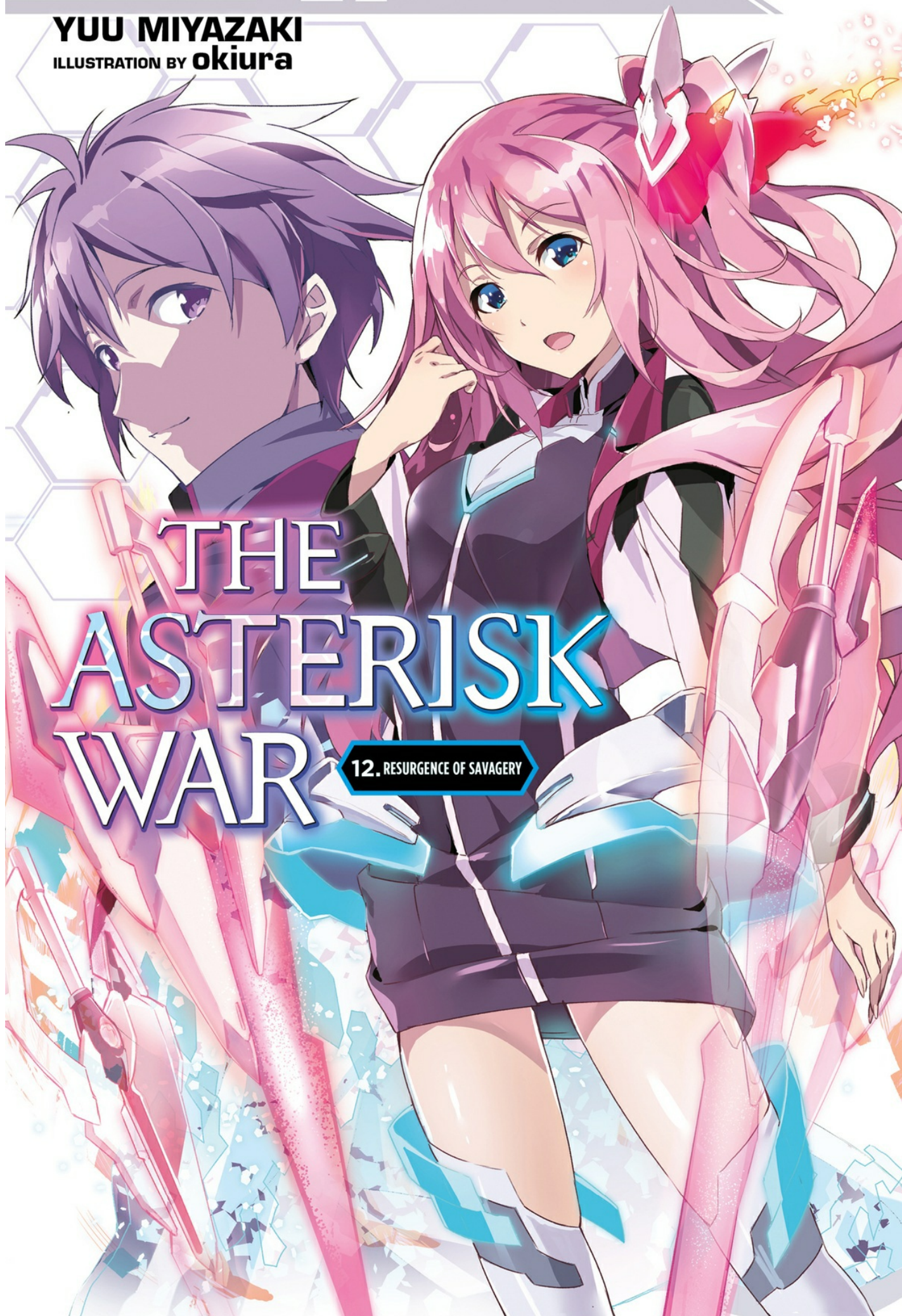


YUU MIYAZAKI
ILLUSTRATION BY **okiura**

THE ASTERISK WAR

12. RESURGENCE OF SAVAGERY



THE ASTERISK WAR

**YUU
MIYAZAKI**
ILLUSTRATION BY
okiura

12. RESURGENCE OF SAVAGERY







Ayato Amagiri

Ayato Amagiri

"I'M NOT GOING TO HOLD BACK.
THERE WOULD BE NO POINT
TO THIS IF I DID."

"I WOULDN'T
WANT YOU TO."

Haruka Amagiri

Haruka Amagiri



Saya Sasamiya
Saya Sasamiya

Julis-Alexia
von Riessfeld

Julis-Alexia
von Riessfeld

Kirin Toudou

Kirin Toudou

Claudia Enfield
Claudia Enfield



THE 12. RESURGENCE OF SAVAGERY ASTERISK WAR

YUU MIYAZAKI
ILLUSTRATION: OKIURA



NEW YORK

Copyright

THE ASTERISK WAR, Vol. 12

YUU MIYAZAKI

Translation by Haydn Trowell

Cover art by okiura

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GAKUSEN TOSHI ASTERISK Vol.12 SEKKI SAIYOU

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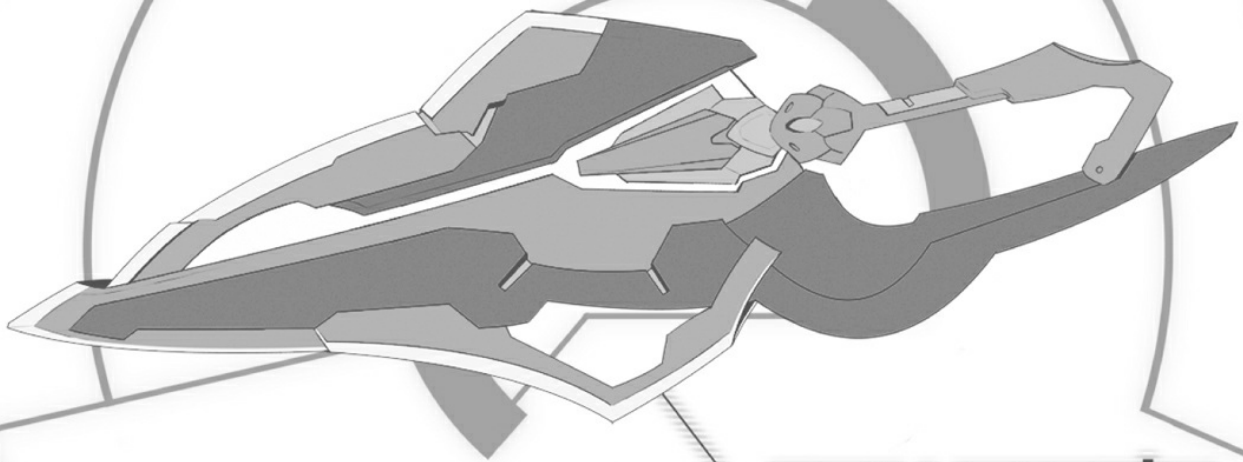
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MADIATH MESA



ser veresta

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c o n t e n t s



SEIDOUKAN ACADEMY

AYATO AMAGIRI



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

ALIAS: Gathering Clouds, Murakumo
ORGA LUX: Ser Veresta

JULIS-ALEXIA VON RIESSFELD



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

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

CLAUDIA ENFIELD



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

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

SAYA SASAMIYA



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

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

KIRIN TOUDOU



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

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

EISHIROU YABUKI

Ayato's roommate. Member of the newspaper club.

LESTER MACPHAIL

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

RANDY HOOKE

Lester's partner for the Phoenix.

KYOUKO YATSUZAKI

Ayato and company's homeroom teacher.

PREVIOUSLY IN THE ASTERISK WAR...

The various members of Team Enfield go their separate ways as they begin their respective preparations for the Lindvolus, with Julis training at Xinglou Fan's private school, the Liangshan; Saya taking charge of her own Lux development facility; and Claudia opening negotiations with Galaxy and meeting face-to-face with Ladislav Bartošik. Ayato and Kirin, both originally intending to go home for the New Year, find themselves paying visits to each other's families. With her help, Ayato is finally able to bring himself to face his father and requests the assistance of Magnum Opus, Hilda Jane Rowlands, to rouse his sister. At long last, Haruka awakens from her long sleep...

characters

CHAPTER 1

REUNION

As they made their way through the subterranean depths of Asterisk's central district hospital, Julis, walking at Ayato's right-hand side, patted him on the back.

"What's the matter?" she said as she looked up at his face, her lips curling impishly. "It's not like you to be this nervous."

"R-really...?" he stammered in surprise.

"She's right. Your whole body has gone stiff." This time, it was Saya, at his left, who suddenly gave him a reassuring pat—on the butt.

"Wha—?! S-Saya?!"

"You're going to make Haru worry if you don't calm down." Despite her teasing, her voice and eyes radiated a smiling warmth.

"Come now, you two," Claudia chided. "Ayato hasn't spoken to his sister in years. Anyone would feel uneasy in his situation."

"B-but is this really okay...?" Kirin muttered. "I mean, won't we all just get in the way? After all, it's such an important moment for you..."

