

Multiverse 16

Chapter 16: Chapter 56-60

Chapter 56: The Discovered Truth

This wasn't the first time Kaiser had sensed something off about Claudia.

At some point, the way the Seidoukan Academy student council president interacted with him had changed.

On the surface, Claudia remained the same—mature, graceful, poised, and undeniably beautiful. Yet, Kaiser couldn't shake the feeling that her attitude toward him had undergone subtle yet undeniable shifts.

Sometimes, he would catch Claudia's gaze lingering on him, only for her to look away the moment he turned to meet her eyes.

Sometimes, it felt like she had something she wanted to say to him, only to hold back at the last moment, as if nothing had happened.

And then there were the times when she would actively seek closeness with him, only to suddenly pull away, maintaining a deliberate distance. One moment, she seemed warm and familiar; the next, she felt distant and estranged, as if constantly oscillating between attachment and detachment.

Even though she hid it well, Kaiser was no fool. Over time, he had grown acutely aware of the inconsistencies in Claudia's behavior.

Yet, in front of others and for most of the time, she acted no differently than before, arousing no suspicion from anyone.

It was, frankly, baffling.

So, Kaiser decided to be a little bolder and probe for answers.

"President, why did you invite me?"

He posed the question directly to Claudia.

This invitation had been rather sudden.

At least in Kaiser's view, if Claudia had simply wanted company, he was hardly the most logical choice.

Their relationship wasn't particularly close. It wasn't bad, but it wasn't intimate either.

In total, they had known each other for just over three months, and their interactions were largely limited to business-related matters. Unless there was a compelling reason, there was no reason for Claudia to specifically seek him out for private company.

In other words, there was no apparent spark between them.

That was why Kaiser asked.

"If the president needed someone to accompany her, wouldn't inviting Riessfeld be more reasonable?"

Though Julis often treated Claudia with visible displeasure, the two had known each other for a long time.

Claudia was the daughter of a high-ranking executive from Galaxy, a major faction within the Integrated Enterprise Foundation, whereas Julis hailed from a remote kingdom's royal family—a legitimate princess.

They had met at various social gatherings multiple times, and over the years, they had developed a somewhat ambiguous friendship.

"At the very least, if not Riessfeld, shouldn't you have invited Amagiri instead?"

Kaiser continued.

"...Why do you think I would invite Amagiri?"

Claudia's smile remained unchanged, but she averted her gaze.

"Because you knew him long before he transferred here, didn't you?"

Kaiser, of course, couldn't just tell her that he knew the original plot. Instead, he laid out a logical inference.

"Amagiri may have been admitted as a special student, and his talent certainly qualifies him for that status, but from what I understand, he has some kind of seal restricting his power. In his normal state, he can't even exert a fraction of his true strength."

"In other words, before he transferred here, his performance on the outside was quite unremarkable."

"The existence of his seal prevented him from demonstrating his abilities. And given that he's not the type to actively seek attention, Seidoukan's scouting agents shouldn't have been able to notice him, much less recruit him as a special student."

So then, how did Ayato Amagiri, despite these circumstances, still receive an invitation to Seidoukan as a special student?

The answer was simple.

"It was you, President. You used your own authority to bypass Seidoukan's recruitment process and granted him the special student status and invitation, didn't you?"

Kaiser didn't mince words.

"And to ensure he accepted, you even leaked information about his sister having attended Seidoukan in the past."

Ayato Amagiri naturally couldn't ignore the whereabouts of his missing sister.

Even though he convinced himself that he wasn't actively searching for her, the fact remained—he had come here because this place held clues about her.

"If you went to such lengths to bring him here, it means you care about him."

Kaiser continued.

"That's why I thought the chances of you inviting him were much higher than inviting me."

Claudia didn't respond immediately.

Instead, she gazed out toward the stage outside the private box, watching as a new round of speeches took place.

Only after a long pause did she finally speak.

"You certainly know a lot, Kaiser. Especially when it comes to my affairs."

At those words, Kaiser fell silent.

Fortunately, Claudia didn't seem intent on pressing him for an explanation. She simply let out a small sigh.

"...It's true. I used to care a lot about Ayato Amagiri."

She admitted.

"But now, I'm... uncertain."

