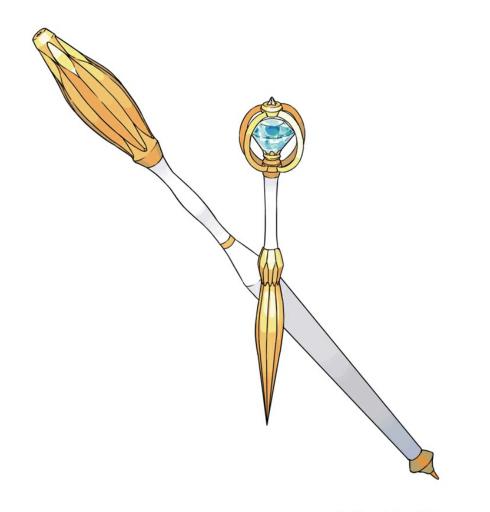




CONTENTS

PROLOGUE	♦ The Sequel to Loss and Resolve
CHAPTER 1	♦ Girl's Revolution
CHAPTER 2	♦ Nostalgic Schoolhouse
	♦ Fairy Canon 1
CHAPTER 3	♦ Class Is in Session
	♦ Fairy Canon 2
CHAPTER 4	♦ Those Who Teach and Those Who Are Taught
CHAPTER 5	♦ The Mirror's Voice
EPILOGUE	♦ My Cliché Answer I Got from You













VOLUME 13 FUJINO OMORI

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IS IT WRONG TO TRY TO PICK UP GIRLS IN A DUNGEON?

ON THE SIDE: SWORD ORATORIA, Volume 13

FUJINO OMORI

Translation by Dale DeLucia

Cover art by Kiyotaka Haimura

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DUNGEON NI DEAI WO MOTOMERU NO WA MACHIGATTEIRUDAROUKA GAIDEN SWORD ORATORIA, vol. 13

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Original Japanese edition published in 2023 by SB Creative Corp.

This English edition is published by arrangement with SB Creative Corp., Tokyo, in care of Tuttle-Mori Agency, Inc., Tokyo.

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New York, NY 10001

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First Yen On Edition: December 2024

Edited by Yen On Editorial: Chloe Ling, Ivan Liang Designed by Yen On Design:

Andy Swist

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Names: Ōmori, Fujino, author. | Haimura, Kiyotaka, 1973– illustrator. | Yasuda, Suzuhito, designer.

Title: Is it wrong to try to pick up girls in a dungeon? on the side: sword oratoria / story by Fujino Omori; illustration by Kiyotaka Haimura; original design by Suzuhito Yasuda.

Other titles: Danjon ni deai wo motomeru no wa machigatteirudarouka gaiden sword oratoria. English.

Description: New York, NY: Yen On, 2016— | Series: Is it wrong to try to pick up girls in a dungeon? on the side: sword oratoria Identifiers: LCCN 2016023729 |

Subjects: CYAC: Fantasy.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.O54 lsg 2016 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2016023729

ISBNs: 978-1-9753-9437-0 (paperback) 978-1-9753-9438-7 (ebook)

E3-20241126-JV-NF-ORI

Contents

Cover

Insert

Title Page

Copyright

Prologue: The Sequel to Loss and Resolve

Chapter 1: Girl's Revolution

Chapter 2: Nostalgic Schoolhouse

Fairy Canon: 1

Chapter 3: Class is in Session

Fairy Canon: 2

Chapter 4: Those Who Teach and Those Who Are Taught

Chapter 5: The Mirror's Voice

Epilogue: My Cliché Answer I Got From You

Afterword

Yen Newsletter

PROLOGUE

THE SEQUEL TO LOSS AND RESOLVE

Гэта казка іншага сям'і

Апошняя сцэна, якую ўбачыла дзяўына

PROLOGUE

THE SEQUEL TO LOSS AND RESOLVE

As a certain hero said:

The story of the battles where the Labyrinth City's survival was on the line will not be passed down to future generations.

The shadowy works of a god who called himself Enyo and even the existence of a demi-spirit will never be known to the world.

There will be nothing more than a single line in the records of the Guild, briefly noting, "clandestine organization eliminated."

Three days had passed since the allied forces led by *Loki Familia* conquered the artificial dungeon Knossos.

It would be fair to call the immediate aftermath hectic and bewildering.

The first order of business was repairing the city and giving the townspeople explanations.

Countless carnivorous flowers appeared aboveground like the harbingers of an orgia. Thanks to the herculean efforts of *Hephaistos Familia* and the other familia, the adventurers of Rivira and *Njoʻrðr Familia* who rushed over from Meren, no one died. However, the streets and buildings of the city had still suffered damage. The rebuilding was proceeding swiftly, with the Guild organizing the efforts—with help from many familias as well as Goibniu, god of construction and the forge—and Orario was quickly returning to normal.

Dealing with the city's residents was an affair that also continued around the clock. There was no denying the appearance of monsters aboveground, the earthquake caused by the spirit's six rings, or the red magic light that had shrouded the city. Some of it had even been noticed outside Orario, and all these things gave rise to terrible unease. A great many people demanded an explanation.

Guild Chief Royman handled this himself, carefully manipulating information and managing public opinion.

As he would put it:

"I'm sure the memory of the armed monsters who threatened Orario recently is still fresh. There is also, of course, the incident involving God Ikelos, who was banished from the city. We recently carried out a raid on one of his hideouts and eradicated a shadowy organization. The monsters that were spotted aboveground and all the other recent commotions are related to that."

It was an explanation that carefully blended fact and fiction.

Ikelos Familia was indeed the impetus behind the Xenos coming to the surface. He used their convenient existence to explain away the assault on a hidden lair beneath Daedalus Street and the annihilation of the countless monsters that still lurked below even though that familia had already been banished from the city.

"Ikelos Familia was warehousing many new types of monsters, and the adventurers were unable to deal with every last one, which led to the current situation. Allow me to apologize for this whole mess, including the armed monster incident, and for troubling so many people living in the city. We are mortified by how we have failed you."

It was all the fault of an entirely unpredictable irregular.

The earthquake was simply a coincidence.

The red light that enveloped the city was merely the remnant of magic scattered by the new breed of monsters.

By requesting the cooperation of both *Loki Familia* and *Freya Familia*, the *unexpectedly* dangerous situation was resolved. The man often known as the Guild's pig had gathered the townsfolk in front of the Guild headquarters to deliver that shameless explanation.

Royman and the other higher-ups of the Guild could not reveal the truth. It was simply not an option to publicly announce the existence of Knossos, as that would mean announcing there was a second path into the Dungeon. Even if most familias had guessed that there was something hidden in the depths of

Daedalus Street, to admit it would sow panic, and many would seek out Knossos for sinister purposes.

And more than anything, admitting that the Labyrinth City had been on the brink of destruction would rock the world even outside the city. Orario was considered by many to be the center of the world. Any chaos in this city would ripple out, just like it had during the age of darkness when Zeus and Hera disappeared and the Evils rose.

At the same time, the Evils were a symbol of terror and a chaotic era that lasted until a scant five years ago. Most citizens still remembered the lawlessness and violence of that time all too well. There was no point in sparking panic if it could be avoided.

That was precisely why Royman never once referred to the Evils.

Naturally, there were some who found his explanation insufficient.

"The same happened in Meren. Their hideout was connected to the sewers, and they came out of Lolog Lake."

"I imagine there are many children worried about not seeing my followers around. The truth is that was because we were also caught up in the incident."

Njorðr and Demeter took up the task of providing more credibility to the official statement.

From the Monsterphilia incident to the armed monsters appearing on the surface, the recent string of crises had taken a heavy toll on the Guild's reputation. The testimonies of these two deities was an entirely different story.

Demeter was hugely influential because of her massive contribution to the city's ability to feed itself and was beloved by most of Orario as a kind and caring goddess. As such, she was deeply trusted, and most people responded with understanding and compassion.

"I've caused so much trouble...and if I can't at least help the city calm down, I won't be able to face my children who returned to the heavens..."

Demeter was even willing to carry the blame for it all herself. Even without that, though, her readiness to cooperate was a huge relief to the Guild, and

especially Royman.

It was also incredibly beneficial that Finn and all the other first-tier adventurers and influential familias had agreed to go along with the story.

"There was a confederate of God Ikelos in the lair down there as well. Dionysius Familia had been tasked with investigating further, but unfortunately, tragedy struck them and their patron god, as well as Goddess Penia of Daedalus Street. The pillars of return the other day were a result of this struggle. We can only apologize to them for our failure and offer them our utmost gratitude for their honorable sacrifices in the service of defending the city's peace."

Royman was crafty when addressing the topic of deities being sent back to the heavens as well.

Quietly letting a tear trickle from his eye, he expressed deep regret and commended the deities who were no longer with them, invoking a tender mood. For someone who had endured days of heart-wrenching anxiety and stomach-roiling pain, this was a masterful performance and a clever transition.

For once, even his patron god, Ouranos, did not comment on the massive expense for all the stomach medicine he had to buy.

"—The danger to the city has passed. Nothing will threaten Orario's peace again."

Lifting his head, Royman made a clear and simple declaration.

And that was how the Labyrinth City completed its ritual purification.

"Daddy, does that mean we can't see Lord Dionysus anymore?"

"...Yes, that's right. It's sad. It is...I won't get to try out any more of his new drinks..."

"That's...nooo!"

"...It's okay. He'll be watching over us from above in the sky. Always..."

The actions of Dionysus, the true mastermind of it all, were never mentioned.

The inconsistency in Royman's explanation was born of his fear of the god and out of respect for his followers. Ironically, Dionysus became a just god who died

in battle with his familia. No one could say whether the people of the neighborhood who interacted with him and a certain family being able to grieve his return to the heavens was a blessing or not.

And finally, the dead were buried.

It went without saying that there was a funeral for all the adventurers who had passed in Knossos.

More than a few people had died in the demi-spirit's massive attack, including members of *Ganesha Familia*, high smiths of *Hephaistos Familia*, healers of *Dian Cecht Familia*, and members of *Loki Familia*. The vanguard force of the second assault had pushed themselves to the limit, and their sacrifices had made the clearing of Knossos possible. Members of *Demeter Familia*, whom Enyo had taken hostage, were among the dead, too. The ceremonies were solemnly carried out by people from each familia. Those for *Dionysus Familia*, which was wiped out in the first assault, were handled by *Loki Familia*.

Every effort was taken to recover whatever was left of those obliterated by explosions and those who had been devoured by the massive wave of green flesh in Knossos. But there were still many empty caskets. All the mementos that could be found were gathered, too, but most adventurers were surprisingly lacking in worldly possessions, to the annoyance and amusement of their friends and familias.

"Makes sense you barely had anything to your name when you were always trying to look cool and live in the moment" was a common sentiment, accompanied by smiles, laughter, and somber looks up at the sky. The skies were clear, but a little bit of rain fell.

People who had connections with the various familias would notice those who were gone and inevitably ask: "What happened to them?"

When asked, the familia members would hide their sorrow and smile.

"They bought it in the Dungeon."

The people of Orario were used to that answer and would leave it at that.

Maybe say a soft "Oh."

Maybe shed a few tears.

Or maybe they would curtly pretend to lose interest.

But if the innocent people who lived in this town continued going about their lives with a smile, then the people who did battle in the shadows considered that reward enough.

So the adventurers smiled, laughed, and raised a racket like always.

They alone would never forget the nameless heroes who joined the eternal procession in the heavens.

Thus, the Orgia Saga, a tale of Enyo's mayhem that would go untold, came to a close.

No matter how it was polished, no matter the lip service paid, countless people had been scarred by this battle.

Mortals and deities alike.

And also a certain girl.



There was no sense of time.

After a never-ending stream of tears and a doleful song of grief, she quietly stood up.

Turning her back on the space where the circle of light was fading, she walked forward.

She did what needed to be done and followed through to the end. She reported everything she had seen to Riveria and Finn. A complete account of everything. She was grateful for their simple responses. "I see." "Good work." She was grateful for the lack of sympathy or compassion in their voice.

Though there were not many, she mourned for her comrades who had lost their lives.