Ayato glanced over his shoulder at the two girls walking behind him. Their expressions were practically polar opposites: Claudia wore the same composed smile as ever, while Kirin's uneasy frown was even more pronounced than usual.

The hospital's underground medical facilities were accessible only to those who had been granted express authorization, so Ayato had asked the institute's director, Jan Korbel, to allow Julis and the others to accompany him.

"It's fine," he responded. "I've been wanting to introduce you all properly for

a while now.”

Ahead of them, two young, uniformed Stjarnagarm officers stood at attention at either side of the door at the end of the corridor. As was to be expected of the two women who had been handpicked by Commander Helga Lindwall, their demeanor and diligence were impeccable. Not only that, but it took only one glimpse at their confident figures to see how strong they both were.

“...Hmm, the security looks tight enough,” Julis said, evidently thinking the same thing.

Ayato merely nodded in agreement.

Five days had passed since Hilda Jane Rowlands, alias Magnum Opus, had used her mana accelerator in Geneva, Switzerland, to successfully dispel the seal that had imprisoned Haruka within her own body. Through a live video feed, both Ayato and Julis had seen Haruka briefly open her eyes, but she had soon slipped back into unconsciousness. According to Hilda’s medical staff, however, this time, she was merely suffering the effects of depleted prana. In other words, the procedure had gone smoothly.

As such, they had decided to bring her back to Asterisk, but as soon as they arrived at the floating airport that served the city, Helga and an assignment of security personnel were already waiting for them. While Ayato was at first taken aback by the unexpected welcoming party, Helga quickly informed him that Haruka was an important witness in her investigation into the Eclipse, and so would be guarded with the utmost caution.

Then, last night, Director Jan Korbel had contacted Ayato to let him know she had finally woken up.

And that brought them to now:

“Uhh, well,” Ayato began, “I’d like to see my sister...”

“Please wait a moment.” One of the guards, her expression unchanging, opened an air-window that linked into the hospital room. “Go ahead,” she finally responded as she and her companion made room for them to enter.

Ayato sucked in a breath before opening the door.

The walls and floor were pure white in color. The room wasn't particularly large, and apart from the bed lying next to the wall, there was little that might have grabbed one's attention.

Even if there was, however, Ayato would have been unlikely to notice it.

His gaze was drawn immediately to his sister, sitting up in the bed—to that beaming smile that he hadn't seen in almost seven years.

"Nice to see you, Ayato."

Ayato's mouth opened reflexively at the sound of that dear voice, but no words came out. His lips trembled for a brief moment before he took a deep breath and broke out into a weak smile. "Long time no see, sis."

Haruka, dressed in a pale blue hospital gown, really hadn't changed at all from how he remembered her.

"Oh? It doesn't feel like it's been all that long to me, though...?"

Given that she had spent these last seven years asleep (or, more precisely, divorced from the flow of time), it made sense that the past wouldn't feel so distant to her.

"But even so, look how big you've gotten! I'm most surprised by that, to be honest."

"Ah, yeah..."

Even though everything might have stopped for her during that time, including her own growth, Ayato had still continued to age. Indeed, if she were still essentially the same age she had been before sealing herself away, then it was now Ayato who was the older of the two.

"But you still knew it was me, right?"

"What? Of course I did. I'm your big sis, after all!" Haruka puffed out her cheeks at the very suggestion—and then, all of a sudden, began to step down from the bed.

Ayato rushed to help her. "H-hold on, Haru! You've only just woken up...!"

"I'm fine, I'm fine. Do I really look that weak to you?"

Indeed, it turned out that her footing was solid. Normally, anyone who had been bedridden for as long as she had would wake to find their body frail beyond imagination. However, given that her sleep had been abnormal, her ability had frozen everything about herself, so that upon waking, she was just as she had been before.

“Oh? So you’ve finally overtaken me, huh?” Haruka said, tilting her head slightly upward as she stood before him.

This was, of course, a first for Ayato, too—never before had he been the taller of the two.

“Ah, right...! Haru, these are yours...” He took a glasses case out of his pocket, handing it to her. The glasses inside were nondescript, with somewhat rounded lenses and a black frame. He had been holding onto them ever since Saya had found them at the abandoned site of the Eclipse.

The lenses had been broken and the frame bent out of shape, but Ayato had them repaired so he could return them to their owner when the time came.

“Wow, thanks! I can’t get used to a borrowed pair,” Haruka exclaimed, swapping the glasses she had been wearing until now with her own. “Yep, there’s no beating one’s own tried-and-true!”

Indeed, her own glasses suited her the best.

“Hey, Ayato. Come a bit closer.” She flashed him a gentle smile as she reached out to touch his cheek.

“Haru...?”

“...I’ve heard all about it. About what you’ve done for me, about how hard you’ve been fighting all this time. Thank you, Ayato.”

Her words echoed in his ears, carving their way into his heart.

At the same time, he came to a sudden realization: No matter how much taller he might grow, no matter what heights he might bring his swordsmanship to, he would never be a match for her.

To him, Haruka was that great a person.

“So...are you going to introduce your friends to me, or what?”

“Ah!” Ayato turned around, only to see his four companions smiling at them somewhat nervously.

The first to speak was Saya, standing to the left. “You look good, Haru,” she said, giving her a thumbs-up.

“Thanks to you. Just look how beautiful you’ve become, Saya!” Haruka said with a wink as she, too, flashed her a thumbs-up in turn. “Yep, I knew you had a sharper eye than Ayato...”

Saya nodded in satisfaction before turning toward him balefully. “When *he* saw me again for the first time in so long, all he said was that I hadn’t changed at all.”

It seemed that she still held a grudge over his remarks from almost two years ago.

“Ah, I’m—”

“Julis, right? Ayato’s tag partner in the Phoenix, a princess of Lieseltania, and a beautiful, flame-wielding Strega, right? You must have such a pure heart. Thank you. I’m sure Ayato owes you a lot, too.”

“Huh? N-no, I’m only...” Julis could only stare back at her, mouth agape, before lowering her head.

“And you’re Claudia, the team’s representative in the Gryps, right? Plus, Seidoukan’s student council president, and the one who invited Ayato here on a special scholarship. And you’ve got the Pan-Dora, too, right? That’s a pretty terrifying Orga Lux...”

“Oh dear, my fame precedes me,” Claudia replied, raising a hand to her cheek before giving Haruka a light bow.

“And you’re the Toudou girl, Kirin. You look so young, but I’ve heard that you’re one of the best swordswomen in all of Asterisk. I know a thing or two myself about dueling. Won’t you have a little bout with me one day?”

“Wh-wh-what...?! I—I’d be honored...!” Turning scarlet, Kirin made a deep, formal bow.

“Ah, I shouldn’t keep you all standing, not when you’ve come to see me like

this. Come here, sit, sit,” Haruka said, fiddling with an air-window by her bed, when a long sofa suddenly emerged from the floor.

“...It looks like you already know everyone better than I could introduce them,” Ayato remarked as he took the closest position on the sofa.

“Eh-heh, I told you, right? I’ve heard aaall about it. All kinds of things!” Haruka teased as she returned to her bed. “Anyway, is one of our guests your girlfriend, maybe? As your sister, I’d like to greet her properly.”

“Wha—?!”

Haruka had spoken lightly, but Ayato and the four guests all turned stiff in consternation.

Haruka watched their reactions with puzzlement for a brief moment before raising a hand to her mouth, as if to take back her words. “Ah...! Sorry, I just thought... I guess I said too much, huh?” She looked at Ayato beseechingly, clearly wanting him to step in.

“Ah, I mean, the thing about that is...” He trailed off, unable to find the right words.

In the end, it was Claudia who came to his rescue: “We’re all presently fighting to be the one, you see.”

“H-hold on, Claudia!” Julis stammered, her cheeks turning red. “You can’t just —”

Claudia raised a hand to stop her. “Fighting to be the one to look out for Ayato, of course.”

“Ah, I see, I see.” Haruka crossed her arms, nodding repeatedly as she gave him a meaningful gaze. “Way to go, Ayato. Who would have thought my little brother would be so popular? You’ve made me proud.”

“...Come on, Haru, cut it out.”

“Oh, is that a blush? But I guess you *are* right around that age now, huh?”

“Haru!” Ayato cried out, practically on the verge of tears.

“Hee-hee, sorry, sorry.” Haruka flashed him an amused smile as she patted

him on the hand.

“R-right.” Julis cleared her throat. “Ayato looks like such a kid, talking to his sister like this.”

Ayato had wanted to find some way to change the subject, but not like this. “I-is that so? I didn’t notice...”

“No, Julis hit the mark,” Saya interrupted. “You’ve always acted like a pampered kid in front of your sister.”

“You did seem a bit more, um, emotional when we went to see your father...” Even Kirin was in agreement with the others.

Not only that, but:

“Don’t worry about it, Ayato,” Claudia said with a light chuckle. “That’s just part of your charm.”

“C-come on, you don’t *all* need to...” Ayato was trying to find any way he could to shield himself from the spectacular linked attack, but Haruka, it seemed, could withstand it no further, bursting out into gales of laughter:

“*Pfft!* Ha-ha-ha-ha!”

“H-Haru...?”

