Xinglou took her place as the master of the Hall like it was the natural order of things.

The way she carried herself, as if she knew everything about every corner of the Hall of the Yellow Dragon, as well as the manners and knowledge that hardly suited someone her age, sparked constant rumors within Jie Long. Xinglou never offered a word to explain such things, and Hufeng had decided some time ago that he would not concern himself with it.

His master was his master. That was enough for him.

Just then, a boy and girl walking toward them in the corridor spoke up.

"There you are, master. We were looking for you."

"Oh, and Brother Zhao, too. It has been a while."

They reverently wrapped their fists and bowed in greeting.

Hufeng frowned slightly at this, but Xinglou halted without a flicker of unease in her innocent smile. “Oh, it’s you two. What news?” she said.

The pair squinted back, smiling.

“Well, it’s nothing much. We simply—”

“—wished to report on our victory today.”

The girl finished the sentence the boy started.

Their words flowed as naturally together as if a single person were speaking, but that perfect synchronization itself was eerie.

The boy was Shenyun Li, and the girl, Shenhua Li. They were siblings, as their names suggested—and the twins who were the ninth-and tenth-ranked Page One fighters of Jie Long.

Being related, they resembled each other closely. Except that Shenhua wore her hair in buns, one could hardly tell them apart.

“Yes, I was watching,” Xinglou said. “An impressive win, indeed.”

“You’re too kind. We have much to learn—”

“—and much training to do.”

Even as they spoke those words, their voices betrayed their pride. They exuded an extreme confidence that bordered on arrogance.

“Hah. You don’t mean that in the least,” scoffed Xinglou. “Now, if you would get to the point?”

“We can’t hide anything from you, master. Well…” Shenyun paused, then flashed a bold grin. “At this rate, we’ll face Brothers Song and Luo in Round Six, and so—”

“—we thought we should have a word with you first, master.”

Xinglou cocked her head. “It’s not rare for students of the same school to find themselves pitted against one another in a Festa. I see no need for a consultation.”

“Well, you’re right, of course… How shall we put this? There are many points on which we don’t see eye to eye with the Wood sect—”

“—and we’ve had more than a few disagreements with them.”

Observing the malicious grins on the twins’ faces, Hufeng’s frown deepened.

Xinglou’s trainees fell largely into two groups. One was called the Wood sect and trained with a focus on martial arts; the other was the Water sect, which primarily studied Seisenjutsu. For various reasons, some of the *daoshi* of the Water sect regarded the fighters of the Wood sect with scorn, and the relationship between the two factions was strained at best.

The twins were a typical example of such *daoshi*.

“I fail to see your point. You’ll have to tell me plainly.”

At Xinglou’s prodding, the twins exchanged a meaningful look.

“What we’re saying is if we do face members of the Wood sect—”

“—there’s a chance that we might go a little too far.”

“What—?!” Hufeng, who had managed to restrain himself in front of his master, paled in anger.

They had all but declared they would use the match as a pretext to settle personal scores. As the leader of the Wood sect, Hufeng could not quietly abide this.

“Oh-ho! You might have said so from the beginning! You two are a troublesome pair,” Xinglou said with a laugh, then gave a composed nod and lifted one hand to hush the irate Hufeng. “But do as you wish. My intent is to teach you strength. I have no interest in lecturing you on right and wrong.”

“Master—!”

Ignoring Hufeng’s protests, the twins contentedly bowed their heads.

“You are too generous, master.”

“We are unworthy.”

And as if considering the matter closed, the twins stepped aside to make way.

Hufeng gritted his teeth, but there was nothing he could do if Xinglou, his master, granted permission herself.

Xinglou, however, was not finished. “I wonder if things will go as easily as you think?” she teased as she strode between the twins.

Each twitched an eyebrow.

“Do you mean—that Brothers Song and Luo will best us?”

“No. I’m only saying that it is early yet to presume who your opponents will be.” Seeing their dubious expressions, Xinglou laughed with unbridled amusement. “You can’t know for certain that Song and Luo will advance, can you?”

“Ah, of course not. But still—”

“—even they cannot lose against opponents who have so clearly revealed their weakness.”

“We at least have that much faith in our fellow students.”

They could not have been more conceited about making their point. Still, Hufeng had to concur.

The data on Ayato Amagiri was scarce, but the videos in circulation showed a large gap in his ability when comparing him at full strength with when he was not. Hufeng doubted that Song or Luo could lose to Ayato with his strength shackled, and with him out of the way it would be two on one. There was no reason to expect a loss.

“Hmm. Be that as it may,” Xinglou said, “you two should concentrate on Round Five first. You never know what can happen in battle.”

“We appreciate your concern, master—”

“—but our next opponents are two girls from Queenvale who only made it this far because of their luck in the bracket placement. There is nothing to worry about.”

Hufeng’s face clouded again at seeing the twins so casually brushing aside Xinglou’s advice.

“Oh, look at the time.”

“Please excuse us.”

Hufeng watched them depart with a sigh. “Honestly. Those twins…”

“Ho-ho. You don’t seem to get along with them very well,” chuckled Xinglou.

“Their hearts are full of arrogance, and they do not value modesty. Who could possibly get along with them?” Hufeng muttered, following her.

While it was true that the *daoshi* of the Water sect tended to sneer at the Wood sect, not all were like the twins. The young woman who headed the Water sect, for instance, was somewhat unorthodox but indeed worthy of respect.

In the end, the only ones with such poor character were the twins.

“But they do have talent,” Xinglou remarked.

“I…cannot dispute that.”

Just as the twins had said, if they were to fight Song and Luo, their victory was all but decided.

Hufeng felt he could take on either one alone. Facing both twins at the same time, though—he might prevail but not easily. When it came to teamwork, no trainees of Xinglou’s could win out against the twins.

“By the way, master,” Hufeng said, “do you think that Song and Luo will lose to that pair from Seidoukan?”

“Heh-heh-heh, who can know?” Xinglou replied. “If Ayato Amagiri and his partner were facing the twins and not Song and Luo in Round Five tomorrow, I do think Seidoukan would lose.”

“Then—even if the Seidoukan team does best Song and Luo tomorrow, they will fall to the twins in Round Six, the quarterfinals?”

At that, Xinglou turned with a mischievous twinkle in her eye, then shook her head. “I think not. If they make it past tomorrow, then we cannot know what might happen. That’s what I am hoping for.”

“Haaah…”

Not quite sure of her point, Hufeng tilted his head in confusion.

For one thing, Xinglou was the student council president. She should not be hoping for students of her own school to lose.

Hufeng wondered for a moment whether he ought to admonish her for that, but as Xinglou's shoulders shook with laughter, he gave up.

She would never listen to him anyway.

*

It was the eleventh day of the Phoenix.

"Honestly. I can't believe word got around this much in just one day."

When Ayato walked into the now-familiar prep room at the Sirius Dome, what greeted him was an exasperated Julis standing amid a cluster of assorted air-windows.

"Morning, Julis."

"Morning, Ayato. How does it feel to have your weakness trumpeted to the whole world?"

In lieu of replying, Ayato shrugged and walked around the table to sit down directly across from Julis.

"As you can see, the news reports are still just vague speculation," she went on. "But the other fighters must have received detailed data from their schools' intelligence agencies."

"How much do you think they know?"

All the air-windows displayed articles related to the Festa, and all the headlines were about Ayato. At least, with phrasing like Could This Be a Major Weakness for a Championship Favorite?! and Does Seidoukan's Newest Superstar Come with a Time Limit?! it appeared the press stopped short of making definitive statements.

The schools' intelligence agencies were not likely to be so charitable.

"I couldn't say… But we should probably assume they know about as much as Claudia does."

Aside from Julis, the only people Ayato had told about the seal on his strength

were Saya, Kirin, and Lester.

He had told Claudia when she'd rushed to see him after yesterday's match, but she had already known, to some extent.

"*Sorry. But that's my job*," she had told him with an apologetic bow. But she would not say anything more on the matter, so there was no way for him to discern how long she'd known, exactly what she knew, or how. But that had given him enough to speculate somewhat.

She probably learned through Shadowstar, the special operations unit. If that was true, then Julis was right—it would not be a surprise if the other schools' agencies had the same level of information.

Of course, Shadowstar might have had a slight advantage because the subject was a student at the same school.

"It's probably reasonable to assume that they have a rough idea of how long the time limit is," Julis said. "They can use our match against Irene Urzaiz as a reference."

Ayato sighed. "Yeah…that's true."

There was nothing he could do about that now.

"The problem is, they seem to know about the aftereffects, too." Julis enlarged an air-window close to her.

It displayed an article quoting someone in a position of knowledge: *I'm also told that once he releases his full strength, he suffers from severe aftereffects that make it difficult to even move around. Word is that he needs to rest for some time until he can fight at full strength again…*

"According to Claudia, this rumor originated at Le Wolfe," Julis added.

"Le Wolfe, huh…?"

Ayato had some idea where the story could have originated.

Le Wolfe's student council president knew Ayato's sister. It would hardly be surprising if he also knew about her ability—the imprisoning chains that had sealed Ayato's strength.

“Damn that Tyrant. If he knew that much, he could have kept it to himself. But going out of his way to leak it like this—he really wanted to make things harder for us,” Julis said with a sigh, then closed the array of air-windows and faced Ayato. “And? How do you feel?”

“Not bad, I guess. Well, it still hurts a lot.” Ayato tried waving his arm.

The aftereffects of breaking the seal did not actually involve any kind of harm to his body. Rather, the issue was his prana overreacting to the reactivation of the seal, which was why it subsided with time.

“I should recover in time for our match. Well, to fight normally, at least.”

“But you won’t be able to use your full strength?”

“No… That would probably be too much.”

With a sideways glance, Ayato checked the clock. It was still early in the morning, and the first match of the day had not yet started. Their match would be third, so there was still about half a day until then. It should have been possible to recuperate substantially if he rested until the match, but it would be impossible to release his power again so soon.

And no wonder. In yesterday’s match, he had gone significantly beyond not just the baseline limit of three minutes, but the serious danger point of five minutes. So the aftereffects were lasting longer than usual.

“All right. We’ll plan as if you can’t.” Julis exhaled in resignation and opened another air-window. This time, the screen displayed not a news site but two strapping young men.

“Let’s go over it again. Our next opponents are Jie Long’s twentieth-and twenty-third-ranked fighters. We faced a Jie Long team in Round Three, but I think it’s fair to say these two are in a different class. They’re pupils of the Ban’yuu Tenra, after all.”

“That’s Jie Long’s student council president, right? The one who’s only about nine?”

It defied any semblance of common sense, but that young girl was apparently the strongest fighter in all of Jie Long.

There were hardly any videos of her matches. The matches for which videos did exist were over too quickly to be informative—which was enough to show that she was strong, but not to gauge exactly how strong she was.

“I couldn’t tell you much about the Ban’yuu Tenra. Jie Long has a lot of students, so it’s relatively easy for info to leak out of that school. But intel on her seems to be an exception. Pretty much the only thing we know is that in the past, her alias belonged to individuals who accomplished great things for their school.” Julis paused and met Ayato’s gaze. “Well, enough about her. The important thing is that we have to take our next opponents seriously. Though if you could fight at full strength, they probably wouldn’t give us much trouble… They’re not as strong as Irene Urzaiz, at least.”

“I sure hope there aren’t many more like her.”

Ayato recalled yesterday’s match. They had managed to win somehow—but one misstep and the result would have been completely different.

“You do realize these two may still be too much for you in your condition?”

“Ngh…” He flinched, unable to deny this. With his power sealed, Ayato lacked the ability to face a ranked fighter head-on.

“I doubt I would lose to either of them one-on-one,” Julis said, “but facing both at once will pose a problem. And both of them specialize in close-range combat. I think I’ve improved in that area, but not enough for this. Lower-ranked opponents are one thing, but I’ll be in trouble if two fighters of their level get close to me.”

“Do you have a plan?”

Ayato had some confidence in his ability to formulate a plan around his own strengths, but Julis had a much better head for team strategy.

As the wheels turned in her mind, she held up two fingers. “Before we discuss that, I have two questions. I noticed it back when we were training, but—even when you have your powers sealed, your defense is very good. How does that work? Even the first time you fought me, you fended off most of my attacks.”

Julis was referring to their duel on the day he transferred in.

“Oh, yeah. If it’s just dodging and defending, I can handle a lot with nothing more than my experience and ability to predict what my opponent will do,” Ayato said. “But my body can’t keep it up forever, so against someone stronger I think I’d end up running out of energy.”

Even in their duel, if they had kept it up for much longer Julis would have roasted him through and through with her flames.

It was the same when they trained with Lester and Saya. He couldn’t adequately react to Lester’s sheer physical strength.

All this meant that if his basic strength and defensive capacity put him at a major disadvantage, compensating with technique could only get him so far. Only a good strategy would make up for the remaining disparity.

“Hmm…I see,” Julis said. “Now, my second question. Your ability to release your power for just an instant—can you do that now?”

“Well, right now would be pushing it. But I should be well enough by the match to do it once. I think.”

“I see…” Hearing his uncertain reply, Julis looked down, holding her chin as she fell deep in thought.

She stayed like that for several moments.

“All right. Then how about this?” Finally, she raised her head with a conspiratorial smile.

CHAPTER 2

ROUND FIVE

"Aaand here we are! The battle you've all been waiting for today, the final match of Round Five! Yesterday in Round Four, this team defeated Le Wolfe Black Institute's third-ranked fighter, Irene Urzaiz, alias Lamilexia! Here come Seidoukan Academy's first and fifth—Ayato Amagiri and Julis-Alexia von Riessfeld!"

The now-familiar voice of the announcer greeted Ayato and Julis as they took the stage, followed by what may have been the loudest cheers they had heard so far this entire tournament.

Naturally, these events drew more and more excitement toward the championship's climax, but the tenor was somewhat different that day. Everyone seemed intent on discovering with their own eyes whether the news stories were true.

"And from the other gate, we have Song and Luo from Jie Long Seventh Institute! These students are from your alma mater, Ms. Tram. What's your take going into this match?"

"Well, y'know, if that bit of info going around is true, I'd have to say Song and Luo have the upper hand…"

"I bet that's what the spectators today would like to know, too!"

As the commentators bantered, Ayato channeled prana through his body, inspecting its flow. "…Okay."

He seemed to have healed up about as much as he'd expected. Now, all they needed was…

"Amagiri."

Just then, one of their opponents from Jie Long walked across the stage and called to him.

This was Song. Apparently older than Ayato, he had firm, well-defined muscles.

Ayato almost assumed a fighting stance by reflex, but the youth, who wore his hair in a braid, looked him in the eye and spoke in a calm, deliberate pace.

“Regardless of whether the rumors are true, Luo and I intend to face you with everything we have. To be frank, I would have liked to fight you one-on-one at your full strength—but this is the Phoenix, where we fight in pairs. I hope there will be no hard feelings.”

This caught Ayato by surprise. “Huh? Oh, um, not…at all…”

Song turned away and went back to his partner. Luo appeared to be about the same age, which would make him older than Ayato as well. His physique was similar to Song’s, but his short-cropped black hair and battlestaff stood out and, like Song, he had an air of sincerity about him.

His staff was not a Lux, but one of ordinary metal. It was very long, almost seven feet.

“Well. He speaks like a true warrior,” Julis muttered, impressed, from behind Ayato.

“So there are students like them, too. I wasn’t expecting that.”

“Their type seems to be common at Gallardworth and Jie Long. But still, it was quite upstanding of him to go out of his way to declare his intentions. Well, in any case, they’ll test you to find out if you really can’t fight at full strength. And most likely, they’ll know right away.”

“Probably…”

When Song had approached earlier, Ayato had sensed his finely honed prana—not something the young man was born with, but purely the fruit of his hard work, an ability refined little by little over the years. And he looked like he had the fighting experience to match. It would be near impossible to deceive such a veteran warrior for long.

“We were right to come with a plan. Now look, Ayato. *This is the mark.* Remember.” Julis activated the Aspera Spina and used its point to carve a star symbol at her feet.

“Got it.” Ayato mentally reviewed their recent strategy discussion. “And the signal is fireworks, right?”

She replied with a curt nod. “Right. We’ll have five minutes after the wall goes up. Make sure you’re ready in time… I know it won’t be easy, but hold out until I finish setting up on my end. I’ll do my best to keep them at bay, but there’s only so much I can do when I’m trying to ready our plan, too. I may be able to keep one of them away from you, though. I’m counting on you.”

“I’ll do what I can,” Ayato said, and activated his blade Lux.

He would have liked to use the Ser Veresta, but when he’d tried it in the prep room, there had been no response at all, so there it remained. Ayato thought he might have earned a bit more respect from the sword in the previous fight. Apparently, his optimism was misplaced.

“*Okay, the match is about to begin! Who will it be?! Which pair will take Round Five and advance to the quarterfinals?!*”

A moment after the enthusiastic announcement, the school crests on the fighters’ chests announced the start of the match:

“*Phoenix Round Five, Match Eight—Begin!*”

As expected, Song and Luo immediately split to either side and rushed at Ayato.

“Burst into bloom—*Primrose!*”

Julis moved to Ayato’s aid, but astoundingly, Song brushed aside the leaping flames with his bare hand. The quick sweep of his fist easily scattered the fiery primrose, like he was batting the petals from a flower.

Such a maneuver was only possible by pouring prana into one’s fist. The extraordinary thing was that Song’s technique was powerful enough to snuff

out a blast from Julis.

“Here I come!”

Having effortlessly cleared her attack, Song closed the gap in an instant and let his right fist fly.

Ayato blocked the strike with the flat of his sword, but a ferocious impact coursed through him, less like a blow from a fist and more like a huge metal wrecking ball. His legs trembled, and he clenched his teeth hard.

This was a kind of destructive power impossible to achieve with brawn alone.

Then Song stepped in as if for a body check and threw his elbow at Ayato’s stomach.

“Ngh…!” Ayato endured the attack by concentrating his prana, but he almost fell to his knees. His body froze for a moment as the breath was forced out of his lungs.

Not missing the opening, Song spun around on the spot and delivered an air-piercing backfist strike aimed at Ayato’s face.

Ayato raised his arm to barely deflect the blow, then leaped back to a safe distance.

It came as no surprise, but fighting at close range placed him at too great a disadvantage. He had to make use of the reach of his weapon to fight on his terms, or else this would not be much of a contest at all.

“So…the rumors are true.” Song unhurriedly assumed a fighting stance. The form was unique, with his hips low and his left leg far out in front—a stance for some sort of hand-to-hand combat, but Ayato, not well versed in Chinese martial arts, could not identify the style.

“*My, my! This is a startling development—Amagiri is completely on the defensive! Now Song’s attacks are impressive, that’s for sure, but could this mean those rumors about Amagiri are true?!*”

“*He didn’t open with his usual incantation, either. His level of prana and its refinement are nowhere near the level we’ve seen from him before, so, looks pretty definitive. Anyway…*”

Ayato steadied his breathing, shut out the noise around him, and focused.

A single moment's lapse in concentration would end the match. He had to keep his eyes on every one of Song's punches and kicks, prepared to defend against any maneuver.

But just then—he heard a sharp cry from Julis.

"Sorry, Ayato! He got past me!"

Luo, coming around from Ayato's left, thrust with his battlestaff hard enough to impale him.

"!"

Ayato dodged by a hair's breadth, but the staff changed trajectory midway and descended on him from above.

When Ayato raised his sword to deflect it, Song had already circled around from the other side to deliver a lightning-fast jumping kick. This attack found its mark, and pain shot through him as if the kick had taken out a piece of his side.

And then Song landed on his toes atop the tip of Luo's staff. With immaculate timing, Luo used it as a lever to launch Song upward.

"How…!" Ayato cried. They were a perfect team.

Song danced through the air to land behind Ayato and, without giving him time to react, nailed him in the back with a palm strike.

"—!"

A tiny sound escaped him, and a shock far worse than before shot through his body. Ayato nearly fainted, but he somehow forced himself to endure and tumbled away from his opponents.

"Hmm, you withstood that attack… You are good," Song murmured, impressed, but as he took his stance again, Ayato could not find even the trace of an opening to retaliate.

Luo also closed in slowly from the other side.

This was just about the worst-case scenario. One opponent was already enough to overwhelm him. Two on one was no fight at all.

Except it wasn't two on one.

"Blossom—*Loropetalum!*"

At Julis's shout, high and clear, a massive wall of flames erupted from the ground to divide the stage from one edge to the other. It had to be almost thirty feet high. Not even a Genestella could jump over it without assistance.

"What's this…?" Song looked up in surprise at the wall of fire but quickly grasped the intent behind it. "I see—you separated us."

Indeed, only Ayato and Song were on this side of the wall.

That meant Julis and Luo had to be on the other side, but the raging flames were impossible to see through.

"*Wow-wee! Is this another of Riessfeld's moves? A wall of fire suddenly split the stage in half! Our guests can follow the action on the big monitor. We'll show you the fight from both sides with a split screen!*"

"Now we're back to one-on-one," Ayato said to his opponent as he stood, then wiped his mouth. Blood came away on his hand, but there was no time to worry about that now.

"Oh… You think you have a chance if it's one-on-one?" Song fixed Ayato with a hawk-like gaze and carefully resumed his stance.

"To be honest, I don't think my odds are that great. But I can't just give up, can I?" Ayato readied his sword in front of him and gauged the distance to Song.

Julis had done her part, and now it was his turn. He had to find a way to prepare for the next step in their plan. And he had to endure his opponents' attacks in the process.

"Hee-hee. You're right, of course." Song laughed softly. "It was a stupid question. I apologize."

Just for an instant, a faint smile came to Song's face—and immediately vanished.

*

"Is that the best you can do? You're not living up to your reputation, Glühen

Rose!”

“Ugh…!”

Julis bit her lip as she barely fended off Luo’s vicious offensive.

Phase one was to force the fight into two one-on-one contests. They had accomplished that. Since this was a critical step in her plan, it was safe to say everything was going well up to that point.

Her one miscalculation was that Luo’s skill far surpassed her expectations.

She hadn’t taken him lightly in the first place, but now she had the feeling she would learn the extent of Jie Long Seventh Institute’s talent the hard way.

He’s their twenty-third? He’d easily make Page One at Seidoukan…!

Without voicing her frustration, Julis fended off Luo’s staff with her rapier and used Livingston Daisy to attack him from above and behind. But deftly manipulating his long weapon, Luo held on at a close distance while not letting any of the flaming chakrams near him.

“Ah—that’s not true, is it? You’re using some of your strength to keep up this wall of fire.” Luo leaped back for a moment and glanced at the partition behind Julis. “Maintaining so much firepower on such a large scale must take an extraordinary amount of prana. That limits the prana you can use to fight.”

And he’s a keen observer, to boot.

“We’ll see about that.” Julis withdrew her chakrams and readjusted their formation.

Normally, she could make over a dozen chakrams with the Livingston Daisy technique. But dividing her prana and concentration as she was now, she could only manage six.

Luo and Song had participated in three Festa events, including the current Phoenix Tournament. Judging by that record alone, they were far more experienced than Ayato and Julis. Still, Julis hadn’t thought he would see through her plan so easily.

“If that’s the case, I could hardly call this a good strategy. There must be other ways to force us to fight divided without going through all this trouble.”

He was correct on that count, as well.

If all they wanted was a pair of one-on-one matches, there were countless other ways to make that happen.

But that would only postpone defeat. It would not lead to victory.

“We had no choice,” Julis said. “This was the only way for us to win.”

“Hmm. So you have something else up your sleeve.” Luo smirked as he twirled his staff. “I can’t wait to see it, but you’d better make it quick. Or else the other fight will be over.”

“Do you mean to say that my teammate will lose?”

“In his current condition, Murakumo is no match for us. You know that, don’t you?” Luo replied as if it was obvious.

“Yes, you’re right. For Ayato to beat one of you now, he’d have to catch you off guard.”

“Off guard? Well, neither I nor Song is careless enough for that.” Luo repositioned his staff, signaling an end to their conversation.

“…”

Julis retreated a step to arrange the chakrams into a defensive formation.

At the same time, she sensed where the other pair was on the other side of the wall and checked the ground out of the corner of her eye.

A little more to the right…

“—There!” Luo lunged to take advantage of the opening.

He swept the chakrams up and out of his way with his staff and leaped into Julis’s range before she could blink.

“Oh no—”

“Too slow!”

The attack streaked through the air into her torso and sent her rapier flying.

“Agh…!”

She reflexively twisted to protect her school crest and cried out in pain as she

sailed across the stage.