And alone, she mourned the beautiful yet monstrous girl who most would never forgive—the girl who she considered a lifelong friend.

Surely, some would have scowled at having her buried in the First Graveyard, where so many adventurers lay in their final rest. She would probably not have wished it herself.

So she asked her patron goddess, Loki, and got permission to leave the city and go to the Alv Mountains, the sacred mountains of the elves. She carried with her a paltry amount of ashes, which were all she could find despite looking as hard as she could.

With a cool, clear sky above, she let the wind atop its peak carry away the remains of her dear friend.

She did not leave a gravestone.

Perhaps it was because she could not bring herself to make one.

She stood quietly on the silent mountain of her people.

The sun set, and the moon rose, and the sun rose again across the horizon.

The dazzling rays of dawn seared her eyes, making her realize finally that she had been standing there all night. Descending the mountain, she quickly returned to the city.

She felt bad about leaving her familia and not helping in the cleanup. But one of the older human familia members causally brushed it off, telling her not to worry about it. Her wonderful roommate clung to her, crying and saying how afraid she was that she wouldn't come back. The girl she looked up to smiled gently and simply said, "Welcome back."

It felt like time was standing still.

But she never stopped moving her body, always trying to do what needed to be done.

She prepared a new set of magical gear.

This was her way of saying good-bye to her old self.

She had a new staff made.

Combining her rod with her wand.

She took up *her* sword.

Even if it was nothing more than a stubborn refusal to let go, she swore to carry on with *her*.

And so.

At daybreak, before the sun had even cleared the horizon.

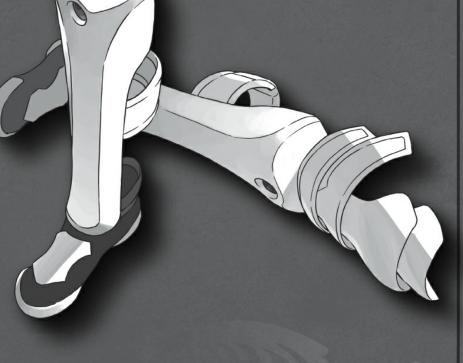
Alone in a dark room.

She put on her enchanted gear, secured her wand at her waist, and picked up the waiting sword.

Then she cut her long, bright blond hair.

CHAPTER 1

GIRL'S REVOLUTION



Гэта казка іншага сям'і.

дзявочая рэвалюыя

CHAPTER 1

GIRL'S REVOLUTION

Twilight Manor, Loki Familia's home.

The large mess hall was bustling that morning.

Many familia members pulled up seats while greeting each other, and the sounds of silverware and plates clattering echoed in the big room.

Some time had passed since Enyo's mayhem, and *Loki Familia* was slowly returning to normal. While many found it hard to ignore how many seats were empty now, they were adventurers, and they knew that brooding and standing still would do nothing for their comrades who were no longer with them. They all had wounds that were not yet healed, but even so, they were filling their stomachs with cheerful smiles and laughter.

It was then that the double doors swung open.

"Sorry for being late."

Turning to see, everyone in the hall fell silent.

An elven girl had stepped through the doors.

"Lefi...ya?"

That was Aiz's murmur. Even she did not believe her eyes.

The elf was not wearing the peach battle clothes that had become her trademark.

She was wearing a new red-and-white outfit.

Each and every thread woven into it was imbued with magic power. The sheer amount of work that must have involved was enough to make any mage cry. This labor of love had created a piece of equipment that boasted extraordinary magic resistance while remaining very light. Riveria's Fairy Queen's Robe was

also enchanted gear, albeit made of a different material. Also, there was a bangle on Lefiya's right arm that seemed to be a magic item, and she was wearing a pure white set of thigh-high boots on her slender legs.

There were two weapons at her hip. She carried her newly made wand and midsize rod in her belt, almost like a swordsman. And hanging from her back was a single shortsword.

The first thing to come to Aiz's mind when seeing her was a magic swordswoman.

White and red. Her magic outfit was a blend of Filvis Challia's dying wish and Lefiya's quiet passion. That was how it appeared to Aiz.

But the familia was not surprised because Lefiya sported new gear. Nor was Aiz. Nor was Tiona or Tione. Nor was Raul or Anakity or the rest of the second-string familia members. They were in shock seeing one thing in particular.

The hair that she had so drastically cut herself.

The beautiful bright blond hair that so many of her generation had been jealous of and that she had surely been secretly proud of herself.

Despite her ignorance of fashion and appearance, it had even caught Aiz's eyes.

The long, bright blond hair tied back by a single hair clip was now so short that the nape of her neck was visible.



No one could manage to close their mouths, which were hanging agape. She was like a completely different person. It was not just her outfit or her hair. The air about her was more like a cool, clear spring than the gentleness she had evoked before. No one spoke to her as she walked between the tables. Loki alone let out an amused whistle.

"Lefiya."

As everyone remained frozen, Riveria rose.

She walked over, stopping right in front of Lefiya, who also stopped.

"Barring exigent circumstances, the whole familia eats breakfast together. That is the familia rule that Loki set. Where did you go without notice?"

Riveria was always Riveria. Always. The familia's second-in-command would not hesitate to reprimand any semblance of rule-breaking, regardless of Lefiya's change in appearance and demeanor.

In response, Lefiya...looked a little bit confused.

"I left a letter addressed to Elfie in our room..."

"Eh! You did?!"

Elfie let out a little squeal when she was suddenly pulled into the conversation. Everyone's attention focused on her, and she put on an awkward smile and mumbled to herself. "Right, there might have been a letter on the table..."

Lefiya raised her shoulders in frustration at her roommate, and then, facing Riveria, she bowed at the waist.

"I received a message from Ms. Lenore that the equipment I commissioned had been completed, so I went to pick it up first thing in the morning. I apologize for my selfish behavior."

When she admitted fault so earnestly, it was impossible to yell at her about it.

"Be more careful in the future." Riveria sighed before returning to her own seat.

The rest of the familia had been on tenterhooks watching the exchange, but with that, the mood in the room eased again. It wasn't long before the quiet mess hall grew lively again.

"It's wild that she cut it so all at once..."

"I'm surprised. I've heard that elves have a big thing about their hair."

"Is this what gods mean when they say someone had a makeover?"

Anakity, Tione, and Tiona, who were at the same table, glanced over while talking. The fact that they kept their voices down, other than Tiona, who was chowing down on some bread and bacon, was because they could guess the

reason Lefiya cut her hair. Aiz, sitting next to Tiona, also glanced over in concern.

Meanwhile, Lefiya's expression did not change as she started walking again.

The end of breakfast was approaching. Most of the familia had finished eating and had empty plates, but she did not try to sit with them.

Curious gazes, concerned murmurs, she ignored it all—as if she had decided it in advance—and went to one person in particular.

```
"Mr. Bete."
```

"...What?"

The werewolf's gray hair swayed as his ears pricked up.

Slouching haphazardly in his seat, he looked up in annoyance at the girl standing beside him.

These two never sat together during breakfast.

Lefiya was usually with either Aiz or Elfie, and Bete always staked his claim to the farthest seat in the mess hall since he hated how noisy Tiona and the others around her were.

Bete probably did not expect to be called out, either, judging by the dubious look on his face.

Raul and Cruz, sitting with him, were visibly baffled.

But whether she knew what they were thinking or not, she continued: "Please teach me how to fight."

And her question silenced the room again.

```
".......Huh?"
```

Again, it was Aiz's murmur. Or at least it felt like it.

A deep quiet filled the mess hall.

As if turning back time, every gaze was focused on Lefiya again.

Some froze, those who could not believe their ears, and those sitting there slack-jawed.

Every familia member had their own reaction, but this time, Finn, Riveria, Gareth, and even Loki were stunned.

The next moment.

"Huuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuh?!"

Tiona shattered the silence.

With a loud voice that shook the mess hall, she finished the breakfast she had been casually working at and rushed around the tables to Lefiya.

"Why?!!! What happened?! Why are you asking this stupid wolf?! You want to learn to fight, so that means you want a teacher or a master, right?! That wasn't my ears playing tricks on me, right?!"

Tiona rushed over in wild confusion, but she was also voicing the question that pretty much every other familia member had in the back of their mind.

Lefiya's expression betrayed a bit of confusion when she saw how fiercely Tiona demanded an explanation.

"I'm not looking for a master or anything...and I have Lady Riveria already. It is just that I just wanted to learn how to fight at close range from Mr. Bete..."

"Then why Bete of all people?! You have me or Tione or Aiz, don't you?!"

"I ain't teaching shit. Sounds like a pain in the ass."

"Hey, don't you dare reject Lefiya, jerk! I mean, I want you to reject it, but don't be so smug about it!"

Suddenly, Bete found himself on the other end of Tiona's scrambled and confused reactions instead of Lefiya.

Most of the familia nodded in agreement with Tiona. All the male members of the familia's second-string adventurers regarded Lefiya with shivering, wide-eyed stares, wondering if she had lost her mind to choose Bete of all people. Raul and Cruz, sitting next to Bete, were shaking their heads in earnest as well, pleading with her to rethink this.

"Lefiya! It may not be for Tiona to say something there, but we can definitely teach you martial arts. And we can spar with you as much as you want to. You

don't need to rely on that selfish, violent, pain-in-the-ass wolf!"

Tione had left her seat and rushed to join the fray, too.

Her mindset was that of an older sister not wanting to have her precious little sister taken away from her. Though there was probably also a personal distaste, as Bete was involved. The twins were not mincing any words: "Get a grip, you asshole Amazons..."

A vein swelled in Bete's forehead.

Both Amazon sisters clearly disapproved of Lefiya's plan and were desperately trying to convince her to change her mind. But....

"I gave it a lot of thought, and I believe it would be best if Mr. Bete taught me. Not because you would be bad. It's just that it feels like this is what I need right now," Lefiya stated calmly.

Her deep blue eyes did not waver as she responded to the sisters' pleas.

"And...I thought that Mr. Bete would be the one who would hold back the least."

"Ugh."

Tiona and Tione both were at a loss for words.

Lefiya was right. Even if it was training, there was a point where they both would stop out of concern for Lefiya. But Bete would never do that. It was a safe bet. It would not matter that it was just training. He would pummel her mercilessly with punches and kicks, even to her stomach, even to her face. That was precisely the Bete Loga that they were talking about.

Put another way, that was exactly why they didn't want Lefiya to train with Bete.

Turning to face the two of them, Lefiya bowed her head.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Tiona. Ms. Tione. It feels like if I don't change now...I never will."

She couldn't afford to indulge in their kindness.

After she laid her heart bare, there was nothing more the sisters could say.

Alicia and the other elves watched with eyes wide.

Looking up, she faced Bete again.

"Please, Mr. Bete."

"You heard me. Go cry to Aiz like the dumbass said."

Bete's answer was unchanged.

He sought strength for himself. As a lone wolf with no time for small fry—and deciding that she had nothing to teach him since he did not use magic—he brusquely rejected Lefiya's request. He didn't even bother looking her in the eye as he bit into some of the bread he had left.

The old Lefiya would probably have just turned tail dejectedly. But the current Lefiya stood firm.

"You hate weaklings, right? But with a little bit of hassle, you could have one less weakling to deal with."

Elfie and the others listening in gulped.

It was an uncharacteristically defiant response—surprisingly aggressive coming from Lefiya.

And hearing that, the werewolf turned his eyes to Lefiya for the first time.

"You have magic, too, don't you? Even if it's not Concurrent Casting or highspeed casting, I can teach you how to manage casting while in the vanguard."

"I don't use magic."

"Is that so? Then what about training under heavy bombardment? You need to test the limits of your reworked Frosvirt, don't you? I'm apparently second only to Lady Riveria in terms of absurd magic power."

"…"

"I can make it worth your while."

She sold herself eloquently, highlighting her value with a calm face. By this point, everyone else was at a loss for words as Lefiya continued.

"I can become useful."

There was a brief silence.

Hearing those determined words, the werewolf...broke into a grin as he stood up.

"Interesting. Sounds like you can talk the talk, so let's see if you can walk the walk."