“Ah, sorry. I’m just so relieved. I was worried what you’d do without me, but seeing these wonderful friends of yours... I’d already heard about everyone, but it’s different meeting you all in person.” She wiped away the tears welling in the corners of her eyes, her voice truly joyful.

“Right, about that. You said you’d already heard, but from whom...?”

“That would be me.”

“!”

Ayato and his four companions all spun around as a voice rang out from behind them. Standing in the corner of the room, leaning against the far wall, was a tall woman.

“Commander Lindwall...?! ”

“My apologies, I didn’t mean to surprise you. I didn’t want to barge in on your

long-awaited reunion, you see.” Helga Lindwall, commander of the city guard and widely considered one of the strongest fighters in all of Asterisk’s history, gave the group an apologetic grin. She had probably been there from the very beginning.

He might have been focusing his attention on Haruka, but Ayato could hardly believe that not only he, but also every single member of the team that had conquered the Gryps, had failed to detect her presence.

Or rather, he was more embarrassed, perhaps, that she had witnessed their previous exchange.

“I’ve had a lot of tests today, so Helga’s been accompanying me. She’s also been filling me in on everything that I missed. She even showed me the Festa.”

“I see... Thank you.”

“What’s this?” Helga said, raising a hand to quiet him. “There’s no need for thanks. What kind of guard would I be if I didn’t accompany her to her tests? And I thought it would be best to fill in some gaps in her information while I was at it.”

“But...” A hint of suspicion infected Claudia’s voice. “If you’re inquiring about *that*, wouldn’t all this new information get in the way?”

She had a point. Human memory could be an uncertain thing, and if Haruka was told what had happened during her long sleep, that new information could end up affecting her recollection of the past.

“That would normally be the case, yes,” Helga responded. “But it doesn’t necessarily hold for this situation. Someone involved in the Eclipse may have the ability to manipulate another person’s thoughts, so there’s every possibility that her memories would be unreliable anyway.”

“...”

Ayato and Claudia exchanged brief glances. She was talking, of course, about the Varda-Vaos.

The two of them, along with Sylvia Lyyneheym, had joined forces with the integrated enterprise foundation Galaxy in pursuit of the Varda-Vaos’s

organization, the Golden Bough Alliance. This was, of course, highly confidential as far as Galaxy was concerned, and one of the conditions of their involvement was that they weren't to utter a word to anyone. Including—no, especially—the city guard.

Ayato certainly wanted to enlist the help of Stjarnagarm, considering it was one of the few organizations that seemed to legitimately want to get to the bottom of the Golden Bough Alliance, but there was no getting around his present situation. He, of course, had confidence in Helga's abilities and trusted her on a personal level, so he couldn't help but feel a touch of guilt at concealing what he knew. But even so, coming forward wasn't something he could decide to do by himself.

"Manipulating memories? You mean, someone capable of mental interference was involved in the Eclipse...?" Julis, a Strega herself, was quick to put the pieces together.

"Indeed," Helga stated. "We suspect they're using an Orga Lux. They're likely associated with the man who attacked Ayato the night before the championship match at the Gryps—this Lamina Mortis who was involved in the Eclipse."

"What?!" All at once, Julis, Saya, Kirin (and Claudia, too, for appearance's sake) turned to Ayato in alarm.

"You said you were attacked, but you never made it out to sound *that* dangerous!" Julis was clearly angry—so angry, in fact, that she looked almost threatening.

"N-no, I mean, we had the match coming up, and I didn't really have time to explain everything in detail..."

Julis, Saya, and Kirin had nothing to do with this affair, and he had wanted to keep them from getting caught up in it unnecessarily. Indeed, if they knew too much, there was every possibility that their actions could draw an attempt on their lives just as Claudia's had.

"In fact, a number of the staff at this very hospital appear to have been attacked as well. And according to our investigations, the student in charge of the Gran Colosseo at the school fair is a victim, too. His memories, it seems,

have been changed.”

“But...I’ve never heard of an Orga Lux with that kind of power,” Saya murmured doubtfully.

“Don’t the integrated enterprise foundations have to disclose everything they know about their urm-manadite stocks...?” Kirin added.

Helga, however, shook her head. “There have always been exceptions. Although, in most cases, it’s more a question of timing, as it’s almost impossible to keep these things under wraps forever. They put an awful lot of effort into keeping tabs on one another, after all.”

“So you’re saying this doesn’t have anything to do with the foundations at all?”

“At the very least, it does look that way for now. The Eclipse was run by Danilo Bertoni and his associates, working individually—albeit with the tacit consent of the foundations. We’re likely dealing with the remnants of that group.”

The commander was as sharp as ever. Even with no more than the limited information at her disposal, she was still managing to put the pieces together with frightening accuracy.

“Ah, my apologies. We’ve gone a little bit off track. Anyway, I thought the easiest way to tell whether Haruka’s memories had been altered was to compare them against what we already know.”

“Also, because I asked her to fill me in,” Haruka, until now listening to their exchange in silence, suddenly interjected. “I wanted to know what’s been happening over the past seven years... I mean, I could always look it up on the Net, but anything I find there is guaranteed to be one-sided, right? So I thought Helga could give me a more objective rundown.”

“We’ve only got so much time, though, so it’s really no more than a rough summary.”

That was enough for Ayato. “...All right.”

“Well, I can always ask you all for more intimate details. We’ve got time,

right?”

At this, Ayato felt a strange warmth begin to spread through his chest.

They had all the time in the world.

That fact made him happier than he could possibly express.

Still, first things first:

“In that case...I’ve got some questions I want to ask you as well.” Ayato set a grave gaze upon her as he broached the topic.

After all, there was something he needed to clarify before they could talk about anything else.

Haruka, for her part, seemed to have guessed what he meant, giving him a slight nod. “Yeah, there’s some things I’d better tell you, too.”

“...If it’s something private, we can clear the room,” Helga offered.

“Ah, yeah...thanks.”

But no sooner had everyone stood up than Haruka shook her head. “No, it’s related to your investigation, and I want the others to hear as well. If Ayato trusts them, then so do I.”

Julis and the others exchanged glances before retaking their seats.

“Well, first of all...,” Haruka continued as they sat, “Helga was right. It does look like my memories have been changed. There’s a lot that doesn’t seem to add up with what she told me.”

“...Huh?”

She had admitted it so readily that Ayato couldn’t help being taken aback, but this was more or less what he had expected.

“There are other areas that are just a complete blank... I don’t know whether my memories have been erased or I just can’t access them. Although it’s probably more like they’ve been censored, I guess.”

“So I was right...” Helga wrinkled her brow.

“Well, I guess we’re lucky, in a way.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Ayato demanded.

Haruka looked up at him with a smile. “I mean, the Ser Veresta has chosen you now, right? That by itself is a kind of miracle.”

“Huh? Well, I guess so... It’s still letting me wield it. Although...”

The Ser Veresta had been badly damaged during the championship match of the Gryps, and he had just gotten it back the other day after having it repaired.

He had been worried that the experience might have soured the Orga Lux on him, but he felt nothing out of the ordinary when he tried it out, so at the very least, it didn’t seem to have given up on him yet.

“Can I hold it? Just for a minute?”

“The Ser Veresta?” Only after Ayato had already removed it from the holder at his waist and handed it to her did he remember that she had been its previous user.

Which meant—

“I don’t know whether Orga Luxes experience time the same way we do, but still...I suppose it’s been a while for you, too. For me, it feels like we last fought together only yesterday.” She spoke to it gently, before suddenly activating it.



Orga Luxes didn't even normally let anyone but their user lay a finger on them, yet this particularly difficult one accepted her so readily.

Perhaps this was to be expected of a former user? Ayato wondered.

A black pattern coiled around the pure-white blade. It was the same weapon he had grown so familiar with, and yet it was roughly half the size it normally took when he wielded it.

"Hmm, it's still a little big, maybe..." Haruka murmured, when it suddenly shrank down before their eyes, until it was no longer than a dagger.

"Well, that is something. Your force of will over it is splendid. But your control over your prana is even more impressive." Helga stroked her chin in admiration.

"We're all counting on you to wield it that well, too, Ayato," Claudia said with a sweet grin.

"Uh..." He had no response to that.

No matter how much he trained, he still hadn't been able to adjust the Orga Lux to an optimal size. Fine control over his prana just wasn't his strong suit.

"I know you're partnered with Ayato now, but won't you lend me a little of your power for old times' sake, Ser Veresta?" Haruka closed her eyes before spinning the dagger-sized blade across one hand, grasping it by the hilt with the other, and raising it in front of her forehead.

That was all she did, but her movements were extraordinarily beautiful.

"What perfect swordplay..." Kirin's voice was filled with wonder.

At that moment, a faint tremor passed through the Ser Veresta, and the room was bathed in crimson red.

"—!"

Ayato covered his face with his arms, but the energy wave wasn't the burning heat he had been expecting.

"...Phew." Haruka let out a deep sigh as she deactivated the Orga Lux, returning it to its holder. "Thank you, Ser Veresta. I feel much better now." And with that, she handed it back to Ayato.

“Haru, don’t tell me you just...?”

“Hmm? All I did was burn away the parts of my memory that had been tampered with. I did a pretty good job, I think.”

She spoke so casually that Ayato didn’t know whether to be impressed or appalled.