That might have broken a few ribs… But with this timing—!

Julis prepared for impact, then let the Livingston Daisy chakrams dissipate as she concentrated.

“Not so fast!” Luo flew in to deliver the finishing blow.

Julis only laughed through her pain.

His opponent excelled in fighting from a distance, and she had just lost her weapon. His decision was correct.

Yes—Luo was right. And that fact made her next move possible.

“Burst into bloom—*Amaryllis Duo Flos!*”

A small fireball formed in each palm.

Still, Luo did not flinch. He was absolutely confident the advantage was his at this distance.

Julis, however, shot the fireball in her right hand not at Luo, but *straight up*.

❄

“To be honest, I’m amazed.”

Though he said he was impressed, Song’s expression was one of exasperation.

“It’s truly impressive that you’ve fended off my attacks so well, even though you can only manage defense. And your reactions have clearly improved since the start of the match. You’re using my breathing, my range, my timing—it’s a testament to your ability to adapt. Sadly, though, your body doesn’t seem capable of keeping up.”

With his back against the raging wall of fire and his lungs heaving, Ayato kept his eyes fixed on Song and never weakened his focus.

He had managed to avoid taking a critical hit, but the cumulative damage was getting hard to ignore. His uniform was ripped and torn all over, and he had more bruises and cuts on his body than he could count.

Even so, the tip of the sword in Ayato’s hand pointed straight and steady at Song.

“If you were at full strength, our positions might have been reversed by now,” Song went on. “No, I doubt I could have held out as long.”

“I think you’re being too kind,” Ayato replied courteously as he calmed his ragged breaths.

Song was definitely tough, no surprise for someone who had advanced to the Fifth Round of the Phoenix. But Ayato found himself admiring Song’s strength, independent of any weapon or special ability—a power that was purely the fruit of physical training.

Not that he was about to give up. Ayato and Julis had two more cards in their hand—and they were ready to play them.

Ayato glanced down to see the star symbol Julis had carved earlier at his feet.

Now all that was left was the *timing*.

“I can hardly bear to bring you more pain. As a gesture of my respect, I will end this with the next attack.” With that, prana rushed into Song’s fist.

By channeling their prana into a single point, trained Jie Long fighters were said to be able to unleash destructive attacks not unlike Meteor Arts. That had to be what Song was doing now.

“No matter how you try to defend against it, my hand will shatter any weapon or limb in its path. It may not be as powerful as your Orga Lux, but I recommend you dodge rather than block. If you can, that is!”

The moment he finished speaking, Song leaped swiftly into the target range.

An earth-shaking stomp, followed by a gouging palm strike.

Song was too close to dodge. And, as Song had said, defending was impossible for Ayato in his current state. That much was obvious from the overwhelming level of prana concentrated in the Jie Long warrior’s hand.

But just before his palm could reach Ayato’s chest, a small burst of fire exploded above their heads.

Fireworks—!

This was their signal.

—One instant.

Just once, for a fraction of a second, Ayato released his full strength, dodged Song's palm strike, and streaked toward the wall of fire towering behind him.

"What…?!"

He heard Song's cry of astonishment, but his attention was already elsewhere.

Just before the fire swallowed Ayato, it parted like the Red Sea in the story of Moses. And across from Ayato was Julis, who had likewise leaped into the wall from the other side.

They exchanged a glance as they passed each other through the flames licking at their skin. With that, Ayato and Julis traded targets.

"How—?!"

"It can't be!!"

Song and Luo, their eyes wide with panic, frantically tried to fall back into stance. But they were far too late.

There was nothing they could do. Luo had been facing Julis, who excelled in long-distance attacks; Song had fought Ayato, who could only handle close combat.



Now, the two were *completely off guard*.

“Amagiri Shinmei Style, First Technique—*Twin Serpents!*”

“Burst!”

Ayato’s blade sliced Luo’s school crest, and the fireball from Julis’s hand shattered Song’s.

“*End of battle! Winners: Ayato Amagiri and Julis-Alexia von Riessfeld!*”

As the automated voice announced the result of the match, the wall of fire vanished. Ayato and Julis both collapsed onto their knees with deep sighs.

The audience’s shock was no less than Song and Luo’s. Stunned silence filled the arena. But then, a smattering of applause swelled into a tidal wave of cheering.

*

“Whew… We won, but…”

“But just barely.”

Ayato and Julis headed down the hallway to the prep room, skipping out on the winners’ interview again.

The interviews were not required, but repeated cancellations frustrated the press and—given the nature of the Festa—could lead to a drop in popularity for the fighters. Today neither Ayato nor Julis had the energy to answer any questions.

They had won, but as Julis said, it was as close as it could have been. The slightest error in timing would have cost them the match.

“Still, making it through today was big,” she said. “We have a day of rest tomorrow. And then you’ll be able to fight at full strength again, right?”

“Yes, I’ll be fine… But what about you, Julis? Didn’t you get hurt…?”

“Oh, this is nothing. They might be cracked, but nothing seems to be broken.”

Julis lightly rubbed at her ribs with a pained smile.

She had taken a direct hit from Luo's staff. It couldn't possibly be such a minor injury. And yet she continued to speak as if it were no more than a light bruise.

"But the real problem is our next opponents," she said. "Even with you at full strength, they could give us a lot of trouble."

"Oh, yeah. They're—"

Ayato paused in his steps. Up ahead, there were two men standing in front of their prep room.

Julis noticed a moment later. Her eyes widened in surprise. "Now here are some unexpected guests. You couldn't have come to congratulate us. What do you want?"

Song and Luo answered her question with earnest looks.

"That's exactly what we came to do. Should we have refrained?"

"You dealt us a sound defeat today. Truly impressive."

Ayato and Julis looked at each other in surprise.

"Huh—? W-well, um—thank you."

"Uh, thanks…"

They responded with confusion to the unexpected congratulations.

Song reached his hand out to Julis. "You must have been the one to come up with that plan, Glühen Rose. The idea, the timing—it was outstanding teamwork that required genuine faith in each another."

Julis still appeared bewildered, even as she shook his hand.

"But be careful. That kind of plan won't work against your next opponents."

"What do you mean by that?" Her eyes flashed with suspicion.

"No need to be so skeptical," Song said, undaunted. "We're not here to trick you. This is a genuine warning. You can take us at our word."

"You expect us to trust you just like that? You have no obligation to help us. In fact, our next opponents are from your side."

Their match was the last of Round Five, so Ayato and Julis knew who their next rivals would be. In Round Six—the quarterfinals—they would be up against another pair of Jie Long students, both Page One fighters.

"Just because we come from the same school doesn't mean we're on the same side. Or does everyone at Seidoukan get along perfectly?"

"Uh, w-well… You may have a point, but…" Julis trailed off and averted her eyes.

It was true. There was infighting at Seidoukan even though they all attended the same school—rather, precisely because they did. That was probably true at every school. The only exception to the rule was Gallardworth, but even that lofty place might have been subject to its own internal strife.

"It's simple, really," Luo said. "Your next opponents, Shenyun and Shenhua Li… Well, let's just say we don't get along with them. That doesn't mean we'll share their weaknesses, but…"

"We've taken a liking to you two. At least, we like you more than those twins. So we wanted to let you know we'll be rooting for you. That's all." Song smiled dryly and shrugged.

They didn't seem to be lying.

"All right," Julis conceded. "Then let me ask you again… What did you mean when you said a plan like that won't work?"

"Because that's exactly where those twins excel. They have an exceptional gift for trickery, deceit, and surprise attacks. No matter what scheme you concoct, they'll see right through it and outdo you. And they'll never use your kind of strategy."

"Our kind of strategy…?" Ayato said.

Song turned an earnest gaze on him. "Your gambit treated your opponents as equals. It had risks, and you accepted those risks. You made a calculated decision. That's why we can accept our defeat—although I'd be lying if I said we weren't disappointed."

"But those two aren't like that," Luo added. "They'll never face you on your

level. They always sneer at their opponents and establish a situation where they hold an absolute advantage. They never expose themselves to harm. And they crush their opponents as they please. It is battle without respect, and it does not allow for tactics. That is how the Li twins fight. And we don't like their way of doing things."

"You've seen their matches, haven't you?" Song said.

Gen'ei Souki and Gen'ei Musan—the Phantom Builder and the Phantom Vanisher—comprised one of the most favored teams in this tournament. Julis and Ayato had studied their matches as well as their data.

Thinking back on the videos, Ayato remembered that the contests were all one-sided. The way they tormented their opponents had been unpleasant to watch.

"You might be thinking too highly of us," Julis said. "We would fight that way if we thought it would make it easier to win. In the Festa, only winning matters."

Luo responded with a thin smile. "If that's how it is, then I guess we were poor judges of character."

"In any case, we're not telling you not to have a plan," Song said. "Only to be careful."

With that, Song and Luo turned and walked away.

"Hmm…"

Julis studied the pair as they left, then opened the prep room door with her school emblem.

"What do you think?" Ayato asked as he entered.

"Well. I don't think they were lying," Julis replied after a pause.

"Same here."

As far as Ayato could tell, the Jie Long pair were not the type to take such roundabout measures for the sake of sabotage. There was no point in deceiving them with such general advice, anyway.

Julis sat down on the sofa and let out a long, deep sigh. “We can take their warning into consideration, but let’s leave the twins until tomorrow. I’m too tired today. Let’s catch our breath and go home.”

“Yeah, sounds good.” Ayato took a seat beside her, letting his shoulders sink into the cushions.

The matches had concluded for the day, but spectators were sure to be lingering inside the stadium. Although contestants could take an express subway back to their schools to avoid the crowds, Ayato wanted a little more time to rest.

After all, they would have no time off between the quarterfinals and the championship.

“You know, Ayato…” Julis chuckled. “The next match is the quarterfinals. Just three more fights until we’re the champions,” she quipped.

“Three more fights… It doesn’t sound like a lot, but this won’t be easy, will it?”

They had to survive three more rounds like the one today. Just thinking about it was exhausting.

Julis gave another soft laugh. “Well, as long as you’re aware… By the way, have you thought about what you’ll do?”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean. Your wish when you win.”

“Oh…” Ayato nodded, pondered for a bit—and finally shook his head. “Hmm. I can’t really think of anything.”

“I guessed that might be the case,” Julis said with a wry smile. Then she gazed straight at him, completely serious. “I’m grateful you’re fighting for me, and to be honest, well—I’m happy. But I think you should think about what you want.”

“That’s easy enough to say, but…”

“Well, for instance…” She paused, hesitant to broach the subject. “What about your sister?”

Ayato was a little startled, but he understood.

Julis had heard what Irene told him the other day—that the student council president of Le Wolfe knew his sister. She must have been wondering how he took the news.

“Well, sure—of course she’s been on my mind, but…”

“But?”

“She must have had her reasons for leaving home. So I don’t want to look for her if she doesn’t want to be found.”

Ayato thought back to the day he arrived at Seidoukan Academy.

“Then why come to this school?” Claudia’s words echoed in his mind.

At the time, Ayato had answered, “*To find out what it is that I have to do.*”

But now that he had found his purpose—now what?

“Maybe so,” Julis said, “but isn’t finding your sister the quickest way to do something about that seal?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah—she should be able to remove it…”

Julis narrowed her eyes at his evasive reply. “Ayato. Don’t tell me you’re—”

A knock at the door interrupted her, and an air-window opened to announce their visitors.

“*…Yoo-hoo.*”

“*E-excuse us…*”

The display showed Saya and Kirin.

They had fought Round Five in a different arena, and they had also safely advanced to the quarterfinal match.

“You came all the way here to see us?” Ayato said.

“*We figured you must be exhausted. And we wanted to congratulate you…*,” little Kirin said, fidgeting and looking up into the camera.

Ayato was touched. She and Saya had just fought their match, yet they were still going out of their way for him and Julis.

“Oh—let me open the door for you.” He reached for the air console.

Kirin spoke up hastily. “*Um, before you do, we have one more visitor here with us—is it all right if she comes in?*”

“Visitor?” Ayato cocked his head.

Saya smiled slyly. “*Yes. A visitor, for Riessfeld.*”

“For me?” Julis had been observing their conversation with little interest, but now she frowned curiously.

On the air-window, Saya and Kirin nodded to each other and stepped back.

A girl emerged from between them.

She was young—a child, in fact, probably on the upper end of elementary school age. The innocent-looking, adorable little girl had one particularly distinctive trait—for some reason, she was dressed as a maid.

Julis was taken aback. “F-Flora…?” she murmured.

CHAPTER 3

THE VISITOR

“So…you came from Lieseltania all by yourself?”

“Uh-huh! My name is Flora. Pleased to meet you all!” Speaking with a childish tone, the girl bowed deeply, nearly a perfect ninety degrees.

Flora explained how she came from the very orphanage in Lieseltania that Julis was trying to save.

“She was having a hard time at the information desk, so I tried to help,” Kirin explained. “And it turns out she knows you, Miss Riessfeld.”

“…She was hard to miss,” Saya added.

Naturally, such a young girl wandering about in a maid’s uniform would draw some attention.

“Uh-huh! I’m so grateful! Thank you so much, Miss Sasamiya, Miss Toudou.” It was unclear whether Flora herself understood this, as she nodded energetically and grinned without a trace of shame.

For now, they were chatting in the prep room, and Ayato couldn’t help but notice how extremely out of place her maid’s uniform looked in an everyday setting.

“Really. You should have let me know you were coming,” Julis chided with a helpless smile, gently stroking Flora’s hair.

That soft, indulgent expression told Ayato how much the girl meant to her.



“But His Majesty gave me a ticket to the Phoenix, and in return I had to promise to keep my visit a secret from you,” Flora said.

Julis sighed. “My brother has a little too much fun at the expense of others. I suppose he told you to dress like that, too.”

“Uh-huh. He said it would make it easy for Your Highness to spot me.”

“Honestly, that man…,” Julis muttered.

Her brother seemed to be a real mischievous character.

“But, but—these are like my regular clothes to me now, so it’s comfy and easy to wear,” Flora said.

“Maybe for you, but this isn’t the palace. You can’t dress like that.”

“Regular clothes?” Ayato asked out of sheer curiosity.

“Flora works as a maidservant in the palace,” Julis replied. “Well, she’s still in training, actually.”

Ayato had thought she acted too comfortable in the uniform to have only worn it for this trip. Now it made sense.

“Oh, I almost forgot!” Flora exclaimed. “A message from His Majesty. ‘Come home to visit before the end of the year,’ he says.”

“…Ugh, that brother of mine, hounding me from who knows where. No matter. I was thinking I should visit anyway. He didn’t need to tell me.” Julis placed her hand on Flora’s shoulder. “Besides, I have to see everyone.”

“Uh-huh! We all can’t wait to see you!” Flora nodded, her eyes lighting up.

Ayato could see the truth behind those words. The other children at the orphanage must care for Julis as Flora did.

Kirin watched the two girls with admiration. “I’m amazed… All this time, you’ve been fighting for an orphanage, Miss Riessfeld,” she said with genuine respect.

“It-it’s really not that big a deal—!” Julis abruptly looked away.

The conversation had cornered Julis into revealing her motivations to Saya

and Kirin a few moments ago. She was rather self-conscious about the topic.

Still, Ayato thought it was good for Julis to close some of the distance between herself and others.

Then a thought occurred to him. “Oh, Flora—can I ask you something?”

“Uh-huh?” Flora cocked her head at him.

“What’s Julis like at home?”

“…Well, that came out of nowhere.” Julis glared dubiously at Ayato.

“I mean, I just honestly want to know,” he pressed. “You never talk to me about it, Julis.”

“…Oh. I don’t?”

In fact, Julis almost never spoke to Ayato about her home.

“Hmm, there’s not a lot to say… She’s pretty much like she is now.” Flora gave the question some thought, then replied with conviction. “She’s warm and kind when she’s with us, and she’s dignified and cool when she’s at the palace. So she isn’t any different!”

“Oh, I see. Thanks.” Ayato was relieved to hear Flora’s answer. It meant Julis could be herself here, too.

“Oh, I know! Would you like to see some pictures?” Flora said.

“Pictures?”

“Uh-huh! There are plenty of pictures from the orphanage on my mobile.” Flora eagerly took out her device from her clutch.

“No, I think we’ve talked enough about me for one day,” Julis protested.

The others, however, answered the proposal with enthusiasm.

“…Oh-ho, now *that* sounds interesting,” Saya said.

“I—I’d like to see, too,” Kirin chimed in.

“Let’s see. This is from Weihnachten two years ago, and this one is when we had a big spring cleaning. This is Hannah’s birthday party…”

Flora opened one air-window after another along with her explanations. She

had photos of every sort, from group pictures of ceremonial events to everyday candid shots. The one thing all the photos had in common was that everyone was smiling. Julis, the children, and the nuns all wore joyous grins.

“Wow, you do have a lot of pictures,” Kirin marveled.

“There’s one sister who insists on preserving as many memories as possible. Thanks to her, all the children take pictures of everything. That’s why there are so many plain everyday photos,” Julis explained with a pained smile.

“…Hmm?” Noticing one in particular, Saya motioned to Flora with her hand. “Flora, what’s this one?”

“Oh, that’s Her Highness washing my hair for me!”

Flora lightly delivered her explanation, but Ayato averted his eyes in a panic upon glimpsing the photo in question.

The picture showed Julis and Flora washing their hair—both wearing nothing besides little towels.

“—!” Julis yanked the mobile device from Flora’s hands and closed all the air-windows at once.

“D-d-d-d-d-did you see? Did you? You saw, didn’t you!”

“N-no, I didn’t! Didn’t see a thing!”

Julis scowled at him, beet red, and Ayato ferociously shook his head in denial.

Technically, he had seen the picture, but he’d averted his gaze before he could process it, so he wasn’t exactly lying…he hoped.

“Flora, didn’t I tell you to delete that picture?!” Julis blustered.

“Ohhh, but…it’s a precious memory with Your Highness…” Flora hung her head dejectedly.

Julis was unable to scold Flora with much energy in the face of that reaction. She pursed her lips awkwardly.

“…Anyway, it doesn’t seem right to send such a little girl so far by herself,” Saya said, perhaps to deliberately change the subject, and patted Flora’s head.

Saya wasn’t much taller than Flora, so the comment was a bit odd coming

from her. But she had a point. Flora was still a child, and it would be safer for her to travel with a chaperone.

Especially to Asterisk, of all places. Duels were banned during Festa events, which made it somewhat safer than usual, but this was far from a normal city. It wasn't rare for tourists to get hurt.

"Umm, well…" Flora was embarrassed, her voice tiny and her head lowered.

Julis took up the task of explaining. "My brother doesn't have much money to spend freely, just as I didn't when I lived at home. Still, since he obeys the integrated enterprise foundations, he can pull some strings if he wants and obtain Festa tickets that way, probably. I'm guessing he couldn't pay for travel or lodging, though, and the funds for that came from the sisters."

"…Uh-huh. They worked really hard to save up, and I think that's where it came from. But they could only send one of us… And they said that if they had to pick, then I'd be the best choice." Flora seemed dejected, but her enthusiasm quickly returned. "But I'll be fine on my own! I'm a Genestella like Her Highness, and I'm planning on coming to Asterisk as a student! And then, I'll help everyone at the orphanage, just like Her Highness!"

"Wow, that's great!" Ayato told her.

He had known the second he saw her that Flora was a Genestella, but what struck him was how she had a concrete goal at such an early age. That was probably why the others at the orphanage decided she was the best one to send.

While Ayato was genuinely impressed, Julis sternly shook her head. "Are you still talking about that…? I've told you a hundred times, there's no need for you to go through this."

"But, but—I want to help everyone, like you!"

"You're still little. You shouldn't worry about things like that, and—"

"But the student council president of Jie Long is younger than I am! So why can't I?"

For such a cute little girl, Flora had quite the stubborn streak.

“Comparing ourselves to a first-ranked fighter now, are we?” Confounded, Julis placed her hand on her hip, then breathed a resigned sigh. “Oh, all right. Suppose you do come to Asterisk to help everyone at the orphanage. Which school do you want to attend?”

“Um—I guess I’d want to go to Seidoukan like Your Highness, or maybe Queenvale Academy for Young Ladies, if I could…” Flora placed her palms together as if in prayer, her eyes shining dreamily.

So Queenvale really is popular with girls, Ayato thought.

“I see. So I was right—you don’t need to be in Asterisk at all,” Julis said.

“…Huh?”

“Both Seidoukan and Queenvale only allow students from middle school and up. Actually, the only school that accepts elementary students is Jie Long, so…”

There was no minimum age requirement to attend Jie Long Seventh Institute. Of course, infants and toddlers were ineligible, but anyone old enough to receive primary education could apply.

This policy apparently stemmed from the philosophy that for martial arts and Seisenjutsu—Jie Long’s forte—it was best to begin long-term training in the fundamentals from an early age. The other five schools argued that those early years were critical to psychological development and it was unethical to place such young children in the abnormal environment of Asterisk—although this was all a transparent attempt to claim moral superiority.

“Anyway, it’ll be at least two more years until you’re old enough,” Julis declared. “By then, I’ll have made *all your wishes come true*.”

“—!” Flora glanced up at her with a gasp.

“I told you the last time we spoke. I will help you all, and I will change our country. And to do that, I will win every Festa event. Do you have so little faith in me?”

“N-no, that’s not it!”

“Then it’s settled.” Julis gave a satisfied nod, then gently patted Flora on the head.

“That’s our Riessfeld. Aiming big and high,” Saya said, impressed. “…But it won’t be a walk in the park. The Phoenix, at least, will go to me and Kirin. Right, Kirin?”

“Wha—?! Uh, um—well, y-yes—!” Flustered at being put on the spot, Kirin’s head swiveled back and forth between Saya and Julis, then nodded with resolve. “I—I’m going to do my best, too! I won’t give up on my wish!”

Flora lit up at this exchange. “Ohhhh. Miss Sasamiya and Miss Toudou are Her Highness’s rivals!”

“Rivals…?”

Julis, Saya, and Kirin shared a concerned glance—then, as if on cue, they all turned to Ayato.

“Huh? Wh-what is it…?”

The three girls stared at him as he took a step backward.

“Well, I suppose that’s true,” Julis muttered.

“?”

Ayato had no idea what was going on, and neither did Flora, apparently. She blankly watched the situation unfold.

“…Um, well, moving on.” Julis cleared her throat and tried to bring the conversation back on course. “If we do fight each other, it’ll be in the final. First we all have to get that far.”

Indeed, since Ayato and Julis were in a different tournament block from Saya and Kirin, the only way they would fight each other was in the final.

Saya chuckled confidently. “Heh-heh-heh… Not a problem. We’re invincible.”

She puffed out her chest and clapped a hand on Kirin’s shoulder. In contrast, Kirin seemed uncertain. But Saya’s conviction was well founded on their actual performance thus far.

In their five matches, Saya and Kirin had completely dominated—an incredible feat, now that they had reached the main tournament—and their opponents so far had hardly posed a challenge. They owed some of this wild

success, of course, to fortunate placement in the tournament bracket. Still, compared to Ayato and Julis's exhausting struggle thus far, their progress had been almost ridiculously smooth.

According to popular opinion, Saya and Kirin were likely winners for the upcoming quarterfinal as well. It might not be an easy victory, but Ayato agreed with that assessment.

The problem, however, would be the following match. Their likely opponents for the semifinal were…

"Well, well, you must have it in the bag, then," Julis remarked. "I gather you're all set to take down those mechs from Allekant?"

Saya's expression hardened slightly.

Allekant's autonomous Puppets, Ardy and Rimcy, had advanced through the tournament with even more overwhelming strength than Saya and Kirin. They were now the favorites to win the Phoenix. It was no wonder, given they had come this far without a single scratch, even though they always granted their opponents one full minute to attack freely—just as they had in Round One.

If both teams advanced, Kirin and Saya would face the Puppets in the semifinal.

"Bet you can't wait to see," Saya countered. "Personally, I'm more worried about you two."

"You're facing Jie Long's Page One fighters next, aren't you?" Kirin asked Julis gravely.

Saya and Kirin had been following the Jie Long twins, too—surely they were aware of how formidable the twins could be.

"We'll manage one way or another," Julis said. "In two days, Ayato will be able to fight at full strength, and we'll have far more options than we did today. We'll make it."

While her words were optimistic, her expression was anything but.

Ayato realized she must be recalling what Song and Luo had told them earlier.

An awkward silence descended upon the room.

Flora was the one to break it. “Oh, look at the time! I’ll say goodbye for today. I’m going to root for you with all my heart during the next round—good luck!”