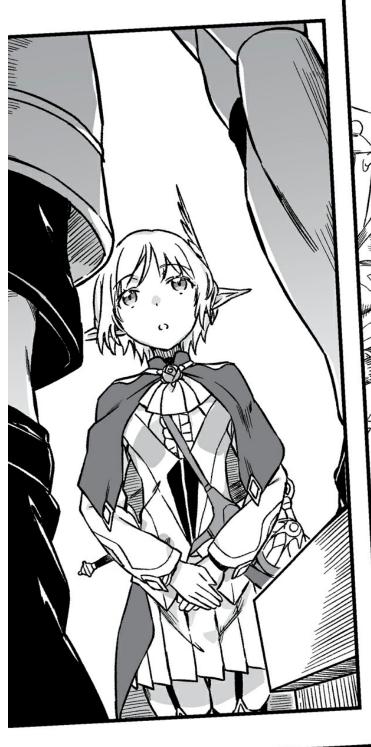
"Please do."

"I'm not gonna play around, though. Don't regret it."

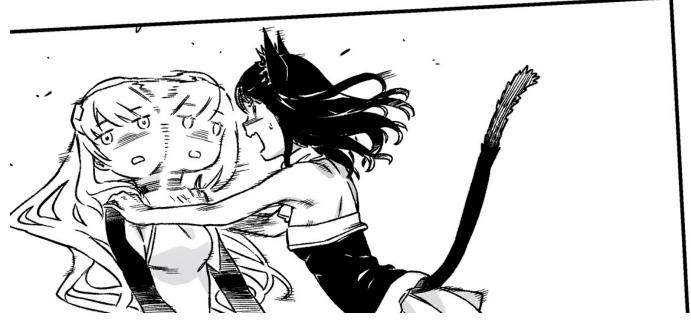
"Why would I?"

She met his grin with a steadfast expression.

The familia members who had watched from start to finish in silence struggled to keep up, but they at least understood that Lefiya was serious enough to convince Bete.







"What a surprise. Didn't think she would ask Bete.....uh, Aiz? Hey, Aiz?! You're not looking so hot!"

"				"

Anakity, who had been staring long and hard at the unfolding drama, finally noticed something was strange with Aiz and frantically raised her voice.

The blond-haired, golden-eyed girl was frozen in time, a mere ghost of herself.

Lefiya, who had trained with her before, had suddenly been taken away.

Her heart burned white as that thought filled her head.

Though it was a massive shock to everyone in the familia, Lefiya and Bete agreed to train together.



Time is priceless.

That was the first thing Lefiya instilled in herself when she decided to change.

Study, training, the Dungeon, chores, personal affairs. She realized there would never be enough time to devote her full attention to everything. She finally understood that.

Time was finite. And even for a long-lived elf, time was still precious.

If there were trials awaiting her in the future, if she was destined to sacrifice things unless she changed, then she had no choice but to put in the hard work now. If sheer effort could change something, she wouldn't hesitate to pour herself into it. She was certain that the only way to achieve that immutable goal was to strip away everything extraneous.

If she still had regrets even after all that, she would give up and accept her fate. But regrets stemming from sloth were unacceptable. That would be unforgivable.

Regrets tended to correlate with time spent. If Lefiya found herself dealing with another hard-to-swallow result only to look back and realize she had been

lazy, she would undoubtedly curse herself.

Sacrifice, sorrow, grief, tears.

Those were luxuries she could no longer have, could no longer accept. If she was going to change, it had to be now.

Just like she told Tiona and Tione, if she let this moment pass, she would remain as Lefiya Viridis. That was why she chose to rush ahead, insisting on not wasting any more time.

By declaring that this was her only chance to change, she restructured her life.

"Too slow!"

"Gwahhh?!"

And so her training with Bete began the same day she approached him in the mess hall.

They were in Twilight Manor's courtyard, the open area surrounding the central tower.

The werewolf's unbridled kick landed cleanly on Lefiya.

"Gaha, gh, gugh...?!"

"How many times do I have to say it to get it through your thick skull?! Quit focusing on your damn casting!"

It was the seventh day of their training.

The sparring began right after breakfast, continuing past lunchtime and well into the evening. The reason it did not start early in the morning was because Bete considered stopping for breakfast "a real pain in the ass."

The sun had risen high above, straddling noon.

"You don't defend, and you can't dodge! So stop mumbling those shitty songs!"

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"Geha...argh...?!"
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"It's nothing but bullshit! Figure it out already! Quit humming like a one-trick

pony!"

His next blow slammed straight into her stomach, sending her spinning and leaving her on the ground on all fours, groaning in pain as Bete berated her.

Other than not hounding her with follow-up attacks, he showed no mercy and no consideration for gender, size differential, race, or anything else.

The sword and wand slipped from Lefiya's hands as she tried to endure the terrible pain.

"Hah! What's the point of copying a dead woman and being even slower than she was?!"

"Gh...!"

Lefiya's eyes flared with sparks of rage.

But Bete was correct. She couldn't deny anything he said.

While trying to learn how to fight at close-range using a shortsword from Bete, she was also aggressively attempting Concurrent Casting. Holding her friend's sword in her right hand, she wielded a wand in her left hand just like her friend, desperate to learn the techniques of a magic swordswoman.

"Copying a dead woman? That's some cringe shit."

No matter how much Bete sneered at it, though, that was the one thing Lefiya refused to compromise on. What she wanted was a way to fight on her own.

It was not because she thought less of the dedicated mage role she had performed until now or that she undervalued it. If serving as stationary artillery was what was asked of her, she would gladly fill the role. But that was something she could still do after mastering the fighting style of magic swordsmen. If anything, she would become better at supporting her allies by understanding the movements of the adventurers who fought in the front and center. Becoming a magic swordswoman would be like a mage with a magic circle. Having the ability would be a plus, and not having it wouldn't be a minus.

She didn't want to just be protected anymore.

The vanguard protected the back lines, and the back lines covered the vanguard. However, Lefiya wanted to become someone who could protect

herself and save others. She wanted to be self-sufficient.

But:

"What do you mean you want to be able to fight by yourself? You don't even qualify as a small fry! You're an ant wishing for wings!"

The werewolf spat on her goal with venom in his voice. He dismissed it as wild-eyed optimism, an impossible dream. Even in that, Bete was merciless, stomping down on her naive ideas and forcing her to face reality. All while hammering her with kicks and punches. His strength tyrannized her with far more persuasiveness than a hundred insults, forcing her to realize just how difficult it would be to achieve her goal.

Bete Loga was sterner than anyone else, just as she had expected—and even more than she could have imagined.

—I was right to ask him.

That was why she was glad.

Even as tears welled in the corners of her eyes, even as a strand of spit dribbled from her mouth, even as she coughed over and over, even in the grips of terrible pain that kept her from smiling, in her heart of hearts, she was still glad.

Bete was hammering reality into her. He was teaching her just how harsh the choice she had made really was. The wolf was more familiar with the logic of the law of the jungle than anyone.

She felt no shame. No humiliation. She had no pride left to lose in the first place. Having already lost something truly precious, what did trivialities like embarrassment matter anymore? If this level of disgrace would help her take even one step forward, she welcomed it. It was worth the price. She would pour her limited time into it. She was more than satisfied with Bete's unforgiving handling. When she came through on the other side, tomorrow's Lefiya would be more potent than ever.

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"...Again...please...!"
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""

Seeing her pull her knees up off the ground and try to stand, Bete was silent for a moment.

It was the one thing that Bete was willing to acknowledge in Lefiya, who lacked everything.

Resolve. Obsession even.

No matter how battered she was or how merciless his words were, Lefiya quickly stood back up. She would clench her fists, force her quivering knees up, wipe away the tears in her eyes, and leap back into the swirling vortex of Bete's violence.

Some people would consider her mindset concerning, even potentially dangerous, but Bete didn't see any reason to stop her. He welcomed it even as he fought the urge to grin at it.

It seemed like he refused to let anyone get in the way when a small fry was trying to change herself.

Bete's eyes narrowed, and he shifted from the rough, gruff tone he had maintained up to this point.

"Okay, listen. You need to *think*. About the difference in how things look from the front and back lines. About your positioning. About the lame-ass role of a mage."

"...! Yes, sir!"

Lefiya nodded in shock as, for the first time, Bete actually gave her some advice.

"When I'm fighting, magic swordsmen are the easiest to deal with. I always say bring 'em on. You know why?"

"...No."

"Because they're half-assed at everything. Casting or attacking. Half-assed is the most useless thing to be. Just like you right now."

"[[]"

Lefiya's deep blue eyes widened as he told her, in not so many words, that

she was in the process of becoming emblematic of the bad side of a magic swordsmen.

"If you know someone's weaker than you in a brawl, then all you have to do is charge 'em head-on. Show them you're stronger, and they'll get scared of tripping an Ignis Fatuus and just panic. Easy pickings."

"That's..."

"There's nothing scary about a magic swordsman's Concurrent Casting."

It was a scathing assessment that hit Lefiya close to home. During all her training with Bete this past week, she had been preoccupied controlling her magic power more than a few times. From her own experience, she could only agree with his stinging evaluation.

Feeling like her resolve and the very existence of her friend Filvis had been rejected, she gripped the sword and wand in her hands.

But:

"The scary thing isn't Concurrent Casting. The scariest thing about a magic swordsman, or really any mage, is their eyes."

"...Their eyes?"

He still had more to say.

"The eyes of someone casting with the resolve to self-destruct...the ones who will finish their spell no matter what have feral eyes."

Lefiya was taken aback. She understood just what Bete was trying to say.

"A mage who's ready to take you down with them in the Ignis Fatuus...is the most dangerous...?"

"The method ain't what matters. A mage is like a bomb. Anyone willing to set off their bomb, no matter what it takes, is a pain in the ass. And at the old lady's level, she even uses it as a bluff."

Using her casting to keep the enemy off-balance and lure them into making a careless mistake. It was similar to a tactic Riveria had taught her before.

She had used that distraction to coordinate with Finn and the others to land a

blow on the monstrous Levis.

Drawing from the example of the city's strongest mage, Lefiya could grasp the idea more concretely.

"Hesitate? Lose. Get scared? Lose. I don't know magic, but I know that much. In any case, Filvis was like that."

When Lefiya heard those words, her determination flared up.

"You aren't desperate enough."

It was a brief summary.

So brief that Lefiya was ashamed of getting ahead of herself.

She thought she had been prepared to do anything, but that wasn't nearly enough. She did not yet have the resolve to cast spells and swing her sword fully prepared to die if it meant landing a decisive blow.

"I've said all there is to say. If you still can't change, then I'm done bothering with you. It's a waste of time."

"Yes, sir!!!"

Lefiya nodded as Bete's eyes took on their usual dangerous gleam again.

Raising her sword and wand again, she leaped forward.

"Unleashed pillar of light, limbs of the holy tree—!"

She charged while singing over and over, only to be knocked away repeatedly. Time and time again, she wiped away the caked-on mud before returning to the fight.



"Lefiya's really working hard."

"Yeah, but...that damn wolf isn't holding back at all."

They looked down at the scene in the courtyard from a stone sky bridge that connected different parts of the home.

Curious about Lefiya and Bete's ongoing training, they watched without breaking for lunch.

"I wondered what sort of training a mage and a warrior with no magic would do, but..."

"At the moment, it's a lot more reasonable than I expected. Lefiya's movements are a bit better than when they started...as a fighter and as a mage."

Tiona leaned against the railing with an annoyed grimace while Narfi and Alicia talked. Like the pouting Amazon, they were initially against Lefiya and Bete training. However, as they kept watching, it was clear that there were improvements in Lefiya's movements and spellcasting. Her fellow elf Alicia could see that it was the seed of what would eventually become tricks and techniques in Lefiya's repertoire.

"It seems Bete has put some thought into the training program in his own way."

"No way, Aki! He's just lazy!"

Tiona immediately disagreed with Anakity, who was on the other side of Alicia and Narfi.

The training Bete had set for Lefiya was extremely simple. Lefiya's only goal was to land a blow on him with either sword or magic.

Even if she managed to get off a spell, Bete's Frosvirt would absorb the magical effects. And if she limited herself to just *Arcs Ray*, there was no chance of causing damage to their home. And he would handle it the same way if she self-destructed in an Ignis Fatuus.