“What?!” Julis exclaimed in astonishment. It seemed she felt the same.

“...Way to go, Haru. That’ll show them,” Saya added, nodding.

Ayato, having wielded the Ser Veresta for close to two years now, knew just how extraordinarily difficult it could be to handle. True, it had the ability to burn through practically anything, even the abilities of Dantes and Stregas, and those of other Orga Luxes, too, for that matter—he himself had made use of that power countless times over by now—but it was bordering on insanity to turn it against oneself.

At least, it should have been.

But what she had done went far beyond his own level of skill—she had burned away only the ability that had been placed on her, leaving the rest untouched. Only someone with a true mastery of the Orga Lux’s power could hope to pull off such a feat.

“Now that that’s done with, where should we begin...?” she asked in her usual calm manner.

Indeed, she hadn’t changed at all from how Ayato remembered her.

*

“...My manipulation has been broken,” Varda suddenly announced.

Madiath and Dirk, until that moment debating with each other about how best to push forward with the plan, gazed at her.

“How do you mean?” Madiath asked.

They were in the Golden Bough Alliance’s regular meeting place, aboard their airship in the skies above Asterisk.

The meeting was taking place earlier than usual, but as they had set a course away from the city, they were unlikely to attract any unwanted attention.

“The adjustments I made to Haruka Amagiri’s recollections. I don’t know how she did it, but she has likely regained her original memories.”

Dirk’s eyes snapped open in alarm. “How the hell is that power of yours so easily broken?”

“It shouldn’t be possible by anyone of this world. However, I made the changes to her memory while she was in a sealed state, so it’s possible the effect was incomplete. On top of that, I didn’t exactly have a lot of time.”

As far as Varda’s mental interference ability was concerned, whether it was brainwashing or the manipulation of memories, the more time she had to complete her work, the more effective—and more reliable—the result.

Apparently, once she had taken over the body of professor Ladislav Bartošik, it had taken her almost a full year to brainwash his students sufficiently to turn them into Genestella supremacists and bring about the Jade Twilight Incident. The majority of them, though long since imprisoned, were still subject to that brainwashing and hadn’t even realized for themselves what had been done to them.

“If it isn’t someone of this world, then it must have been an Orga Lux. In which case, it was probably the Ser Veresta. It is in the possession of her younger brother,” Madiath pointed out. “I doubt he’s reached the stage where he could cut through your powers himself, but in her hands, it wouldn’t come as too much of a surprise.”

Dirk turned his hateful, disgusted gaze on Madiath. “Is this really the time to be so blithe? Or maybe you’re finally showing your true colors?” His voice was low and dark, as if welling up from the depths of hell. When truly angry, his usual rage and indignation subsided, a deadly calm taking their place.

Madiath, however, merely leaned back in his chair, flashing him a purposefully provocative smile. “You mean to say I’ve been ignoring your warnings?”

“...If we had disposed of her when I said so, this would never have happened. Am I wrong?”

“Hmm.” Instead of responding to the accusation, Madiath merely reached for

the holder at his waist and activated the Raksha-Nada. The gigantic, crimson blade burst forth, stopping just inches from the tip of Dirk's nose.

"What's this supposed to be? Do you really think you can intimidate me?"

"Ha-ha, no. I wouldn't expect that of you."

If Dirk had been that easy to scare, he never would have been brought into the Golden Bough Alliance to begin with.

"Perhaps showing will be more effective than telling, in this case."

"What?" Dirk's dubious gaze ran down the length of the weapon—until his eyes suddenly flashed in surprise. "*Tch*... I see. So you made contingencies."

Still watching his colleague, Madiath continued: "Think of Varda's adjustments to her memory as having been little more than insurance. I told you, didn't I? We've taken all necessary precautions. Of course, we won't be able to prevent at least some information from leaking out...but anything that she does remember would only relate to the old plan. Not the current one."

"...And what about your identity?"

"My trust in her has never run that deep. What she knows isn't enough to find her way back to me."

"You're forgetting that Ayato Amagiri has that little vixen with him. If she were to use Galaxy's database..."

"There's no need to worry about that," Madiath answered. "Luckily for us, Varda has been establishing a number of associates on the inside for quite a few years now. Any hazardous information that they had has long since been taken care of."

Dirk glared back at him in silence for a long moment, as if to sound out his true intentions. Finally, he let out a brief sigh before reclining back in his sofa and putting his legs up on the table in front of them. "Fine. I'll take your word for it. For now."

"I would say the commander of the city guard poses a greater risk. If she manages to dig something up—no matter how out-of-date it might be—there's every likelihood that *she* might be able to find a connection leading back to

me.”

“I’ll take care of that. If the city guard’s got more work than they can handle, that old hag won’t have any time left for old investigations.”

“In that case, it wouldn’t hurt to sacrifice a few pawns.”

Madiath wasn’t unappreciative of his two colleagues’ suggestions, but he understood, even if they didn’t, that anything too conspicuous could backfire on them.

“Well, if push comes to shove, we can always move the plan forward a little.”

That was really the only sensible option available to them right now.

And, of course, he had Haruka Amagiri to thank for that.

Not only had she completely crushed the previous plan, she was beginning to cause them problems all over again.

And yet—

“Well then, perhaps it’s time we called it a day?” With that, he rose to his feet, returning the Raksha-Nada to its holder at his waist. As he left the cabin for the narrow deck outside, a powerful blast of wind suddenly bore down on him.

Beneath him, the city of Rikka sparkled brilliantly amid the dark of night.

From his place in the sky, the scenery looked to have barely changed at all since he had first stepped foot in this city more than twenty years ago.

But, of course, changed it had.

The passage of time washed over everything—cities, people, even memory and passions.

“My apologies, Haruka, but this is the best I can do for you,” he murmured under his breath. “Even if you are Akari’s daughter... No, precisely *because* you’re Akari’s daughter, I suppose.”

As Madiath Mesa reminisced, his eyes drifted shut, and he let the past slowly overtake him.

Tears were welling in her eyes.

“What exactly am I supposed to do...?!”

Still casting her head downward, she slammed her fist against the wall, a dull thud echoing across the room.

“...”

She had no idea how long she had been sitting there like this.

She rubbed at her eyes with the back of her hands before slowly rising to her feet.

At the same time, countless small flames burst into light around her.

There were well over a thousand of them in total.

“...How am I supposed to make up my mind?!”

How could she be expected to choose?

All she could do was follow through with what she had already started, no matter how much it ate at her.

That was the only real option left to her now.

They were on a small outdoor stage in the corner of a park located in the commercial area. There were, of course, no defensive barriers or any such advanced facilities at a stage like this—rather, it was enclosed only a by lowlying physical wall.

“...Your uniform suits you.”

“Do you think so? Ha-ha, thanks. Well, I’m not officially enlisted until tomorrow, so it’s still just for show... I wanted to show it to you, though.”

In the center of the stage, Ayato and Haruka were chatting idly as they did their prematch stretches.

He, of course, was dressed in his Seidoukan uniform. Haruka, on the other hand, having easily passed the recruitment exam, was clothed in the formal uniform of an officer of Stjarnagarm.

It was eight o'clock in the evening, and seeing as they were some distance from the business areas, there was no one else in sight.

"Well, should we get started? Can you lend me the Ser Veresta for a second?"

"Right," Ayato murmured, removing the Orga Lux from its holder at his waist, before activating it and handing it over to her.

"Sorry, Ser Veresta," Haruka whispered to it. "This will probably be a little uncomfortable, but it will only take a little while."

Chains of mana flowed from her hand and then across the blade, wrapping themselves around it as the seal took hold.

"...Hmm, this should do it. I don't think it will last for very long, but this should seal away the sharpness of the Ser Veresta at least for a little while. We wouldn't be able to train properly otherwise."

Ayato could only look on with admiration. "I had no idea your ability could do this... You really are amazing, Haruka."

In principle, Orga Luxes greatly exceeded the abilities of Dantes and Stregas in power. They were simply too different in the ways that they manifested themselves. Even if it was only temporary, the fact that Haruka could even do this at all was nothing short of incredible.

"It only worked because Ser Veresta is willing to cooperate. If it wasn't, there's no way the seal would hold," Haruka said, waving her hands as if to brush away the praise.

In other words, the Ser Veresta trusted her. That, too, was almost unbelievable. He knew firsthand how difficult the Orga Lux could be to please.

"Are you ready, Ayato? Like I told you earlier, you've never been very good at properly controlling your prana. But we won't have time before the Lindvolus if we start right from the very beginning."

"...That's why we're using the Ser Veresta, then?"

In other words, he didn't need versatility.

It would be enough if he could properly handle the Orga Lux.

“First, you’re going to need to have mastered Ser Veresta. You’ve always been the kind of person who learns through practice, so we’re just going to have to jump right into it. Are you okay with that?”

“Yeah, I’m ready.”

The two of them took their positions before bowing toward one another and adopting fighting stances. Ayato held the Ser Veresta in front of him; Haruka, her blade-type Lux over her shoulder.

“I’m not going to hold back. There would be no point to this if I did.”

“I wouldn’t want you to,” Ayato answered.

No sooner did he finish speaking than Haruka rushed toward him.