She stood and gave them a brisk bow.

“Hold on, Flora. Which hotel are you staying at? I’ll walk you there.” Julis got up to follow as Flora walked to the door.

“No, I’ll be fine on my own. Your Highness must be tired from the match.”

“You don’t need to be so considerate, you silly thing. —Oh, but Ayato, about tomorrow…”

Julis probably meant their strategy meeting to prepare for the quarterfinal. “I think we could start in the afternoon,” he said. “You and Flora must have a lot to talk about.”

“And now *you’re* being too considerate,” Julis sighed. “But I’ll gladly accept. I could use the rest. The afternoon would be better.”

After Julis and Ayato hammered out the details for their meeting, they all dispersed for the day.

*

“I’m back! …Oh. But Yabuki isn’t.”

Ayato flicked on the light switch in the pitch-black room, and only quiet solitude greeted him.

Eishirou’s desk, piled high with documents and handwritten notes, had not been touched. His bed was also immaculately made, as it had been since the last time he had changed the sheets. There was no sign he had come back to their dorm at all.

This was no surprise to Ayato. Things had been like this ever since the start of summer break. Still, he had to wonder where his roommate was and what he might be up to. He had asked once, but Eishirou had simply replied, “Gotta cover the stories!”

“Maybe he’s living it up in the red light district…or something.”

Ayato had only heard about that part of the redevelopment area the other day. Apparently, the students who had gotten a taste of the nightlife were well

acquainted with it.

"Well, maybe it's for the better that he's not around," Ayato murmured to himself. "Otherwise he'd just ask a bunch of questions."

He took out his mobile and plopped down on the bed. Earlier, he had thought he might need to find somewhere else private, but with Eishirou out, there was no need.

"*Well, for instance… What about your sister?*" Julis's voice echoed in his head.

He didn't mean to seek out his sister against her will. But it was true that he wanted to know.

"Let's see… Here we go."

He called the recently added number, and almost immediately the air-window showed the person he wanted to talk to: Priscilla Urzaiz.

"*Oh—hello, Mr. Amagiri!*"

"Evening, Priscilla. Sorry to call out of the blue."

Priscilla appeared to be cooking, wearing an apron just as she had the other night. From the furniture in the background, Ayato could see it was the apartment where she had hosted him and Julis.

"*Oh, it's no trouble! I kept thinking that I should thank you properly, but I didn't want to bother you during the Festa… I really appreciate what you did for us!*"

"No—I didn't do anything that deserves thanks."

It's odd for the loser of a match to thank the winner, Ayato thought.

But Priscilla shook her head slowly. "*You brought my sister back to me, Amagiri. Words aren't enough to thank you. Oh, I know! Could I invite you over for dinner again? I'll make something better than last time…*"

"*Ugh, enough already! Gimme that!*"

"*Huh? Oh, Irene, j-just a second—!*"

Irene entered the field of view, shoving Priscilla aside.

"*Hey, Amagiri. Saw your match today. Looked like you had a pretty rough time.*"

"Thanks to you."

"*Ha-ha, serves you right!*" Irene smirked in the air-window.

Ayato responded with a pained smile.

Her eyes were just as sharp as before, but somehow less severe. *This must be Irene as she really is*, he thought.

"*You wanted to talk to me and not Priscilla, right? Wait, no. The one you want isn't me—it's that jackass Dirk.*"

"…How'd you know?"

Irene was completely right, and Ayato made no attempt to hide it. The corners of her mouth curled in a grin. "*I'd like to say I had you pegged, but actually, it was all Dirk. He said you'd try to get in touch with him, and he told me to let him know when you did.*"

The man wasn't the "Devious King" for nothing. He had predicted Ayato's every move. But that did nothing to change what he had to do.

"Okay—well, would you mind telling him? Let him know I have some questions about Haruka Amagiri, and that I'd like to meet with him."

"*Yeah, sure. That's part of my job, after all*," Irene replied.

"Thanks. I appreciate it."

"*Just be careful. I'm not the only dog he's got on a leash. People are sayin' he has* Erenshkigal*, too.*"

"The Witch of the Solitary Venom?"

If the Strega currently renowned as the strongest fighter in Asterisk was in the palm of Dirk's hand—that really would be something else.

"*And…he's also got Grimalkin.*"

"Grimalkin…?"

"*Le Wolfe's covert ops unit. They're bad news, for real. They'll do any kind of*

nasty job they're given, no hesitation… Though Dirk doesn't seem to have a whole lot of faith in them."

So they were like Seidoukan's Shadowstar. "Got it. I'll be careful."

"*You better be. You can't do anything if you're dead.*" Then Irene narrowed her eyes at Ayato. "*By the way, Amagiri. How'd you get your hands on Priscilla's number?*"

"Huh? The other night, when you invited us over for dinner…"

Ayato had asked for it in case something happened and he needed to contact her. Had he done something wrong?

"*Hrmm.*" Irene glowered at Ayato through the video chat, then suddenly jabbed a finger at him. "*I'm only gonna say this once. If you ever lay a finger on Priscilla, I will end you.*"

"*Now, hold on, Irene! Where did that come from?!*" Suddenly, a panicked Priscilla pushed Irene out of the way. "*I—I'm sorry, Amagiri! My sister can be so weird.*"

"Oh, um, it's fine… Well, tell her I said bye."

"*Wha—? Hey, Priscilla! I'm not done talking to him!*" Irene shouted from off camera. The two sisters appeared to be as close as ever.

Feeling relieved, Ayato was about to hang up when Priscilla stopped him.

"*Oh, Amagiri—could you wait just a moment?*"

"Huh…?"

Priscilla also left the field of view, and Ayato heard the sisters whispering quietly.

Eventually, Irene reappeared with a vaguely guilty countenance. "*Um—Amagiri.*"

"Hmm? Something the matter?"

"*No… Uh, I just thought I should…thank you, y'know. I mean, I owe you that much.*"

"Thank me…?"

Irene focused on the wall offscreen and scratched her head, mumbling. "*See, about the other day. About Gravisheath. I don't like to admit this, and I hate that I'm making less money with that thing gone, but…I guess it's true, I could have been in real trouble if I kept going like I was.*"

"Oh, I see. That." Come to think of it, Irene did have a strong sense of duty.

"*You saved me. So…thanks*," Irene said with her face still turned away, and then the air-window abruptly went dark.

Smiling faintly, Ayato stared at the blank display for a while, then set down his mobile on the desk and sprawled out on the bed.

"Guess I'll have to see what Tyrant's next move is…"

From what Irene had told him, everything was developing just as Dirk had predicted. Ayato had no idea what the man had in mind, but for his own part, there was nothing more he could do.

Claudia had promised to look into things, but gathering intelligence on another school was far from simple—especially when the target was Le Wolfe's student council president.

"…Sis." Ayato closed his eyes and pictured Haruka. His mental image of her was five years out of date.

Five years was a long time—more than enough time to change a person.

That was true for him, too.

He had been standing still for far too long, and now he had finally taken a step forward.

And yet—

"I'm home! Man, it's been a while!"

The door suddenly opened and Eishirou burst in, weighed down by a significant amount of luggage.

"Whoa—Yabuki?"

"Aw, sorry, Amagiri. Were you sleeping?"

"No, it's fine, I was just lying down. It really has been a while, though." Ayato

sat up and turned toward Eishirou, who had plopped down on the floor.

“I had a bunch of work piled up. I did manage to get through a lot, but there’s still a ton left,” Eishirou said, sighing.

“By work, you mean for the newspaper club?”

“Bingo. The Festa is when we make the big bucks. There are stories everywhere, and if we don’t put in the work now—oh, by the way, I watched the match today. Congrats, you made it to the quarterfinals!” Eishirou gave him a thumbs-up.

“Just barely. We didn’t win by much.”

“Come on, a win is a win. Be happy.” Laughing, Eishirou reached into the mini-fridge for an iced tea and guzzled it down. “Ahhhh. So are you up against the Jie Long twins next? Those two are trouble. Just a nasty pair through and through.”

“Do you know a lot about them, Yabuki?”

“On paper, yeah. If you look at just their raw power, Irene Urzaiz and the Gravisheath would rank higher, for sure. And if you look on Odhroerir or Hexa Pantheon, neither of the twins are rated that high.”

“Look on what, now?” Ayato didn’t recognize those terms.

Eishirou responded with surprise. “They’re famous fansites about Asterisk—about the Festa. You don’t know them?”

Ayato shook his head.

Guess I have to explain, Eishirou’s look said as he took out his mobile and opened the two sites. “Each school in Asterisk sets the ranks, so obviously they only apply within that school. Right? So the only way to see if the first-ranked fighter in our school—well, you, I guess—is stronger than the number one at Gallardworth, is if they actually fight. But the world wants to compare everything and speculate, so there’re a ton of people on the net who make up their own rankings for students across all the schools and post them up.”

“Like an unofficial ranking of all the students in Asterisk?”

“Pretty much. And Odhroerir and Hexa Pantheon are the two biggest ones.”

Ayato thought that sounded logical enough. Without a comprehensive ranking system, there would be no point of reference in competitions like the Festa where students from different schools fought each other.

“Odhroerir is run by individuals,” Eishirou went on, “It’s been around since the early days of Asterisk. The rankings have a reputation for being pretty accurate, and a lot of gambling businesses use it to set the odds. Hexa Pantheon is relatively new, but it uses an evaluation system that anyone can participate in. That makes it more of a popularity contest.”

“Whoa. Interesting.”

“Still, because they’re unofficial, a lot of people don’t trust either one. I think Her Highness was among the nonbelievers. And our student council president said in an interview once that she didn’t care for ’em, either.”

“Yeah, Julis would be skeptical,” Ayato mused.

She didn’t seem to put a lot of weight on the school rankings, so it was only natural that she would trust the unofficial ones even less.

Claudia, on the other hand… It was a mystery why she took that stance.

“Well, as long as you know it’s unofficial, I don’t think it hurts to check it out,” Eishirou said. “Incidentally, the top-ranked fighter for both sites is *Erenshkigal*.”

“Not surprising.” *You don’t win two Lindvolus tournaments by luck*, Ayato thought.

“Hexa Pantheon has rankings that include past fighters, and that’s pretty fun to look at. The leader of Stjarnagarm has held the top spot there forever.”

“She was the first one to win back-to-back Lindvolus tournaments, right?” Ayato asked. “Does that mean people place the most weight on how fighters do at the Lindvolus?”

“In the end, the Lindvolus is the most exciting of the Festas,” Eishirou replied. “To give you an idea, you’re ranked nineteenth in Odhroerir, and thirtieth in Hexa Pantheon. You were a bit higher before you fought Irene Urzaiz.”

In other words, his rankings had fallen with the news about his seal getting out.

“Well, I think you’re still one of the more promising rookies to come up this year,” Eishirou added.

“So I should be happy about that…I guess?”

His curiosity aroused, Ayato browsed both sites. Claudia was the highest-ranked Seidoukan fighter on Odhroerir. But Hexa Pantheon had Kirin ranked higher, so Ayato could tell why these sites could only be used as rough references.

“Anyway, to get back on topic,” Eishirou interrupted. “What I wanted to say is, individually, the twins aren’t regarded that highly as fighters. Not that they’re weak, by any means, since they’re on Jie Long’s Page One. I’m just talking about how people think of them in comparison to the top fighters at the other schools.”

Then Eishirou closed the air-windows with a crooked smile.

“But we all know that rankings alone don’t decide matches. I mean, if Irene Urzaiz was set to fight those twins, I don’t know who would win. I think they’re *that* good.”

“I’ve seen the data,” Ayato said, “and they seem to be really good at taking advantage of their opponents’ weaknesses.”

The twins’ basic strategy was to spot the enemy’s weak point and attack it mercilessly. The approach made perfect sense, but what made them stand out was their unusual creativity in the execution.

“They’re ridiculously good at exploiting the advantage of Seisenjutsu,” Eishirou said. “It must be hell for anyone who faces them.”

“What advantage?”

“Versatility, of course. Attack, defense, support—they can do whatever… Oh, right. This’ll be your first time going up against *daoshi* fighters, won’t it?”

“Yeah, we’ve faced a few Jie Long teams, but they’ve always used regular martial arts.”

Ayato knew that *daoshi* was the name for practitioners of Seisenjutsu, but he lacked a concrete grasp of what exactly Seisenjutsu was.

“Oh, well. I guess I can give you another lesson, as a token of our friendship.” Eishirou once again opened an air-window to display the Jie Long Seventh Institute. “Simply put, Seisenjutsu is what you get when you take the powers of Stregas and Dantes, then codify and generalize them. Usually, those powers are highly specialized, but Seisenjutsu turns them into a technique and breaks it down so anyone can use them. I guess that’ll do for a working definition.”

“Anyone can…? Is that even possible?”

“Well, not really *anyone*, strictly speaking. They say Stregas and Dantes make up just a few percent of Genestella, right? In reality, though, lots of people have a natural ability to link with mana but can’t express it as special powers—either because they’re too weak or they can’t visualize what they want to do. According to some, more Genestella have that basic ability than not.”

“Wow…”

“In theory, if you can link with mana, it should be possible to manifest special powers. What Seisenjutsu does is develop that natural talent into all sorts of abilities by teaching them as standardized techniques. They incorporate things like gestures, incantations, and spell charms.”

“That definitely sounds amazing. But…” Ayato had to ask the obvious question. “Why is something so great only taught at Jie Long?”

“So, that’s the thing,” Eishirou replied excitedly. “It turns out there are plenty of Seisenjutsu users, but only a handful of teachers who can pass it on. For someone to learn Seisenjutsu, the flow of prana in their body has to be adjusted in some special way. And only the teachers can make that adjustment.”

“So they basically have a monopoly, huh.”

“They say there are twelve teachers who were trained by the first Ban’yuu Tenra herself, and seven trained by the second. There are only about twenty teachers in all, including the current Ban’yuu Tenra. I’ve heard people have tried to recruit them in all sorts of ways. But seeing as no one’s succeeded, their training must include instilling loyalty, too.” Then Eishirou gave Ayato a more serious look. “There are hundreds of powers that have been turned into Seisenjutsu techniques. Stregas and Dantes tend to use more distinctive powers, but that means they’re not as balanced and easier to plan against.

Daoshi don't have that weakness. So be careful."

"Got it. Thanks, Yabuki."

The Tyrant, his sister, the quarterfinal in two days, and his seal on top of that… Ayato had a lot on his plate.

"Haaah…" He looked up at the ceiling. *Nothing to do but tackle things one at a time.*

CHAPTER 4

DOUBTS

There was a small clearing in the middle of the woods.

Two young children, each with a weapon in hand, battled fiercely.

“Uh, um—oh, Amagiri Shinmei Style—*Twin Serpents!*”

The innocent boy drew a clumsy cross with his sword at the girl holding a large gun.

“—Too slow.”

The girl easily evaded the attack, spinning her small body toward the boy, and fired a shot. The ball of light blasted out of the enormous pistol-shaped Lux and brushed past the boy’s midsection as he contorted to evade it. Somewhere far-off, the missile created a cloud of grass with a small bang. Although the gun’s output had been lowered to an appropriate level for self-defense, a direct hit would have incapacitated him.

The boy swung his wooden sword in a feint and put more distance between himself and the girl. Usually, it was poor strategy to give a gunner the advantage in range. This girl, however, was also formidable in close-range combat. He had to fight at the best distance for his attacks, as long as that was possible.

As if to thwart his plan, the girl launched a rapid volley.

“Aw, crap!” Dodging some rounds and deflecting others with his sword, the boy fought like mad to maintain his distance. But eventually, he caved and sprang backward, clicking his tongue in frustration.

“…Gotcha,” the girl murmured, and took aim to shoot him down.

But he was expecting that.

“Haaah!” The boy redirected the projectile back at the girl.

Ordinarily, such a stunt would be unimaginable. But with a projectile reduced in power, and a good guess as to the timing, this was not impossible.

“!”

A hint of surprise crossed the girl’s stoic face as she dodged.

Meanwhile, the boy zigzagged toward her to close the distance again.

Rushing to land a counterattack, the girl squeezed the trigger over and over—but every shot failed to find its mark, landing a moment too late.

In the next instant, the boy struck upward from a low stance to send her gun flying into the air.

“I win, Saya.”

As Ayato Amagiri spoke triumphantly, Saya Sasamiya raised her hands in surrender.

“…Okay. You win this time,” she said with a small sigh. Her expression barely changed except for the slight frown that wrinkled her brow. Defeat did get to her a little.

“So that’s three hundred twenty-one wins for me, and one hundred eighty-two for you,” Ayato said. “But I lost a bunch in a row, so it’s about time.”

The two children had lived next door to each other and had been playing together as long as they could remember.

At first, they had amused themselves like normal children, playing tag or hide-and-go-seek or board games. But ever since Ayato had begun training at his family’s dojo, they had sparred like real fighters. After that, their playtime had started to resemble actual matches.

In spirit, these were the same good-natured competitions many children had. But they had provided valuable training for Ayato, who had been banned from participating in matches at the dojo. And they had given Saya the chance to use the guns her father made.

There was something else, too.

“…All right. Here.” Saya took out a piece of paper from her pocket and handed it to Ayato.

In childish writing were scrawled the words *Wish Coupon*.

“Hee-hee! Thanks!” Ayato accepted the voucher and gleefully held it up to the sun.

The token was valid only between Ayato and Saya. Like other coupons for favors between friends and family, this one could be exchanged for any single wish. Ayato and Saya wagered these whenever they had any sort of competition. Saya had come up with the idea, inspired by the Festa prize.

There were, however, two restrictions on the type of wish.

One—wishes that would upset the other friend were forbidden.

Two—a coupon could not be used to nullify a wish made using another coupon.

These were mostly redeemed for such innocuous wishes as getting the other person’s share of a snack, or asking the friend to do one’s homework. But they had certainly started using their wishes in increasingly creative ways.

For example…

“Hey, Saya?”

“Hmm?”

“You wouldn’t want to, maybe, take back your wish…would you?”

They could not use a wish to negate another wish, but the person using the ticket could always take it back. Which was what Ayato had been hoping for…

“Nope,” Saya replied flatly.

“But shouting out the names of my moves is kind of embarrassing…”

“It’s not embarrassing. It’s super cool, so don’t worry.” Saya gave him a firm thumbs-up.

“Umm…you think so?”

“That’s what all the heroes on TV do. Nothing wrong with it.”

“Well, I guess you’re right…”

“It’s fine. You’ll get used to it.”

Ayato couldn’t help but feel that Saya was intentionally missing his point.

Still, her wish didn’t upset him quite that much, so he kept his mouth shut.

“Anyway, what about your wish, Ayato?”

The coupons had no expiration date, so there was no need to use them right away. They could save as many as they wanted, or redeem several at once.

Today, Ayato already had a wish in mind.

“Oh, yeah. I’m gonna use this one right away.” He held out the slip of paper toward Saya. “Just once, I want to beat my sister. Will you help, Saya?”

*

“Mm…”

When Ayato woke to the ringing of his mobile device, it was already past ten in the morning.

Usually, he woke up on his own for morning training, but the fatigue from the last few days had caught up to him.

“Why am I dreaming about the past again?” Ayato muttered to himself, scratching his bed-head hair.

He had dreamt about his childhood before, but this was from even further back than usual—nearly ten years ago…

Meanwhile, his mobile was still ringing.

“Whoops…” He grabbed it and saw the call was from Julis.

Glancing at the other side of the room, he saw Eishirou spread-eagle on his bed, seemingly deep in his own dreams.

Adjusting the volume so as to not wake him, he opened the air-window to find an apologetic Julis. “*Oh—were you still sleeping? Sorry, I didn’t mean to wake you.*”

“Yeah, but don’t worry. It’s time I got up anyway. So, what’s up?”

Their strategy meeting wasn't until the afternoon. He had plenty of time until then.

"*Actually, Flora wants to invite you for lunch. She says there's something she has to ask you.*"

"Flora does?"

"*Only if you want to, of course…*"

"I don't mind."

Ayato wondered what kind of question Flora could have for him.

"*Good. Can you meet us in the commercial area? Main Street will be too crowded, though. Somewhere else would be better, but…I'm still not very familiar with the place.*"

"Yeah, you're right." Ayato could recall how busy that area was on a normal day. It wasn't hard to imagine what it would be like during a Festa event. "But I don't know much more about the city than you do."

After all, he had spent his days off and after-school hours training with Julis and the others. He'd been living in Asterisk for two months now, and he had hardly gone out at all. They had spent more time in the city since the Phoenix started, but that didn't really count—it was just commuting between the arenas and the school.

At that moment, Eishirou yawned dramatically.

"What, you guys looking for a place to eat?" he asked Ayato, slowly sitting up in bed while blearily rubbing his eyes.

"Uh, yeah. We were wondering what to do, since anywhere we go is bound to be crowded."

"Hmm—then I'll recommend a place. You're going on a date with the Princess, right?"

"*A d-date?! Y-y-you idiot! You have it all wrong!*"

Paying no attention to Julis's shouting or her bright red face in the air-window, Eishirou reached for the mobile by his pillow. "Here, try this one. It's

near the edge of the residential district and pretty far from the trains. Not a lot of tourists, plus the atmosphere and food aren't bad—it's a bit of a hidden gem. It's a favorite with Queenvale students, but it's summer break now, so it shouldn't be too crowded."

Ayato checked the shop profile Eishirou shared. It was a café with a pleasant ambience—the sort that might be popular with young women. "Huh, not bad, Yabuki. How'd you know about a place like this?"

"Well, you know. Our club deals in all kinds of information," Eishirou replied with a smug smile.

"So, what do you think, Julis? Will this do?" Ayato forwarded her the profile.

"Hmph… I guess so. I don't like that Yabuki is the one suggesting it, but it does look nice." Julis sounded grudgingly interested.

"All right, that's where we'll meet."

They promised to meet at the café in two hours, and Ayato hung up. "Thanks, Yabuki. That was a big help."

"Hey, don't mention it." Sitting on top of his bed, Eishirou glanced meaningfully at Ayato. "I figure it can't hurt for you to owe me a favor."

"I hope I can afford to repay you," Ayato replied with a wry smile, and he stood to get ready to go out.

*

"Huh…?" After Ayato quickly made himself presentable and started down the dorm path toward the front gate, he noticed some familiar figures approaching.

They noticed him, too, and one—Kirin—trotted over. Since she was in workout gear, he guessed she was in the middle of a run.

"Hello, Ayato. Are you going out somewhere?" With a bashful expression, Kirin bowed to him in greeting.

"Yeah, for a bit. Hey, I don't see the two of you together a lot."

"Oh? Is it unusual?"

A few steps behind Kirin came her companion, Claudia. She smiled as she

always did, placing her hand on her cheek with a slight tilt of the head.

Ayato really could not remember seeing the two alone together.

“We bumped into each other, and I wanted to discuss something with Miss Toudou,” Claudia said.

“Like what?”

“About Orga Luxes.” Claudia glanced to Kirin for approval and, after the other girl nodded, she continued. “Following her uncle’s demands, Miss Toudou never used an Orga Lux, but as you know, she’s free to do as she chooses now. I thought it might be worth trying some, if she was interested.”

“I see…”

Ayato could easily imagine a much stronger Kirin with an Orga Lux. After all, she had achieved the top rank at Seidoukan with nothing but an ordinary katana. The only reason he had bested her was because his unusual tactics had panned out. He doubted he could win again.

“However…”

“I appreciated the President’s suggestion—but I really can’t use anything other than a katana,” Kirin explained, shaking her head apologetically. “I’m attached to the Senbakiri, and the Conjoined Cranes is a technique specialized for the katana…”

“Oh, right,” Ayato said. “And the Toudou style sticks to a strict set of forms.”

No matter how powerful an Orga Lux was, it was wasted if it restricted the skill of the wielder. Fighting with a familiar weapon was no small advantage in and of itself.

“I have to admit, the size of the Ser Veresta is giving me a little trouble,” Ayato added.

“Hee-hee, I’m sorry to tell you, but I think that means you haven’t fully harnessed its power yet.”

“Huh?” Ayato’s eyes went wide.

“The Ser Veresta has no fixed size. If you have it completely in your control, it

should naturally assume a size and form that's best for you."

"I—I didn't know that…" Ayato's eyes dropped to the Lux at his waist.

So this rebellious character had yet to accept him.

"You seem to have trouble exercising precise control of your prana. Maybe that's part of the reason," Claudia suggested.