"Uncertain?"

Kaiser prompted.

Claudia didn't answer right away.

Instead, she reached for her waist and withdrew a pair of Activators.

Pan-Dora's Activators.

"Kaiser."

She gently caressed the devices, her voice suddenly cool and deliberate.

"You did something to this child, didn't you?"

Kaiser's brows twitched.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

He instinctively looked away.

"You should understand exactly what I mean."

Claudia didn't let him off so easily.

A soft chuckle escaped her lips.

"I can't imagine any other factor that could have caused such a drastic change in this child."

"At first, I thought it was malfunctioning."

Her tone turned almost mocking.

"For over a thousand days and nights, I've been by this child's side. I know exactly what kind of malicious, twisted existence it is. I know how much it enjoys my suffering—how much it wants to see me in agony."

"Something like that... would never suddenly change its nature."

"It wouldn't just stop tormenting me and start granting me happiness instead."

"Even if it was planning to lull me into a false sense of security before striking me down with even greater pain—it should have acted by now."

"But it hasn't."

"It continues to let me have these happy dreams."

To anyone unfamiliar with Claudia's past and Pan-Dora's price, her words might have sounded cryptic or even nonsensical.

Unfortunately, Kaiser understood them all too well.

"I'm certain."

Claudia looked at Kaiser again, smiling faintly.

"This has never happened to anyone before."

"This child is rotten to the core. Its behavior now is completely unnatural."

Her meaning was clear.

"Why has it suddenly changed?"

Claudia murmured as if lost in thought.

"When that question first crossed my mind, the first person I thought of... was you."

It wasn't a difficult conclusion to reach.

"From the very first time it met you, this child displayed an unusual reaction."

Claudia gazed straight into Kaiser's eyes, as though trying to see through him.

"And then there's Ser-Veresta. At first, she didn't seem interested in you at all."

"But later, something changed."

"She became fixated on you—to the point where the compatibility threshold shattered, something that had never happened before."

Connecting these pieces, Claudia couldn't help but suspect that the abnormal shift in Pan-Dora's behavior was somehow linked to Kaiser.

"I don't know the specifics, but you must possess some unique ability—something that causes Orga Luxes to undergo inexplicable changes."

"I'm not wrong, am I?"

There was no accusation in Claudia's voice. She wasn't interrogating him.

She was simply verifying a hypothesis.

It seemed she wasn't expecting an actual answer from Kaiser—merely voicing her thoughts aloud.

"To be honest..."

Claudia withdrew her gaze, almost as if speaking to herself.

"This child is the reason I was so fixated on Ayato Amagiri. I wanted to use him to fulfill a certain wish of mine."

Her voice was soft, almost a whisper.

"But now... I don't know what to do anymore."

Kaiser remained silent.

Chapter 57: What One Truly Desires

Kaiser had always known Claudia's wish.

And it was a truly sorrowful one.

His gaze flickered toward the Pan-Dora resting in Claudia's arms.

Her tragic desire was entirely because of that thing.

No one knew—not the students, nor the faculty, nor even her closest acquaintances. No one realized that the ever-composed, mature, and graceful Claudia had long been standing at the edge of ruin.

She had possessed Pan-Dora for over a thousand days and nights. Every single night, she was tormented by relentless nightmares, suffering the agonizing pain of death again and again.

It had long since extinguished her will to keep living.

This wasn't a matter of her mind breaking from despair or succumbing to the pain, nor was it a simple case of losing the will to fight.

If it had been that simple, she could have just abandoned Pan-Dora.

If she let go of that cursed Orga Lux, she would be free from its torment, and there would be no reason for her to seek death.

Yet, Claudia never abandoned Pan-Dora.

She stubbornly continued to wield it.

One couldn't help but admire her strength of will and perseverance.

But at the same time, there was a problem.

After experiencing so many deaths, she had gradually become desensitized to the most terrifying and unbearable thing of all.

She had come to an understanding—no matter who one was, as long as they were human, they could not escape death.

No matter how happy their life was, no matter how much wealth they accumulated, once they died, everything would turn to nothing.

And so, instead of fixating on how to live—she began contemplating how to die.

That was the conclusion she reached.

She wanted to die for the sake of someone else.