“Umph!”

Ayato stepped back, hoping to avoid her diagonal overhead slash, but as she closed in, the tip of her blade flashed in front of him before darting down straight into his chest.

The Amagiri Shinmei Style, Middle Technique—Twin Serpents, Recapitulation...?!

He shifted his body with the Ser Veresta in an attempt to evade her attack, but Haruka wasn’t about to let him get away. She moved to the side, closing in around him, to prevent him from putting any distance between the two of them.

At their current positions, it was clear that Haruka had the advantage. The Ser Veresta was too large for him to match the speed of her blade. It seemed she was trying to force him to up his game by staying as close as possible.

As he should have expected, she was showing him no mercy.

He dodged her next strike, a low slash, while at the same time realizing that she was holding her weapon single-handed. As a result of that, her movements were slightly slower than usual. He moved reflexively to counter, when she reached with her left hand behind her back and—

She activated a second blade.

“!”

Ayato raised the Ser Veresta desperately to shield himself.

“Haaah!”

She swung down first with her right hand and then cut back across from the left with it. She spun around and then lunged forward, cutting down diagonally with the left blade and slashing across with the right. Haruka spun around once more, stabbing toward him with her left, until finally stepping yet closer and, with her right-hand blade, launching into the Amagiri Shinmei Twin Sword Style, Middle Technique—*Hell Spider*.

Ayato, withstanding the sequence of seven consecutive attacks, still couldn't pull away from Haruka, who came now rushing toward him with her twin swords reversed, poised to slam the pommels of both blades into either side of his body.

“Ngh...!”

It was a grappling technique from the Amagiri Shinmei style—Grindstone Pommel, Strata.

There was no way that he could have avoided this move. His only option was to focus his prana and hope that he could withstand it.

But Haruka didn't stop there, spinning her blades around back to their normal position and swinging them toward his shoulders like scythes.

This was Twin Serpents, a dual-sword technique from the Amagiri Shinmei style—but this time, Ayato managed to parry the move at the last possible moment before taking advantage of the brief opening to pull himself away and regain his defensive stance.

“Haaah...! Haaah...!” His breath was ragged.

“Just like I thought. The Ser Veresta hasn't fully accepted you.”

With that, Haruka returned the Lux in her left hand to its holder at her waist and adopted a two-handed posture with her remaining blade.

“That's a bit harsh, Haruka...!”

According to what she told him when she had woken up, he was supposed to have reached her own level of ability back when he had unlocked his third seal.

While it was true that her assault was giving him few opportunities to counter, and that the sheer size of the Ser Veresta was one contributing factor to that, he couldn't deny that she was simply more proficient at the Amagiri Shinmei style. If they were to fight with the same weapons, using the same techniques, she would undoubtedly get the better of him. Ayato, who had only been taught the basics by his father, Masatsugu, couldn't hope to match her in that regard.

To begin with, Haruka had already mastered almost all of the Amagiri Shinmei style's various techniques. As a rule, students of the style weren't permitted to study other weapons, such as the spear or the short sword, until they had mastered the sword techniques up to at least the middle level. The grappling techniques in particular were a necessary building block before one could master the hidden techniques. While Ayato had learned both the sword and the grappling techniques to a considerable level, he was still studying the others (although it was true that Masatsugu had taught him the basics of wielding two blades simultaneously).

The two of them were practically equal in overall strength, but as far as physical stamina was concerned, Ayato was no doubt ahead. In an actual battle, Ayato would probably have been able to emerge victorious.

However—if he couldn't adjust the Ser Veresta to an optimal size, he wouldn't be able to control the most essential component of all his techniques, which would leave him with little chance of turning his current situation around.

“Let me give you some advice,” his sister said. “What's the Ser Veresta to you? Think about that.”

“What is it to me...?”

Ayato had no idea what she meant.

“If you don't know that—no, if you can't feel that—it won't stay with you for very long.”

Haruka wasn't the kind of person to prolong a match just to tease her opponents. She was no doubt planning to deal the final blow.

No sooner had that thought run through his head than she began to shuffle toward him, narrowing the distance between them, when, as expected, she launched into another full-frontal assault.

She swooped toward him from above, from below—from every possible direction with an almost godlike speed.

That's the Amagiri Shinmei Style, Middle Technique—Spiraling Whirlpool...! And the First Technique—Scarlet Saber! And another Middle Technique—Saddle of Knowledge!

He only barely managed to catch the moves with the Ser Veresta thanks to the sheer size of the weapon. It was clear, however, that at this rate, Haruka would keep chipping down at his defenses until he could no longer resist.

Of course, Ayato wasn't devoting everything he had to defense. While holding Haruka off, he poured his prana into the Orga Lux's urm-manadite core, trying every possible technique he could think of to try to make it take on a more optimal size.

No matter what he did, however, he couldn't bring it under control.

While controlling one's prana was often compared to threading a needle, given the sheer quantity of Ayato's prana, it was much more like trying to force a rope through the eye of a needle—in other words, all but impossible.

This is bad...! Any more of this, and...

Haruka's attacks continued to increase in speed and intensity. By the way she was managing to stay one step ahead of him, she looked to be reading his every movement.

Ayato might have grown considerably from how she remembered him, but given that she was the one who had taught him most of what he knew of the Amagiri Shinmei style, it was perhaps inevitable that she would be able to see through his actions.

For his part, Ayato knew Haruka's fighting style all too well, but as far as raw

speed was concerned, he was simply no match for her.

“Ngh...!”

The tip of her blade tore through his uniform, leaving blood oozing from a light wound.

She certainly wasn’t going easy on him, but this was still just a training bout. She had probably pulled back at the last minute to keep from seriously injuring him, although given Ayato’s prana, it was unlikely that a slash from a regular Lux would cause too much damage.

In any event, if he couldn’t win here, he wouldn’t stand a chance against Orphelia.

Nor would he have any hope of defeating Lamina Mortis.

I’m not about to lose...!

He wouldn’t let that happen.

Those words echoed through his mind like a prayer, and that was when he felt something emanate from the Ser Veresta.

“What...?!”

There were no words.

It was a pure, unmediated sense of will.

An emotion close to anger.

Unwillingness. Displeasure. Those were the kinds of emotions it was directing toward him.

What did I do to...?

Though confused, he probed deeper into the Orga Lux’s mind.

What was it about him that the Ser Veresta didn’t like?

He had always been sincere with the weapon, or so he liked to believe. He had always respected it, and he had always trusted it.

Which was why it should have been willing to help him now.

And yet—

“!”

He had misunderstood.

At that moment, something in his mind clicked.

Right. I've been wrong all this time.

What the Ser Veresta wanted from him—what it wanted from its user—wasn't respect or trust.

More than anything else, *it wanted to be used*, the same as all swords did.

Now that he finally understood that, a voice-like sound echoed through his mind.

That will do.

Then, he felt the Ser Veresta guiding him as his prana harmonized with its urm-manadite core.

“Yaaaaaaaaaargh!”

“Oh...!”

Ayato let out a ferocious roar to precede a slash with the Ser Veresta, cutting straight through the middle of Haruka's blade and forcing her, with a look of surprise, to jump back to safety.

“My, my! Excellent. I knew you could do it, Ayato,” she said proudly as she deactivated her blade and returned it to its holder.

“...I have you to thank for that.”

In his hands, the Ser Veresta had shrunk to around three feet in length. But it wasn't just the size that Ayato found astonishing—the Orga Lux felt remarkably familiar in his hands now.

By the looks of it, the seal that Haruka had placed over it had also been burned away.

“You're too kind, Ayato. You've been treating Ser Veresta like any other person you might meet, keeping it at a distance. I could see that right away. But you know, that isn't what it wants from you,” Haruka said, her gaze a complex mix of affection and severity.

Ayato stared down at the sword in his hand.

“Of course, it won’t allow itself to be touched by someone who doesn’t give it the proper respect,” Haruka continued. “But more than anything, it needs to satisfy its dignity as a weapon. If you’re willing to do that for it, it will surely lend you its power.”

“If you knew that, why didn’t you tell me sooner?” Ayato bit back.

Haruka placed her hands on her hips, lobbing him an amused smile. “What would be the point of that? It wouldn’t mean anything if you didn’t work it out for yourself.”

He had a feeling that was what she would say.

“But I guess you’re finally ready now.”

“...Huh?”

Just as he was wondering what she meant, Haruka removed her still-functioning Lux from its holder at her waist, the one that she had been using as her secondary weapon until just a few minutes earlier, activating it.

“When I went home, Dad gave me permission to pass them on. He said that you’re ready now.”

“H-hold on a second. What are you talking about?”

Ayato had no idea what she meant.

“Ayato, I don’t think you know this... But there’s more to the Amagiri Shinmei style beyond the Hidden Techniques.”

“—?!”

Ayato had never heard of any more advanced teachings.

“The Amagiri Shinmei style’s Hidden Techniques are designed to ensure your survival on the battlefield, so they assume you’ll be fighting in a melee, right?”

“That’s...only natural, seeing as that’s how it got started. Isn’t it?”

The Amagiri Shinmei style was, after all, developed as a set of techniques to be used by warriors clothed in a full set of armor.