"Um, yeah, maybe…" Ayato had no retort, since that really was his greatest weakness.

"Oh, we seem to have gotten off topic. As for Miss Toudou's Orga Lux—what if we can find one in the shape of a katana?"

"What? Is there an Orga Lux like that?" Kirin asked, surprised.

Claudia shook her head disappointedly. "No, not among the Orga Luxes in Seidoukan's care. The closest would be the Ser Veresta…"

The Ser Veresta was a single-edged blade, after all, and shaped like a *tachi* sword. Although…

"N-no, that belongs to Ayato, and I'd never be able to control it—!" Flustered, Kirin waved her hands in protest.

"So katana-shaped Orga Luxes are rare?" Ayato asked.

"I would say so," Claudia replied. "The powers and form of an Orga Lux come from the character of the urm-manadite core, to a surprising degree. It's not as if we can design an Orga Lux to order."

"Not very convenient, is it," Ayato said bluntly.

Unable to disagree, Claudia smiled helplessly. "Well, their powers more than make up for that, so we can't be too greedy… Well, actually, our R&D division recently got their hands on a new urm-manadite from Galaxy's research surplus. So, perhaps…"

"It might end up katana-shaped?" Ayato finished.

Claudia nodded. "I've heard it's a possibility. There's no way to know how it will actually turn out, or when it will take shape as an Orga Lux… But if it does work out that way, please give it a try."

“O-okay!” Kirin bowed timidly.

“You’re pretty serious about this, Claudia,” Ayato observed.

“It’s my job to do everything I can for all the students of Seidoukan and see that they perform as well as possible at the Festa.”

“It must be hard being student council president…”

Claudia herself was a Page One fighter, and she had to spend her time and effort making other students stronger. *It takes some fierce dedication to keep up with it all*, Ayato thought.

Then something occurred to him. “By the way—have you two ever fought each other?”

“Huh?”

“What?”

The two girls exchanged a glance.

Kirin was the former first-ranked at Seidoukan, and Claudia was second. It wouldn’t be a surprise if they had faced each other at some point.

But Kirin nervously replied, “N-no, no, never!”

“Well, her uncle saw me as a threat,” Claudia said. “So of course we had no chance.”

“Besides, you haven’t participated in any matches or duels for about a year now, have you?” Kirin asked.

“That’s right. It has been quite a while. I hope I’m not getting rusty!” Claudia laughed good-naturedly.

“Duels I can understand, but no matches, either…?”

Julis might have mentioned something like this, Ayato recalled.

This meant no one had challenged Claudia in an official match. Under Seidoukan’s rules, a student could not refuse a challenge from a lower-ranked fighter. Claudia was second, so almost any ranked student could try for her place.

But if she hadn't fought in any matches for a year…

"Ayato, have you seen any recordings of Claudia's matches?" Kirin asked.

"Hmm? No, I haven't…"

"If you did, you'd understand right away," Kirin said, dead serious. "The reason no one fights her is because she's just that strong."

"I imagine that what everyone fears isn't me, but the little one." Claudia caressed the Orga Lux activator at her waist.

Her Orga Lux, the Pan-Dora, granted the exceptional power of future sight—in exchange for a cruel cost. Naturally, not many would willingly engage an opponent who could see the future, but that no one tried at all seemed a bit strange.

"To be honest," Kirin said, "I have imagined fighting you, Miss President. But… I just can't picture how I might win."

"Oh, you're being too modest," Claudia answered with a self-deprecating smile.

"But it's the truth. Besides, Odhroerir has you ranked higher…"

"That is based on the subjective opinions of outsiders, which are not very useful."

As Yabuki had said, Claudia placed little faith in the unofficial rankings.

"But, still…," Kirin stubbornly demurred.

"Haaah…" Claudia let out a small sigh. "Then—in those imaginary encounters, did you lose to me, Miss Toudou?"

"W-well…"

Kirin fell silent, and Claudia continued.

"You couldn't picture how you would lose, either, could you? Even if I can see what's to come, that won't save me if I cannot respond in time. And you have the advantage over me in speed, at the very least. Who knows how a match might go?"

So, were the two of them—abilities and all—evenly matched in Claudia's

estimation?

“Oh, how silly of me. Here I am chattering away…” Claudia clapped her hands, and bowed to Ayato and Kirin. “Excuse me now. Good luck in the quarterfinals tomorrow, both of you. I’m expecting great things.”

“Oh—yeah. See you,” Ayato said.

“What Claudia said is true,” Kirin murmured, watching her leave. “I didn’t picture myself losing, either.”

The pride and will of a warrior shone in her eyes.

“But I based those hypothetical scenarios on her previous matches,” she went on. “Claudia lost in the Gryps team contest, but she didn’t seem worn out herself. Which means—no one has ever seen her fight at full strength.”

“Claudia at full strength…”

Ayato remembered when she had attacked him that night. She had been dreaming then, so she couldn’t have been going all-out.

“Hey, weren’t you headed somewhere, Ayato?”

“Oh, that’s right…!” He checked the time to see that he didn’t have much to spare. “Sorry, Kirin. I have to go.”

“Okay. Take care.”

Ayato waved and hurried on to the main gate.

*

“Ooh. That was *really* good!” Flora declared, grinning in satisfaction, upon clearing her plate of omelet rice.

“Oh, look at you. You’ve got ketchup on your face.”

“Aw…”

Next to her, Julis wiped the edge of her mouth clean.

They made a sweet picture together, like actual sisters.

The café that Eishirou had recommended was on a back street, just one block over from a main avenue. The unassuming facade was painted black and easy

to miss, but once a potential visitor noticed it the atmosphere of mystery lured them in.

The interior was brighter than Ayato had expected, and classical music played softly. There weren't many seats—maybe twenty or so between the tables and the counters. Ayato, Julis, and Flora occupied one of the tables.

"Well, it's true. Both the fare and the ambience are good," Julis said. "I hate to admit it, but Yabuki was right."

"You should tell him yourself. He'd be glad to hear it."

Ayato and Julis had also finished their meals, and each had a cup of coffee in front of them.

"That, I can't do. He's caused trouble for me more than a few times. We're far from even." Julis turned away to sulk.

Although she had improved in recent days, her basic treatment of relationships still revolved around who owed what to whom. And in her view, Eishirou was still deep in the red.

Ayato suppressed an urge to smile at her stubbornness and turned to the other girl instead. "So—you wanted to ask me something, Flora?"

"Oh, yes! Just a second, please…!" Flora dug into her clutch to produce a cute notebook. The notebook went well with the maid uniform she was wearing again. "Here it is! Hmm, let's see…"

Flora flipped through the pages—but suddenly stopped.

"Hmm?" Wondering at the pause, Ayato then noticed her gaze had drifted to the next table.

"Here's your house special fruit parfait." An impeccably uniformed waiter was serving an enormous dessert.

The variety of fruits made for a colorful treat particularly appealing to girls. The guests at the table, who looked like Queenvale students, squealed in delight.

"What, you want one of those, too?" Julis asked with good-natured exasperation.

“…Uh-huh.” Flora nodded bashfully.

“It’s fine with me.”

“Yay! Thank you!”

Julis called the waiter over and ordered.

When the parfait arrived, she watched Flora and her sparkling eyes with a gentle smile.

Then she noticed Ayato, and the smile turned to a piercing glare.

“Why are you staring at me?”

“Oh, um—” Ayato stammered for a moment, but then he realized he had no reason to be embarrassed and told her honestly. “I just didn’t know you have a soft spot for kids.”

“Does it surprise you?”

“A little bit.”

Ayato knew how tough Julis could be on herself and others, so this side of her was strange to him.

“Well, I can’t help it,” she told him. “These children don’t get much pampering. The nuns can’t afford it, and by Flora’s age, they’re already taking care of children younger than themselves. I’m one of the few people who can, so I’m determined to spoil them silly. They’re all like little sisters to me.”

Julis gently caressed Flora’s head.

A doting sister… I guess Haruka spoiled me, too.

Remembering his own sister, Ayato felt his heart twinge.

He was strangely emotional these days. The Urzaiz sisters had a similar effect on him.

“Besides, an orphanage won’t have nice desserts like this,” Julis continued. “It’s a rare treat for her.”

“Oh, but the sisters always say the money you’re sending us really helps!” Flora interrupted with whipped cream all over her face.

“Wow, you send money home?” Ayato asked.

“It—it’s nothing, really. It’s not like I have anything else to spend the Page One stipend on.”

Page One students received not only free tuition but a fixed monthly sum from the school. This detail had surprised Ayato, and the amount was more than a student would need. It was no wonder the competition for rank was so fierce.



“Your Highness, Your Highness!” Flora tugged at Julis’s sleeve.

“What is it?”

“Try it!”

As Flora held out the spoon, Julis smiled with resignation and opened her mouth.

“Hee-hee-hee!” Flora giggled contentedly and spoon-fed the princess.

“Hmm… Yeah, this is good.”

“Uh-huh! It’s so good it makes your toes curl!”

The whole exchange seemed completely natural. They probably shared things this way all the time.

Besides, the parfait was much too large for Flora to finish by herself. Splitting it seemed just right.

As Ayato thought, Flora suddenly turned to him. “Oh! You should have some, too, Master Amagiri!”

“Wha— Huh?!”

“Really? I can have some, too?”

“Of course! Her Highness and the sisters always say that good food is better when you share it! Right, Your Highness?” Flora gushed innocently.

Julis, for some reason, lowered her bright red face. “Well, yes, that’s true, but…but I just used that spoon, and…,” she mumbled.

But Flora strained to lean across the table and held out the spoon to Ayato. “Here you go! Open up, Master Amagiri!”

Smiling awkwardly as Julis had moments ago, Ayato opened his mouth and found it filled with a soft, sweet substance. “…Mm, you were right. This is good.”

“Uh-huh!”

The perfect balance of dense cream and tart fruit created a harmonious combo that Ayato could easily finish by himself. Both the entrees and the

desserts were of exceptional quality, and he could see why the place was so popular.

“Thanks, Flora,” he said.

“Hee-hee!” Flora giggled happily. Meanwhile, Julis regarded him with an inscrutable expression on her crimson face.

“Um…Julis, is something the matter?”

“N-no! It’s nothing! Anyway, Flora, didn’t you have something to ask him?! Get it over with!”

“Okay.”

Flora started flipping through her notebook again with the spoon still in her mouth.

Perhaps because she worked at the palace, she had better manners than most girls her age. Still, the adorable impishness she couldn’t entirely hide was probably the real Flora.

“At last, the topic at hand.” Julis sighed tiredly and reached for her coffee.

“Umm, first was— Oh, here it is!” Flora turned to Ayato again and read from her notebook, stumbling a little. “Now, my first question. Um, ‘How far has your relationship with Her Highness progressed?’”

“Pfft?!” Julis promptly choked on her coffee. “Wha— Wh-wh-wh-wh-*what* kind of question is that?!”

Without knowing she had leaped to her feet and shouted, she lowered herself back down under the stares from other patrons. Then she leaned toward Flora and whispered, “You didn’t come up with that question, did you?”

“No. His Majesty gave me a list of things to ask ‘the man who might one day become his younger brother.’”

“Ooh, that brother of mine…!” Fury blazed in Julis’s eyes. “Flora, let me see that. What other questions do you have there?”

“Oh, I can’t! His Majesty said to keep this a secret because you’d get mad…!”

As Julis snatched the notebook from her, Flora flailed and twisted in her seat

to retrieve it.

What kind of person is *her brother…?* Ayato wondered.

“It’s a secret, is it?! You’ve already given it away!”

“Oh, no! You’re right!” Finally realizing this, Flora gasped and covered her mouth.

“I’m confiscating this,” Julis said.

“B-but you can’t! His Majesty gave me this task! Please let me do it!”

“Request denied.”

While Julis and Flora butted heads, another girl shyly approached their table. “Um, excuse me. Sorry to interrupt. May I have a moment?”

“Oh, sorry. We’ll keep it down…”

Ayato assumed that a waitress was warning them to be quiet, but then he realized this was not the case—the girl was clearly a student.

“Um, you’re Ayato Amagiri, is that right?”

“Yes…”

“I’m sorry to trouble you, but would you please come with me?”

Surprised, Julis and Flora stopped arguing as Ayato sat confused at the sudden request.

“Oh, p-pardon me. I’m Korona Kashimaru, the secretary to the student council president,” the girl in the Le Wolfe uniform said, bowing to them. “The president is waiting for you.”

❄

“The student council president—?” Julis’s expression tensed in an instant, and her eyes darkened with suspicion. “What does the Tyrant want with my partner?”

“Eep…” Korona backed away from Julis and her demand, apparently ready to burst into tears.

“Hold on, Julis,” Ayato interjected. “I asked to see him.”

“What? What’s going on?”

“Well…” Ayato quickly explained how he had asked Irene to arrange a meeting between himself and Dirk Eberwein. “…I didn’t think I’d get to see him the very next day, though.”

“But…are you sure? The Tyrant is the man who ordered Irene Urzaiz to knock you out of the tournament. It’s not really safe to contact him…”

“I know. I understand the risks.”

“Mm.” Julis mulled this over, then turned a sharp gaze on Korona. “Fine. In that case, I’ll go, too.”

“Huh? B-but the president asked for Mr. Amagiri…”

“Is there a problem?” Julis asked, her tone verging on murderous.

“Eeeep!” Korona yelped, backing up even farther.

Ayato remembered that in the business with Irene, Julis had been much more upset than the actual victim of the scheme.

Korona’s mobile device activated suddenly with a darkened air-window. *“Doesn’t matter. Bring her, too, Korona. Might as well get a glimpse of the famous* Glühen Rose*.”*

The voice was deep, intense, and knifelike. Ayato gathered that the speaker was Dirk himself—and he had been listening to their conversation all along.

“Y-yes, sir. Will do, sir.” Korona hastily bowed toward the air-window, then nervously addressed Ayato and Julis. “I—I’ll show you the way. Please follow me…”

If Korona’s frozen expression was any indication, Julis really must have scared her. She didn’t look at all like a Le Wolfe student. It was almost funny.

“Sorry, Flora, but something came up, as you can see,” Julis said. “Can you make it back to the hotel on your own?”

“Uh-huh! I’ll be fine!” Spoon still in hand, Flora nodded energetically.

“I’m sorry, Flora,” Ayato added. “Let’s meet up again later.”

He waved lightly to Flora and followed Korona out of the restaurant.

Korona walked briskly ahead, periodically glancing back at Ayato and Julis. Before long, they had passed through the commercial area and into a main street in the residential district.

At a corner sat a large black car. It looked like a limousine, with big tinted windows so that no one could see inside.

“In here, please.”

When Korona opened the door, it was more spacious and comfortable than Ayato had expected. Where a standard car would simply have seats, this one was outfitted with leather sofas and a massive table, almost like a small living room.

A young man with dull red hair sat farthest from the door. He was short and stout, and impatience simmered dark and deep behind his glare.

“Get in.”

At Dirk Eberwein’s command, Ayato and Julis exchanged glances, then nodded and stepped in.

Of course, they took every precaution. Ayato tried to sense the presence of others in the car, but there did not seem to be anyone besides the driver and Dirk.

As they sat across the table from him, the car started and Dirk spoke.

“So you’re the Gathering Clouds, Murakumo… Hmph. Not all there, are you? It says something about Seidoukan that a guy like you is ranked first.”

“And yet *someone* handed down an order to crush him. Who do you suppose that was, Tyrant?” Julis’s reply held a razor-sharp edge.

Dirk shrugged with a theatrical lack of concern. “No idea what you’re talking about.”

“You’ve got some nerve! Irene Urzaiz said so herself! You’re the one who—”

“Julis, it’s no use.” As she rose out of her seat, Ayato restrained her with one hand. “Irene told us that, but we don’t have any proof.”

“But—!”

“Besides, if we don’t leave it alone, she’s the one who’ll get in trouble.”

“—!”

Julis bit her lip in anger and fell back onto the sofa.

Korona, anxiously shrinking in on herself, sighed with relief.

“Huh. So you do have a brain in that skull.” Dirk’s large eyes narrowed slightly.

“I’m not here to ask you about that.”

“Right. But before we get to that, let me tell you one thing.” Slouched in his seat, Dirk jabbed a finger at Ayato. “I’m under no obligation to answer your questions. You keep that in mind.”

“Then…why did you come here?” Ayato asked.

“Good question. You could call it a whim.”



“The esteemed—and probably very busy—student council president came all this way on a whim? I don’t buy it.”

“…”

Ayato let out a deep breath and looked him straight in the eye. “We both have something to offer each other. Isn’t that right?”

“…Exactly. If you want something, you have to offer something. That’s the only way deals work.” Dirk deliberately uncrossed and re-crossed his short legs. “All right, you’ve passed the first test. What do you want to ask me?”

“I want you to tell me everything you know about my sister—Haruka Amagiri.” Ayato’s gaze remained steady.

“Haruka Amagiri, huh…? Unfortunately for you, I don’t actually know a whole lot. I just saw her once, is all.”

“Where?”

“The Eclipse” was Dirk’s blunt reply.

Julis reacted with shock. “What?!”

“You know about it, Julis?” Ayato said. Whatever Dirk had just mentioned, he’d never heard of it.

Julis nodded reluctantly. “Well, a little. I’ve only heard rumors. Some lowlifes who weren’t satisfied with the Festa made up their own contest for more exciting battles—no rules, and completely illegal.”

“No rules…” A shiver ran down Ayato’s spine.

“You couldn’t forfeit,” Julis went on. “Matches ended when one of the fighters lost consciousness—or their life. It was an underground event, so obviously the scale was much smaller than the Festa. Still, some of its biggest fans were rich fat cats, so it did well as a business. But it—”

“But the Eclipse was abolished long ago,” Dirk finished. “The leader of Stjarnagarm was dead set on taking it down. When I saw Haruka Amagiri, she was one of the contestants. At the time, I was in the audience.”

“My sister…fought in it?” Ayato said.

“Yeah. I remember it clearly because she was using that damn Ser Veresta. Not too many would bring an Orga Lux to the Eclipse.”

“So…how did it go?”

Dirk answered him blandly. “She lost.”

The news hit Ayato like a blow to the head.

The world tilted and warped. The earth seemed to crumble away, and emptiness crept up to consume him.

He’d never known a feeling like this. Like being swallowed by a bottomless pit.

“Hey, Ayato. Are you all right?”

Julis was lightly shaking his shoulder. He came to with a tiny gasp.

“Well, it didn’t look like she died,” Dirk said. “I don’t know what happened to her after that, though. That was the only time I saw Haruka Amagiri.”

“Okay…”

Uttering the brief reply took all Ayato’s effort.

“Now, it’s my turn to ask you a question.” Dirk did not show the least concern for the other boy’s turmoil. “What’s your relationship to Madiath Mesa?”

“Huh…?” For a moment, Ayato stared blankly, uncertain what he had just been asked. “Madiath Mesa…? The chairman of the Festa Executive Committee? Him?”

They had no relationship. Ayato had never spoken to the man or even met him.

But he did remember that their eyes had met momentarily at the opening ceremony…

“Guess you’re not just playing dumb,” Dirk snorted. “That’s all I needed to know.”

He snapped his fingers and the car slowed gently to a halt. After a pause, the door opened.

“Our chat’s over. Get out of my face.”

“Hold on,” Julis said, glaring balefully at Dirk. “Something’s been bothering me. How did you know where we were?”

“Hmm?” Dirk replied irritably.

“We only decided to go to that café a few hours ago. If we’d made a reservation, that would be one thing, but how did you find out in such a short time—”

“Idiot,” Dirk cut her off. “I’ve got no obligation to answer that.”

“Nngh…!” Julis nearly snapped at him, then realized that any further conversation with someone of Dirk’s disposition was a waste of time, and simply stepped out of the car. Ayato followed her.

The car had stopped at a quay near Seidoukan Academy. It was less than ten minutes by foot to the school.

“…”

But Ayato didn’t move. He stared at the wide blue sky beyond the lake as if something had sucked out his soul.

After they left, the car sped off, as unfriendly as its primary passenger.

“Ayato…are you really all right?” Julis asked gently.

“Yeah. I’m fine.” He clenched his fists.

*

“Haaah…”

As the car started again, Korona let out a deep sigh of relief.

“Mr. Amagiri seemed nice, but Miss Riessfeld was scary,” she remarked.

Dirk glowered at Korona and grunted disinterestedly. “You’re a weak judge of character as usual. That Glühen Rose is easy to read, but guys like him are the worst type to face in a fight.”

“Oh…is that right?”

“Never mind. This was worth the trip.”

“Huh? But…”

To Korona, it looked like Dirk had been the one giving up all the information. Ayato had answered his question, but the reply had been worthless to them. The exchange had seemed far from balanced.

“There’re lots of ways to use information,” Dirk said. “In some situations, it pays to *feed it to someone*.”

“I see…,” Korona murmured, even though she didn’t really.

“Anyway, if the information upsets him, that’s good enough for me,” Dirk spat, and he slouched into the sofa.

“Oh, I forgot to report this earlier,” Korona said, “but when I went to pick up Mr. Amagiri and Miss Riessfeld, there was an adorable little girl with them. Oooh, she was just like a doll… I wonder who that was?”

“What did you say?” Dirk’s eyebrow twitched.

“She wasn’t in the files you gave me…but she was little, and she had no school crest, so she couldn’t have been an Asterisk student— Oh, right! She was wearing a maid outfit. A maid, can you imagine?! It really did suit her, though. She was *so* cute,” Korona gushed with a goofy smile.

“Tell me everything about her.”

“Huh? …Are you into maids, sir?” Korona asked blankly.

Dirk clicked his tongue, viciously annoyed. He didn’t need to voice the warning.

“Oh, um, sorry, I’m sorry! Just kidding! A joke!” Korona waved her hands in denial, then filled him in on the situation when she’d picked up Ayato and Julis.

Dirk listened, deep in thought. “Hmph. I see…,” he finally muttered.

Something dark and dangerous glittered in his eyes. Korona felt a nasty chill slide up her spine.

CHAPTER 5

HIS SISTER AND HIS OLD FRIEND

“So, as we can see from their previous matches, the Li twins’ greatest strength is the variety of their Seisenjutsu techniques. In particular, they’re true masters of illusion. Just as his alias ‘Phantom Builder’ suggests, the brother Shenyun is adept at making things that aren’t there appear real. Likewise, the sister Shenhua—the Phantom Vanisher—makes things that *are* there disappear.”

“Okay…”

Julis and Ayato were in one of the private training rooms at Seidoukan Academy.

Upon returning to campus, they had begun their strategy meeting for tomorrow’s match as originally planned. Julis had opened several pictures of the Li twins’ matches in the Phoenix so far.

“And, as one might expect from twins, their teamwork is exceptional. They execute perfect combination attacks, hardly exchanging any words or even eye contact. They really are a dangerous pair. On top of all that, if we take Song and Luo at their word, we have to assume that they’re formidable strategists—hey, Ayato? Are you paying attention?”

“Huh?” Ayato’s head snapped up. “Oh, sure. Sorry.”

Julis regarded him with some suspicion and continued.

“In terms of martial arts only, Song and Luo are probably stronger. But overall, these two are unquestionably the better team. The textbook strategy of eliminating one first would be the most effective, but their Seisenjutsu is especially powerful in defense. So to deal with that…”

“…”

Julis paused there and waited for Ayato.

But while he wore a perfectly earnest expression, his eyes were focused on neither the air-windows nor Julis.

His thoughts were clearly somewhere else.

“Haaah…” Observing him intently, Julis let out a grand sigh. “You’re worried about your sister, aren’t you?”

He flinched. “That’s not…”

His attempted denial trailed off.

“I could say I know how you feel, but I won’t. I don’t know what kind of person your sister is, or what your relationship with her was like. But I think I understand how much you care for her.”

“Julis…”

“But isn’t that just another reason to give your all to win the Phoenix?”

Puzzled, Ayato frowned. “Do you mean…that I should win, then use my wish to find my sister?”

“That’s right. But to do that, we need to win the tournament, and that’s no easy task. You don’t think you have enough clues to find her on your own, do you?”

Indeed, there was no record of Haruka in the Seidoukan Academy databases, and their newest clue was nothing more than an eyewitness account of a now defunct underground event.

“You said earlier that you didn’t want to look for her if she didn’t want to be found. Do you still feel the same way?”

“…”

Instead of answering, Ayato only bowed his head.

Julis held in another sigh. She didn’t want to say this, but she had to.

“Ayato. You can let me have it if I’m wrong—but are you afraid?”

“Afraid?” he said dubiously.