In her mind, that was the most meaningful way to die.

And as fate would have it, among the countless nightmares Pan-Dora had shown her, one death stood out as the most poignant and fulfilling of all.

In that dream, she had died protecting Ayato Amagiri.

No matter how many nightmares she had suffered, no death felt more satisfying than that one.

Thus, she developed a dangerous idea.

She wanted to make that dream a reality.

She wanted to recreate that moment, to exhaust every effort to make it happen—so she could find peace in death.

That was Claudia's wish.

That was why she had gone to such lengths to recruit Ayato into Seidoukan Academy.

Everything—was for the sake of staging a grand death.

"Utterly foolish."

Kaiser couldn't help but voice his most honest opinion of that wish.

"...Eh?"

Claudia was stunned.

She saw an expression she had never seen before on Kaiser's face—one of sheer seriousness, completely devoid of warmth.

"Isn't it?" Kaiser said coldly. "If I'm being generous, I'd call your perspective 'enlightenment.' But to be blunt, you're just running away from reality."

At that moment, he thought back to his own life.

Divorced parents. Deceased grandparents. Living alone, enduring hardships and struggles.

There were times when he felt like his life was difficult, frustrating, and unfair.

But never—not even once—had he thought about giving up on living.

"Giving up survival is easy. Fighting to live is the hard part."

"Maybe when a person dies, they take nothing with them. But that doesn't mean what they leave behind is meaningless."

"Just because you'll die one day, does that mean you can't experience happiness while you're alive?"

"Just because you'll eventually lose everything, does that mean you should never seek to have anything at all?"

"If you ignore the journey and only care about the ending, what's the point of life?"

Kaiser looked directly into Claudia's eyes, speaking each word with unwavering conviction.

"Listen to me, Claudia. The reason people strive to live isn't just because of survival instinct or fear of death."

"It's because they want to leave something behind."

"They have something they want to obtain."

"Maybe there is such a thing as a meaningful death. But living with purpose will always hold more value."

"A valuable death is admirable, but a valuable life is far more worthy of respect."

"If someone's sole purpose in living is to pursue death, then from the very beginning, they've already defied the meaning of existence itself."

At least, that was what Kaiser believed.

"So, forgive my bluntness, but your wish is foolish. Your way of thinking is flawed."

He was merciless in his words.

"And I don't think I'm alone in this opinion. Anyone who knows your true wish would think the same."

This time, it was Claudia's turn to fall silent.

"...It seems you know more than I thought."

The smile on her face became strained.

And this time, Kaiser did not deny it.

"I'm glad you're feeling lost right now."

His voice softened just a little.

"Because that means you're beginning to doubt your own wish. You're questioning your own actions."

"If, even after experiencing true happiness, you still believe life is meaningless, and that seeking death is the only truth..."

"Then there really would be no saving you."

The fact that Claudia felt lost, that she no longer knew what to do, meant that her nightmares had turned into dreams of happiness.

The suffering that had plagued her for so long had, through Kaiser's interference, transformed into an unending sequence of blissful dreams.

Having never tasted such happiness before, Claudia naturally began to question—

Was her old way of thinking too extreme?

Now that she understood what happiness was, it was only natural that she hesitated in her pursuit of death.

"This is a good thing."

Kaiser said.

"Face it properly. Face your own heart.

And really think about it—

What is it that you truly desire?"

With that, he said no more.

Claudia stared at him.

A moment later, she lowered her head, looking down at the Pan-Dora in her hands.

Silence filled the private lounge.

Neither of them spoke.

The ceremony outside continued as scheduled, unaffected by the heavy atmosphere within the room.

After a long while, the drawing ceremony for the tournament matchups finally began.

"Well then, I'll be heading over."

Claudia suddenly stood up, her usual smile returning as if nothing had happened.

"Go."

Kaiser nodded, acting as if their conversation had never taken place.

Claudia turned and left the lounge.

As she walked toward the stage, her expression gradually faded, replaced by contemplation.

"A valuable death is admirable, but a valuable life is far more worthy of respect... huh?"

She let out a self-mocking sigh.

"That's the first time anyone's ever said that to me."

Her tragic wish was not a secret.

As Kaiser had said, those who knew about it all thought it was foolish and pitiful.