It was rough around the edges, but his training program made sense.

"C'mon, Tiona, Bete was the head of *Víðarr Familia* before. He's not that dumb...seriously."

"Then he should demonstrate some of that leadership more often..."

It was not entirely clear if Raul was covering for him, and Cruz just crossed his arms with an awkward look on his face.

Many members of *Loki Familia* had gathered on the long skyway, like a crowd enjoying a show.

Tiona and Tione. Alicia and Narfi. Anakity, Raul, and Cruz.

And:

"Lefiya...Lefiya...with Bete...Just like Bell...? Bell...Lefiya...everyone...is it Bete's time now...?"

"Aiz! Aiz?! What's going on with you?!"

Elfie desperately called out as Aiz turned pale from yet another shocking development.

She had been murmuring random things like that in a daze ever since Bete had agreed to train Lefiya.

The mildly airheaded girl who had mistaken Bell Cranell's goal to become like Bete was currently feeling like the pathetic master who had her beloved disciples stolen away by the Bete School of martial arts. Aiz was despondent, while inside her, a young Aiz in a Far Eastern martial arts outfit lay slumped on the ground.

"Just leave her be, Elfie. She'll be back to normal if you buy her a Jyaga Maru Kun." Tiona suggested a random solution as Lefiya rolled violently across the ground.

"How long is this training going to last, do you think...?" Raul grimaced sympathetically.

"Until Lefiya is satisfied, of course." Anakity sighed, concern visible etched on her face.

The number of people watching them was a testament to her ability to make friends and a likeable personality. And her friends on the sky bridge weren't the only ones watching, either. Others were keeping an eye on her from here and there around the home.

Lefiya Viridis was a model student, for better and for worse.

She was kind to everyone and cared for by many. She was widely loved, which was uncommon for the notoriously fastidious elves.

But that might more accurately describe the old Lefiya Viridis.

"Right now, she's working so hard, and there's no stopping her, but...I'm scared," her roommate, Elfie, murmured, looking down. "It seems like she's changing...like she might go someplace far away..."

No one could answer her.

Tione and Tiona, Raul and everyone, they were all silent.

In that sense, Bete was the correct training partner for Lefiya right now. And the worst possible one. The precarity they were feeling in Lefiya, he would affirm it. The two of them would go as far as they could. Even if it was someplace far, far away.

And that was surely what Lefiya wanted.

Recovering from her absentminded babble, Aiz could only look on as she saw something very familiar in the face of Lefiya, who was pouring herself into training down below.



Lefiya Viridis LEVEL 4

Strength: I 0->I 97 Endurance: I 0->G 212 Dexterity: I 0->H 187 Agility: I 0->G 204 Magic: I 0->E 401 Magic Control: H Immunity: I Magic Defense: I

Riveria's long jade hair swayed, and she felt a terrible headache as she looked at the Status update sheet Loki had given her.

"How long has it been since her last update?"

"The last time I did it was before the fight in Knossos, so around two weeks?" Loki answered easily.

"Absurd."

An increase of over 1,100 points across all of her stats.

The clearing of Knossos was a massive battle that was nigh unheard of, but these were not normal numbers for a Level 4 mage to achieve in half a month. Even an expedition down to the deep floors would not have caused such dramatic changes.

Riveria stared at the numbers in the home office.

"I imagine most of the excelia came from the battle in Knossos, but..."

"Aye, you can see the training is showin' results. Bete really isn't holding back more than the bare minimum. It isn't exactly fighting with Udaeus every day... but at her level, it's not far off, either."

Finn and Gareth calmly assessed the numbers as Riveria furrowed her shapely eyebrows.

As has been repeated several times, the battle in Knossos could safely be called an unprecedented fight to the death. There was no knowing just how much excella had been gained by those who survived.

In Lefiya's case, she was adding in serious training with Bete, a first-tier adventurer, on top of it.

It wasn't hard to believe that her brutal training, which was no different from going into battle every day, would lead to extraordinary growth.

"That much is clear. Even so, it is going too far."

But Riveria's brows remained deeply furrowed at that.

Even if she had just leveled up and the range of her stat growth from here would shrink, it was still like seeing a certain Record Holder.

"That's our Lefiya! She should leave that cocky shrimp's kid in her dust!"

Riveria's staff immediately slammed down on her patron goddess's head.

"Wagh?!"

Ignoring Loki writhing in pain on the ground, the high elf who was Lefiya's true master sighed deeply.

It was undeniably incredible growth—the manifestation of a determination to claw her way up even if her fingernails broke or tore away.

Right now, Lefiya had slipped the bonds of self-restraint.

"As a familia, it's welcome news. Several others have grown significantly,

too."

"Sharon, Olba, and Arcus reached Level Four...and Anakity Level Five. Across the board, everyone who fought the demi-spirit directly leveled up."

As Finn and Gareth said, Loki Familia had seen significant growth as a result of their recent quest.

Almost all the Level 2 members had reached Level 3, and more than half of the Level 3s had reached Level 4. Anakity had reached Level 5, which was particularly significant. She was *Loki Familia*'s eighth first-tier adventurer.

Much like the massive wall separating lower-class adventurers from upperclass adventurers, there was a seemingly insurmountable gap between secondand first-tier adventurers. The simple fact that there were not forty first-tier adventurers in all of Orario highlighted just how high that wall was.

They had even heard word that Anakity, who usually played the cool and collected beauty, had clenched her fists and let her tail swing excitedly when she found out, looking quite pleased with herself.

They had had a similar exchange the other day.

"Finn, you gonna consider Aki for a leadership position?" Loki asked.

"No...let's put a pin in that for now. I knew it already, but seeing how she handled things during everything that happened with the Xenos brought it home again just how well balanced she is."

He was referring to his announcement of their joining forces with the Xenos during the attack on Knossos.

At that moment, when others were shouting in anger and reproach, she had questioned him calmly, which had become the impetus for bringing the familia together again.

"She'll be a flexible bridge between us and the rest of the familia. She can see things well from the perspective of the strong and the weak. As long as she doesn't mind it, I'll have her carry the midlevels of the familia with Raul and them."

Finn clearly valued Anakity's discretion, which none of the other first-tier

adventurers had, not even himself. Loki generally left familia management to them anyway, so she accepted their decision with a breezy okay.

Changing subjects, the reserve force during the second assault on Knossos—Raul, Alicia, Cruz, Narfi, and the other Level 4s in the team that had rescued *Demeter Familia*—would have to wait for their next chance to level up. Raul, who joined at the same time as Anakity, had drawn a few smiles when they saw how his shoulders had drooped at the news.

"We're gonna have to think of a flashy ole celebration for y'all, too."

Loki, who had been rolling around on the floor, brushed off the dust and smirked as they answered with weary smiles.

"Lefiya is more important," Riveria responded, as if unhappy that the original conversation had been derailed.

Circling back to her concerns, she looked around at them.

"It isn't just her training with Bete. She is practicing releasing her magic power before sunrise and meditating at night."

"And spending all her free time in the Dungeon, huh..."

"I've heard Elfie and Alicia and some others have been goin' along with her... but maybe it is a bit too much cramming."

"It not being so obviously reckless makes it hard to address. She's calm on the surface and inside, making it hard to persuade her. She's thinking it through before acting."

Riveria, Finn, Loki, and Gareth all spoke.

Raul and the others had tried to talk with Lefiya, but when they got into the nitty-gritty of the scheduling, the numbers, and the fundamental reasoning behind everything they were apparently outdebated. Raul apparently got so worked up that he had tears in his eyes.

"The brakes deities speak of appear to have been cut."

"It wasn't so different for us when we came to Orario and experienced our baptism."

"All the same. This is too extreme." Riveria shook her head and closed her eyes. "...The worst part is that Lefiya can continue this for some time yet."

There was a tone of certainty to her voice. Hiding a pained, pensive feeling in her brow, she continued.

"Having experienced failure once, those who stand back up can embrace the hardships and press on. They can keep running, even as it wears down their body and soul. Because they know now that there is something more bitter, more painful than dying without achieving their goal."

"...That's true. Now Lefiya has the security...no, the resolve to not give up halfway. Regret is becoming the thing that fuels her."

Gareth nodded at Riveria's assessment.

The elf and dwarf stared into the distance, recalling one particular moment from the past.

"The younger Aiz all over again."

Riveria could see Aiz's familiar shadow on Lefiya's face. Even in the present day, Aiz still had her moments of recklessness, but she had improved a lot. The fact that Riveria had said the same thing was happening again instead of saying Lefiya was just like Aiz showed how deeply concerned she was.

"So it's not just Aiz. You're Lefiya's mama, too, huh, Riveria?"

"Do not taunt me, Loki. I am being serious here."

She did not bother entertaining with her goddess's joke. It was the other side of her concerns with Lefiya. Because she had clashed with the young Aiz countless times and almost made mistakes several times, she could see the danger in Lefiya's current behavior. From a different perspective, and speaking from a different position, even though they didn't say it openly, they all shared Riveria's opinion.

"Well, it's true Lefiya ain't all right...It's even worse than the old Aiz in some ways." Loki crossed her arms with a pensive sigh.

She usually left all the work to them without doing anything herself, but now that she decided to do a little bit of work for once, she let her mind get to work... Then her lips curled into a smile.

"All right, just leave Lefiya to me. I've got an idea."

"...Truly?"

"I mean it, I mean it. I'm a bit curious about her, and *that* should be just perfect for her."

Loki flashed an okay sign as Riveria stared at her, unsure whether it was actually safe to trust her.

"It will have to wait just a bit, but I've got a trick up my sleeve. The real reason is I just don't wanna go to that dumbass's place...but at least I can put him to some use," Loki boldly declared, as if she were delivering an oracle. "I'll have Lefiya be our recruiter when the School District comes in a month."

CHAPTER NOSTALGIC SCHOOLHOUSE

Гэта казка іншага сям'і.

Насталвгічная школа

CHAPTER 2

NOSTALGIC SCHOOLHOUSE

Lefiya continued forward, undaunted.

She trained with Bete without fail, other than days when he had plans or his own training to do. Once, after constantly bowing and pleading, she even joined him in his exploration of the Dungeon, but the Amazon Lena had appeared out of nowhere

"A new rival appeared from the most unexpected angle?! An ambush here of all places?! Wait, new clothes and a new hairstyle, too?! You're serious about bagging Bete Loga! I'm not gonna let you have my man!!!"

And she rambled on and on, taking Lefiya aback.

Lena was kicked away after that. She sounded almost happy as she groaned.

When Lefiya, after reflecting on the rashness of her own actions, apologized earnestly for interrupting their time together, Bete punched her pretty seriously, which hurt.

When she was not training with Bete, she immersed herself single-mindedly in her magic training.

She greedily requested lessons from her true master. Still, Riveria closed her eyes as if restraining a sigh every time, telling her, "You should rest now," "You are overusing your Mind," or "You can force some things with a Level Four status, but you must not overestimate your limits," insisting she be more disciplined in her self-training.

She still taught what needed to be taught, of course, and the teachings born of her experience were assuredly wise. But given how strict she had been before, Lefiya could not help being flustered by Riveria's decidedly unaggressive course. Lefiya desperately tried to explain that she was not forcing herself, even providing a journal to demonstrate that she was resting every day when she

should be resting. That might well have been the first time she had ever shown any opposition to Riveria.

But Riveria responded with a warning:

"Lefiya. You are only yourself. Just as no one else can be you, you cannot be anyone else."

Lefiya failed to grasp what Riveria meant.

She could not ignore the instructions of the woman who was both a high elf and her respected teacher. She gave in and increased her breaks, even as she increased the intensity of training. Riveria could only sigh.

The days passed.

Life was so busy that the events in Knossos started to feel distant as the season of the Labyrinth City's two great festivals came.

Lefiya arranged a small expedition and hid away in the Dungeon, dodging Elegia. She had already said her farewells to the irreplaceable, beautiful, and monstrous girl who had been her friend. Though that was not the real reason, Lefiya could not bring herself to a somber, grieving mood. Or perhaps it was just subconsciously avoiding lingering in grief in order to keep from standing still.