She silently watched him for a moment, then slowly went on. “Your sister placed that seal on you and disappeared without a word. I know you want to see her again. But that would also mean learning why she did what she did. And you care about her so much, maybe you’re afraid to find out.”

“…!” Ayato looked up with a gasp.

“You know,” Julis said softly, “I think you’re scared of the idea that she might have abandoned you.”

He winced. That hadn’t occurred to him before.

“Maybe you’re right…,” he murmured, trying to process that possibility. “Yeah, now that you mention it, maybe I really am afraid.”

Julis nodded. “That’s understandable. It hurts when someone dear to you tosses you away. You shrink back from the very prospect. It’s only natural.”

Even as she spoke, she felt a pang shoot through her heart.

For an instant, an image flashed through her mind—a friend with whom she’d parted ways.

That dear friend who had changed so completely…

Julis gave her head a tiny shake, suppressing the swell of emotion inside her.

“At the same time, if you have any intention of finding out the truth, this would be your chance to do it,” she told Ayato. “You should give it some thought.”

“Yeah… Thanks.” He nodded, though he still sounded listless.

“All right, then. I think that’s enough for today.”

“Huh? But what about our strategy…?”

“In the state you’re in now, I doubt we’ll come up with anything useful, no matter how much we discuss it,” Julis said. “It’s a waste of time.”

“Um…sorry.”

He seems aware of it himself, at least. She smiled awkwardly at his candid apology. “We’ll be cutting it close again, but let’s make time to talk before the match tomorrow. We’ll pick up where we left off then.”

“Got it.”

She watched Ayato as he nodded weakly and left the training room. Then, after a bit of hesitation, she reached for her mobile.

It was frustrating to admit, but she had done all she could.

She had to ask for the help of someone else.

She entered the number, and in a few moments, an air-window popped up with a familiar face.

“It’s me,” Julis said. “Sorry to call you out of the blue, but I have a little favor to ask.”

*

When Ayato returned to his room, there was no sign of Eishirou.

He had said he still had work left over, so maybe he was taking care of that. Or he could be out on the town…

Wherever Eishirou was, solitude suited Ayato just fine right now. Welcoming his roommate’s absence, he turned off his mobile and decided to lie down on the bed.

He looked at the high, distant summer sky nearing the end of the day outside the window. He stared absentmindedly for a while, then exhaled deeply, as if to expel the dregs of stale breath from his body.

“Am I scared…?”

Julis is probably right, he thought.

He hadn’t even noticed the uncertainty lurking in his heart.

Of course he had faith in his sister. She was strong, and sincere, and above all filled with love and kindness. She would not abandon him, no matter what. He believed that firmly and deeply.

Still…

At the same time, there were doubts in him that he couldn’t fully erase.

Why had she placed this seal on him?

Why did she disappear?

Why didn't she *tell* him anything?

By focusing on his trust in his sister, Ayato had tried not to dwell on those misgivings.

Even if he had, he would have found no answer. Worrying accomplished nothing, he'd told himself.

Looking back, he didn't think taking that attitude was a mistake. And yet, in a sense, maybe it really was only a way to run from the truth…

In the midst of his reverie, Ayato suddenly noticed a peculiar presence outside his window. "Hmm…?"

The visitor didn't feel hostile, but they were searching for something…

"…"

Cautiously, Ayato quietly opened the window—and realized he had felt a similar presence before.

When? Was it that time he'd walked Kirin back to her dorm…?

"*Boo*," the intruder said, hanging upside down from above the window.

"Gah!" Ayato yelped in surprise. He had guessed who it was the moment before she appeared, and still her bizarre greeting startled him. "Saya, didn't I tell you not to scare me like that?"

"But your mobile was off." Saya performed a neat flip into the room. This girl was like a cat.

"Oh, I just wanted to think alone for a bit—wait a sec, Saya! This is the boys' dorm!"

"Yep. I know." She tilted her head as if to ask, *So what?*

The opposite sex was prohibited from entering the boys' dormitory, and vice versa.

It was one thing to arrange a visit according to school protocol and meet in the lounge as Kirin had. Trespassing, however, was strictly punished for both the girls' and boys' dormitories. Just as the girls' buildings had a dormitory

watch, a group of boys also patrolled the buildings and maintained order.

There was, however, one difference. For girls' dorms the intruders were punished, but for the boys' dorms it was the person hosting the illicit visit—in other words, the boy who occupied the room. Generally, the excuses from the boys went unheard.

"…Okay, Ayato. Sit."

As Ayato wondered whether Saya knew what would happen if he was caught with a girl in his room, she plopped down on his bed and patted the space next to her.

Resigned, Ayato sighed and did as he was told. "So, why are you here?"

It had to be something important to bring Saya all the way to the boys' dormitory.

And apparently, she was finally familiar enough with the campus to walk around without getting lost.

"…"

But she did not respond to his question, and simply looked him in the eye.

"Wh-what's the matter?"

"…I should be asking you that." Without breaking her gaze, Saya spoke in her usual monotone, but he detected a hint of reproach.

"Huh?"

"…Ayato, what are you so worked up about?"

Startled, he did a double take. "Oh. Julis must have said something, huh?"

Saya nodded. "I got a call a little while ago. Riessfeld is really worried about you. She wouldn't ask me to talk to you otherwise."

"Julis asked you to…?"

That was a little surprising.

Ayato knew his partner was not one to ask favors of other people lightly—especially not of Saya. He must really be making her worry.

Aware of this, Saya bowed her head slightly. “Riessfeld’s a better person than I gave her credit for. I misunderstood her.” Emotion colored her voice, a rarity for her. Then she met his eyes again. “But never mind that… Ayato, do you really think Haru abandoned you?”

“I…” Ayato found himself unable to answer the direct question. He tried to string together a rebuttal, but it wouldn’t leave his mouth.

Could she have…? What if she did…? The pessimistic whispers stubbornly clung to the corners of his mind.

As she watched him, Saya knit her brows together as if his waffling offended her, and she slowly lifted her hands.

Then—

“Dummy!”

With a loud *smack!* she slapped Ayato on both cheeks like she was catching a bug.

Ayato’s eyes went round at the sudden impact. His face didn’t hurt, but it did feel hot between her hands.

“I’m absolutely sure of it,” Saya told him sternly. “Haru would never abandon you, ever.”

“Saya…”

Maybe her assertion was nothing more than an unfounded, careless attempt to comfort him. Saya knew Haruka well, but Ayato was the only one to see her the day she disappeared.

And yet, just hearing someone say it so confidently lifted Ayato’s spirits.

“Besides,” Saya continued, “if Haruka really did lose—I don’t believe it, but if it’s true—maybe it’s not that she didn’t contact you, but that she couldn’t.”

“!”

“So, this is no time to lose yourself in doubt,” Saya gently admonished him.

“Yes. You’re right, Saya.” Ayato nodded firmly and returned his friend’s earnest gaze.

If he did nothing because he was afraid of the truth, he would learn nothing. He would have only regrets.

So he had to do what he could.

“…Good. There’s my Ayato,” Saya said, smiling warmly as she caressed his cheeks. A breeze from the window gently ruffled her blue hair.

It was the first time he’d seen a look like that on Saya’s face. Ayato’s heart responded with a particularly loud thump.

For the briefest moment, an intense sensation struck him, something he’d never felt with her before.

“…Ayato?”

“Oh, um, nothing! I’m fine!” Ayato didn’t even understand what was happening. He waved both his hands and backed away from her.

Saya regarded him quizzically, then suddenly clapped her hands together.



“Oh, speaking of Haru—do you remember when the two of us challenged her to a match?”

“Of course. How could I forget?”

It had come back to Ayato in a dream only the day before…

*

“Sorry! Were you waiting long?” Haruka, still in her school uniform, apologized to Ayato and Saya when she saw them ready to go.

“No, it’s fine, sis,” Ayato replied.

“…’s not a problem,” Saya said.

They were in the usual clearing. Dusk would soon fall.

Ayato gripped his well-used wooden sword, and Saya had already activated two Lux pistols.

“Anyway, you’re okay fighting us two on one? If we can land a clean hit on you—”

“Mm-hmm, I know. You want to come on the upcoming training expedition, right? I’ll put in a word for you with Dad—but only if you beat me.” Haruka drew her own wooden sword and gave it a few practice swings.

She was usually an easygoing girl, but she changed the moment a weapon was in her hand. The tension gathering in the air around her made it hard to breathe.

Ayato and Saya both swallowed anxiously and took a step backward, overcome by Haruka’s presence.

“Well, then. You two seem to be ready,” Haruka said. “Shall we begin?”

Ayato and Saya silently exchanged glances and nodded. They had already gone over the basic plan.

After the two sides bowed to each another, Saya and Ayato split up and slowly repositioned themselves until they were on opposite sides of Haruka.

Haruka held her sword ready, out to the side, and did not move. Her eyes warily followed her two opponents, but she did nothing else.

Ayato had faced Haruka many times outside the dojo, but she almost never made the first move. Her style was to let Ayato attack as much as he wanted, gauge how strong he had become, and then swiftly end the match with a counterstrike.

He had never once landed a clean hit on Haruka.

But this time, it's two against one. It'll be different, I know it…!

Ayato told himself that and steadied his breathing.

Haruka's stance gave them no opening to attack. But he wasn't about to just stand still.

"Hyaaah!" With a piercing shout, Ayato brought his sword down from a high stance. At the same time, Saya fired a volley at Haruka from the opposite side.

It was a perfectly timed pincer attack, but Haruka evaded Saya's bullets of light with barely any movement at all and effortlessly deflected Ayato's blow.

Undeterred, Ayato realigned his sword for a second thrust, then a third.

"Hmm. Your technique is much better," Haruka said casually. "You've been working hard on your fundamentals."

"Because—that's—all—I'm—allowed—to—do!" Ayato yelled between attacks.

Under his rapid-fire assault, Haruka easily defended and calmly delivered a critique. She fought with confidence and perfect composure. Although Saya placed her shots to complement Ayato's attacks, Haruka easily dodged them.

But so far, things were going as expected. Ayato had not believed he would land a blow on Haruka, even with supporting fire.

"Saya!"

"…On it."

As soon as Ayato gave the signal, Saya—who had been fighting from a distance—swiftly closed in.

"Oh?"

Although Saya was proficient in close-range combat, she was far from a match

for Haruka. Attacking in tandem with Ayato, however, was a different story. Plus, gunfire from close range was naturally harder to dodge.

The younger pair reversed roles so Ayato would provide cover for Saya as he waited for the gunfire to create an opening in Haruka's defense. That was their plan.

"Oh—now, this isn't bad…!"

Haruka sounded impressed as she defended against the fierce offensive. Gradually, Ayato and Saya gained the advantage. Their intricate teamwork was improvised rather than planned, but their perfect synchronization gave Haruka no chance to regain her ground.

"I'm getting jealous…," Haruka murmured.

And with that, her fighting completely transformed.

Before, her sword had only moved to deflect, but now it attacked with finely honed skill. She had decided that she could not stay on the defensive.

Here comes the real fight! Ayato focused and readied himself for Haruka's attacks.

Now that she had turned her attention to offense, her movements were extraordinarily sharp. One misstep and the match would be over instantly. It also presented Ayato and Saya with an opportunity—if Haruka was on offense, she would leave more openings in her defense.

If we can just hold on here…!

Just as determination welled in him anew, a lightning-fast strike deflected his sword upward and nearly knocked it from his grasp.

"Nngh!"

He winced, barely managing to keep hold of it, and his hands tingled from the blow.

Haruka's sword continued into an arc through the air that struck the pistol from Saya's right hand.

"Ayato—!"

Saya's eyes met his.

Understanding her instantly, Ayato tightened his grip.

In the next moment, a round from the gun remaining in her left hand—not at Haruka, but at the ground beneath her.

"Huh?!"

Ayato heard Haruka's surprised cry from behind the rising cloud of dust. Seizing his chance, he shouted and swept his sword once horizontally. "Yaaah!"

The timing of their combination attack could not have been better.

But Ayato's strike, dealt with the assurance of victory, stopped short with a firm and heavy impact.

"?!"

"Wow—you scared me a bit."

As the dust cleared, he could see Haruka's self-deprecating smile.

Her wooden blade had blocked him in the nick of time.

"Ugh…!"

Even as their hearts sank, Ayato and Saya quickly distanced themselves from Haruka to regroup.

Even that didn't work…?! Ayato ground his teeth in frustration. But his sister was clearly impressed.

"Whew… That was amazing, both of you. To be honest, I didn't think you'd be this good."

Despite himself, Ayato was glad to hear his sister's praise—but her next words erased that from his mind.

"I guess this means I'd be insulting you if I didn't fight at full strength."

"Your…full strength?"

Ayato had never even seen Haruka fight at full strength, let alone faced her himself.

Haruka lowered her sword and took a few deep breaths. She closed her eyes

briefly, then opened them again.

The air, already taut, was nearly palpable. Ayato felt like he was balanced on the edge of a razor. At the same time, Haruka's prana was surprisingly quiet and clear.

But…that was all.

Her weapon dangled at her side, leaving her practically defenseless. She was open to any attack at all.

"Saya…" Ayato glanced at her, and she gave a small nod in reply.

It could be a trap, but there was nothing to be gained by thinking and waiting. They had to make the first move.



They placed her between them as they had in the beginning, and slowly closed in.

There would be no tricks. They would decide the match in a single clash.

“Haah!” In front of Haruka, Ayato brought his sword down at an angle.

The same instant, Saya fired at close range behind Haruka.

Just then—

Haruka’s wooden weapon moved slowly, almost drifting.

She neither blocked nor evaded, but invited it with a step back.

As she did so, she twisted, and the attack passed her without slowing. The point of his sword met the muzzle of Saya’s pistol, about to fire.

“What—?!”

“…Huh?”

The cries of surprise came just as Saya’s pistol exploded.

Even though it was a Lux for self-defense with low output, the blast from the jam was fairly powerful.

“Augh!” Ayato sailed backward to land on his behind, and the tip of Haruka’s sword stopped an inch from his eyes.

“…”

He stared in shock for several moments, then he pulled himself together enough to ask the question on his mind. “What was that…?”

“One of the master techniques of the Amagiri Shinmei Style—the *Reverse Rakshasa*,” Haruka replied with a bright smile. “It draws in attacks from multiple enemies so that they eliminate each other.”

“A master technique…”

Ayato had only learned up to the middle techniques. The master techniques were one level higher.

“I heard you can only use master techniques if you push your senses to their limits,” Ayato remarked.

“Well…something like that. I’m not really supposed to say,” Haruka said. She put away her sword and held out her hand to her brother. “Your teamwork was amazing; I mean it. But my senses were broader than yours.”

Once Ayato was on his feet, Haruka helped Saya up as well.

“…Broader?”

Seeing that Saya was confused, Haruka gave it a little thought and tried again. “For instance…in a fight, you pay attention to your opponent’s breathing, expressions, and little movements, right?”

“…Right.” Saya nodded.

“The more information like that you have, the better you can respond to whatever your opponent does. Expanding your attention beyond your opponent to the surrounding space—that’s the level of the master techniques. In the Amagiri Shinmei Style, we call that state *shiki*—‘consciousness.’”

For Ayato and Saya, this explanation was at the same time clear and enigmatic.

One thing was certain—they had lost. In their disappointment, they understood that perfectly.

“This applies to more than fighting, though. When our focus narrows, we tend to get stuck. And when that happens, I think it helps to look at all sorts of things in different ways… But maybe you two are still a little young for all that.”

Haruka smiled gently and patted the children on their heads.

*

“We never did beat Haruka,” Saya said, slumping her shoulders.

“She really was strong…even though she was always so laid back,” Ayato replied.

“Well, you’re no different, Ayato,” Saya muttered. “What about after I moved away?”

“More of the same. I couldn’t beat her, not even once.” Ayato sighed helplessly with upturned palms.

Only a year after Saya moved away, his sister had vanished. In that one year, he thought he'd improved a lot—but he'd still been no match for her.

"…I see," Saya said curtly, then hopped off the bed. She walked to the window and turned around. "All the more reason to find her and challenge her to a rematch. Me and you."

Her challenge surprised him a bit—and then he smiled. "Yeah, we have to. Although we probably still can't beat her."

"…Then we'll work together. Like we did back then. So, Ayato…"

"Yeah?"

"Don't try to handle your troubles on your own. I'm not the only one who will help you out, you know… Though I hate to admit it," Saya added, pouting for some reason. With that, she hopped out the window and vanished.

Ayato saw her off with a resigned smile and quietly closed the window.

Sunset had just begun painting the sky red.

CHAPTER 6

THE SECOND KEY

“You’re looking a little better,” Julis said upon seeing Ayato enter the prep room.

It was the day of the quarterfinals.

“Thanks to you,” he replied.

“So you’ve made up your mind?” She observed him carefully.

Ayato nodded deliberately. “Yes, I have. I’m going to find my sister. And the fastest way to do that is to get the integrated enterprise foundation to help.”

“I see.” Julis smiled, glad to hear his resolve, but it quickly disappeared as she opened an air-window. “Then we have to start by winning today.”

The window displayed a boy and a girl who looked remarkably alike—the Li twins, their opponents in just a few hours.

“I found two patterns from their past matches,” Julis explained. “The first is that these twins exclusively attack their enemy’s weak points—they adopt whatever tactics will frustrate their opponents the most. Of course, that’s generally a good strategy… But I think strategy is secondary for them.”

“Secondary? You mean there’s something else more important that they do?” Ayato asked.

“Probably. From what I’ve seen, they care about toying with their opponents more than fighting.”

“Toying with them…”

Ayato had noticed this as well. The twins seemed to go out of their way to inflict suffering.

“Even victory is probably low on their priority list,” Julis went on. “Essentially, they’re sadists drunk on power.”

“Not the kind of people I’d want to hang out with.”

“I completely agree. And the other pattern: These two never take risks. They give themselves an unbeatable advantage and go on the offensive only after they’ve established their own safety. A charitable way of putting it would be that they’re careful. All I can see, though, is a pair of despicable cowards afraid of putting themselves in harm’s way.”

He could hear the disgust in her voice. To someone of her character and principles, the twins must be entirely anathema.

“Still, the fact that they’re skilled fighters is undeniable,” she said. “On top of that, they’re terribly proficient strategists. Their real strength isn’t their Seisenjutsu, but rather their teamwork and ability to formulate effective plans.”

“Song and Luo said something like that,” Ayato recalled.

“Yes, and I think they were right. If it comes to a battle of wits, I don’t stand a chance against the twins,” Julis admitted candidly.

Her strategies sometimes caught her opponents off guard, but she would never maliciously entrap anyone. That was simply a natural consequence of her personality, so she couldn’t help that the twins surpassed her there.

“But for this match, we do have one advantage,” Julis said with a conspiratorial smile.

“An advantage?”

“Yes. If the twins’ M.O. is to go after their opponents’ weak points, nothing could be more predictable.”

“Oh!” Ayato clapped in realization. “My seal.”

“Right. To be precise, they’ll try to take advantage of the time limit. They couldn’t hope for a better weakness. So, we know what approach they’ll take.”

“Stalling.”

Julis nodded. “We can be sure of that. So now the question is, what do we do

about it? Ideally, we attack fast and bring them down. If we can take one of them down, that would all but decide the match." She shrugged at this. "But that's easier said than done. And it's exactly what the twins will plan for. They'll be ready for it."

"Probably," Ayato said.

Prepping for battle involved predicting the other side's strategy as well. Against an opponent with a time limit, a fast offensive would be the first thing to expect. It was inconceivable that the twins wouldn't have a countermeasure.

"So, what we could do…" Julis lowered her voice to explain her plan.

"I see," Ayato said slowly.

"Not bad, is it? Although, to be honest, it was the only thing I could come up with."

"No, I couldn't do any better. Let's go with that."

Ayato played out the scenario in his head and liked the results. The only difficulty was the timing at the end, but then again, that was usually the case.

"Good, then we're agreed," Julis said, relieved. "So, let's hammer out the details."

*

"*This is the moment we've all been waiting for! It's time for the quarterfinal match here at the Sirius Dome! Out of the east gate, here come Ayato Amagiri and Julis-Alexia von Riessfeld of Seidoukan! And on the other side, from the west gate, we have Shenyun Li and Shenhua Li of Jie Long Seventh Institute!*"

"*It's Seidoukan against Jie Long, just like in the fifth round, huh.*"

"*Right you are! We should note that the matches in the other arenas are over—which means three of the four spots for the semifinals have been decided! Who will it be?! Which team will earn the last one?!*"

Amid deafening cheers and the echoing voices of the announcers—
with the volume nearly at maximum, to compete with the crowd—Ayato and Julis slowly took the stage.

"Everyone sounds pretty hyped," Ayato remarked.

“We’re almost to the finals of the Phoenix. The energy must be getting to the fans, too,” Julis said without much feeling. With her hand on her hip, she gave Ayato a sidelong stare. “Anyway, Sasamiya and Toudou advanced. We can’t afford to trip up here.”

Just as the announcer had mentioned, the other quarterfinal matches were over, with Saya and Kirin advancing easily to the semifinals. Ayato and Julis had watched the bouts in the prep room. All had gone as expected.

The contestants for the semifinals thus far were Saya and Kirin from Seidoukan Academy, a pair of knights from St. Gallardworth Academy—and the automatons from Allekant Académie, Ardy and Rimcy.

“I know,” Ayato replied, clutching the Ser Veresta’s activator. “I’m ready.”

That’s right. We can’t afford to trip up here!

“Good, I’m glad to hear it. But don’t put too much pressure on yourself.” Julis looked at him dubiously, then turned her gaze forward.

The twins from Jie Long approached.

“Nice to meet you, Glühen Rose, Murakumo. I’m Shenyun Li.”

“And I’m Shenhua Li. Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

The twins greeted them with thin smiles.

Ayato marveled at how alike they looked up close. The loose-fitting Jie Long uniforms hid the contours of their bodies, leaving almost nothing to distinguish them except for the buns in Shenhua’s hair.

“And what do you want?” Julis asked curtly, not bothering to hide her suspicion.

“Well, we thought we should apologize.”

“Apologize?”

“Yes, for the pathetic showing of our peers the other day—”

“—which was shameful for us, as pupils of the same master.”

Shenhua smoothly picked up the rest of Shenyun’s sentence without a moment’s pause.

“Peers—you mean, Song and Luo?” Julis asked.

“I didn’t think they were pathetic at all…,” Ayato said to the twins.

Shenyun shrugged dramatically. “Well, we can’t have you thinking that’s a standard performance from the pupils of the Ban’yuu Tenra.”

“So, we’ll show you a world those two could not—”

“—the depths of Seisenjutsu.”

The pair took turns continuing each other’s sentences, then erupted into contemptuous laughter.

“Is that right? We can’t wait.” With that, Julis looked away, signaling she had nothing more to say.

At that, the Jie Long team turned on their heels and returned to their side of the stage.

“Hmph. An obvious taunt,” Julis sneered openly after them. “They’re just as unpleasant as I imagined.”

“But seeing them in person, I know for sure we can’t let our guard down,” Ayato said.

Song and Luo had approached them before the match began, too, but their reason for doing so was the polar opposite.

For the twins, that conversation was part of their strategy.

“Whatever,” Julis said. “We’ll just do what we have to.”

“Right,” Ayato replied. “Okay, here goes…”

He heightened his prana. Strength bubbled up from the depths of his body, and the chains binding him strained and creaked.

“*By the sword within me, I break free of this prison of stars and unchain my power!*”

The rising pressure flung off his bonds in an eruption of prana.

“*Whoa, there it is! Amagiri’s fancy opening! —Or maybe it’s not really just for show, Ms. Tram?*”

"*We can't say for sure, because the team won't tell us, but the majority view seems to be that it's some kind of procedure to undo the constraints on his power, so. Judging from how they fought in Round Five, he seems to need some time before he can release that power again… Now, I think Amagiri's a top-rate fighter. But considering these limitations, maybe his team's victories were much more hard-won than they've let on.*"

"*I see, I see! Oh, and now it's time to start the battle! Which team will receive Victory's blessing?!*"

The commentator's analysis was really spot-on, Ayato reflected. Stifling a cynical chuckle, he activated the Ser Veresta.

He focused his breath and his mind.

"*Phoenix Quarterfinals, Match Four—Begin!*"

As soon as the announcement sounded, Ayato closed in on Shenhua and sliced diagonally at her with the Ser Veresta. The quick strike was impeccably timed. But, apparently expecting this, Shenhua sprang backward to evade it. "Nngh!"