But never—never had anyone told her why seeking death was foolish.

Never had anyone told her why it was pitiful.

Only Kaiser had told her.

Because living had more value.

Because living had more meaning.

"What I truly desire..."

Claudia stopped in her tracks, glancing back toward the lounge.

Truthfully—she wanted to tell Kaiser.

She wanted to tell him that what she truly desired—

Was him.

Yes. That was her greatest desire now.

And the reason was simple.

Lately, every time she dreamed—

He was always there.

Pan-Dora had once made her experience all kinds of deaths.

Now, it was showing her all kinds of happiness.

Among them—

Falling in love.

Getting married.

Having children.

Growing old together, without a single regret.

And the one who was with her through all of it—

The one who loved her, married her, and spent a lifetime by her side—

Had always been the same person.

Kaiser.

"This was your doing too, wasn't it?"

Claudia touched Pan-Dora's Activator.

She knew.

This was all its work.

Perhaps it had been scared of Kaiser.

Or perhaps it had simply decided that being with him was the greatest fortune or happiness of all.

Because in every beautiful dream it had woven—

Kaiser was always at the center.

She didn't know what he had done to make Pan-Dora hold him in such awe.

But she did know one thing—

Everything had changed because of him.

"...Heh."

For some reason, a genuine smile formed on Claudia's lips.

Then, with a strangely light step—

She continued forward.

Chapter 58: This... Feels a Bit Illegal...

Evening. Twilight.

As the sky was bathed in the hues of sunset, the bustling streets of Asterisk finally saw a decline in traffic.

A gentle evening breeze swept through the city, carrying away the lingering heat of the day and bringing with it a refreshing coolness.

"Kaise-senpai!"

Kaiser had already returned to Seidoukan Academy and was strolling along a familiar pathway he often took for evening walks.

Just then, a voice he had become increasingly familiar with in recent days called out to him.

Turning around toward the source, he saw a petite girl jogging in his direction.

"Kirin?" Kaiser blinked in surprise. "What are you doing here?"

"I..."

Kirin Toudou ran up to him, tilting her head upward to meet his gaze. Her expression carried a hint of shyness.

"I was waiting for Senpai to return."

Clearly, Kirin had already figured out Kaiser's usual routines. Knowing that he often passed through this area, she had deliberately waited for him here.

"How long have you been waiting?"

Kaiser was momentarily stunned before instinctively asking.

"Not... not too long..."

Kirin's eyes darted away, unable to meet his gaze. However, beads of sweat trickled down her forehead—silently betraying her words.

Kaiser sighed helplessly, then reached out and gently wiped away the sweat from her forehead.

"Senpai..."

Feeling the warmth of his touch, Kirin's face turned slightly red. Yet, rather than embarrassment, her expression was filled with contentment.

"You saw the official tournament bracket, right?"

As Kaiser wiped her forehead, he casually brought up the topic.

"Yes."

Kirin immediately nodded.

One of the reasons she had waited for him was to discuss the tournament matchups.

As for whether that was her main reason... only she herself would know.

"Let's go."

After finishing, Kaiser smiled and said, "We'll talk in my room."

At those words—

Kirin instantly stiffened.

"Y-Y-Your room?"

Her voice trembled with nervousness.

Understandable.

Although they had become practically inseparable in recent weeks, Kirin had never been to Kaiser's room before.

"What? You don't want to?"

Kaiser chuckled. "Then how about we go to your room instead?"

"M-My room?!"

Kirin panicked, frantically waving her hands.

"No, no, no! That won't do! My room is a mess right now...!"

More accurately, it wasn't that her room was messy—it was that it wasn't suitable for visitors.

After all, she had just taken a bath before leaving, and her freshly discarded clothes were still lying on her bed—including her... inner garments...

The mere thought of that made Kirin's face burn as red as a tomato.

"We'll go to Senpai's room!"

Her tone was the firmest it had ever been.

"...Alright."

Kaiser didn't think too much about it and readily agreed.

"Stay close to me. Don't wander off."

It was summer vacation, so many students had returned home for the break. However, there were still plenty of students who remained in the dorms.

If Kirin got lost and accidentally walked into some other guy's room, she would probably die of embarrassment on the spot.