“Indeed. But you know...not all of our fighting forms are inherited from our founder,” Haruka explained as she readied her blade. “Ayato, it’s time I taught you the Amagiri Shinmei style’s Ultimate Techniques.”

EPILOGUE

At long last—winter.

“Phew... I don’t think I’ll ever be able to get used to that awful little personality of yours.” Claudia, having awoken before dawn from one of her Pan-Dora-induced nightmares, went to take a shower in an attempt to wash away the lingering chill of her dreams.

Since realizing the truth, her nightmares were becoming more intense. Or to put it more concretely, now even Ayato was among her killers. That said, the situations were so contrived as to be laughable, with the only remarkable thing about them being their sheer vulgarity.

Even so, she wouldn’t allow her dreams to disturb her.

As she let the water wash over her, the nightmare that had gripped her until just a moment earlier became no more than a faint noise, a dull pain fading away to nothing.

“I still need you, so I’ll hold onto you for as long as necessary.” As she dried her hair from her seat on the side of her bed, she murmured softly to herself, as if to put her sense of resolution into words. “But...I wonder whether it isn’t already too late...”

Outside her window, the pale light of dawn began to spill over the eastern horizon.

When the sun reached its zenith, this season’s final Festa would be under way.

“Good luck, everyone... Now, especially.”

Her efforts over the past months hadn't been in vain.

At the very least, it was probably fair to say she had pinned down Lamina Mortis's identity.

She still didn't have any proof, however.

Besides, if she was right, if it was really *him*, that knowledge would only put Galaxy in an even more difficult position. After all, he was nominally one of their own executives. On top of that, given that he was the executive chairman of the Festa, Galaxy wouldn't be able to take action against him by themselves. The situation would no doubt back her mother even further into a corner.

Their biggest problem, however, was that they still hadn't been able to track down the whereabouts of the Varda-Vaos. Galaxy's highest priority was the recovery or destruction of the Orga Lux; compared with that, Lamina Mortis was little more than a distraction for the foundation. They saw no point in apprehending him if it meant that Varda were to escape.

"At least, that's how Galaxy sees it," Claudia said with a bitter laugh.

In any event, there was a high probability that he would make his move sometime over the next two weeks. Given everything that she had learned about him and his plans, that was obvious enough. The question was when, exactly, he would do it.

He wouldn't want to leave anything to chance.

"...In any event, this year's Lindvolus is going to be a handful. For the contestants and everyone else, as well."

That being the case, she would do what she could to manage affairs on the outside.

As she finished doing up her hair and headed for her dressing room, she nodded to herself with renewed confidence.

"Huh...? Is it morning already?" Saya wondered as she made her way through her research and development lab in Seidoukan's harbor block, checking the time only to find that the day really had gotten under way.

Looking toward a corner of the room, she noticed that her assistant, Nueko Kuzukura, still dressed in her white lab coat, had fallen sound asleep. Nueko had been indispensable in the development of the new Luxes. Saya wasn't the kind of person who proactively socialized with others, but outside of the members of Team Enfield, Nueko was probably her closest friend.

"Are you still here?" a voice called as Saya's father, Souichi, suddenly appeared before her.

Or rather, a hologram of him did.

"I can't say that pulling an all-nighter is a particularly efficient use of your resources. To begin with, today's the first day of the Lindvolus."

"I was just making the final adjustments. And besides, I don't have a match today, so it's all right," Saya replied, turning toward an oversized Lux holder positioned in the center of the room. Inside was one of the new Lux models that she had built with her father's and Nueko's help.

"I can't help but be impressed at this young genius I've brought up. I can see now that coming to Seidoukan was the right decision. You've grown, Saya."

"Mm-hmm." Saya glowed, puffing out her chest at the compliment.

"Now you just need to grow a little more on the outside. I'm sure Ayato would love that, too."

"...I'm already growing quickly enough."

"In what way?"

"...My hair, for example."

Indeed, she had grown her hair out considerably over the past months.

"...Ahhh." Souichi let out an exaggerated sigh.

At this response, Saya made to kick him in the shin—but, of course, her foot went straight through the hologram.

As it happened, Nueko had been the one to suggest that she grow out her hair. "You'll knock Ayato off his feet with how cute you are!" she had said. But on top of that, Saya had done it for herself, too.

“I know it’s a bit late to ask, but what set your mind on such an exorbitant weapon? And on top of that, you decided to increase the output again, far beyond its original specifications. You shouldn’t need anything this powerful just to win the Festa.”

“...You’re asking that, even knowing that I lost in the semifinals in the Phoenix?”

“Ah...! N-no, I don’t mean...”

Saya found herself breaking out into a weak smile as she watched her father fumble for words.

Indeed, her original goal had been to exact revenge on the puppet that had defeated her last time. To that end, she needed a weapon with enough power to break through Ardy’s defensive shield with a full-frontal attack.

But the reason she had increased its power beyond that level was to help Ayato.

After all, he had managed to wind up in trouble yet again, this time getting caught in the crosshairs of an incredibly powerful foe.

Ayato and Haruka couldn’t defeat this opponent alone. They needed stronger weapons—the more powerful the better.

Ayato’s enemy was her enemy. Nor would Saya show mercy to anyone who used Haruka’s life as a bargaining chip the way they had.

“Well, I had better go back to my dorm and get ready. I can’t go to the Festa looking like this,” she said as she fitted the gigantic Lux holder, taller even than she herself was, onto her back.

“Take care!” Souichi said with a thumbs-up as he saw her off.

Kirin was running alone along the footpath by the lake shore, her sportswear-garbed figure shrouded in fog.

The eastern sky had begun to brighten, although the morning air in the winter was still biting cold.

“Haaah... Haaah...”

She moved almost without thinking, her breathing regular and undisturbed. Her silver hair, done up in a ponytail, swept left and right gracefully, fitting the meaning of her first name.

Since meeting Ayato's father, Masatsugu, Kirin had been focusing her efforts exclusively on the most fundamental kinds of training.

Naturally, she had focused on coordinating with her teammates during her training last year in preparation for the Gryps, so in a way, it was good to get back to this kind of strenuous, basic training that could be carried out alone.

Of course, she still engaged in regular practical training matches with Ayato and the others, but she was spending the majority of her days repeating and polishing by herself these most basic techniques.

After all, she knew that the destination that she wanted to reach, the strength that she wanted to obtain, was at the end of this long road.

But as she ran along the lake's edge, she found herself recalling fondly those days before the Phoenix.

I wonder how far I've progressed since then...?

At such times, she always ended up questioning herself like this.

She had gained new techniques and skills, and she had grown both physically and mentally. As a swordswoman, as a person, she had become much stronger than she had been back then.

She understood that.

And yet, there were still so many things in the world that were simply out of her control. She hadn't even been able to be of any help to the person most important to her.

And now the Lindvolus has already started...!

She bit her lip in disappointment but quickly shook her head as she returned to her senses.

Right. There's still time.

Claudia and Helga seemed to be moving forward with a new strategy timed to

coincide with the opening ceremony of the tournament.

In that case, all she could do now was polish the edge of her blade.

The edge of the blade that was Kirin Toudou.

But as she once again came to the same conclusion—

“Huh-whaaa...?!”

Trying to veer from the footpath to keep from running into a cat that had appeared in front of her, she found herself stumbling.

She managed to stop herself from falling to her feet, but it took her a little longer than it should have to regain her balance.

The reason for that...was that there was now a little more weight at her chest.

“I didn’t need to grow anymore here, though...!”

She had said something similar once and remembered Julis and Saya staring at her in a way they hadn’t before or since. And then Claudia had gotten involved, too, and when Ayato had tried to get them to calm down...

Without realizing it, she found herself blushing.

It wasn’t just her—they were all thinking about one another.

That was why she knew they would be okay.

“...Ah, it got here in one piece.”

“Thank goodness! I was worried it wouldn’t make it in time!” Flora, on the other side of the air-window, had bloomed into a sweet young lady—but as she clapped her hands together, smiling joyfully, it was clear that she still possessed a childlike innocence.

The parcel that had arrived the previous night rested open atop Julis’s lap.

Inside lay a beautiful barrette, shaped like a pair of elegant wings.

“It’s a present from everyone at the orphanage! We’re all praying that you win! All of the kids and the sisters, His Majesty, too, everyone here in Lieseltania is supporting you! So do your best!”

“...Ah, thanks,” Julis replied, averting her gaze as she tried to stop the tears from welling in her eyes.

“Princess...?”

“I’m fine, really. Don’t worry about me.” Having composed herself, Julis turned back to Flora in the air-window. “I’m grateful for everyone’s support. I’ll take the crown, I promise you. Just you wait and see.”

Julis wondered whether her confident laugh sounded authentic. She wondered, too, just how well she was managing to look like the Julis-Alexia von Riessfeld that everyone thought they knew.

“Of course! I believe in you!” Flora shone her a dazzling, radiant smile.

Julis narrowed her eyes in an attempt to smile back. “Well then,” she said, cutting the transmission, and let out a deep sigh.

She slapped herself on the cheeks with both hands as if to wake herself up, before standing in front of the mirror and trying out the hair ornament that Flora and the others had sent her.

What was she supposed to do?