"Ha-ha, so you are fast!" Shenhua laughed. "But not so fast that I can't dodge it when I know it's coming!"

Fighting Irene had been the same. Ayato's speed was not enough to grant him an insurmountable advantage.

"Burst into bloom—*Primrose!*" Julis promptly let her spell fly, but Shenyun beat her by an instant.

"*Jí jí rú lǜ lìng, chì!*" Shenyun folded his fingers into a complicated figure, and the air around him shimmered. The next instant, smoke billowed from all corners of the stage.

"A smokescreen?!" Julis exclaimed.

In the blink of an eye, the dark cloud engulfed the battlefield. Julis withdrew her Primrose fireballs. It would be practically impossible to hit her target under these conditions—and she might accidentally hit Ayato instead.

Ayato doubted he could land an attack, either, and stepped back. “Are you all right, Julis?”

“I’m fine. But they got us good… I wasn’t expecting this.” She clicked her tongue angrily.

Ayato focused on her presence and listened for Julis’s voice to locate her. He looked around carefully, but the smoke was too deep to see through.

Then he realized that something was off. Despite being so thick and deep, the smoke wasn’t smoky at all.

“Julis, *I don’t think this smoke is real*.”

With a gasp, she scanned the arena, too. “I see. So it’s an illusion…”

Shenyun was an expert at this—creating the appearance of things that weren’t there. This smoke was naturally a trick of his Seisenjutsu.

“I did hear that Shenyun Li’s illusions can make all sorts of things, but *smoke*… Well, it’s fine. This will clear soon,” Julis declared.

“Why do you say that?” Ayato wondered at her confidence.

“Attacking after obstructing the view from the outside is against the Stella Carta,” she replied, almost indifferently. “They’ve never done anything like this in the past.”

“I see. I guess if people can’t see the match, they can’t tell whether you’re breaking the rules.”

“Well, that’s part of it,” Julis said, “but the biggest reason is that this is a spectator event. The audience can’t be entertained if they can’t see what’s going on.”

It was a more inhumane reason than he’d thought.

Proving her point, the crowd started booing vehemently. When the jeering grew louder, the smoke suddenly cleared away.

“Spectators these days have no patience…”

“There’s no need to rush us. The real show is about to start.”

Shenyun and Shenhua had moved to the edge of the stage and spoke with

malevolent grins.

For them, the smoke had achieved the desired effect. They had shaved nearly a minute from Ayato's allotted time by hardly expending any energy.

"Ugh. They really are terrible people," Julis spat, offended, but her mind was already preparing for her next technique.

Ayato silently agreed with her, then repositioned the Ser Veresta and advanced toward the twins.

"Oh, you're impatient, too. Well, then, let us show you our next technique." Shenyun made another symbol with his hands. The space around him distorted like clay, and shadowlike forms rose from the arena.

The shadows took the shapes of people. Four perfect duplicates of Shenyun stood with intrepid smiles.

"There it is…!" Julis said.

It was Shenyun Li's best illusion—Copying. He had used this skill in almost all his previous matches.

Of course, the apparitions had no physical form. But they were so detailed it was impossible to tell them apart by appearance, and they even replicated his prana flow. On top of that, all four behaved independently, so there was no way to analyze a pattern to find the real Shenyun.



And, on top of that—

“Now it’s my turn.”

Shenhua also formed a symbol with her hands, and her body seemed to vanish into thin air.

This was Shenhua’s favorite technique—Obscuring. She did not just become invisible to the eye but hid everything about her presence, even sound and prana, in an illusion as accomplished as her brother’s. It was impossible to detect her without deep concentration.

Both of the twins’ skill sets were perfectly suited to buying time.

“Now, we’re ready to begin—”

“—and wouldn’t it be amateurish to wait for you to make your move?”

“Yes, and boring for the audience.”

“We have to liven it up a little or they might boo us again.”

“So—”

The five Shenyuns spoke in turn. Even their voices were perfect replications.

“—let’s make this a little flashy.”

The five clones snapped, and paper materialized between their fingers.

“Look out, Ayato—those are spell charms.” Julis readied her rapier, the Aspera Spina, and cautiously lowered her center of gravity.

Spell charms were a type of support item, slips of paper infused with the power of Seisenjutsu. They were single use, but their wide variety of applications made them practical in battle.

“But there’s only one real one, right?” Ayato said.

No matter how intricate the illusion, the apparitions had no physical form. That meant the tags of the copies would also be fake.

“That’s true, but— *Tch.* Here he comes!”

The five Shenyuns rushed at them at once.

They held no weapons, so Ayato guessed the charms held some offensive technique.

He greeted one of the attackers with the Ser Veresta, splitting him easily in two. But there was no impact, and the severed illusion swayed like smoke to quickly reform.

That one's fake…!

Even knowing most were illusions, Ayato could not tell them apart. He cut through another one with a backhand, but again his weapon simply passed through.

"Too bad! Wrong again."

A third Shenyun who had slipped under his attacks thrust a spell charm at Ayato with a grin.

"*Bào!*"

The slip exploded with a deafening *boom*.

"!"

The blast and its heat hurled Ayato through the air, then sent him rolling on the ground. Having seen the attack in the recordings of the twins' matches, he was able to defend with his prana and reduce the harm done. Still, his bones creaked from the shock.

"Heh, not much damage for taking an explosion charm at that range. You don't have that ridiculous amount of prana for nothing—you're pretty hardy."

Shenyun spoke with pure admiration, but quickly distanced himself again to mingle with his copies.

"Ayato! Are you all right?" Julis, who had been facing the remaining two Shenyuns, tried to rush to his aid.

"Don't forget about me." Shenhua's voice came from nowhere, and a similar blast exploded inches from Julis's face.

"Aaaugh!" Julis hurtled backward.

"Julis!" As Ayato rushed to break her fall, Shenhua's laughter surrounded

them.

She was making her voice echo every which way, confounding any efforts to locate her.

"*Ngh.* I—I'm fine," Julis said, wincing in pain as she stood. "But, Ayato, aren't you almost out of time? I'll cover you. Take out Shenyun Li."

"…Got it."

A good while had passed since the start of the match. He couldn't afford to waste any more time.

And if he was going to attack one of the twins, it made more sense to go after Shenyun rather than the invisible Shenhua. The apparitions posed their own challenge, but at least he knew *what* to target. Even if he had to beat them one by one, it was possible he could hit the real Shenyun on the first try.

"We played completely into their hands—but in a way, that's a part of our plan, too. Keep a cool head." Julis channeled her prana as she spoke, and the mana around her condensed in response. "Burst into bloom—*Livingston Daisy!*"

A dozen or more chakrams of fire took shape and rushed at the five Shenyuns ahead of Ayato.

"Hmm, I thought you might target me first," one of the Shenyuns murmured, but this one did not even prepare for an attack, only stood leisurely. Ayato guessed that it was an illusion.

Then all I have to do is ignore it!

As Ayato dashed between the chakrams to close in on his marks, he made a split-second decision.

That moment, without warning, a giant wall formed right in front of him.

"—?!"

It blocked all the chakrams, and while they created sparks in a vain effort to cut through the thick wall, they ran out of momentum and vanished.

Ayato jumped sideways to go around the wall, but an explosion nailed him from nowhere, as if it had been lying in wait. "Aaagh!"

This time, he did not have time to defend with his prana, and he groaned in pain as he suffered the full power of the blast.

"Oh, I should warn you—*the spell charms Shenhua set up are invisible*," Shenyun told him gleefully.

Set up—that meant the trap was readied in advance.

That wall was probably from a defensive spell charm, Ayato thought. But when did they put them down…? Then the answer hit him—the smokescreen.

Julis had abilities similar to these traps, but because the spell tags were infused with the necessary prana when they were made, activating them took almost none of the user's own prana. In other words, they could use as many traps as they wanted until they ran out of charms.

There was no telling how many tags there were on the stage.

"Step aside, Ayato! I'll just burn them all!"

They might not be able to see the charms, but if they were physical objects, they could be destroyed.

And Julis had the ability to burn away a large area at once. However…

"You keep forgetting that I'm here, too." Shenhua's mischievous voice sounded behind Julis.

She whirled with a gasp, but it was too late.

"*Qiáo léi!*"

"Aaaaaagh!"

With a tremendous flash of electricity, a piercing shock ran through her body. Julis screamed in pain at the effect of Shenhua's Seisenjutsu.

"Julis!" Ayato moved as if about to rush to her.

Collapsed to her knees, she shouted at him. "D-don't worry about me! Beat Shenyun!"

"Tch…!"

Over two minutes had gone by since the start of the match. And with battles

the next day and the day after that, he didn't have a second to lose.

"Okay! Then you get Shenhua!" Ayato immediately closed in on the closest Shenyun.

"Right. Leave her to me!"

As he heard her reply, Ayato skidded to a halt in front of Shenyun, then quickly sidestepped.

After a slight delay, the space in front of Shenyun shimmered, then exploded.

I thought so—!

These spell charms activated automatically when he stepped within a certain distance.

The five Shenyuns were scattered around him, but not aimlessly. Everything the apparitions did had a purpose. This gave Ayato some idea of where the traps were.

"Hmm…not bad," one of the Shenyuns muttered, sounding impressed.

Ayato cut through him in a single breath—but again without impact. Another fake.

He immediately turned his attention to the next target. "Fine, I'll just cut through all five!"

"You are Seidoukan's first ranked, after all. I guess you won't be that easy to take down."

The other Shenyuns had started reading Ayato's attacks to avoid him, but they couldn't dodge forever at close range.

Enduring several explosions, Ayato cut through a second, then a third apparition…

"Oops, sorry. Wrong one again." The copy blurred like a mirage and laughed tauntingly.

"Ugh…" Ayato groaned. The damage from the explosions and the impending time limit wore at him bit by bit.

But now there were only two left—the one farthest from him, and another

slightly closer. One of these had to be the real Shenyun.

"Then it's *you*!" Making a guess based on Shenyun's personality, Ayato set his sights on the farther one.

Shenyun evaded his sweep to the side, but then Ayato turned his wrist and swung upward.

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

But there was no contact.

I was wrong…?!

"Tch…" Ayato faced the last Shenyun and dropped to one knee, making a pained noise under his breath.

"Oh, dear. Are you out of time now? And you were so close," Shenyun said, a hint of relief in his voice.

"Ayato!" As Julis rushed toward him, she was suddenly launched into the air. "Guh—?!"

"That felt good!" Shenhua said with an elated laugh, but Ayato couldn't tell from where. She must have landed a direct hit.

"Gaaah…!"

As Ayato groaned in protest, magic circles materialized around him, and chains of light restrained him once again.

The blade of the Ser Veresta vanished, and the activator dropped from his hand with a clatter. Shenyun observed Ayato with pleasure but cautiously kept his distance.

Once the chains vanished and Ayato had collapsed, breathing hard, Shenyun finally walked to his side.

"I don't know why that happens to you, but what a shame. So, how do you feel right now?" Shenyun grinned, confident in his victory.

Yes, the twins knew about the time limit. And from watching the match against Irene and Priscilla, they also knew that exceeding the limit would immobilize Ayato. This was exactly what they had been waiting for.

Yes, exactly.

“Heh-heh…”

“Hmm?”

As Ayato chuckled softly, Shenyun regarded him with suspicion.

“What’s so funny?”

“Oh, nothing. It’s just that—the fight isn’t over yet.” Ayato activated a blade-shaped Lux with his right hand.

With surprise on his face, Shenyun braced himself—but it was too late.

In one instant, Ayato rose and swung his arm straight across.

The twins knew about Ayato’s time limit, but not how long it was. With only the match against the Urzaiz sisters and maybe the duel against Kirin to go on, their estimate for the time limit was rough at best.

Ayato had been fighting for a little over three minutes. It had taken a toll on his body, but not so much that he was immobile.

This was Julis’s plan. First, they would strike quickly. If that worked, good. If they failed, then they would pretend that their opponents’ stalling strategy had succeeded and wait for their chance. The twins were the type to deliver the final blow once they were sure of victory. Everything had gone just as they had predicted.

Ayato’s sword sliced through Shenyun’s school crest, giving him no time to dodge.

But—

“Wha…?”

Once again, the attack made contact with nothing.

*

It can’t be—! This one was a copy, too?!

Stunned, Ayato stared at the shimmering apparition.

“Ooh, that was close. As the saying goes—‘One who understands Destiny

does not stand beneath a tottering wall.’”

A space far behind him warped, and from it emerged Shenyun with a thin smile. As he snapped his fingers, the five copies all disappeared.

“…!”

Ayato finally understood. The five Shenyuns had *all* been copies, and Shenhua’s technique had hidden the real one.

But since when…?

Ayato thought back, and the realization shocked him.

There was only one time they could have accomplished this—during the smokescreen. So Ayato and Julis had been fighting an illusion the entire time.

“Ha-ha! Did you finally figure it out? You guys had a plan of your own, I guess. But unfortunately, you’re nowhere near our level.” Gleeful anticipation made itself plain on Shenyun’s face.

“But what about the first spell charm—?”

Apparitions could not use real spell charms. Ayato thought the real Shenyun had to have triggered the first exploding charm, at least.

“Oh, that? Shenhua set up that one, too. It was timed to go off.”

“Timed?”

“Yes. I just set the copy on you at the right place and time. It was a little tricky to pull off, but it made you think that one of the copies was real.” Shenyun theatrically shrugged his shoulders. “Did you really think I’d do something so stupid? Jumping into the range of your attacks just because I had copies?”

He flicked his wrists, and multiple spell charms appeared between his fingers.

“You might not have such an easy time dodging these now.”

Shenyun flung out his arms, and the spell charms shot through the air to surround Ayato.

The charms moved fast, but Ayato at his full strength could have cut them all down without needing to dodge their attacks. The tags hung around him as if they had been pinned to the air.

“Not yet…!”

“Hmm?”

“You haven’t won yet…! I won’t lose here!”

“Oh—I didn’t know you could make a face like that. Mm, how enticing.” Shenyun’s tone was brimming with pleasure.

Grinding his teeth, Ayato adjusted his sword and tried to break out of the enclosure by force.

“I just love your futile struggling,” Shenyun crooned. “It makes my heart sing!”

Before Ayato could get through, one of the spell tags shimmered, then exploded.

“Gaaaaah!” As he cried out in agony, the blast sent him into another tag, which then exploded. The charms knocked his body around like a ping-pong ball. With no time to defend, battered by shock waves and heat, Ayato crumpled helplessly to the ground.

“Ugh…” He groaned. Bruises and cuts all over, and probably a broken bone or two.

“Well, as much as it pains me, I should probably wrap this up.” Shenyun produced yet more spell charms.

But just as they left his fingers—

“Ayato! Give me your hand!”

It was Julis. He reached out as he was told, and she dived down with fiery wings to grab his hand, then whisked him away.

“Damn!” Shenyun muttered. The spell charms detonated a moment too late. The blast made Julis lose control, throwing her and Ayato to the ground. But they had escaped.

“Th-thanks, Julis. You saved me there.”

“No, I’m sorry it took so long. I knew you were in danger, but I had trouble shaking off Shenhua.” Even as she spoke, Julis stood and readied the Aspera Spina.

Ayato struggled to his feet, but his injuries quickly forced him to his knees again.

“Don’t push yourself too hard. You know you’re no match for Shenyun in your current state,” Julis told him, an angry edge in her voice as she glared at the twins.

Shenhua had reappeared beside Shenyun, and the two were discussing something. The teams were separated and regrouping. But Ayato and Julis were at a significant disadvantage.

“It’s my fault that they outdid us in strategy,” Julis said. “You won’t help things by charging in recklessly.”

“But…”

“We’re in a tough spot, but we haven’t lost yet. Keep cool, remember?” Julis admonished, then suddenly smiled. “Though I have to confess—part of me is glad to see you fail at that.”

“Huh—?”

“The reason you lost your head is because you want to win now, isn’t it? Because you’ve realized how badly you want to find your sister?”

Ayato pondered that for a moment, then nodded.

“I was happy when you said you would fight for me. That’s the truth. But at the same time, I felt bad, because there was nothing I could do for you in return.” She turned to Ayato. “But now, we’re on equal footing. We each have our own wish, and we both want to fight to the end for each other. That’s the way it should be—because we’re a team.”

“Julis…”

“The problem is, you try to take on too much by yourself. I mean, you’re strong enough to do that. You can protect me and fight your way through. But I’m going to turn your words back on you…” Julis smiled mischievously, placing her hand on his cheek, and her voice was kind. “‘Who’s going to protect *you*?’”

“!”

And in that moment, a gleam of light appeared deep in Ayato’s heart. *This is*—

But then…

“Are you two done with your heart-to-heart? Because—”

“—it’s about time we got back to business.”

Shenhua and Shenyun broke in with arrogant grins

“They’re ready, apparently,” Julis said. “Probably set up another pile of spell charms…”

“Julis,” Ayato called.

She had been watching the twins again, and she turned back to him quizzically. “Hmm?”

“Thank you,” he said with a warm smile.

Taken aback, Julis stared blankly at him, then abruptly blushed and turned away. “Wh-what’s that for, all of a sudden?! I didn’t do anything worth thanking!”

“No. My eyes are open because of you. This time, for sure.” Ayato took a few steady breaths, then got up slowly to stand alongside her. “So, I’ve got a favor to ask my partner. Are you up for it?”

“What do you need?” Julis said, a hint of color lingering in her face.

“Can you buy me a little bit of time?”

“Oh? Did you think of a plan?”

“Not exactly—just something I want to try. If it works, maybe I can get us out of this.”

“Fine, I’ll give it a go. It’s not like we have any better options. But I don’t think I’ll last very long.” Julis stepped forward.

Ayato burned the image into his memory, then slowly closed his eyes. He turned his thoughts inward and recalled what Saya told him yesterday, and what Julis had just said to him.

And what his sister had said long ago—and the thing he had to do.

Once again, somewhere in his heart, a tiny light glimmered. Ayato slowly

reached for it.

He knew what it was. He could feel it.

This is…

*

Julis was surprised at herself.

In the midst of these adverse circumstances, her spirits were strangely high. She didn't feel invincible, exactly—but she found herself full of energy.

Her body hurt all over, but she was in better shape than Ayato. He had received the brunt of Shenyun's attacks on the front lines, while Shenhua had only attacked Julis to harass her and slow her down.

So that must be Ayato's real smile.

Remembering his expression just moments ago, Julis could not help but smile in return.

She had seen Ayato smile countless times but never so carefree. He was easygoing and a little bit hard to read—but maybe what she had just seen was his true self.

Sasamiya has known that smile all her life…

"No fair," Julis had blurted aloud before she knew it.

Catching herself, she shook her head and brought her attention back to reality. The twins eyed her with self-assured, sadistic grins.

"My my, what's this? The Glühen Rose is all alone?" Shenyun taunted.

"You don't intend to face both of us by yourself, do you?" Shenhua added.

"That's exactly what I plan to do," Julis declared. "Do you have a problem with that?"

The twins both shrugged.

"Aw… They think so little of us, Shenhua."

"Yeah… It really is hurtful, Shenyun."

Despite their complaints, those grins showed no signs of waning.

“Very well. We don’t know what you’ve got up your sleeve—

“—but we’ll find a way to make it fun.”

Shenhua made a symbol with her hands, and her figure melted away.

“Hmph. Maybe you’re the ones who think too little of *me*,” Julis scoffed, then channeled her prana. This was no time to keep her cards to her chest.

Leading the twins as far away from Ayato as possible, she released her spell.

“Burst into bloom—*Ranunculus!*”

She swung the Aspera Spina downward, and wave after wave of flames rolled out.

“Aaagh!”

“Da—!”

Unable to dodge the inferno, the twins cried out in pain.

The wide-range attack engulfed nearly a third of the stage, though it was really a defensive technique to fend off enemies when she was surrounded. As attacks went it wasn’t very powerful.

Still, it was enough.

“I see… It’s the spell charms you were after,” Shenyun observed, watching the traps go off all over the stage.

Indeed, Julis was sure she had succeeded in burning away most of the charms within range of the Ranunculus. And the rolling flames would continue as long as it was active. The spell depleted a large amount of prana, but it should help keep the twins from getting too close.

In the meantime, Julis concentrated her prana for another spell.

Casting something else while keeping Ranunculus active was difficult—both technically and in terms of her prana supply—but she had little choice.

“Hmm, not bad… Maybe we should change things up, too.” With swift movements, Shenyun made a symbol with his first two fingers extended. “*Jí jí rú lü` lìng, chì!*”

“Wha—?!”

Massive amounts of water gushed from the air.

As Julis shouted in surprise, the water covered the stage and kept rising—to her ankles, knees, then thighs. It was if the stage had turned into an ocean.

But it’s not cold… Is this another illusion?

“You didn’t think copying myself was the only illusion I could use, did you?” Shenyun said. “I actually prefer fancier spells, like this.”

“And so what? It’s still just an illusion,” Julis snapped.

Shenyun’s shoulders shook with laughter. “Yes, just an illusion. But then why did your spell lose power?”

“Nngh…!”

Stregas and Dantes used their powers by imagining something, and then making it real. If the visualization was disrupted, the effects of the powers would diminish. Shenyun was using the illusion of water to attack the *image* of fire in Julis’s mind.

“This won’t stop me…!” Julis concentrated to maintain her prana flow.

“Hmm, then how about something like this?” Shenyun snapped his fingers and countless arrows of ice appeared above his head. “*Fly!*”

With his command, the arrows fell upon Julis.

She responded by closing her eyes. He was trying to disrupt her concentration—but an illusion had no effect if she refused to look at it.

“I see. A wise defense if all you want to do is withstand an illusion. But I don’t think you ought to close your eyes during a fight,” Shenyun said playfully. “Maybe I should go after your teammate next?”

Reflexively Julis opened her eyes.

As if it had been waiting for that moment, a giant icicle pierced her chest.

By the time she realized she had been tricked, it was too late.

As much as she told herself it was an illusion, her concentration was broken.

The flow of prana was interrupted, and she lost the Ranunculus.

“Oh, and it was such a nice try—too bad.” The laughter and the voice came from directly behind Julis.

“Oh no—” She made a rushed attempt to defend, but the attack—probably a kick—from her invisible opponent hit her directly in the chest. Julis screamed.

“Aaaaaagh!”

“Does it hurt?” Shenhua materialized, laughing quietly. “Yes, it must. That’s where Luo hit you before.”

That was indeed exactly where Julis had been injured in the previous match. But a question occurred to her through the pain.

“Wh-why didn’t you go after my crest?”

It would have been an easy opportunity for Shenhua to knock her from the match. As Julis dropped to one knee, her face contorted in agony, and she glared at Shenhua.

“Heh-heh. Oh, I missed a little, that’s all,” Shenhua said with feigned innocence. Deliberate cruelty was forbidden under the Stella Carta, but this was not a clear enough violation to warrant punishment. The twins were perfectly aware of that.

“Hmm, is that so?! Then I’ll make you regret it!” As she grappled with the pain, Julis released the spell she had prepared earlier. “Blossom, *Semiserrata!*”

A magic circle lit up on the ground, and an enormous fiery camellia bloomed above her head.

“What—?! Y-you’re blowing yourself up—?!”

In a panic, Shenhua vanished, but that would not avail her. If Julis couldn’t see her opponent, all she had to do was burn the entire area.

The camellia of flame descended, and a swirling blast radiated fierce heat and fire in all directions.

But in the center of the explosion, where it was most destructive, Julis stood without so much as a single burn.

“I wanted to keep this one a secret…,” Julis lamented. Her injuries hurt, but having to reveal her precious trump card pained her even more.

Still, she thought, *if it let her defeat one of the twins, the price wasn’t too steep. But—*

“So you can resist your own powers.”

The voice came from beyond the whirling flames.

“—?!”

As it subsided, she saw a giant wall. Not just one, but several walls interlocking to make an improvised enclosure.

“I had heard it was possible for some elite Stregas and Dantes—but I’m amazed to see it in person. Your reputation as Witch of the Resplendent Flames doesn’t even do you justice.”

The wall shimmered and disappeared to reveal Shenhua and Shenyun, both unscathed.

“I’m the one who should be amazed, Phantom Builder.”

She had timed that attack perfectly. Even if they had made a wall, just one or two layers would not have been enough to withstand such an inferno. But the twins had managed to cooperate to construct a protective barrier in an instant.

They may be despicable…but their teamwork is flawless!

Yet, while Shenyun still looked confident, some of the color had drained from Shenhua’s face. Julis had come close.