Then again, thinking about it now...

Bringing a girl to his room during the holidays, when she was only thirteen years old...

This... kinda seemed like a crime.

Especially considering Kirin's expression—

Though visibly nervous and uneasy, she didn't seem to suspect that Kaiser had any improper intentions.

Her unwavering trust in him made Kaiser feel a bit... ashamed of himself.

"Wait, why am I feeling guilty?!"

Kaiser suddenly snapped out of it.

It wasn't like he had any ill intentions toward Kirin!

There was nothing to feel ashamed about!

"...But still."

Kaiser's gaze flickered toward Kirin, who walked beside him with a mix of apprehension and slight... anticipation?

Dressed in casual clothing instead of her usual uniform, she wore a simple light blue dress. The waist was cinched, giving it a flattering fit, while the hemline stopped just above her knees, exuding an air of youthful innocence.

Naturally, thanks to the fitted design—

Her front still appeared... quite prominent.

As for Senbakiri, she carried it in a long, sheath-like bag slung over her shoulder, resembling a single-strap backpack.

If not for the presence of her sword, she would have looked like nothing more than a young, somewhat naïve, yet undeniably stunning girl.

Taking someone like her back to his room...?

Kaiser had a feeling his self-control was about to be tested.

Not long after, the two arrived at the male dormitory.

Since most students were away for the break, the dorms were largely unoccupied, and there was no one around to stop them.

Without any issues, Kaiser led Kirin to his room.

"This is Senpai's room?"

Kirin's eyes widened as she looked around curiously.

The suite was spacious, featuring two bedrooms and a living area—easily comparable to Claudia’s room in terms of size.

The difference, however, lay in the decor.

Claudia’s room had an unmistakable European style, furnished with luxury items and complete with carpeting.

Kaiser’s room, on the other hand, had no particular aesthetic—just a simple, open-concept layout.

Directly opposite the entrance was the living room, connected to an open balcony. The overall atmosphere felt clean and refreshing.

"This was given to me after I became Rank One."

Kaiser explained.

"Since I haven’t lived here long, and I don’t really care much about interior design, what you see now is just how it was originally furnished. I haven’t customized anything."

Originally, he had lived in a two-person dorm.

After reaching Rank Thirteen, he applied for a single-person room.

Then, a little over a month ago, after defeating Kirin and claiming Rank One, the academy asked if he wanted to move into this suite.

Kaiser hadn't particularly cared, but he had been curious about what kind of room the top-ranked student received.

That was the only reason he agreed to move in.

"Oh, right."

Kaiser suddenly remembered something.

"Are you still staying in your old room?"

"Ah—Yes! I'm still living in my previous room."

Kirin nodded quickly.

"Since I'm still in my buffer period, I get to keep my previous privileges."

Seidoukan Academy's ranking system was based on an exchange system.

Because of that, when Kaiser defeated Kirin and took her Rank One position, she lost her official ranking.

To prevent the ranking system from causing students to lose everything immediately upon defeat, the academy had a buffer period.

During this period, students who lost their ranks could still enjoy the same privileges as before.

Additionally, they were allowed to challenge any ranked student below their former position in an official duel—without needing to climb from the bottom.

Since Kirin was still in her buffer period, she retained all the rights of a Rank One student, including her room.

"If I get the chance, you should invite me over."

Kaiser teased.

"...Okay."

Kirin's face remained red, but she nodded softly.

"Sit down."

Kaiser decided to stop teasing her and gestured toward the couch.

Kirin obediently sat down, and Kaiser grabbed a carton of milk from the fridge, handing it to her.

Ever since teaming up with Kirin, Kaiser had learned that her most frequently consumed drink was—

Milk.

No wonder she had that kind of figure.

"Since you've already seen the bracket, what do you think?"

Kaiser sat beside her—not across from her—before bringing up the topic.

Without hesitation, Kirin, holding her milk with both hands, responded.

"We're really lucky."

Indeed, their luck was quite good.

"Judging by the bracket, we won't encounter any real threats until the semifinals."

That was Kirin's evaluation.

Chapter 59: Opponents in the Semifinals

At this moment, the official tournament bracket had been fully displayed before Kaiser and Kirin Toudou.