She still hadn’t been able to sort things out. Not with Orphelia, not with Ayato, not with Haruka.

With everything still unresolved, a sense of fear never failed to well up inside her at the mere thought of coming to a decision.

But no matter how much she tortured herself, the reality of the situation wouldn’t change.

As painful as it was, her deadline for making a decision was fast approaching.

“But until then... I’m going to pull through this. I’m not going to let anything as stupid as fate get in my way...”

No, she wasn’t about to give up that easily.

That was what she swore to herself. She finished tying up her hair and reached into the dresser drawer—from which she brought out a handkerchief that she pulled close to her chest.

Ayato was waiting outside the main gate leading into Seidoukan Academy as the light of dawn began to break through the morning mist.

“Good morning, Ayato,” Haruka called out to him warmly, her faint figure emerging from the fog.

“Morning, Haru.”

“Sorry for calling you out here so early. I’m not allowed to enter the school grounds, and I won’t be able to go cheer you on today, so I thought...well, I wanted to let you know I’ll be with you all the way.”

Haruka, now an officer of Stjarnagarm, couldn’t have looked more natural in her uniform.

With this year’s Lindvolus being the most anticipated in history, the rush of tourists to Asterisk had left every hotel and lodging house completely booked out, and while the tournament had yet to properly get under way, there had already been more trouble throughout the city than at the last Festa. The city guard, already perennially understaffed, had its hands full.

On top of all that, Haruka and Helga were continuing their investigation into Lamina Mortis and his associates.

“Don’t worry about it. I’d just finished my morning training anyway.”

“Ah... Wait, hold on a second.” Haruka suddenly leaned forward, staring intently at his face.

“Huh? Wh-what is it...?”

“Hmm, you should take a bit more care with your appearance. I thought the same thing when I watched the recordings of the Phoenix and the Gryps, actually...”

“R-really...?”

He had to admit he hadn’t really put a lot of thought into it.

“At the very least, you can do something with your hair... Come here,” she said, before beginning to straighten it up for him.

Ayato found himself suddenly remembering the time when Julis had done

something very similar at this very place. It felt like such a long time ago now, but at the same time, it was so close to his heart.

Julis...

Since telling her that he would be entering the tournament, Julis seemed to have distanced herself from him—and from Claudia, Saya, and Kirin, too. Of course, they still said hello whenever they saw each other, but they had hardly ever had lunch or trained together over the past few months.

She had her reasons for doing so—she couldn't give up on winning the tournament.

Just like he couldn't give up on doing everything within his power to keep Haruka safe.

And the fact that she hadn't spoken about it with him no doubt meant it was something that she couldn't discuss.

In that case, he—

"Hey. Don't make such a face," Haruka said, pressing both of her hands against his cheeks as if he were a baby. "That's no way for someone hoping to win a grand slam to look."

"Haruka..." As she patted his cheek warmly, that was all he could bring himself to say.

"It'll be fine."

Ayato looked up. Somehow, those words were enough to lighten his shoulders.

"It'll work out. For you, for me...and for Julis, too."

"...Right. Thank you."

Haruka didn't cast blame for their current situation—not on him, not on herself. She knew just how much it would pain him if she did.

Which was why she kept her parting words simple: "Well, then... You can do it, Ayato."

"I'll do my best." That equally muted response was all he could bring himself

to say.

For now, at least.

AFTERWORD

Hi there, Yuu Miyazaki here.

First of all, I'd like to apologize for the delay in getting Volume 12 to you all. I had originally planned to have it ready a little earlier, but I wasn't able to pull it off, and it ended up taking a full year from the release of Volume 11. I'm truly sorry about this.

Also, I mentioned this briefly in the afterword of the second volume of *The Asterisk War: The Wings of Queenvale*, but okiura, our illustrator, hasn't been well this year, and so for a while, we were considering publishing this volume without any illustrations. Nonetheless, after discussing everything with my editors, we decided that okiura's pictures are part of what makes *The Asterisk War* what it is, and they're part of what its fans love about it, too. So even though we ended up making you, the readers, wait a little while, I'm so pleased that we were able to get the work finished with a new set of wonderful illustrations.

Going forward, we've changed the style of the cover illustration to reflect the new story arc. Our protagonists have received new uniforms and hairstyles, and we've gotten our first glimpse of everyone gathered together! Given all the extra challenges involved, and for managing to make our heroines look even cuter and Ayato even cooler, I'd like to doubly express my deepest gratitude to okiura.

Now then, let's touch on what happens this time around (beware spoilers!). If it's fair to say that Volume 11 was mainly about Kirin, then this one is mainly about Haruka. I hope I've been able to bring out her distinctive charm that we've only seen until now in flashbacks and memories. Because depicting her

past in detail would probably take another full book, I've only really covered it here in outline form. If I get the chance, I'd love to be able to announce something that deals with this, but seeing as this story is mainly about Ayato and his companions, I didn't want to get too off-topic. On the other hand, seeing as Madiath's and Akari's story directly relates to the main plot of *The Asterisk War*, I wanted to explore it a bit further. The Lindvolus will get under way with the next volume, so expect it to be filled to the brim with battles. Enemies old and new will make an entrance, so I hope you're all looking forward to it as much as I am!

The mobile phone application *The Asterisk War: Brilliant Stella* closed just the other day. I'd like to thank everyone who played it, and all the staff involved in its development.

Last but not least, I'd like to express my gratitude to everyone who helped bring this volume to life.

To O, my editor, to S, who helped edit Fuyuka's Kyoto dialect, to everyone else at the editorial department, to everyone involved in the anime or video game adaptations, and, of course, to all my readers who have supported me on the way, thank you.

I'm looking forward to seeing you all again next time.

Yuu Miyazaki

July 2017



SEIDOUKAN ACADEMY

SOUICHI SASAMIYA

Saya's father. Appears as a holograph after losing most of his body. Technical adviser for Seidoukan's Matériel Department.

SILAS NORMAN

A former companion of Lester's. Attacked Ayato with Allekant's backing but was defeated. Now a member of Seidoukan's intelligence organization Shadowstar.



ALLEKANT ACADÉMIE

SHUUMA SAKON

Student council president of Allekant Académie.

ERNESTA KÜHNE

Creator of Ardy and Rimcy.

CAMILLA PARETO

Ernesta's research partner.

ARDY (AR-D)—“ABSOLUTE REFUSAL” DEFENDED MODEL

Autonomous puppet. Fought alongside Rimcy during the Phoenix.

RIMCY (RM-C)—“RUINOUS MIGHT” CANNON MODEL

Autonomous puppet. Fought alongside Ardy during the Phoenix.

HILDA JANE ROWLANDS

One of the greatest geniuses in Allekant's history. Also known as the Great Scholar, Magnum Opus.



LE WOLFE BLACK INSTITUTE

DIRK EBERWEIN

Student council president of Le Wolfe Black Institute.

KORONA KASHIMARU

Secretary to Le Wolfe's student council president.

ORPHELIA LANDLUFEN

Two-time champion of the Lindvolus and the most powerful Strega in Asterisk.

IRENE URZAIZ

Priscilla's elder sister. Under Dirk's control. Alias the Vampire Princess, Lamilexia.

PRISCILLA URZAIZ

Irene's younger sister. A regenerative.

WERNHER

A member of Grimalkin's Gold Eyes. Kidnapped Flora.



JIE LONG SEVENTH INSTITUTE

XINGLOU FAN

Jie Long's top-ranked fighter and student council president. Alias Immanent Heaven, Ban'you Tenra.

XIAOHUI WU

Jie Long's second-ranked fighter and Xinglou Fan's top disciple.

FUYUKA UMENOKOUJI

Jie Long's third-ranked fighter. Alias the Witch of Dharani.

characters

CECILY WONG

Hufeng Zhao's former tag partner, with whom she became a runner-up at the Phoenix.

HUFENG ZHAO

An exceptional martial artist often entrusted with secretarial tasks by Xinglou Fan, who always gives him something to worry about.

SHENYUN LI & SHENHUA LI

Twin brother and sister. Defeated by Ayato and Julius during the Phoenix.

ALEMA SEIYNG

Jie Long Seventh Institute's former number one, with overwhelming ability in martial arts.



SAINT GALLARDWORTH ACADEMY

ERNEST FAIRCLOUGH

Gallardworth's top-ranked fighter and student council president.

LAETITIA BLANCHARD

Gallardworth's second-ranked fighter and student council vice president.

PERCIVAL GARDNER

Gallardworth's fifth-ranked fighter and student council secretary.

LIONEL KARSH

Gallardworth's student council treasurer. A member of Team Lancelot.

KEVIN HOLST

Gallardworth's student council vice president. A member of Team Lancelot.

NOELLE MESSMER

Gallardworth's seventh-ranked fighter. Alias the Witch of Holy Thorns, Perceforêt.

ELLIOT FORSTER

Fought with Doroteo during the Phoenix, with whom he advanced to the semifinals.



QUEENVALE ACADEMY FOR YOUNG LADIES

SYLVIA LYVNEHEYM

Queenvale's top-ranked fighter, student council president, and popular idol.

MILUŠE

Rusalka's leader. Vocalist and lead guitarist.

PÄIVI

Rusalka's drummer.