She had planned to go alone, but Elfie, Alicia, and some of the other women of the familia joined her. She felt terrible about it, stealing from them the one time a year set aside for sorrow.

When she tried to apologize, though, Elfie had just smiled and said, "You can buy me a grape cream Jyaga Maru Kun when we get back!"

Alicia also told her, "If there is ever anything you cannot speak with Lady Riveria about, you can talk with me as much as you need." Her offer to lend an ear as a supportive, older elf only made Lefiya feel even guiltier.

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"Lefiya."

"...Yes?"

"It does not matter how many mistakes you make."

"...?"
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"If you ever turn down a truly wrong path, we will correct you. That is what familia means."

Alicia even told her that. Lefiya's eyes widened, and Alicia sat beside her, quietly lending her a shoulder. Lefiya could not understand why she did that. The elf woman she looked up to, like an older sister, touched her shortened hair gently.

It was similar to the Goddess Festival.

She had at least taken one day off, but after that, she was back on an expedition into the Dungeon in the name of practical training.

By the time she noticed, *Hestia Familia* had gotten itself into another war game, with *Freya Familia*, of all people. To top it off, Bell Cranell and his gathered allies somehow managed to win, though Lefiya did not have any particular thoughts about it.

"Huh."

Was the extent of her reaction.

No, that's a lie.

"Hah?

"What do you mean?

"No, of course, I won't lose, either.

"I'm not falling behind, but I should start going into the Dungeon a bit more...

"Level Five....."

It lit a competitive fire in her heart, and she increased both the quantity and the intensity of her training (and when Aiz and the others celebrated his victory, too, in that moment at least, she was jealous of him).

The red blaze of rivalry had turned into a quieter, hotter blue inferno—something like that.

Just as she promised herself, though, she never allowed herself to idle.

Day by day, she could feel herself approaching the goal that she had set. She could feel herself edging closer to her ideal version of herself through her

training with Bete. And as she caught up to that ideal, she immediately set a new goal. Previously, she had focused only on defense and evasion during her Concurrent Casting, but now she has added offense and counterattacking. She could swing her sword with confidence, though Bete always countered it with ease and usually tacked on a sneering comment about getting ahead of herself.

But even so, she needed to experience casting while attacking, defending, moving, and evading as much as possible. She was shifting from a more magic-oriented magic swordswoman to a sword-oriented magic swordswoman. There was a vast gulf between her magic firepower and her skill in melee combat. Her body was that of a natural magic caster, so her foundational magic power would grow independently as long as she did not slack on her daily training. She kept telling herself that this was enough, that this was good. To become able to protect herself and save anyone.

Her weight fell a bit, so she became careful of what she ate. But it continued to fall. She began to consume meat more proactively, even though she, like most elves, did not particularly like it. Consequently, her chest became bigger. She didn't understand why.

What she did understand was that Aiz and the others were worried about her. Compared to before, she was interacting with them less often. It was not out of cruelty, and she still took meals with them. Even so, she stopped relying on them quite so much. Or perhaps it would be better to say she had depended on them in the past.

Either way, Lefiya perceived this as the moment for her to leave the nest.

But they did not seem to feel that way.

"Lefiya...recently, you've been pushing yourself too hard...don't you think...?"

Aiz made up her mind to say something, but...

"I do not think you are one to speak when it comes to that, Ms. Aiz."

Lefiya had some choice words for her.

Aiz's face froze as if feeling a heavy shock.

Are you not getting up early every morning and swinging your sword?

When Tione and Tiona nodded in agreement, Aiz got even more depressed.

Even though she thought that might have been a little too harsh, it was all so Lefiya could continue pushing herself.

And so two months passed since she had lost her friend.

The cool tendrils of winter began to be felt.

That was when Loki called her in.



"You would like me to serve as the School District recruiter?"

When she was called into the office of the manor, Lefiya's eyes widened.

Finn, Riveria, and Gareth were there as well.

"That's right!" Loki smiled right in front of her. "You're a graduate! Who could be better for grabbin' up all the top students from that cheeky place?! You're the one who knows us and them best!"

"That is...true, I suppose, but..."

The School District, the roving institute of education, would return to Orario in three days.

And its return marked the start of the season when every familia would seek out students with future potential.

This period was Orario's recruiting season.

With cooperation from the School District's leadership, representatives of every familia would hold sessions explaining and promoting their factions.

For Orario, it was a way to gather talent, and for the School District, it was a way to provide its students with opportunities. Given the merits for everyone involved, this event had been sponsored since the school was founded—or rather, the original intention in founding the School District was to gather people from all over the world in the Labyrinth City.

And amid all that, the administration could request that a familia send a member for an extended period as a recruiter. They could build a deeper relationship with the students, teach them more about their familia, and advertise its activities. Generally, the reason for this from the School District's perspective was because of a large number of students demonstrating an interest in joining a given familia, and as such, it was an accommodation for the largest familias.

As one of Orario's strongest, *Loki Familia* was of great interest to many students.

"Royman and 'em have been hounding me. They wanna make sure Orario grabs lotsa top students and all."

If they could capture the students' interest, Orario's strength would grow, even if they all ended up joining different familias.

The Guild was interested in enlisting the best of the best—potential future top-tier adventurers.

It is true that the students are brilliant, but wasn't Loki Familia not aggressive about recruiting? I heard Loki had only grudgingly engaged with it last time.

Lefiya was confused.

She was the first student from the School District who *Loki Familia* had accepted.

It caused a big stir at the time, with people calling it the most extraordinary feat since the School District's founding. As one of the top students at the time, she had won a recommendation and was the only student to be accepted out of eight hundred applicants.

"But if a representative of the familia is being sent, I believe Ms. Aki or Ms. Alicia would be better suited."

"What do you know, we sent those two kids as recruiters last time. Wouldn't want them grumbling about having to do the same thing all over again, though, and it's rough around here without them."

Put bluntly, Lefiya wanted to withdraw her name from consideration, but Loki wouldn't let her get out of this so easily.

Even for the sake of strengthening the familia, Finn and the rest of the senior leadership could not leave for an extended time. The familia would stop running

without them. As for the other core members...*I'm sorry to say that they are just not suited to it.*

Aiz was not especially articulate, Tiona and Tione would probably break something, and Bete was just out of the question. In that situation, the obvious targets would be the second-tier members, particularly the tactful Anakity and Alicia.

However, as Loki mentioned, they were the recruiters sent last time around when Lefiya was a student.

"Anyway, no training with Bete during that time. And no goin' into the Dungeon, either."

Lefiya's eyes flared hearing that.

When she finally sussed out their true intent, her tone grew immediately prickly.

"Loki, I understand my condition better than anyone. I am not forcing myself, and I am taking breaks. Please do not push work onto me as an excuse to limit my freedom."

"I ain't sayin' anything like that. I just want ya to focus on the recruiting. If we're gonna poach some students, I want ya a hundred percent focused on it."

She could not help glaring at her brazen patron goddess.

It was all the worse because it was a perfectly reasonable argument.

She could not be half-hearted if she was serving as a recruiter or an official representative of her familia. It would likely mean staying aboard the ship for the duration of its visit.

Loki surely had that planned from the start.

Lefiya recognized that every escape route was sealed no matter how she struggled.

"And most of all! Just think of those cute and innocent students looking up to you, the OG alum!! Just imagine their eyes glistening, calling you big sister! A lovely lily or two might just bloom, hee-hee-hee!"

They won't call me that, and nothing of the sort will bloom.

Exasperated, she stared sharply at Loki, who did not bother to hide her ulterior motives.

Loki smiled quietly at her.

"You against it?"

Of course. I don't have time for this. I want to get stronger. Just when I was starting to really feel the change happening.

She could see through Lefiya's heart even if she kept a straight face and still smiled.

"But too bad. Goddess's orders."

"Gh...Loki."

Lefiya leaned forward as her goddess played the ultimate trump card, but...

"It is a request from me as well, Lefiya. Our familia has sustained casualties, including the people we lost in the last battle. I would like to recruit graduates from the School District to make up for some lost strength. All the more so if there are promising students like you."

"Captain..."

"Not that we think elves like you are poppin' up all the time, though! If they are, they're more'n a wee bit better at teachin' people than we are! Ga-ha-ha!"

Gareth's garrulous laughter eased the mood after Finn's earnest request.

After receiving such a request, Lefiya found it impossible to refuse.

Fighting the urge to sigh, she gave in and straightened up.

"Very well...I accept the recruiter position."

"Thank you, Lefiya. I appreciate it," Finn said, thanking her

"Take this opportunity to reexamine yourself, Lefiya," Riveria said. "Not just through your own eyes, but through the eyes of others as well."

Ŧ

The iconic ship earned the title of the world's largest many times over.

A diameter of 700 meders.

Its body was a cylinder that could hardly be called a hull. It was most correctly described as a floating ship. A grand manifestation of Orario's magic-stone industrial development, an amalgamation of 500 large-scale magic-stone devices—a flotation device also used for the elevator in Babel—allowed it to slide across the surface of the sea and boldly travel all around the world.

The round structure that made up the ship was divided into three layers: the control layer, the residential layer, and the academic layer. The cylindrical layers were over twenty meders tall, providing a massive amount of living space despite being on a ship normally out at sea. More than ten thousand people lived on board, and its scale was on par with that of a large city.

The highest level, the academic layer, was bathed in sunlight beneath the blue sky. It was covered in schoolhouses, large-scale arenas, and various other facilities laid out in beautiful symmetry. In the center was the bridge, a tower that resembled Babel.

The bow resembled the head of a heron and could move a full 360 degrees, setting the ship's course.

It, too, was a magic-stone product, a one-of-a-kind forcefield propulsion device.

A short stack of pancakes.

A clock with an extra-long hand.

A grand dragon's back.

Described along those lines by those who saw it, it was an object of envy across the breadth of the mortal realm.

Both a ship that traveled the world and a world of knowledge and study unto itself.

Welcoming those who studied, illuminating those who were lost, a guiding light that spread its wings across the whole world.

Its official name was the Hringhorni. Its other name was the Maritime Academy for Scholarship Special Administrative District, aka the School District.

The enormous ship was visible through the window.

"It's really back..."

Lefiya murmured as she looked out at the floating ship that was her alma mater.

The School District was docking in Meren.

Built on the edge of the elliptical, brackish Lolog Lake, Meren's harbor, stretching from the eastern edge to the center, was split between a trading port and a fishing port. The western side was a shipyard and a massive berth to allow the largest ships to dock—a harbor solely for the School District.

"It's the same as always, but it really is huge. Haaah, what a pain."

"It travels the world, taking in students from everywhere, so its size is justified...or rather, could you please not disparage the place you are sending one of your followers?"

Loki looked like she might spit any moment as the carriage rumbled slightly.

Lefiya was taken aback by seeing her patron goddess take such an inimical stance toward the school—or rather, toward its principal, whom she utterly despised.

In all the world, there were not many ports capable of berthing a 700-meder-diameter ship. It would stop at sea whenever it visited other lands, and smaller boats facilitated movement between it and land. There was no way to fully accommodate it other than building a harbor specifically for it, and Meren was the only one in the world.

Orario had been heavily involved in establishing the School District, and it was the shipyards here in Meren that had built it. So the harbor here had the necessary scale to begin with—though with all of the School District's improvements and additions over the years, even the harbor that had given birth to it was reaching its limit.

As with every year it returned to Meren. The ship that filled more than half of Meren harbor drew complaints from every other ship that docked there. The western harbor, which was usually open, would be completely occupied, drastically limiting the number of vessels that could enter the port.

"It seems to have had quite the adventure this time, too..."

With her Level 4 enhanced vision, Lefiya spotted countless marks of major and minor damage on the side of the massive ship.

As it traveled around the world, it would face adventure, get attacked by marine monsters, become involved in international disputes, and the like. When she was studying there, a much less experienced Lefiya had been both stunned by and roped into those adventures on many occasions—though it was also how she managed to level up even before joining *Loki Familia*.

The School District returned every three years primarily for its flotation device's maintenance.

Though it was the product of Orario's world-leading magic-stone industry, it still required regular inspections and maintenance. That was why the entire ship regularly underwent a complete overhaul, which included swapping out the spare flotation device.