“You need to be more careful, Shenhua.”

“I—I’m sorry, Shenyun…”

“It’s fine… Well, now I know for sure. We can’t afford to toy with you any longer.” Shenyun’s eyes lit up in earnest. “It’s time to end this.”

He drew more of his tags and slowly advanced toward Julis.

She responded by taking a step backward, and the ground beneath her feat shimmered. *Already?!*

Shenhua must have set a trap when she had gotten close. Chains suddenly swarmed up from the ground and wrapped around Julis like snakes.

"*Ngh*— Why, you—!"

Shenyun coldly watched Julis struggle as he flung his spell charms. Evading them would be impossible now. The charms exploded in her face, and the blast sent her flying.

She rolled across the ground and landed on her back, unable even to scream. "Guh…haah…"

"Wow, still conscious—you're a stubborn one. Now for the *coup de grâce*."

Shenyun's voice sounded far away, and Julis had almost given up. But at that moment—

"?!"

All three gasped at an overwhelming burst of prana.

*

The light glimmering in Ayato's hand was a *key*.

What it would unlock—that was obvious. It was the key to the chains that bound him. He understood now that it was made so he could only see it after he had fulfilled a certain set of conditions.

In his mind, Ayato looked at himself from above. Observing his chains carefully, he saw that there were three locks. The first one lay shattered, as if it had been forced open. It was completely destroyed, clearly beyond repair.

Ayato thought he might know how. After his sister had placed this seal on him, he'd been so bewildered and confused—and he had made up his mind to try to break the chains by force. The very first time he had succeeded, he'd seen in his mind an image of this lock shattering.

Half certain of what would happen, Ayato inserted the key into the second lock.

Carefully, he turned it, and the lock released with a satisfying *click*. A part of the chains loosened and fell away into the void.

And then—strength surged in him.

"…"

Ayato opened his eyes and took stock of his condition. There was no bright pillar of prana like before. Instead, he felt the energy fill his body.

"Okay. I can do this…I think."

He scanned the arena, taking in the progress of the battle. Julis was on the verge of defeat, but he was just in time. He reached for the Ser Veresta on the ground and activated it.

"There—!" With a single leap, he reached his partner and cut through the chains binding her. "Sorry to keep you waiting, Julis."

"That was too close, Ayato." She greeted him with a pained—but also relieved—smile. "Did you completely undo the seal…?"

Ayato shook his head. "No. It looks like there are stages to the seal, and I finally opened the second one. It's not like I've powered up or anything."

"Really? But your prana…"

"Oh—it's just that now I can hold in the prana that was leaking out of me. So I'm only as strong as when I opened the seal before. But I think my time limit is longer."

"How long?"

"Hmm, let's see…" Ayato compared the power inside him to what it had been before and came up with a rough estimate. "Probably more than an hour."

"…"

Speechless for a moment, Julis could only stare at him.

"I see," she said finally. "Then can I leave the rest to you? I don't think I have anything left, to be honest."

"Got it," Ayato replied, then turned to the twins. "You heard her. I'll take over from here."

Shenyun, likewise gawking at Ayato, let out a deep breath. “You two really are full of surprises. Don’t tell me you were saving all that power?”

“Well, it’s a long story,” Ayato said. “So? Do you want to try to buy yourselves another hour?”

“No, I don’t think so.” Shenyun took out several spell charms.

Silent and grim, Shenhua disappeared.

“All right, then.” Readying the Ser Veresta, Ayato calmly assessed the situation.

The upshot was that he was still at a dramatic disadvantage.

Ayato did have a longer time limit, but he wasn’t actually any stronger, nor did his injuries heal. The balance of power was unchanged. And now, with Shenhua coming after him as well, he was fighting one-on-two. He’d been struggling against Shenyun alone just moments ago, so the situation had actually worsened.

But there was one thing he could do now that his prana wasn’t overflowing out of him. *It’s been a while*, he thought. *I don’t know how well I can pull it off…*

Ayato closed his eyes again.

This time, it was not to reach inward, but outward.

Pushing his senses to their limits, he could perceive not only his opponents’ movements and their flow of prana, but also every sound, the atmosphere itself, every kind of information—as if he’d become omniscient. This was *shiki*.

This had been mostly impossible for him before—the overflow of prana had acted as noise. But now…

“Haaah…”

He opened his eyes slowly. The sight before him looked no different. But he keenly felt his perception expanding. He could visualize everything that was going on around him.

“Here goes.” Ayato casually took a step forward.

As he walked, he waved the Ser Veresta through the air with one hand. A

severed spell charm materialized and burned to nothing. He strolled along with leisurely strides, cutting down one invisible charm after another—the ones Julis's fire wave had missed. Ayato knew exactly how many there were and where they had been placed.

"It can't be—you can see them?" Shenyun mumbled, stunned.

Ayato did not see them. He just *knew*.

"In that case…!" Shenyun hurled all the spell charms in his hands at once, hemming Ayato in a ring of twelve explosion charms.

But Ayato calmly continued forward. The charms ignited, setting off one bomb after another. He dodged each one at the last possible instant. He could form a perfect image of where they would go off and which way to step to avoid them.

Behind me, to the right.

With the slightest movement, he dodged Shenhua's attack as she lunged at his back. He lightly shoved the invisible Shenhua on the shoulder, diverting her course.

"Wha—?"

"Amagiri Shinmei Style, Master Technique—*Reverse Rakshasa*."

Shenhua's redirected attack landed a direct blow onto her own hidden spell charm.

"Kyaaaaah!"

The tag detonated mercilessly, and Shenhua shrieked as the blast propelled her into the air. Thanks to her shock, her invisibility spell broke, and Ayato cut through her school emblem.

"*Shenhua Li—crest broken.*"

"Nngh…!"

As the crest system announced his sister's defeat, a hint of panic rose in

Shenyun's face. He took a large leap backward and readied more slips of paper. "This is an unexpected turn of events. But even I have a trump card!"

Shenyun spread his arms wide, and an avalanche of spell charms rushed out of his sleeves.

There were more than could possibly fit into his uniform—he must have stored them using Seisenjutsu. The flood of tags rose up like a tornado, then formed a giant sphere above Shenyun's head.

If each one was an explosion charm, that globe had tremendous firepower.

"This mine-sphere contains my entire arsenal. I hope you enjoy it." Shenyun made a symbol with his hands.

The ball rippled like a mirage, then vibrated and multiplied. One became two, then two became four—in the end, eight mine-spheres surrounded Ayato from above.

"Those are an illusion, of course. Only one is real. But you can probably see that, and I bet you could dodge it, too." Shenyun flung his arm downward, and the spheres began descending. "But what if I try this?"

Ayato looked up with a gasp. Just as Shenyun said, he already knew which one was real and which ones were illusions. And so he also knew—

I'm not the target—he's after Julis!

Indeed, the mine-spheres were falling on Julis, on her knees behind Ayato.

"Nngh…!"

She realized this, too, and tried to stand, but immediately dropped to the ground again. The bombs moved slowly, but Julis could not tell the real one apart from the copies. Even if she could, dodging it in her current state was another matter.

"So, what will it be, Murakumo? Can you sacrifice your partner? No, I don't think you can!" Shenyun shouted, grinning.

He was certain that Ayato would rush to his partner's aid. That meant flying into the mine-sphere—and not even the Murakumo could withstand its firepower.

“Ayato! I’ll be fine! Just get him—”

“Would you keep quiet for a bit, Glühen Rose?” Giving Julis an icy glare, Shenyun made a symbol with his hands.

“—!” Lightning streaked toward her. But—

“You’re consistent, Shenyun Li—to the very end.” Ayato stood in front of Julis to deflect the bolt with the Ser Veresta.

“Ayato!” Julis shouted in alarm.

Shenyun cackled. “Ah-ha-ha-ha! Perfect, Murakumo! You can’t dodge it now, can you? You two can take the blast together!”

Indeed, the mine was already right in front of him.

“I don’t need to dodge it,” Ayato murmured, and poured his prana into the Ser Veresta’s urm-manadite core.

Drinking in Ayato’s abundant prana, the Ser Veresta suddenly grew, and black symbols danced merrily around it. In barely a second, the blade had reached more than thirty feet long.

He had tried this Meteor Art technique once, when he had defeated that dragon creature with Kirin. Because it expended so much prana and shortened his time limit, he had never considered trying it in a match. But that wasn’t a problem now.

“Wha…?!” Shenyun exclaimed as Ayato swung the giant Ser Veresta to easily slice through the mine-spheres, copies and all. A tremendous chain reaction began, but Ayato brought down the blade to sever *the blast itself*.

“Th-that’s not possible…”

The Ser Veresta carved a long, deep gouge across the stage floor, just narrowly missing Shenyun, who stood frozen. Ayato let go of his weapon. Unarmed, he leaped to Shenyun in a single breath.

“That made me angry.” He squeezed his fist.

“Huh…?”

Ayato hurled that fist directly into the stunned face of Shenyun.

“Guh-hah!” The punch threw Shenyun to the ground, where he lay motionless.

“That’s what you get,” Ayato said to the fallen Shenyun, then let out a short sigh.

“*Shenyun Li—unconscious.*

“End of battle! Winners—Ayato Amagiri and Julis-Alexia von Riessfeld!”

Cheers and applause raged across the arena like a hurricane. The din completely drowned out the announcers’ commentary.

When Ayato turned, Julis—exhausted but grinning with unmistakable joy—sent him a hearty thumbs-up.

CHAPTER 7

UNYIELDING DETERMINATION

“Congratulations, Your Highness!”

When Ayato and Julis returned to the prep room, Flora met them with an enthusiastic greeting. Nearly collapsing under the girl’s tackle hug, Julis smiled indulgently. “Thanks, Flora.”

“You were really, *really* amazing! I was so excited!” The younger girl waved her arms wildly, her cheeks flushed and eyes sparkling.

Unable to escape the winners’ interview this time, Ayato and Julis had stymied the press corps with vague answers. They had finally been released just moments ago, and a fair amount of time had passed since the end of their match. Flora must have truly been impressed to maintain this level of excitement.

“You were really awesome, too, Master Amagiri! How did you become so strong? Can I be that strong someday?”

“Um… Well, maybe if you train every day.”

“I see! Then, then—can you help me train sometime?!”

“Uh, sure…”

“Yay! Thank you, Master Amagiri! I’ll work hard!” Flora threw her arms around Ayato.

Like Kirin, she reminded him of a small animal, but in a different way—maybe a lively little puppy. He wanted to gently pet Kirin’s head, but Flora was a bouncy kind of cute that made him want to ruffle her hair.

“You’re always so full of energy, Flora. It’s good to see.” In the back corner of the room, Claudia had been happily observing the scene.

“Oh, you’re here, too?” Julis said. “Well, I suppose Flora couldn’t get in by herself.”

“Yes—although I was a little surprised to see her here.” Claudia laughed softly.

“So you and Flora know each other, Claudia?” Ayato asked.

“Yes, I’ve seen her attending Julis several times.”

“Miss Enfield is always so nice! She gave me yummy sweets today, too!”

“Sweets?”

Now that Flora mentioned it, Ayato noticed something like chocolate on her mouth, as well as an assortment of pastries and other confections spread across the table.

“Oh, those are a little something from me,” Claudia said. “I finished up a few tasks and I had some time.”

“So you made these?”

“Well, I hadn’t been in the kitchen in a while, so I can’t make any guarantees about the quality.”

Despite Claudia’s disclaimer, the pastries looked good enough to give a bakery’s wares a run for their money—better, in fact.

“Thanks, I think I’ll have some,” Ayato said. “I am a little hungry.”

“Please.”

He selected a chocolate-covered cookie. “Mm, that is good!”

Ayato had little to compare it to, since he didn’t often go for desserts. The elegantly bittersweet chocolate was aromatic, not too sweet—exactly the sort of treat he liked.

“Hee-hee. I’m glad you like it.” Claudia smiled happily, her cheeks tinged ever-so-slightly pink.

“So you can cook on top of everything else, Claudia? That’s amazing.”

He’d figured she, a well-heeled young lady, would have little reason to learn

culinary skills, but she really could do anything.

“You’re so perfect that it makes the rest of us feel bad,” Julis complained. “Everything comes naturally to you. Isn’t there anything you don’t do well?”

Still, with a look of resignation, she reached for a sweet herself.

“Oh, there are plenty of things I’m bad at. I just thought I should score some points for myself, that’s all.”

“Points…?” Julis repeated suspiciously.

“The rest of you were all making hand-cooked meals for Ayato to attract him,” Claudia replied. “I can’t sit idly by, can I?”

“*P-pfft!* I—” Julis sputtered. “No one’s trying to attract anyone! How did you know about that, anyway?!”

“Hee-hee. How, indeed? Well, leaving that aside…” Carelessly dodging the question, Claudia looked seriously at Ayato and Julis. “Congratulations, both of you, for advancing to the semifinals. On behalf of Seidoukan Academy, I express our joy and gratitude.”

She bowed to them deeply.

“Um, you don’t need to thank us…,” Ayato said.

“That’s right,” Julis agreed. “I’m only fighting to make my wish come true, after all.”

“I understand, of course,” Claudia said. “But in terms of the projected results for this season, Seidoukan has scored more points than we could have hoped for. Your teams are the first in several years to reach the final four. It really means a lot to our school.”

“Well, I admit, I don’t mind hearing genuine words of praise from you,” Julis said. “But you’ve already congratulated the other team, then?”

“Yes. They did finish first, after all. I paid my respects to them before coming here.”

The “other team,” of course, referred to Saya and Kirin.

“I invited them to come here with me,” Claudia said, “but they wanted to

prepare for tomorrow.”

“Oh? They must be very invested in winning,” Julis remarked.

“Well, they’re going to face Saya’s rivals,” Ayato said.

The next opponents for Saya and Kirin were the autonomous Puppets from Allekant. For Saya, they were the reason for entering the Phoenix. And in each match, those automatons had completely trashed the competition.

Even Ayato was interested to see how they would fare against the Puppets.

“You’ve made it this far,” Claudia said. “I’m rooting for an all-Seidoukan championship match.”

Julis nodded firmly. “We’re aiming for nothing less. And I’m sure they are, too.”

*

“So the final four teams are finally decided.”

Sinking into a chair in his executive office, the chairman of the Festa Executive Committee, Madiath Mesa, let out a long sigh.

“Yes, sir. There might not have been as much hype leading up to this season’s Phoenix compared to past events, but it proved to be splendidly exciting once it began. Your decision to allow Allekant’s Puppets to fight as proxies was met with great success. It’s all due to your acumen, chairman.”

“I’d say it’s a little early to call it a great success. People might still change their minds with the semifinals and the final.”

“Well, we’ve already exceeded the revenue and attendance of the last Phoenix. I don’t think public opinion will take a dive at this point…”

“But you never know. That’s what makes things interesting.”

As Madiath answered the fawning older subordinate, he placed his hand on the console at the end of his desk to open eight air-windows containing data on the semifinalists.

They comprised one team from Allekant Académie, one from St. Gallardworth Academy, and two from Seidoukan Academy.

“So, which team do you think will win?” Madiath asked.

“What—? Sir, I’m a member of the Executive Committee. It wouldn’t be appropriate for me to voice my personal opinion on—”

“Ha-ha. No need to be so uptight,” Madiath said with a laugh. “It’s fine. You have my permission. Consider it a part of your duties.”

“I see…” Pressed by Madiath but still looking uncertain, the other man scrutinized the rows of faces on the screens. “Well… To be frank, I didn’t expect two teams from Seidoukan. Traditionally, they’ve fared well in the Phoenix, but their dismal showings in recent years have been hard to watch.”

“Yes,” Madiath agreed. “But they seem to have even more drive now because of it. Do you think one of those teams will win, then?”

“No, sir. It’s true that both teams are excellent, but the fighters are too volatile. I don’t see either team winning the championship,” the man declared bluntly.

In Madiath’s opinion, this man was fairly competent. Of course, there would hardly be anyone incompetent at the upper levels of an integrated enterprise foundation, but even with that in mind, Madiath considered him quite capable.

He trusted his subordinate’s judgement, derived from watching countless fighters over many years of Festa administration.

“I see,” Madiath said. “Then what about the two from Gallardworth?”

“Hmm. That young man in the eleventh rank is a decent Dante, but I don’t think it’s a favorable matchup for him. How a Dante’s strengths compare to his opponent’s is very significant. Barring something unforeseen, I think they will lose in the next round.”

“So, in your opinion, Allekant’s Puppets will be the champions?”

The subordinate nodded politely. “Yes. Their abilities are marvelous. They’ve taken all their matches effortlessly. I think it’s reasonable to say that they’re the unquestionable favorites. However…”

“However?”

For a moment, the man seemed unsure. “Well—it’s just that…considering the

kind of effects their victory might have on future Festas, it may not be the most desirable outcome…”

“You think so?”

“Oh, er—I’ve overstepped. My apologies, sir.” The subordinate quickly bowed his head.

“Not at all. I value your opinions. It’s true some fans will be disappointed to see mechs win the tournament when they only entered on a special ruling. And even the fans who are cheering for them now might find that it’s just…*a little much* to see non-humans take the championship.”

Allekant had brought the question of the special ruling for automatons directly to Madiath—which meant the consequences for any errors in judgment would fall squarely on his shoulders.

“But, well, if that happens, it happens,” he mused. “All we’ve done is give them a fair chance.”

“Very true, sir.” The subordinate spoke respectfully. His expression changed, as if it suddenly occurred to him to ask: “How about you, chairman? Who do you think will win?”

“Me? Hmm, well…” Madiath scanned the eight air-windows, just as the other man had done moments ago. “I’d have to say Allekant.”

“Oh, you think so, too, sir?”

“If we simply compare each team’s abilities in combat, there’s not much of a debate. The odds of them winning this Phoenix are eight in ten. —Oh, is it almost time?” Madiath checked the clock.

“Ah, yes. It’s time for your meeting with Frauenlob,” the subordinate said. “I’m sorry to have taken up your time like this.”

“No, don’t worry about that. I’m the one who asked, after all.” Madiath motioned with his hand. His subordinate bowed and left the office.

Once he was alone, Madiath exhaled and closed the air-windows one at a time. The pair from Gallardworth disappeared, then Saya and Kirin, then the mechs from Allekant, and finally, Julis.

Only the window displaying Ayato Amagiri remained open. Madiath's hand paused.

"Haruka's little brother," he said aloud, a playful smile coming to his face. "It's true… You never know what might happen. That's what makes things interesting."

*

On the fourteenth day of the Phoenix, in a prep room at the Sirius Dome…

"Well, should we get going now?" Kirin prompted.

Saya looked up from her hands and nodded with her usual stoic expression.

"Hmm? What is that?" Kirin asked.

Saya had been fixated on an old scrap of paper. "…My lucky charm."

She held out a voucher, an obviously homemade one. In the adorable, oversize handwriting of a child, it read *Wish Coupon*.

"It's a magic coupon to make any wish come true."

"Wow—that sounds wonderful." Kirin guessed it was an important memento to Saya from the way she handled the piece of paper. "Oh, were you wishing to win today's match?"

"No." Saya emphatically shook her head. "This is just for good luck. We'll win today with our own strength."

"You're right. Sorry."

Saya could not be more correct. They would never advance if they placed their faith in anything other than themselves, Kirin told herself, summoning all her resolve.

Saya placed the paper in her shirt and turned to her. "Kirin…"

"Oh—yes? What is it?"

Saya suddenly bowed her head. "Thank you."

"Wha—?! For what?!"

"I've made it this far thanks to your help. I really appreciate it."

“P-please. There’s no need to thank me.” Flustered, Kirin waved her hands.

“I wanted to make it this far, no matter what,” Saya said as she clenched her fists.

“To defeat the Puppets from Allekant, right?”

Kirin had heard about the events leading Saya to enter the Phoenix—one of the Allekant students had insulted a gun made by her father, and she was fighting to demand a retraction.

Still, Kirin couldn’t help but wonder. She could understand that the issue was important to Saya, but it seemed excessive to enter the Phoenix for that alone.

As if she had read Kirin’s mind, Saya smiled awkwardly. “…You deserve to know. My dad lost most of his body in an accident at the research facility where he worked.”

Saya spoke so nonchalantly that for a few moments, Kirin couldn’t take in the meaning of her words. “Huh…?”

“His brain was unharmed, fortunately, so he used his workers’ comp to build a workshop at home and linked himself to its core. Now that he’s used to it, he’s been happy enough—he can do more intricate work than he ever could have with a human body.”

“…” Uncertain what to say, Kirin helplessly lowered her eyes.

“You don’t need to feel bad for us. Dad says he’s glad to have the freedom to research what he wants, and I’ve come to terms with it.”

“Research what he wants…?”

“Making guns for me.” Saya patted the Lux activator sheathed at her waist.

“For you?”

“Right. So in a way, what Camilla Pareto said is right. This power wasn’t intended for the people, but for just one person—me.” Saya exhaled and closed her eyes—then slowly opened them again. “But even so—no, that’s *why* I can’t allow her to disrespect it.”

Saya’s gaze shone with fierce determination.

It was an unshakeable conviction.

“Oh, one more thing. Don’t tell Ayato about my dad.”

“Why?”

“He’s a nice person, so he’ll only worry. I’ll tell him after this tournament.”

“I understand.”

If this is what Saya decided, it’s not my place to intervene, Kirin thought. But in her heart, she smiled. *It’s just like Saya to look out for Ayato.*

“All this talking is wearing me out… Let’s go.” Saya sighed and walked out of the prep room.

“O-okay!” Kirin strapped the Senbakiri to her waist and rushed after her.

The passageway to the stage was long and dimly lit.

This was their first time fighting in the Sirius Dome. It was essentially no different from other large-scale arenas, but there was something special about fighting on Asterisk’s main stage.

Kirin noticed two figures up ahead, near the entrance gate.

Saya saw them, too, and her steps slowed a bit.

As they approached, Kirin saw that they were female.

Allekant uniforms…? Then are they—?

“Hey there, little lady. Been a while, huh!” A woman with a ponytail called out in a strangely cheerful tone.

It was Ernesta Kühne.

“…What do you want?” Saya said.

“Aw, gee, that’s cold! We might be about to fight, but we can get to know each other, can’t we? It’s not like we’re trying to rig the match or anything.”

“*You’re* not fighting us. Those Puppets are.”

“Mm, technically, that’s true…”

Saya seemed uninterested in continuing the conversation. Not sure what to

do, Kirin looked on awkwardly.

“Anyway, so, Camilla here had something she really wanted to tell you!” Ernesta said.

The bronze-skinned woman behind her stepped forward. “Hello, Saya Sasamiya. It seems I was wrong about you, so I wanted to say something before we settle the score.”

“Wrong how?”

“I see it now that I’ve watched your matches. In and of themselves, all your Luxes are flawed. But when you wield them—that is, when one considers you and the Lux as a single weapon—they are extremely powerful.”

Saya reacted with surprise. “Then—”

“I still won’t retract what I said,” Camilla declared before Saya could suggest it. “If you are part of the weapon, the organic components introduce additional unreliability. That is impractical. What’s more, my beliefs—the beliefs of Ferrovius—and my professional pride do not allow me to accept such a perverse gift of power to a single individual.”

“Then I’ll make you accept it by beating your toys.”

“Impossible. Even if you could—as unimaginable as that is, even if Ardy and Rimcy were to lose to the two of you—I will never accept it.”

Saya’s glare burned with rage at Camilla.

“But if they should lose, I will take back some of what I said to you. I have poured every ounce of skill and technology that Ferrovius and I have amassed throughout the years into Ardy and Rimcy. If you defeat them, I will have to recognize that your weapons are practical.”

With that, Camilla abruptly turned her back to Saya and walked away.

“Wha—? C’mon, you’re just gonna flounce off once *you’re* finished talking? I’ve got all sorts of questions about her guns! Aw, wait for me! Hey, Camilla!” Ernesta skipped after her but suddenly stopped and turned around to shout in farewell. “Have fun, okay? Take care of our babies!”

She waved her arms like a child, then disappeared into the passageway at a

trot.

"…" Saya stared after them for a while, then turned to the gate. "Let's go, Kirin."

"Right."

They headed toward the brightly lit stage and the storm of cheers around it.

"We have to win."

"Right!"