Just like in the preliminary rounds, the bracket was structured in the shape of a castle.

At the very bottom were the names of the 32 teams that had advanced to the main event.

These 32 teams were paired up into 16 groups, neatly arranged across the chart.

Kaiser and Kirin's names appeared in the second group.

One thing was clear—their bracket draw had been exceptionally favorable.

In the fourth round of the tournament, where 32 teams would be narrowed down to 16, their opponents were none other than their old rivals from Le Wolfe Black Institute.

Specifically, they were up against Le Wolfe's Rank 14 and Rank 15 students.

Based on their performance in the preliminaries, these two likely had strength on par with the lowest-ranked members of Page One.

However, at best, they were only at the bottom tier of that level.

For Kaiser and Kirin—who were both former and current Rank Ones—defeating them would be an easy task.

A comparable reference would be Kirin's past duel against Mistwitch, the Rank 10 student of Seidoukan Academy.

Mistwitch was also a member of Page One, yet she had been utterly helpless against Kirin.

In other words, Kaiser and Kirin were far stronger than these Le Wolfe opponents.

As long as they remained cautious, victory was assured.

Of course, the reason Kirin called their luck good wasn't just because their fourth-round opponents were easy.

The real stroke of luck was that—according to the bracket—their next opponents wouldn't be difficult either.

"If we win in the fourth round, then in the fifth round—the match to determine the Top 8—our opponents will be the winners of the first group."

Kaiser expanded the names listed in the first group.

"The winners should be these two, right?"

Kirin pointed to one of the matchups.

It was a team from Jie Long Seventh Institute, ranked 25th and 28th.

Although their rankings weren't high, Jie Long was the largest of the six academies—home to the most students and famous for training warriors from a young age.

When it came to producing strong fighters, Jie Long had the highest overall number of experts among the six academies.

Even students ranked in the twenties at Jie Long could easily possess Page One-level strength when compared to students from other academies.

Based on their performance in the preliminaries, these two Jie Long students were at least as strong as Kaiser and Kirin's fourth-round opponents—possibly even stronger.

Their opponents, on the other hand, were completely unimpressive.

They were the kind of team that, with a little bad luck, could have lost in the preliminary rounds.

It was already a miracle that they had even made it this far.

They stood no chance of winning.

Which meant—

The first group's winners would undoubtedly be this Jie Long team.

And in the fifth round, they would face Kaiser and Kirin.

That said, even then, victory wouldn't be difficult.

"After that, it's the semifinals."

Kaiser closed the first group's section and opened up the third and fourth groups.

If they won the fifth round, their next opponents would be the final victors from these two groups.

"Who do you think will make it through?"

Kaiser asked Kirin, testing her judgment.

"It should be them, right?"

Kirin pointed to a specific team from the fourth group.

A team from Queenvale Academy for Girls.

Specifically—

Sandra Segur, and her teammate.

"I think so too."

Kaiser nodded in agreement.

Among the third and fourth groups, Sandra Segur had the highest individual ranking.

Her teammate wasn't particularly strong, but Sandra herself was formidable.

With her Orga Lux, she could easily overpower Seidoukan Academy's Rank 5, Julis-Alexia von Riessfeld.

Kaiser didn't believe any of the other participants in these groups could defeat her.

Based on the data Claudia had provided, Sandra Segur's team was considered Queenvale's strongest team in this Phoenix Festa.

There was no way they would lose to nobodies.

Thus—

The semifinals' match against Sandra Segur's team was practically inevitable.

However—

"If you face her, do you think you can win?"

Kaiser asked Kirin.

"Yes."

Kirin replied confidently.

"Her Orga Lux isn't as troublesome as Senpai's Ser-Veresta or Urzaiz-senpai's Gravisheath. If it's just controlling water, I can break through it with Renzuru."

She sounded completely at ease.

And if Kirin could handle her—

Then Kaiser had even less to worry about.

A single release of Ser-Veresta's heat could instantly evaporate all of Sandra's water attacks.

Thus, their victory in the semifinals was as good as secured.

As long as they avoided any major mistakes or unexpected developments, Kaiser and Kirin's path to the semifinals was practically guaranteed.

That was why Kirin had said they were lucky.

Meanwhile...