The School District's previous role was as a seaborne fortress, a foothold for slaying the Leviathan, one of the Three Great Quests.

Setting out to slay the giant dragon that dominated the sea, Zeus and Hera took down the ancient monster with this enormous platform and the help of *Poseidon Familia*.

Given that background, it was not something that would break easily—though, as most expected, it had been badly damaged in the great battle with Leviathan—so it was not so odd that the school would embark on some adventure. Incidentally, one of its external parts, the sublime winglike dimmers, were made from Leviathan's azure fins.

A symbol of success in one of the Three Great Quests...I didn't give it much thought as a student, but it's only natural it's called the grandest ship in the world.

That very same school had cut the power to its constantly used flotation device, and was currently resting on the water's surface.

At last, the carriage reached the harbor where the massive ship was docking.

"By the way...why are we using a carriage like this? It would not have been a difficult walk for me. Isn't this an unnecessary expenditure?"

"I'm here, too, ya know! Meren's awkwardly far from Orario, and I'd get tired. And it's been a long time since I've had you alone in private to harass as much as I want, gee-hee-hee! That was half the reason."

"I see. Though I intercepted all of your attempts."

Loki seemed oddly excited as she brazenly revealed her ulterior motive, even as she painfully waved her bright red hands.

That was a result of Lefiya mercilessly swatting them down.

"It's so sad! You've gone as cold as Riveria and Aiz!"

Lefiya sighed as Loki whined with a fake sob.

"Also..."

Just when Lefiya reached for the door, tired of dealing with the goddess...

"A celebrity needs to have a fitting entrance."

Loki smiled warmly.

As she stepped down from the elegant carriage, the faint scent of seawater greeted Lefiya...along with a big cheer.

"They're here!!!"

"Loki Familia!"

"Is that really Thousand Elf?!"

"Show some respect for your senior, dummy!"

"Lefiyaaaa!"

The outer edge of the top academic layer was filled with countless students. Some were shouting. Some leaned out over the railing. Some blushed and waved at her.

Lefiya was stunned by the unexpected greeting as she set foot on the docks.

"They were just as wild when Alicia and Anakity came. Orario's the center of the world, and we're *Loki Familia*, after all."

Loki's words said it all.

Among all the familias that had come to recruit, *Loki Familia* was without a doubt the most popular. Their name rang out wherever it traveled, and countless students admired them. Whenever the list of their feats grew, students would cheer and wait impatiently for their return to Orario. Becoming an adventurer was a standard career path many of the School District's students aspired to and one of the most sought-after jobs.

"...I'm not Ms. Aiz or any of the famous first-tier adventurers, though..."

She murmured as she endured the spasm starting in her cheek.

She was completely numb to it at this point, but the title of the strongest faction in Orario was not just for show. Seeing the students' reactions made her recognize the position they were truly in.

She could not help thinking it was still too far overblown, but remembering how she had once been on the other side of it as a student herself, she laughed a bit to herself.

The old Lefiya had not even been aiming to become an adventurer, so she had not been quite so excited.

"Hah, I love those girly cheers! The schoolgirls here are top quality like always, mmmmmmm!"

"Loki..."

Don't look at me like that. You're enjoyin' it, too, ain'tcha?!"

"Please don't tease me."

Loki was throwing kisses left and right to the students overhead as Lefiya watched wearily.

She was surprised. But that was all.

To the current Lefiya, the students' cheers were not particularly pleasant. If anything, she found them difficult to accept because she knew that she hadn't

done anything to deserve such ardent cheers.

"That's not gonna cut it, Lefiya. Can't have you keep lookin' that gloomy forever. Kids with heavy eyes who never smile eventually lose the ability to smile from their heart."

Loki's tone suddenly changed. Her unserious attitude faded in an instant, and she looked at Lefiya with a goddess's smile.

"Do you know why you're here right now?"

"...To find and recruit new talent."

"When you first met Aki and Alicia, how were they?"

"...Pretty, smiling, relaxed, and natural. They seemed like the epitome of adulthood."

"Then what are you doing?"

This time, she tapped Lefiya on the shoulder like a mischievous older sister.

Looking into her arched vermilion eyes, Lefiya exhaled slightly and then looked up overhead. With a smile on her face, she waved to the students.

"Kyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!!"

The cheers exploded.

It felt like Meren itself was trembling as Lefiya and Loki walked toward the enormous ship.

The cheers were unceasing. The students welcomed *Loki Familia*, who was given pride of place among all the recruiters as the first to be allowed on board.

Lefiya was still just fifteen. There were surely still some students there who were older than her.

She could not help thinking there was no point for them to get so excited over a young elf girl, but she had been given a job as a member of *Loki Familia*. She decided to face it with an appropriate grace.

That was what Lefiya promised herself as the cheers rained down around her.

That was what she vowed, but...

Umm. I'm not saying I mind. Really, I don't, but...why does it feel like there are so many more girls cheering?

"You're so dashing, Lefiya!"

"She's so much prettier than I imagined! Like that's what it means to truly be an elf!"

"I want to call her big sister!!!"

"""Yeah!!!"""

...I didn't hear anything. Not a word.



All they needed to board the ship was to speak briefly to the person serving as the gatekeeper on the harbor side.

Climbing the gangway, which extended like a drawbridge from the control layer at the bottom of the ship, they set foot onto the School District.

"Welcome, Goddess Loki and Ms. Lefiya Viridis. I am Alisa Ragast. I shall be your guide."

-Alisa.

Lefiya was visibly surprised to see the human girl, an old friend, waiting for them. Her trademark glasses and dark hair were worn up at the back of her head. She undoubtedly noticed Lefiya's gaze but maintained her professional smile.

"...I am grateful for the warm welcome. Please, lead the way."

Seeing her performing the role of an official representative for the school so thoroughly, Lefiya also did her best to act as an official representative of *Loki Familia*.

But her patron goddess didn't care about any of that.

"Ohhh! I remember you, Alisa! You're the cute little glasses girl who was always with Lefiya! Do you remember me?!"

"Of course. It is perhaps inappropriate to say to a deity, but it is nice to see that you have not changed, Goddess Loki. This way, if you please. God Balder is waiting in the principal's office."

Alisa deftly dealt with the ever-indelicate Loki as she led them into the ship.

"That smooth student council president is the same as before! It's always nice seein' personalities we don't have at home!"

Loki acted like she always did, and Lefiya, pinching the goddess's hip to silence her, followed close behind.

Unlike the residential and academic layers, there were naked pipes and bare metal walls here, as well as the smell of lubricant and experimental drugs that seemed to give off the scent of lemons.

The core of the School District housed Hringhorni's control centers and the compounding, alchemy, and mystery departments' experimental laboratories. The utilitarian appearance of the control layer was familiar to every student, new or old, and Lefiya found it nostalgic.

The students who had cheered them from above did not come all the way down just to squeal some more, but the crew and mages who they passed in the hallways all watched with interest.

Lefiya had been a model student when she still attended school here, but she was never treated like this. It was strange, but returning to her alma mater reinforced how different her position was now.

With Alisa leading the way, they quickly passed through the control and residential layers and reached the academic layer.

Bathed in the warm sunlight and the attention of the students milling about outdoors, they finally reached the bridge—Breithablik.

"Hello, Lefiya. It's been three years, hasn't it?"

In the large sacred chambers at the top of the tower, she was greeted by her beautiful former patron god, who offered her a gentle smile.

"Hello, Lord Balder. It is an honor to meet again this way."

"There's no need to be so formal, Lefiya. There is no one here but us. Please, speak with me as you did before."

When they'd first met, Lefiya believed Balder was the epitome of what a god should be. That was just how wise, tranquil, beautiful, and above all, divine the god before her was.

His eyelids were always closed, and he always seemed to have that gentle smile on his lips.

His long blond hair was even more golden than Aiz's, and he was particularly slender even among gods. But he was also tall, closer to 180 celches than 170. He wore sacred vestments with long sleeves, his chest bare from his right shoulder to where the sleeve hung on his arm. His smooth, milky skin could inspire envy in even a goddess.

If she were to speak without worrying about possibly being misunderstood, Lefiya would say that she did not know anyone godlier than him. He was the living embodiment of what a god must have been to the people of the mortal realm in ancient times.

That was God Balder in a nutshell.

"Lefiya obviously thinks you're gross. That's why she's keeping it formal, dumdum. Should've noticed sooner, greenhorn! She's forgotten all about the past, and now we're spending every day madly in love!"

"You are the same as ever, Loki."

Because he was a god of light, he had the worst possible chemistry with Loki, a goddess who had mastered every form of mischief and was the very personification of recklessness and casting off all inhibitions.

Or more accurately, Loki decided to be hostile, rather one-sidedly.

They had known each other since their time back in the heavens, and Loki had apparently tried to kill him simply because "that smug smile of his always pissed me off." As it so happened, with the help of some mistletoe in the heavens and his brother Hodur, he successfully foiled her plot, laughing all the while.



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Lefiya had been stunned from her first meeting, seeing Loki so up in arms at the god she so loved and respected, and when she learned that it had been decided she would join *Loki Familia*, she had even been uneasy over it. But Loki's words never angered Balder. If anything, he even seemed to accept her because she was one of the few deities who found fault in him.

Seeing their relationship, a thought had once crossed Lefiya's mind.

Is this like wanting to torment the person you like?

Before entering *Loki Familia*, when she was converting from *Balder Familia*, she had asked Loki that question without thinking.

"Even if you are a beautiful little slip of an elf girl I've had my eye on, say another word of that, and I won't forgive you."

Loki responded with a quiet smile while emanating a divine presence that made Lefiya feel like she was next to a raging blue flame. That was probably the first and only time Lefiya had been terrified of Loki as a being who surpassed the ken of mortals.

"Now Lefiya's just flirtin' with me all the time! Let me tell you how often I've felt her growing breasts with these hands of mine! How about it, huh?"

"Please be quiet so we can move the discussion along."

"Argh?!"

Now, as she had learned from Riveria and the others, Lefiya could properly respond to her antics.

Loki writhed in pain after getting cracked in the back of the head by Lefiya's rod, even as Balder was still smiling as kindly as ever. The difference in personality was like night and day.

Lefiya could sense Alisa's face tensing as she waited by the door.

"Loki is still Loki, but...you've changed, Lefiya."

Paying no mind to Loki, Balder addressed her.

Sitting in front of the big ash desk, he quietly smiled.

"I didn't recognize you."

Lefiya felt as if the god whose eyes were closed had nonetheless been able to see right through her—including all that had happened in these three years, what she had felt, what she had lost.

"There is much I would like to ask, much I would like to hear, much to catch up on...but let us get down to business. Before Loki suffers any unpleasant thoughts."

"Too late, bub. The annoyance got turned up to eleven the moment I saw your face. Let's just get this over with already," Loki said bitingly as she stood up.

Balder nodded before looking at Lefiya through his closed eyelids.

"Lefiya, I would like you to take on a party."

Lefiya arched her brow dubiously.

"Not recruiting or a seminar?"

"Of course, we will hold a seminar for those who wish to sign up. But separate from that, there are students who I would like you to teach about what you have seen in Orario. What you have felt...in the Dungeon."

Hearing that much, Lefiya could hazard a guess at what this request entailed.

He probably also wanted her to accompany the students in exploring the Dungeon. And train them both in body and spirit. That was what Balder was asking.

"They all have ambitions of becoming adventurers. It would be fair to say they are currently at the top of the class. Were any student to meet the standards of *Loki Familia* or *Freya Familia*—ah, yes, they are no longer an option. Nevertheless, if anyone were to meet your familia's standards, it would have to be them, by our judgment.

"Assuming we're only talking about students ready for combat today, that is," Balder added with a glance at Loki. "There may, of course, be others who possess great skill and potential or who otherwise might meet Loki's beauty standards."

Loki snorted in annoyance at having her thoughts anticipated by an old not-

even-friend.

"So a pseudo-internship, then?"

"Your quick understanding is appreciated. To supplement, though, it would perhaps be more correct to say we are entrusting them to you as an instructor rather than having the students accept an internship."

"Me...an instructor...?"

Balder nodded.