*

"*Hello, everyone! Are you as excited as we are?! It's your favorite announcer, Mico Yanase, live from Sirius Dome, and with me is Ms. Tram on commentary!*"

"*Hey, folks.*"

"*So we're finally in the semifinals of the Phoenix! The first match is between Saya Sasamiya and Kirin Toudou of Seidoukan Academy, and—fighting as proxies—Ardy and Rimcy of Allekant Académie! This one's gonna be good!*"

"*Some people are saying this one will decide the championship.*"

"*Is that right?*"

"*Well, both teams in the other semifinal have made it through some hard knocks. Those fighters have some serious fatigue and injuries to cope with. Both teams in this match have made it here with hardly a scratch, so.*"

"*I see, I see! These two teams won most of their battles before you could blink. Now, Team Sasamiya-Toudou did have a tight contest in the quarterfinal, but Team Ardy-Rimcy took only about a minute to win every time!*"

"*And that's after telling their opponents they wouldn't attack for that full minute, so. I'm thinking one of the keys to today's match will be whether Team Sasamiya-Toudou can break through Ardy's Absolute Shield.*"

Absolute Shield—this was what they called Ardy's wall of light. The phrase had popped up on the net, and by now it had become the accepted term. Saya suspected it was a small-scale version of the defensive barriers used for the Festa stages. So far, no one had succeeded in breaking through to land an

attack on Ardy.

As usual, Ardy's declaration boomed through the arena. "Hear me! Once again, we will grant our opponents one minute. During this time, we will not attack you. Do as you wish!"

"…Hmph."

His condescending challenge sounded almost more human than an actual human.

Saya gave him a contemptuous glance and turned to her partner. "Kirin, he's all yours."

"All right."

"Show him what's what."

Kirin nodded and drew her katana an inch from its scabbard. She focused her mind to prepare for combat.

"*Phoenix, Semifinal Round One—Begin!*"

Even when the match began, Ardy and Rimcy showed no intention of moving.

Ardy, standing firm and imposing with his arms crossed, hardly looked ready to fight. He was the very picture of arrogance.

"I, Kirin Toudou, will face you in battle." Holding the Senbakiri in front of her, Kirin confronted Ardy's enormous frame directly.

"Hmm, so you are my challenger, Kirin Toudou. I was not expecting this," Ardy said incredulously.

"…Is there a problem?"

"I had thought Saya Sasamiya would face me—that is all. I am somewhat surprised."

"Do you mean to say that I'm not a worthy opponent for you?"

"If you mean to break through my defensive barrier, the logical choice is Saya

Sasamiya and her high-powered Luxes.”

“…”

“It is true that you possess perhaps the most athleticism and skill among all the contestants of this Phoenix. The data does not lie. But your weapon is not even a Lux—it is an ordinary katana. If you had an Orga Lux, it would be one thing, but you cannot hope to break through my barrier with that.” Peering down at Kirin from far above, Ardy slumped in dismay. “My advice would be to switch with Saya Sasamiya, or to jointly—”

“Would you like to try me, then?” Kirin interrupted Ardy quietly.

“Hrm?”

“Please see for yourself whether the Senbakiri and I will indeed be no match for you.”

“Very well. If you insist, give it a go. I’m interested to see what you will try in the next minute.”

As soon as Ardy nodded, Kirin’s katana whipped through the air like a flash of light.

The diagonal strike came with superhuman speed. But just before the tip of the blade reached Ardy’s body, the wall suddenly appeared to deflect it.

Undaunted, Kirin attacked a second, and then a third time.

“Ah—your speed is phenomenal. I am impressed that you have reached this level with a body of flesh.” Ardy still stood unflinching, his arms still crossed.

The barrier repelled every single one of Kirin’s attacks.

“But it is of no avail,” Ardy said bluntly. “No matter how fast you might be, it is impossible for a human to surpass me in reflex. Which is to say, your attacks will never reach me.”

Kirin paused her blade to slow her breathing. “I see. Now I know what I need to know.”

Repositioning her katana by her shoulder, she went for Ardy again.

“I just told you, it’s of no avail…”

But Kirin's katana slid around the wall of light and, with a hard *clang*, left a clean, straight scratch on Ardy's arm.

"Hrm…?"

"*W-wow, this is incredible! Finally, for the first time all tournament, an attack has landed on Ardy! Did Toudou just achieve the impossible? Did she get through the invincible Absolute Shield with just an ordinary katana?!*" The announcer's excited voice rang through the arena over the wildly cheering crowd.

Ardy, meanwhile, stared at his arm in quiet shock.

"How—this is not possible. How did you—"

"Our minute isn't up yet," Kirin said. "Please withdraw your declaration. And let us confront each another on equal terms."

"And what do you mean by that?"

"I mean, don't take us lightly, please."

Chagrinned, Ardy fell silent. Kirin wasted no time in attacking again.

The wall of light materialized to block it, but once more Kirin's blade zipped around it to carve into Ardy's side. He grunted in frustration.

"The first time was not a fluke. If you insist on continuing this, the next attack will be the last." Kirin pointed the Senbakiri at Ardy.

"…" He remained silent.

Kirin let out a short breath, and the Senbakiri gleamed.

But before she could strike, Ardy activated a hammer-shaped Lux to go on the offensive.

"—!"

Kirin withdrew her blade and dodged the attack, then sprang backward to distance herself.

"*And—and now! Ardy attacked his opponent! It's been fifty-six seconds since his challenge! It hasn't been a minute yet!*"

Spinning the hammer around him, Ardy slammed its end into the ground.

“Most impressive! In this, you have bested me. I withdraw my declaration!” Ardy retracted his statement boldly, and more easily than Kirin might have expected. “It appears that I have presumed too much. I know now that I have much to learn. Now, I would humbly ask, what technique was it that you used?”

Ardy’s demeanor remained haughty despite his verbal show of humility, but he did seem to be speaking honestly.

As she readied her blade, Kirin replied deliberately. “It worked because you’re a machine.”

“What do you mean by that?” Ardy tilted his head, unable to process her answer.

“You analyze my data and actions to predict my incoming attack and activate the barrier. Isn’t that right?”

“Indeed, that is correct.” *And what’s wrong with that?* Ardy left unsaid.

“The Toudou style has techniques to manipulate the opponent using my breathing, my gaze, changes in range and distance, movements of my muscles —everything. I am constantly planning and adapting. But you—because you’re such a well-made machine, you observe all of that and arrive at a conclusion that is beyond *perfect*. So all I have to do is make my attack slightly off.”

“Then—you were baiting me?” Ardy blurted in disbelief.

“If this was a fight between two experienced swordsmen, we would be reading each other in every possible manner, every single instant. Neither of my earlier attacks would have reached Ayato, for example. I did bait your movements in an obvious way. But because you’re a machine, you respond simplistically.” Kirin paused, then delivered her verdict in no uncertain terms: “Essentially, your flaw is lack of experience as a fighter.”

*

Saya watched the exchange between Kirin and Ardy.

“…That’s my Kirin.” She nodded in satisfaction.

“I don’t understand,” Rimcy said, scowling suspiciously. She had been facing

down Saya.

“Hmm? Don’t understand what?”

“Why didn’t you try to attack me in that one minute?”

Just as Rimcy said, Saya had simply watched her partner without doing so much as activate her Lux.

“If that good-for-nothing oaf gets his butt soundly kicked, that’s his own fault. But you refused to take an advantage that was offered to you. You’re the one underestimating us. This is most displeasing.” Rimcy activated an enormous gun-shaped Lux in each hand and aimed them at Saya.

“Displeasing? I just wanted you to fight us without holding back.” Calmly, Saya finally took out her own Lux activator. “There’s no point otherwise.”

Then, bullets of light rained down on her like a storm. Saya twisted to dodge the volley and activated her Lux in midair.

“Type 41 Lux twin blaster, Waldenholt,” she murmured for no one else to hear.

Naming aloud the weapons her father had made for her—that was one of Saya’s self-imposed rules.

A large-scale Lux with a massive backpack unit materialized, and a targeting HUD projected from her hair ornament. An enormous gun wrapped around each of her arms.

As she landed, she poured prana into the manadites. Dodging the next salvo, she squeezed the trigger.

“*Burst.*”

Bright bluish light amassed at the muzzles of the guns.

The next moment, with a high-pitched shriek, two giant projectiles pierced through the air.

“—!”

Rimcy barely managed to evade the first shot, but not the second.



As the thunderous explosion threatened to bring the whole arena down, Rimcy slammed into the opposite wall. Saya's firepower was so devastating that if not for the protective barrier, the Puppet might have exited the arena itself.

"Well, I'm good to go, too," Saya said to the cloud of debris. "Bring it on."

In reply, a pair of red eyes glowed through the dust.

EPILOGUE

The brilliantly sunlit room was outfitted with a perfectly ordered array of refined furniture. Curtains patterned with a classic design fluttered in the wind, and the deep blue and off-white carpet created a conservative base for the décor. Elaborate carvings embellished the ebony office desk with a golden pen holder perched on its corner—every last item in this room made for a harmonious space.

It was its own small world—not too extravagant, but elegant and tasteful.

In the center of this space, a young man smiled jovially.

With arrestingly fine features and immaculate pale blond hair, at first glance the youth might be mistaken for part of the room itself.

But meeting him in person would quickly dispel that impression. His frank disposition and charming, powerful presence would see to that—as would the edge lurking behind his serene smile, as any observant person might notice.

Of course, if he was not this way, he would not be serving as the student council president of St. Gallardworth Academy—nor would the Runesword have chosen him.

Nor could he maintain the top rank at the school.

“You seem to be enjoying yourself, Ernest.” The vice president, Laetitia Blanchard, lightly knocked on the room’s open door.

“Ah, you’re here, Laetitia.” Ernest Fairclough looked up at her with a cool smile. He had been watching the air-window in front of his folded hands.

“Oh, were you watching the semifinals?”

“No, I was watching the quarterfinals from yesterday.”

Laetitia’s brows knit at his answer. “The quarterfinals…?”

Swiping her curled hair—a darker blond than Ernest’s—back from her eyes, she peered at the display.

The video was of yesterday’s Phoenix quarterfinal match. The fierce contest between Seidoukan and Jie Long had attracted glowing reviews, and the winners were set to face Ernest’s comrades of the Silverwinged Knights—the Life Rhodes. His interest was only natural.

It was natural, but Laetitia didn’t like it. “Does that boy really intrigue you so much?”

“Ha-ha. Well, yes.” Ernest laughed softly and nodded, as if he had nothing to hide.

“My, my—first her, and now you. What do you see in him? I just don’t understand.”

“Now, now. That’s no expression for a girl everyone calls a ‘saint.’” Ernest scolded Laetitia as she puffed out her cheeks in a sulk. “You really do act childish wherever Miss Enfield is involved.”

“What—?! I—I do not! I most certainly, absolutely do not!”

Ernest glanced sidelong at Laetitia’s scarlet-faced denial, then returned his gaze to the screen. “Anyway… He really is wonderful. His blades have principle, pure and dignified. I would dearly like to cross swords with him.”

“Ernest, you know you can’t…”

“I know. I’m just thinking aloud—no harm in that, is there?” With a regretful smile, Ernest shrugged.

This was what it meant to be chosen by the Runesword.

He must always be noble, discard all selfishness, and act as an agent of order and justice in everything. That was the cost demanded of him by the sword Lei-Glems.

If there was ever a shadow of a doubt, this Orga Lux—one of the Runeswords

—would ruthlessly abandon him. That would mean the loss of the alias Pendragon and the privileges that came with it.



This would be unacceptable—for Laetitia, as well as for the other knights.

Gallardworth needed him more than ever.

“Don’t fret, Ernest. Even if you can’t face him man-to-man, you should have the chance to go head-to-head with him soon enough…at the Gryps next year.” Laetitia smiled dauntlessly. “That boy will fight as a member of her team, I’m certain of it. And he’ll come up against our team sooner or later. You can fight to your heart’s content then. And victory will of course be ours!”

She clenched her fists.

“My word… You really want to defeat Miss Enfield, don’t you?”

“I admit it, I do. I can’t lose to her, no matter what.”

Yes. She had to defeat Claudia Enfield. When next they met, Laetitia would win.

She swore it on her honor as the second ranked at St. Gallardworth Academy—Gloriara, the Witch of Shining Wings.

“You weren’t satisfied with the last Gryps? A win is a win, isn’t it?”

“I know we won as a team—but still!” Recalling what had happened two years ago, Laetitia ground her teeth.

Even though her team had won that match, Claudia’s swords had destroyed Laetitia’s school crest—that hateful Pan-Dora.

“I’ll never forget how she humiliated me…!”

That wasn’t the only reason Laetitia needed to beat Claudia, of course. But her pride wouldn’t allow her to leave a defeat unavenged.

“Hmm…” Ernest closed the air-window and sat in thought. The smile had faded. “There is another reason why I’m interested in him.”

“There’s something else?”

“It seems that Dirk Eberwein has made contact with him.”

“The Tyrant?” Laetitia made no effort to conceal her displeasure.

Gallardworth and Le Wolfe had no shortage of disagreements. To Laetitia, and

the rest of their school, Le Wolfe's notorious student council president was a mortal enemy.

"There are also reports that he's mobilized the Cats," Ernest said, "although we're not sure if it's related to the boy."

"That…would seem to indicate some disturbance," Laetitia remarked.

If the intelligence apparatus of Le Wolfe was in motion, trouble was sure to follow.

Whether that trouble would ever reach the public consciousness was another issue entirely.

"We can only hope that nothing will come of it…" Ernest turned his eyes, now shadowed with apprehension, to the scene outside his window.

*

"*W-wow, another unbelievable turn of events! Sasamiya's landed a clean hit on Rimcy! Needless to say, this is also the first time all tournament for Rimcy to take a hit! Could the invincible team from Allekant finally fall today?!*"

The elated cry of the commentator filled the arena over the thunderous cheers of a frenzied crowd.

Flora was no exception to the madness, shouting from a corner of the stands with sweat in her balled fists and ecstasy lighting up her face. "Miss Sasamiya, Miss Toudou! You're both awesome!"

A pure admiration swirled in her chest along with a wish that she could be like them someday. She waved her arms wildly.

The spectators were standing up in their excitement, and soon everyone in the audience was on their feet. Flora, being so short, was lost in the crowd. As she hopped up and down on her seat, trying desperately to get a view—

"Hey, you." A deep, dark voice spoke from directly behind her.

"Huh…?"

Just as she turned, a sharp blow landed on her neck.

Not a single person in the feverish crowd noticed the girl disappear.

AFTERWORD

Hello, Yuu Miyazaki here, delivering Volume 4 of *The Asterisk War* to you.

You did get it, didn't you…?

Well, as it happens, while I was working on this volume my schedule got thrown completely off the rails thanks to a mystery toothache. The symptoms got worse, especially at night, and for a long time I couldn't sleep because of the pain. Even when I ran to the dentist, the X-rays showed no cavities, and the medicine they gave me for hypersensitivity or whatever didn't work at all.

In the end, they figured out it was pulpitis and gave me the right treatment—but what a mess. They gave me only local anesthesia, so I was surprised to find I fell asleep in the dentist's chair for the first time in my life. Sleep deprivation is serious business.

So, long story short—things got more down to the wire than ever before, and I was terribly worried about whether this volume would make it safely into your hands. Well, I guess if you're reading this, everything must have turned out okay.

Now, enough about my life. Let's talk about the story.

The Phoenix, which started in the previous volume, is finally heading to a climax.

This volume revolved around the Jie Long Seventh Institute. With Seisenjutsu and a particular aesthetic, it's one of the more distinctive of the six schools. I'm

glad I finally got to turn the spotlight on them. One way or another, so far I've been able to give you a glimpse of four out of the six schools.

I'm hoping to wrap up the Phoenix in the upcoming fifth volume, so please bear with me a little longer.

By the way, I asked my editor, Mr. Iwaasa, to include a brief summary of the characters and the story so far. This series has a pretty sizeable population of characters, so I hope that helps if you find yourself asking, *Huh? Who's this guy, again?*

Once again, okiura has given us wonderful, awesome, and adorable illustrations. I was thinking about how tiring it must be to work on the Jie Long designs, since their costumes are so unique. But I'm very excited—what he came up with exceeded my highest expectations.

I had left everything to him, including the mech team of Ardy and Rimcy, and Saya's new weapons, which made it onto the front cover. I couldn't contain my excitement when I saw the finished illustrations. Just really amazing stuff.

And the manga adaptation of *The Asterisk War* by Ningen is running in *Monthly Comic Alive* to great acclaim. The character designs have a lot of rigid lines to them, okiura admits, and I imagine that must be hard to turn into dynamic scenes for a comic. But Ningen has really refined characters like Claudia to shine in that medium. Neither okiura nor I could stop repeating how amazing it was.

I can't wait to see the paperbacks!

And finally, I received help from a great many people in completing this volume.

To my editor, Mr. Iwaasa, I am so thankful for his hard work pushing the project forward despite the problems with my work schedule. Likewise, to Sakai with production, I'm so sorry for all the trouble I heaped on you, and so grateful. Thank you so very much. To Shimizu, Ohrui, and all the editorial staff, all the staff at the bookstores who made my signings possible, and most of all to

my readers who keep supporting this work—thank you, everyone.

Until next time!

Yuu Miyazaki, August 2013

THE WORLD OF *THE ASTERISK WAR* GLOSSARY

THE INVERTIA

A mysterious disaster that befell the Earth in the twentieth century. Meteors fell all over the world for three days and three nights, destroying many cities. As a result, the strength of existing nations declined considerably, and a new form of economic power known as "integrated enterprise foundations" took their place.

A previously unknown element called "mana" was extracted from the meteorites, leading to advances in scientific technology as well as a new type of human called "Genestella" with extraordinary powers.

The Invertia was undetected by all of the observatories in the world, and the destruction it caused was actually much less than ordinary meteors should have done, so the pervading theory is that it did not consist of normal meteors.

INTEGRATED ENTERPRISE FOUNDATION

A new type of economic entity formed by corporations that merged to overcome the chaotic economic situation following the Invertia. Their power far surpasses that of the diminished nations.

There used to be eight IEFs, but there are currently six: Galaxy, EP (Elliott-Pound), Jie Long, Solnage, Frauenlob, and W&W (Warren & Warren). They vie for advantage over each other and effectively control the world. Each one sponsors an academy in the Asterisk.

THE FESTA

A fighting tournament where students compete, held in the Asterisk, and operated by the IEFs. Each cycle or "season" consists of three events: the tag match Phoenix in the summer of the first year, the team battle Gryps in the fall of the second year, and the individual match Lindvolus in the winter of the third year. Victory is achieved by destroying the opponent's school crest, and the rules are set forth in the Stella Carta. As the event is held for entertainment, acts of deliberate cruelty and attacks intended to cause death or injury can be penalized.

The event is the most popular in the world, with matches broadcast internationally. The IEFs prioritize economic success and growth above all else, so the direction of the Festa has always been driven by the majority demand of consumers. (This is why the fighters are students—viewers want to see beautiful boys and girls fight each other.) Some speak out against the Festa on ethical grounds, but under the rule of the IEFs, those voices have fallen from justified dissent to unpopular opinion.

The cultures of the different schools veer to extremes, which is also by design, for the sake of the Festa.

THE STELLA CARTA

Rules that apply strictly to all the students of the Asterisk. Those who violate these rules are harshly penalized, sometimes by expulsion. If a school is found to have been involved, the administration can also be subject to penalty. The Stella Carta has been amended several times in the past. The most important items are as follows:

- Combat between students of the Asterisk is permitted only insofar as the intent is to destroy the other's school crest.
- Each student of the Asterisk shall be eligible to participate in the Festa between the ages of 13 and 22, a period spanning ten years.
- Each student of the Asterisk shall participate in the Festa no more than three times.

MANA

A previously unknown element that was brought to Earth by the Invertia. By now, it can be found all over the world. It responds to the will of living things that meet certain criteria, incorporating surrounding elements to form objects and create phenomena.

GENESTELLA

A new type of human being, born out of influence from mana. With an aura known as "prana," they possess physical abilities far beyond those of ordinary humans. Those who can link with mana without special equipment are called Stregas (female) and Dantes (male).

Discrimination against Genestella is a pervasive social problem, and there are many students who come to the Asterisk to escape this. (The negative bias against Genestella is one reason why opposition to the Festa is in the minority.)

PRANA

A kind of aura unique to Genestella. Stregas and Dantes deplete prana as they use their powers. They lose consciousness if they run out of prana, but it can be replenished with time. The manipulation of prana is a basic skill among Genestella, and by focusing prana, they can increase offensive or defensive strength. This is especially effective for defense, which explains why serious injuries among the Asterisk students are rare despite the commonplace use of weapons.

METEORIC ENGINEERING

A field of science that studies mana and the meteorites from the Invertia. Many mysteries remain pertaining to the effects of mana. Research on manadite, however, has advanced significantly, making use of rare metals found in abundance in the meteorites to yield a variety of practical applications.

MANADITE

A special ore made of crystallized Mana. By applying stress, it can be made to memorize or retain specific elemental patterns. Before the Invertia, it did not exist on Earth, and it must be extracted from meteorites. Manadite is used in Lux activators, as well as manufactured products developed by meteoric engineering.

LUX

A type of weapon using a manadite core. Records of elemental patterns are stored in pieces of manadite and re-created using activators. By gathering mana from the surroundings, they can create blades or projectiles of light. Mana also acts as the energy source for Lux weapons.

URM-MANADITE

A name for exceptionally pure manadite, much rarer than ordinary manadite. Luxes using urm-manadite are known as Orga Luxes. Urm-manadite crystals come in myriad colors and shapes, and no two are the same. They are said to have minds of their own.

ORGA LUX

A weapon using urm-manadite as the core. Many of them have special powers, but using them takes a toll—a certain "cost." The weapons themselves have something akin to a sentient will, and unsuitable users cannot even touch the weapon. Suitability is measured by means of a compatibility rating.

Most Orga Luxes are owned by the IEFs and are entrusted to the schools of the Asterisk for the purpose of lending out to students with high compatibility ratings.

characters

ALLEKANT ACADÉMIE

ERNESTA KÜHNE
A genius meteoric engineer, the pride of Allekant. Head of the Pygmalion faction.

CAMILLA PARETO
Specializes in Lux development, and inseparable from Ernesta. Head of the Ferrovius faction.

ARDY (AR-D)—"ABSOLUTE REFUSAL" DEFENDED MODEL
Autonomous Puppet created by Ernesta.

RIMCY (RM-C)—"RUINOUS MIGHT" CANNON MODEL
Autonomous Puppet created by Ernesta.

LE WOLFE BLACK INSTITUTE

DIRK EBERWEIN
A devilishly clever young man known as the Devious King, Tyrant. The first non-Genestella student council president of Le Wolfe.

KORONA KASHIMARU
The student council president's secretary. Unranked, with no powers useful in battle despite being a Genestella.

IRENE URZAIZ
Ranked third at Le Wolfe. Alias the Vampire Princess, Lamilexia.

PRISCILLA URZAIZ
Unranked. Irene's younger sister, and a regenerative (a Genestella with healing powers).

ST. GALLARDWORTH ACADEMY

ERNEST FAIRCLOUGH
Student council president of St. Gallardworth Academy. Ranked first, alias the Paladin, Pendragon.

LAETITIA BLANCHARD
Student council vice president of St. Gallardworth Academy. Ranked second, alias the Witch of Shining Wings, Gloriara.

JIE LONG SEVENTH INSTITUTE

XINGLOU FAN
Student council president of Jie Long Seventh Institute. Successor to the alias Immanent Heaven, Ban'yuu Tenra and one of the strongest fighters in all Asterisk.

ZHAO HUFENG
Ranked fifth. An exceptional martial artist and Xinglou's star pupil. Alias the Peerless Thorn, Tenka Musou.

SHENYUN LI AND SHENHUA LI
Twin brother and sister, ranked ninth and tenth. Alias the Phantom Builder, Gen'ei Souki, and the Phantom Vanisher, Gen'ei Musan, respectively.

SONG AND LUO
Pupils of Xinglou who faced Ayato and Julis in the fifth round of the Phoenix. Ranked twentieth and twenty-third at Jie Long.

QUEENVALE ACADEMY FOR YOUNG LADIES

COMING SOON!

OTHERS

MADIATH MESA
Chairman of the Executive Committee for the Festa, granted full authority over the events by the six integrated enterprise foundations.

MICO YANASE
Announcer for the Phoenix events and a Queenvale alum.

PHAM THI TRAM
Commentator for the Phoenix events and a Jie Long alum, ranked twenty-fifth there.

FLORA KLEMM
A ten-year-old girl from the orphanage Julis is supporting.

HARUKA AMAGIRI
Ayato's older sister; missing for five years.

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