MONICA

Rusalka's bassist.

TUULIA

Rusalka's rhythm guitarist.

MAHULENA

Rusalka's keyboardist.

YUZUHI RENJOUJI

Studies the Amagiri Shinmei Style Archery Techniques. Acquainted with Ayato.

MINATO WAKAMIYA

Leader of Team Kaguya. Alias Indomitable Perseverance, Kennin Fubatsu.

characters

PETRA KIVILEHTO

Chairwoman of Queenvale Academy for Young Ladies.

VIOLET WEINBERG

Alias the Witch of Demolition, Overliezel.

NEITHNEFER

Queenvale Academy for Young Ladies' second-ranked student. Alias the Goddess of Dance, Hathor.

OTHERS

HARUKA AMAGIRI

Ayato's elder sister. Her whereabouts had been unaccounted for, but she was discovered in a deep sleep, from which Ayato woke her using his wish for winning the Gryps.

SAKURA AMAGIRI (AKARI YACHIGUSA)

Ayato's and Haruka's mother.

MASATSUGU AMAGIRI

Ayato's and Haruka's father.

ISABELLA ENFIELD

Claudia's mother. The top executive of the integrated enterprise foundation Galaxy.

URSULA SVEND

Sylvia's teacher. Her body has been taken over by the Varda-Vaos.

VARDA-VAOS

An Orga Lux capable of usurping the mind of its user. Currently in possession of Ursula's body.

SISTER TERESE

The representative from the orphanage Julis is supporting.

DANILO BERTONI

Former Chairman of the Festa Executive Committee. Died several years ago.

NICOLAS ENFIELD

Claudia's father.

FLORA KLEMM

A young girl from the orphanage Julis is supporting.

HELGA LINDWALL

Head of Stjamagarm.

MADIATH MESA

Chairman of the Festa Executive Committee.

MICO YANASE

Announcer at the Festa.

BUJINSAI YABUKI

Eishirou's father, and the head of the Yabuki Clan, aka the Night Emit.

JAN KORBEL

Director of the hospital treating Haruka.

JOLBERT

Julis's elder brother and the king of Lieseltania.

LADISLAV BARTOŠIK

A genius researcher in the field of meteoric engineering. Creator of numerous Orga Luxes, including the Varda-Vaos and the Pan-Dona.

characters

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.



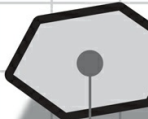
SEIDOUKAN ACADEMY

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.



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.



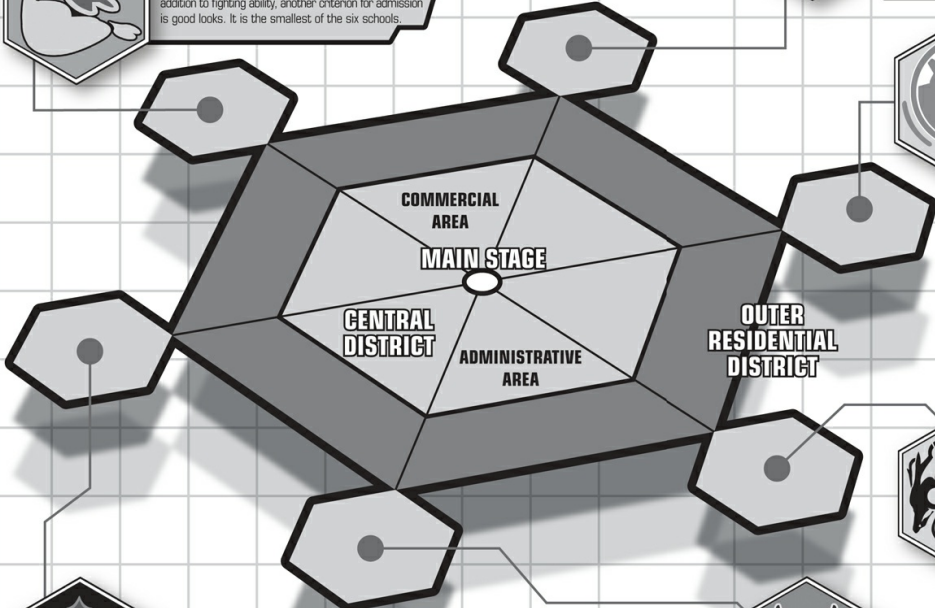
ALLEKANT ACADEMIE

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



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.



An academic metropolis, floating atop the North Kanto Mass-Impact Crater Lake. Its overall shape is a regular hexagon, and from each vertex, a school campus protrudes like a bastion. A main avenue runs from each school straight to the center, giving rise to the nickname Asterisk.

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

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

THE WORLD OF THE ASTERISK WAR GLOSSARY

THE INVERTIA

A mysterious disaster that befell Earth in the twentieth century. Meteors fell all over the world for three days and three nights, destroying many cities. As a result, the strength of existing nations declined considerably, and a new form of economic power known as "integrated enterprise foundations" took their place.

A previously unknown element called *mana* was extracted from the meteorites, leading to advances in scientific technology as well as a new type of human with extraordinary powers, called Genestella.

The Invertia was undetected by all the observatories in the world, and the destruction it caused was actually much less than ordinary meteors, so the prevailing 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 (Elliot-Pound), Jie Long, Solnage, Frauenlob, and WSW (Warren & Warren). They vie for advantage over one another and effectively control the world. Each one sponsors an academy in Asterisk.

THE FESTA

A fighting tournament where students compete, held in Asterisk, and operated by the IEFs. Each cycle, or "season," consists of three events: the tag match (Phoenix) in the summer of the first year, the team battle (Gryps) in the fall of the second year, and the individual match (Lindivulus) in the winter of the third year. Victory is achieved by destroying the opponent's school crest, and the rules are set forth in the Stella Carta. As the event is held for entertainment, acts of deliberate cruelty and attacks intended to cause death or injury can be penalized.

The event is the most popular one in the world, with matches broadcast internationally. The IEFs prioritize economic success and growth above all else, so the direction of the Festa has always been driven by the majority demand of consumers. (This is why the fighters are students—viewers want to see beautiful boys and girls fight one another.) Some speak out against the Festa on ethical grounds, but under the rule of the IEFs, those voices have fallen from justified dissent to unpopular opinion.

The cultures of the different schools veer to extremes, which is also by design, for the sake of the Festa.

THE STELLA CARTA

Rules that apply strictly to all the students of Asterisk. Those who violate these rules are harshly penalized, sometimes by expulsion. If a school is found to have been involved, the administration can also be subject to penalty. The Stella Carta has been amended several times in the past. The most important items are as follows:

- Combat between students of Asterisk is permitted only insofar as the intent is to destroy the other's school crest.
- Each student of Asterisk shall be eligible to participate in the Festa between the ages of 13 and 22, a period spanning ten years.
- Each student of Asterisk shall participate in the Festa no more than three times.

MANA

A previously unknown element that was brought to Earth by the Invertia. By now, it can be found all over the world. It responds to the will of living beings who meet certain criteria, incorporating surrounding elements to form objects and create phenomena.

GENESTELLA

A new type of human being, born after regular human children were exposed to mana. With an aura known as *prana*, they possess physical abilities far beyond those of ordinary humans. Genestella who can tap into mana without special equipment are called Stregas (female) and Dantes (male).

Discrimination against Genestella is a pervasive social problem, and many students come to Asterisk to escape this. (The negative bias against Genestella is one reason why opposition to the Festa is in the minority.)

PRANA

A kind of aura unique to Genestella. Stregas and Dantes deplete prana as they use their powers. They lose consciousness if they run out of prana, but it can simply be replenished with time. The manipulation of prana is a basic skill among Genestella, and by focusing it, they can increase offensive or defensive strength. This is especially effective for defense, which explains why serious injuries among Asterisk students are rare despite the common use of weapons.

METEORIC ENGINEERING

A field of science that studies mana and the meteorites from the Invertia. Many mysteries remain pertaining to mana, but experimentation on manadite has advanced significantly. Fueled by the abundance of rare metals found in the meteorites, manadite research has yielded a large variety of practical applications.

MANADITE

A special ore made of crystallized mana. If stress is applied, it can store or retain specific elemental patterns. Before the Invertia, it did not exist on Earth, and it must be extracted from meteorites. Manadite is used in Lux activators, as well as manufactured products developed through meteoric engineering.

LUX

A type of weapon with a manadite core. Records of elemental patterns are stored in pieces of manadite and re-created using activators. By gathering mana from the surroundings, they can create blades or projectiles of light. Mana also acts as the energy source for Lux weapons.

URM-MANADITE

A name for exceptionally pure manadite, much rarer than ordinary manadite. Luxes using urm-manadite are known as Orga Luxes. Urm-manadite crystals come in myriad colors and shapes, and no two are the same. They are said to have minds of their own.

ORGA LUX

A weapon using urm-manadite as its core. Many of them have special powers, but using them takes a toll—a certain "cost." The weapons themselves have something akin to a sentient will, and unsuitable users cannot even touch the weapon. Suitability is measured by means of a compatibility rating.

Most Orga Luxes are owned by the IEFs and are entrusted to the schools of Asterisk for the purpose of lending them to students with high compatibility ratings.

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