"This year's situation is a tad different from most. Many of the students are *impatient*. We decided that it would be *concerning* to hold the Dungeon practical in Orario."

"...And this party is particularly striking?"

"Indeed. There are some other children we are concerned about in addition to them, but...with *that boy's* help, we should be able to manage with them."

"?"

Lefiya cocked her head, unsure of what he meant by that.

"It's nothing," Balder said with a smile. "I believe I understand how unforgiving the Dungeon can be. I would like you to teach them about that from your perspective."

"…"

"It's fine to admonish them if that's what they need. If they need encouragement, that's perfectly fine as well. I would like you to observe them and share your honest thoughts, whatever they may be. For your own sake as well."

Balder wore a tranquil smile as he finished with that line.

Loki did not say anything.

Even though Balder was making requests, she just quietly watched Lefiya.

All eyes were on the young elf. The final decision was hers.

She slowly opened her mouth.

"...Very well. I was taught here myself. I have never forgotten that privilege. I don't believe I'm qualified to teach students, but I shall do my best."

"Thank you very much, Lefiya."

Conscious of her position as an elf, she carefully chose her words and accepted the request, and Balder thanked her.

"Then we will be employing Lefiya temporarily. Will that be acceptable, Loki?"

"You don't have to check with me for every little thing, dumbo. If it's for her sake, then whatever's fine."

From this day until the agreed-upon date—about two weeks—Lefiya would leave *Loki Familia* and take up residence aboard the School District. As best she could remember, Anakity and Alicia, the recruiters when she was a student, had also stayed on board, though it was only for a short time. Lefiya had lived in the dorms here as a student and had no complaints about it.

Balder seemed almost happy at Loki's unmistakably dismissive response. With a transparent smile, he turned his gaze back to Lefiya.

"I look forward to working with you again, Lefiya."

"Yes, Lord Balder."

"Leon is currently teaching, so he could not be here for this meeting, but he will provide you with a more detailed explanation later. If there are any issues regarding personal necessities...Alisa, could you please help her?"

"Please leave it to me."

Alisa bowed, and then the meeting ended.

Loki left because she didn't want to hang around a second longer than necessary, so Lefiya had no choice but to bow slightly to Balder and leave as well.

"That stupid smirk is the absolute worst! Who does he think he is, playin' up that 'I'm a good god' angle all the damn time! Is he trying to put out my eyes with how dazzlin' he is or somethin'?!"

"How can you hate Lord Balder so much...?"

"It can't be explained with something as simple as logic! It's not even a physical problem; I can't stand his very existence!"

After ranting loud enough that Balder could surely hear through the door, Loki gave Lefiya and Alisa a thumbs-up and announced. "All right, then, I'm gonna go pick up some cute girls!"

"I will slap you down in Lady Riveria's stead, if I must."

"Agh. Kidding, just kidding! I meant I'll be sniffing out talent! Just looking around for potential stars! You don't need to look so scary, Lefiya! This is just a little scouting to see just how many hotties and cuties there are this time, guha-ha!"

"Ah...Loki!"

Lefiya watched in exasperation as her goddess dashed away from them faster than she could react.

But at the same time, she realized this was Loki's way of looking out for her.

"...This is her giving us some space and telling me to take my time with an old friend, right?"

"That's what it seems like. She can be considerate in the oddest ways sometimes..."

Alisa's tone changed from the formal and polite one earlier as they glanced at each other. Finally, they both laughed.

"It's been a while, Lefiya! I'm so happy to see you again!"

"Me too, Alisa! You grew your hair out!"

"And you cut yours so short! I came since they said you'd be the one coming, and I still couldn't recognize you at first."

"Ah, rude!"

They smiled and laughed like ordinary teenage girls.

Now that they were alone, they could forget their positions for a moment and simply be themselves.

Alisa Ragast.

She was two years older and used to be in the same class as Lefiya. They had been roommates and became fast friends ever since Lefiya enrolled.

The School District, managed with support from the Guild in Orario, was a collective of several familias. As the principal and the school's representative, Balder stood at the top, but no familia was considered higher or lower—though they each had quirks.

And within the School District, familias were normally referred to as classes. Iðunn Familia became Iðunn Class, Bragi Familia became Bragi Class, and so on.

The students received falna from their respective deities while going about their school life. It was a peculiar familia structure that was only found here.

Lefiya and Alisa had both belonged to Balder Class.

"But it's a relief to see you here, Alisa. I imagine there are hardly any people left from our era. I was always getting into trouble with you and Bardain and the others."

"Ha-ha! Rulebreaker Bardain! You're so softhearted that you always got wrapped up in his shenanigans and got treated like a convenient cannon for blowing things up. He was always diving headfirst into nests of monsters and everything else."

If Lefiya was a model student, Alisa was the student council president who always took charge. Her skill in alchemy was unbelievable, and while she paled in combat ability compared to Lefiya, the teachers always considered her uniquely suited for a career in industrial manufacturing.

"Look at you, a prefect now."

"Yes, somehow. I was lucky."

"You were the smartest of us all, Alisa. It was skill. I'm sure you can become a teacher here like you always wanted."

"That's not true at all. I have my hands full just trying to do everything I can!"

Walking down the hallway, Lefiya noticed the armband around Alisa's left arm.

The ray of light and ship crest—the emblem of Balder Class—was proof she

was a prefect, something none but the chosen few could become.

They were student representatives who served as the bridge between teachers and students in each class. They had the authority to discipline students as they deemed necessary. It would not be wrong to describe them as quasi-teachers.

In familia terms, the teachers were like the core leadership, and the prefects were candidates for future promotion to leadership. In *Loki Familia*'s case, they were in a similar position as Raul and the other second-string members.

Lefiya had left for Orario, aiming to be an adventurer while Alisa had remained in the School District to become a teacher.

Becoming a teacher there had the same low odds as joining one of the more powerful factions in Orario. Of course, it required the proper qualifications, but countless people dreamed of being like the wonderful instructors and deities who had guided them through their student life.

Becoming a prefect could be considered the most direct route to becoming a teacher.

"The LFC is still going strong, I imagine?"

"Of course! Managing an unofficial organization requires official influence! I'm the head of the Leon Fan Club! It's not an abuse of authority, though! It's a prefect's job to hear the students' voices and manage things so friction doesn't build between them and the instructors!"

"Right...do try to keep it in moderation..."

Right around when she met Lefiya, Alisa was crushing on a certain instructor.

She originally set her sights on becoming an teacher because she wanted to get closer to him. But even if that yearning was the spark, her determination to become an instructor was genuine.

Watching her first love moved her deeply, and it wasn't long before she became interested in working in the same field as him.

She was still striving earnestly to become a teacher here, to achieve her dream.

Lefiya was happy for her, almost like it was her own dream.

The Alchemy Department's ace and a prefect.

Those were Alisa's current titles.

"Did you hear, Lefiya?! Before Orario sent the request for a recruiter, *Hestia Familia*'s Bell Cranell snuck in without permission!"

"Huh?"

"The Record Holder was so well known in the countries and towns we've been to lately! To think he was so thoughtless! It was such a disappointment! Do you know him?"

"No, not at all. Not even a little. I don't know anything about that lewd, peeping, terribly rude rabbit."

"I—I see..."

While talking about recent events and just generally chatting, they stepped out onto a terrace halfway up Breithablik. There wasn't a single cloud in the perfect blue sky. Down below, the schoolhouses Lefiya had attended for years were the same as ever, and she could see students walking around here and there.

And a suspicious-looking vermilion-haired goddess was constantly hitting on them.

"There is still so much I want to talk about. I don't know what to do. I can't even say it all. And it's only been three years apart."

There was a fond, openhearted glint behind Alisa's glasses as she held down her hair, which the sea breeze seemed eager to carry away.

Right...it's already been three years...

Only three years. Or already three years.

Different people would see it their own way. But Lefiya was in the latter camp.

All those turbulent days spent adventuring in Orario were filled with countless experiences that left her head spinning.

Joy, sadness, failure...and loss.

Remembering that beautiful, hideous girl, Lefiya averted her eyes.

"Lefiya...you've changed."

"Eh?"

"Like I said before, I didn't recognize you at first. You feel like a different person...or maybe it's that you've grown up?"

Alisa carefully chose her words.

"No...you've become an adventurer," she said with a lonely laugh. "You took the lead. It's...frustrating. I'm sure you're the person from our generation who has grown the most. Maybe you were right to choose *Loki Familia*."

Alisa didn't mean anything by those words. She was simply speaking her mind. But even though she knew that, Lefiya could only manage a fake smile.

"...It's not something right or wrong."

It was true.

If she had not become an adventurer, she would never have met Aiz and everyone else, and she would never have needed to experience such crushing loss.

But at the same time, even if she could have escaped that pain, she couldn't say with conviction that would be the right choice.

It was no exaggeration to say that the city might have been destroyed had Lefiya not been there. And not just her. If any single person had been missing, things may have ended very differently.

So she had no idea what was correct or right.

If it seemed like she had changed, then it was because she regretted something so much that she couldn't forgive herself. It was only after realizing something far too late that she found herself standing here in front of Alisa.

To Lefiya, that was not something worthy of praise. Not at all.

Lefiya didn't notice the self-deprecation creeping into the smile on her face.

When Alisa saw that, she realized she had said something she shouldn't have and clammed up.

"...But your fame is spreading all over the world. Really, in all sorts of places. Can you believe it? Hearing stories about my roommate from the Empire to the Kaios Desert!"

"That's...I'm sure they've been embellished. I'm not that famous..."

"There was one about how Altena was targeting you out of jealousy!"

"Ah, that one is true..."

Feeling apologetic as Alisa cheerfully changed the topic, Lefiya smiled.

After smiling for a while, she looked out at the scenery of the school.

I accepted it and understood the responsibility, but I already regret coming here.

This was a place too filled with memories.

Everywhere she looked evoked scenes from the past, easily dredging up old memories.

Just talking with Alisa like this—looking out at the School District from this terrace—brought back too many.

It wasn't Alisa's fault. The cause was Lefiya's sentimentality, her shame.

Here, she was forced to confront her old self, no matter how much she wanted to look away.

The naive student who knew nothing and saw only a brighter future, believing in a better tomorrow with anticipation in her eyes.

Confronting her naive self right now was unpleasant.

It was painful when she had just lost her.

What about me has changed?

As she asked a question she could not begin to answer, Lefiya's mind slipped into memories.

FAIRY CANON © Kiyotaka Haimura

FAIRY CANON

1

Lefiya Viridis was a kind, compassionate girl.

Never unbearable or prone to pride or lacking in concern for anything besides other elves, which could make her fellow elves seem stubborn and hardheaded.

She was pure and innocent in her dealings with every race, every person. It would probably be fair to say she was a bundle of curiosity. Put simply, she was the opposite of the common stereotype. She was an elf who was easy to get along with.

That was all due to the village where she was born and raised.

Lefiya's home, Wishe Forest, was an unusual place.

Even among the many elven villages in the world, it was widely known to the outside world.

Located in the great river of trees that spread across the center of the continent, Wishe Forest was a transit hub for merchants and travelers crossing the continent. Many people of other races visited the village and passed through it on their travels.

That was an extraordinarily unusual situation compared to most elven forests.

The isolated and isolationist elf villages were in the process of adjusting to the changes that came with the dawn of the era of gods. But none were so open as that. Most of the elves living in the forests protected their sacred trees, followed the teachings of their people, and drew a distinct line between themselves and the outside world. It was common for elves who left their homes to be stunned to discover the diversity of the world.

There was none of that for the people of Wishe Forest.

They proactively interacted with people of other races, dreamed of the world

outside their forest, and eventually left on journeys of their own. Sociable, compatible with other races, and possessing magic powers that stood out even among fellow elves.

That was the trademark of a Wishe Forest elf.

It all traced back to the inspiration for the village's name.

Ahh, 'tis so silly, so trite!

What meaningless fairy customs!

My fellow elves, leave the woods and gaze upon the world.

Build bonds and expand the circle of fairies.

Elves, know ye true pride!

It was one of the works of Wishe, who was known as one of the three great bards whose names survived from the distant past.

And it was, to this day, one of the core teachings of the village.