"Ayato-senpai and Julis-senpai are in the lower bracket..."

Kirin re-examined the tournament chart, looking at the names with a conflicted expression.

"More specifically, they're in the sixteenth group—the very last one."

Kaiser also studied the chart, a peculiar look on his face.

"In some ways... you could say they're lucky too."

Why?

The reason was simple.

Based on the bracket, Ayato Amagiri and Julis' fourth-round opponents were Jie Long's Rank 20 and Rank 23 students.

These two were undoubtedly stronger than the Jie Long team Kaiser and Kirin would face in the fifth round.

Both of them were Page One-level opponents.

Even for Julis, who was Rank 5, securing victory in a one-on-one fight would be uncertain.

If Ayato was unlucky, he could also lose.

And the problem?

Ayato's seal.

His ability to fight at full power was limited.

If their opponents managed to stall the battle, they would be in serious trouble.

And that was just the beginning.

If Ayato and Julis won their fourth-round match, their next opponents in the fifth round would be...

Li Shenyun and Li Shenhua.

The strongest team from Jie Long Seventh Institute in this year's Phoenix Festa.

Even if Ayato could fight at full strength, defeating them would be anything but easy.

And even if they somehow won that battle—

In the semifinals, they would face the strongest team from Saint Gallardworth Academy—

Doroteo Lemus and Elliot Forster.

It was practically confirmed that Ayato and Julis would meet them in the semifinals.

And if they won that match—

Then in the Top 4 semifinals, their final opponents would be...

Allekant Academy.

The team that had benefited the most from this year's rule changes.

In the original timeline—

Ayato and Julis had faced Allekant's strongest team only in the finals.

After an extremely difficult battle, they had barely won.

Now?

Jie Long, Saint Gallardworth, and Allekant—

Three of the most dangerous teams in the entire tournament.

Ayato and Julis had to fight them all just to reach the finals.

Kaiser let out a low chuckle.

"...Even their bracket draw is a nightmare."

"Truly befitting of the main characters of the original story..."

That said—

Kaiser and Kirin's most dangerous opponent was waiting as well.

Kaiser's gaze drifted toward Groups 5, 6, 7, and 8—

Where a certain name stood out.

Irene Urzaiz.

Their likely opponent in the semifinals.

Chapter 60: The Expected Battle

Asterisk – Redevelopment District

As night fell, the lights of Asterisk continued to shine brightly across the city.

However, this particular district remained shrouded in darkness.

Apart from Pleasure Street, it was difficult to find any source of illumination.

"Boom!"

A dull impact echoed through a dimly lit alleyway near Pleasure Street.

A figure was sent flying from within.

"Guh...!"

The person tumbled across the ground multiple times before coming to a painful halt.

When they finally stopped rolling, they realized—

They were surrounded by unconscious bodies.

Their own allies.

"Damn it...!"

The man gritted his teeth, attempting to stand.

But before he could—

A violent pain surged through his entire body, forcing him back down.

At that moment—

A rough, irritated voice came from within the alley.

"Tch. You're still not giving up? How annoying."

A young woman stepped out of the shadows, her Le Wolfe Black Institute uniform hanging open in a boldly casual manner.

Around her neck was a thick scarf, entirely unfitting for the warm season.

She looked down at the man sprawled on the ground before her.

"All I did was wreck your casino—do you really have to keep harassing me over it?"

Irene Urzaiz spoke with clear impatience.

The veins on the man's forehead bulged in anger.

Did she even realize how absurd her words were?

"Don't think you can just run away, Vampire!"

The man roared in fury.

"Run?"

Irene tilted her head, then suddenly grinned.

"Who said anything about running, you filthy lowlife?"

"Boom!"

She kicked him.

Hard.

The man let out a pained scream as he was sent crashing into a nearby wall.

He slumped over—unconscious.

"Tch. What a buzzkill."

Irene didn't even spare the defeated men a glance.

She adjusted her scarf, letting out an annoyed sigh.

"I thought I could sneak off to Pleasure Street for a few rounds of gambling while Priscilla was asleep..."

"But these damn guys just won't leave me alone."

She kicked aside some of the unconscious bodies as she muttered.

"If your people hadn't been cheating, I wouldn't have wrecked your casino."

"And instead of blaming yourselves, you take it out on me?"

"This place really hasn't changed at all—just a dump full of human trash."

"...Seriously, I feel like demolishing all of Pleasure Street."

Just as Irene was about to leave, a black communication window suddenly appeared in front of her.

A deep voice spoke through the screen.

"You seem to be in good shape, Irene Urzaiz."

"...Tch."

Irene stopped in her tracks, her irritation growing rather than fading.

"Oh, it's you, you damn fat bastard."

Her voice was dripping with disdain.

"The tournament bracket has been finalized."

The man on the other end ignored her attitude, getting straight to the point.

"You've seen it, haven't you?"

"Yeah, yeah, I've seen it."

Irene let out a cold laugh.

"If things go according to plan, as long as I make it to the Top 4, I'll face Blazing Star Swordsman and Keen-Edged Tempest in the semifinals, right?"

"That's correct."

The voice remained calm and calculating.

"In four days, you'll meet them on the battlefield."

"Don't disappoint me, Irene."

"...You really think I can pull this off, huh?"

Irene sneered.

"Well, I'd love to act all confident, but do you seriously believe I can handle this alone?"

"That guy is Seidoukan's Rank One."

"His partner is the former Rank One."

"A team with two Rank Ones—you think I can beat them by myself?"

"Besides—"

Her expression darkened.

"That day, I already reported what happened."

"You're not gonna tell me you forgot, right?"

"Gravisheath was almost destroyed by that damn sword."

"In this situation, you still want me to go through with this?"

What? You want me to just go get myself killed?

She didn't say those words aloud.

But the implication was clear.

"I've read your report."

The voice remained steady.

"I didn't expect that brat to wield Ser-Veresta so proficiently."

"But—"

"A power of that level cannot be used without limitations."

"All Orga Luxes come with a cost."

"And you, more than anyone, should understand that."

Irene fell silent.

Because he was right.

She knew better than anyone.

After all, there were two reasons why Gravisheath was infamous.

Its overwhelming power.

Its terrifying price.

Gravisheath's price was blood.

A massive amount of blood.

Even using it at a basic level would drain a person dry in mere moments.

That was why—

In the past, no one had been able to fully unleash Gravisheath's strength.

Some had even died trying.

Only those with a high enough compatibility rate could survive its effects.

For them—

Their bodies would be modified.

After the modification—

They could sustain themselves by consuming blood from external sources.

That was why she had been given her infamous title.

"Vampire Princess of Carnage."

Because she was not just called a vampire—she actually needed to drink blood to survive.

"And Ser-Veresta is no different."

The voice continued.

"That Four-Colored Magic Sword burns through Prana at an astronomical rate."

"No ordinary Genestella could sustain that cost."

"In other words—"

Before the voice could finish, Irene cut him off.

"You're saying all I need to do is drag out the fight and wear him down?"

Her tone was laced with mockery.

"But have you thought about the fact that I can't afford a battle of attrition either?"

"Hmph."

The voice let out a low scoff.

"You have your sister."

"You'll have plenty of fuel."

"Tch..."

Irene clicked her tongue in frustration.

"What about Keen-Edged Temprest?"

"Dealing with Blazing Star Swordsman alone is bad enough."

"Just use Gravisheath properly."

The voice dismissed her concerns.

"She's neither a Strega nor an Orga Lux wielder."

"She won't be able to handle Gravisheath's ability."

"I'm sure you already have a plan in mind."

"...You really have everything figured out, huh?"

Irene gritted her teeth.

"Fine."

"But you better return Gravisheath to me fully repaired after this."

"Don't worry."

"As long as the Urm-Manadyte core remains intact, the exterior can be fully restored."

"One more thing."

"When the match starts—do not get hit by Ser-Veresta."

"That sword's power is something even Orga Luxes fear."

Tch.

Like she needed to be reminded of that.

She had already experienced it firsthand.

As she recalled that searing heat, her red eyes glowed with intensity.

"Don't you dare lose before I get my revenge, Blazing Star Swordsman..."

She couldn't wait for this rematch.

....

Four days later.

The tournament progressed rapidly.

The battles grew fiercer as only the strongest teams remained.

And finally—

The highly anticipated semifinals arrived.