By all accounts, Wishe had been an uninhibited, rootless traveler who would never stay still in any place long enough to build a village.

But elves who looked up to that bard recovered the forest where Wishe was born from the monsters that had taken it over and established a village there, taking the bard's name for the village. That was the origin of the place that was called Wishe Forest to this day.

Following the teachings of an elf who was freer than any, they possessed a greater interest in the outside world than any other elves.

And the young Lefiya was no exception.

She often listened excitedly to travelers at the village tavern, begging them for stories, and became enchanted by the souvenirs that villagers brought back with them from the outside world.

"A grand waterfall hiding a sea...a sea of sand called the Kaios Desert...and the Dungeon...what sort of places are they?"

Sometimes she would crouch down low on the mossy ground and crawl through a tunnel of tilted trees to enter a secret garden.

This was a field of countless little white flowers that only Lefiya knew about. This was her special place.

"I...want to see the outside world."

She would sink into imagination, sitting on a fallen log, a picture book of the outside world in her lap, while looking at the sacred tree of Wishe Forest, famed for its crown of light.

Kind, a little bit cowardly, and a little bit indecisive, Lefiya found it difficult to set out alone with such vague feelings. She was scared, uneasy, and had nothing to rely on. But she intended to leave the village immediately if the opportunity ever arose.

Some guidance from a spirit would be more than enough. It was a bit embarrassing, but she would not have minded a prince on a white horse coming to take her away. Indulging in childish, fairy-tale-esque fits of imagination, Lefiya hoped for an opportunity to come knocking.

She was an elf who could race ahead if she had a reason. Something. Anything.

She spent every day hoping while staring up at the sacred tree. However, against all expectations, that opportunity came sooner than she had expected.

"Lefiya, did you hear?! The School District showed up in the port town to the south!"

"They did?!"

"Yeah! The school that travels all around the world!"

It was the day she turned eight.

According to an excited local merchant, the School District had stopped in a harbor that lay south of the river of trees. Any child ages six to ten, no matter who or their race, was allowed to enroll. There was no tuition required, either.

The only requirement was the determination to study.

Hearing that, Lefiya's long, pointed ears pricked up.

"Mother, Father! I'm going to the School District!"

""A-all right.""

Taken aback by the look on the girl's face when she came home and slammed her hands on the dinner table, her parents agreed without argument.

Lefiya was almost impossible to stop once she had made up her mind. More than anything, Lefiya wanted to learn about the outside world and discover what she wanted to be. She wanted to be more than just a Wishe Forest elf. She wanted to become Lefiya Viridis. She was sure that the School District, which could allow her to travel the world and experience all sorts of new things, was the perfect fit for her.

Determined not to miss her long-awaited opportunity, she diligently set about packing her bags.

No one stopped her. Per Wishe's teachings, they encouraged their children setting out into the world.

Her parents were lonely, but they sent her off with smiles on their faces.

Her amber-haired mother and dark-blue-eyed father held a small party for her the night before she left. Lefiya's eyes filled with tears while growing a little hesitant and worrying about how it would be pathetic if she failed the examination and came back right away.

"Come home whenever you need. Be it tomorrow or ten years from now."

"Your mother's right. It can be one day's worth of stories or ten thousand days' worth. We would love to hear about what you saw and learned traveling the world, just like Wishe did."

Her parents noticed her worries and gently patted her head while telling her just what she needed to hear.

After Lefiya shed some tears, a smile came to her lips.

After burying her head in her parents' sides, she loudly declared that she would come back.

On the day she set out, there was a crown of light atop the great tree.

It seemed like the sacred tree was sending her off like all the villagers who had come out to see her.

There were glimmering shards of light.

It was magical energy scattering like the petals of a Far Eastern sakura tree—fragments of a bond.

What a beautiful circle of light.

No matter what happened, no matter what she saw, she would never forget the sight of that fairy ring that had taken root in her heart.

Certain of that, Lefiya set out on her journey.

After she was brought to the harbor town by the local elf merchant, Lefiya's first reaction, like everyone else's, was awe at the size of the enormous ship floating out in the harbor. Once she got over her initial awe, she adjusted her backpack, steeled herself, and took her next step, walking alongside countless other children toward where applicants were being registered.

The School District's curriculum differed from places of learning established anywhere else in the world.

Ordinarily, students at various academies and schools would graduate at set times as new students were admitted, taking their place. But there wasn't a clear progression at the School District.

At most, the triennial return to Orario for an overhaul was the closest thing they had—and it was the busiest time for admissions when people gathered in Orario and Meren hoping to enroll—but even that wasn't a firm graduation date.

Students who made up their minds could choose at any point to disembark from the ship and leave as a graduate.

Destinations were as varied as the students, including the global powerhouse known simply as the Empire; the nation of magic, Altena; the city of pleasures, Santorio Vega; the land of song and dance, Maelstra; the sea nation, Dizara; the Kaios Desert...and countless other countries and regions. Students who found their dreams or met someone who changed their life could embark on a new journey in any and every land.

"It's an incredible school custom. It's so free, some can't help but be see it as

irresponsible."

"That's the School District for you. The epitome of laissez-faire."

Many described it like that, but the goal was not wealth, prestige, or power.

The School District's calling was showing all the many possibilities to children who did not yet know what path they wanted to take in life and help them set out on their own. It was a place that gave people goals.

Of course, many students who graduated in a rush ended up failing. The school tried to accommodate its students' desires as best as possible, but there were occasional differences between dreams and reality. However, even for those students who failed, their experience at the School District was by no means wasted. Its ideal was to foster a spirit of inquiry.

That inquiry included self-examination. Learning how to study and live, the students usually became far more tenacious than when they enrolled, learning how to handle most things themselves even when faced with failures.

Students could graduate at any time as long as the deities and instructors agreed there wouldn't be any problems.

The fastest graduate left after only three months.

Getting back to the subject at hand.

With graduates setting off in every land it visited, the School District usually had open seats, as odd as that may have seemed. Children from all over would travel to the lands and towns it visited, hoping to claim one of those empty seats.

When Lefiya took the admission exam, six spots were available for the twelve hundred applicants—1-in-200 odds.

The sheer number of candidates shocked Lefiya, but the daunting odds did not make her lose her nerve. In the interview that was the admission exam, she expressed her determination frankly.

"I want to know about the outside world. What's out there, what's happening, and what I can become. That's what I want to know."

The examination ended easily, almost anticlimactically.

And the results were delivered that night.

The School District welcomed Lefiya's aspirations toward the wider world.

"We approve of your admission, Lefiya Viridis."

Lefiya would never forget the joy she felt when she was called into the room, and Balder said that with a smile.

At the time, Lefiya was by no means smart or strong. But her desire to know the world and to find herself had been acknowledged.

To an institution of learning that chased after dreams, that desire, that curiosity, and that impatience for self-discovery were the most valued traits of all.

Beneath the gaze of deities who could not be deceived, Lefiya had demonstrated her passion for learning and the strength of her desire. She had won one of a mere handful of open seats for herself.

When she reported the results to the young merchant from her home, he leaped into the air in excitement, and after saying farewell, Lefiya left aboard the floating school.

A white jacket and skirt. A lovely girl's uniform.

A badge marking her class.

She received these emblems of the school and a falna. With that, she became a student.



"So you're my new roommate. I'm Alisa. What's your name?"

"L-Lefiya. Lefiya Viridis!"

She met Alisa in one of the multipurpose rooms in the seventeenth sector of the residential layer.

Lefiya entered a two-person dorm room, taking the place of a student who had graduated. She was immediately welcomed with a handshake.

As a member of Balder Class, Lefiya was quickly blessed with good friends,

starting with Alisa.

"So you're the new student! I'm Bardain! A bull person, as you can see! I like big boobs and love even bigger boobs! So a flat-chested little girl like you doesn't meet my standards! Sorry! But never fear! In terms of potential, you're not any worse off than Alisa and the others! I know that a desolate plain today can become fertile ground in the future! Join me in chest exercises!!!"

"Curl up and die already, Bardain." "Seriously." "Stay away, Bardain." "How would you make it up to Lefiya if your perverted thoughts got her pregnant? Begone."

I—*I* can certainly tell all the girls dislike him...

Despite being the same age as Alisa, Bardain was already big and tall enough to tower over them.

Always enduring withering glares from the female students, he was, as expected, in the Combat Studies Department and, indeed, a problem child who always broke the school rules. And he had an abnormal passion for large breasts.

Generous and always smiling, Bardain was like everyone's older brother and hurting Lefiya or the others was the last thing he'd ever want to do.

"Lefiya, you're from Wishe Forest, right? Tell me about that odd place. I'm curious."

"O-of course! But tell me about your home, too, Nassen!"

"I don't wanna. It's enough for me to learn. Other people learning doesn't benefit me."

"Ehh..."

That was the curious prum, Nassen, in a nutshell.

Quiet, small, and bespectacled, he was always carrying a dictionary that seemed far too big for him. He knew far more than Lefiya or Alisa and might have had the makings of a genius, but he was awful at interacting with people. With the various incidents he caused for the sake of satisfying his curiosity, he could hardly be called a model student.

Bardain often dragged him and Lefiya into fights and messes.

"I never wanted to become a fighter!"

"Don't cry, Lefiya! If you don't put that Wishe Forest magic power to use, it'll build up and explode in your boobs! You have to let out your magic for the sake of better boobs!"

"That has nothing to do with anything!"

"Quit mouthing off about breasts while dragging a little girl around, Bardain. And breasts don't get bigger just from channeling mana. If that theory were true, elves and the other races with high magic affinity would have an enormous number of women with big breasts. And if by 'boobs,' you mean a woman's chest region rather than the breast specifically, then you would have to consider men's boobs as well, thus requiring further evaluation of the relationship between mana and boobs—"

"Quit talking about boobs this and boobs that while we're surrounded by monsters!!!"

Lefiya and Nassen, picked for their magic and knowledge, were dragged into this predicament by Bardain. Alisa often raced after them and also got drawn into many battles against monsters and people. It was an everyday sort of thing from the moment Lefiya enrolled, and somewhere along the way, the four of them were considered inseparable and were placed in the same squad.

Lefiya cried softly as she was forced to fire off magic left and right—this was the origin of her reputation for having ludicrous amounts of magic power.

"This is why I said recycling scarletite to make orichalcum would be fastest! What's wrong with my formula?!"

"Scarletite is a miraculous metal created in the Far East. That alone is enough to make it equal to orichalcum in value and rarity. Your formula isn't sublimation. It's just equal exchange. If you don't like it, then try making it from scratch, stupid four-eyes class president."

"Nassennnnnnnnnn!!!"

"P-please don't fight, you two!"

"Mm. Scarletite sounds more austere than orichalcum, so I like it more!"

"Be quiet, Bardain!"

Her school friends were like giant balls of curiosity molded into the form of students, and even for students of the School District, they stuck their noses into every little thing they came across.

They started debates about even the most trivial things, escalating into shouting matches at times. As young Lefiya grew, she was deeply influenced by them.

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"Lefiya...I'm...in love."
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"What?!"

And beyond just studies and knowledge, there was love.

"Professor Leon scolded me, but he also smiled and gave me a serious advice! And when another instructor got mad at me for something I didn't do, he defended me, saying that I wasn't the sort of student who would do that and that I'm harder on myself than anyone else and that I'm always sincere with others! He's a teacher, but he's also my knight!"

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"Eh? Alisa...?"
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"And afterward, he even said, 'Even as an instructor, I respect her'!!! That's practically a confession, right?! Like a vow to walk down the aisle with me?!"

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"No, that's a little—"
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"Aaaaaaah, I wuv you, Professor Leon!"

"W-whoa..."

Lefiya had no idea how to react when she saw hearts in Alisa's eyes turn into hearts behind her glasses. An older female student flashed an almost godlike smile as she said, 'Crushing on Professor Leon is a path everyone walks,' and with that, Alisa broke free from Lefiya's restraints and joined the LFC.

Puberty was a storm of youth, and the School District was a garden of sweet rendezvouses. Watching it unfold from a distance, Lefiya used her friend as an example of what not to do and did not experience love herself.

Studies, combat, and youth.

They enjoyed many encounters. And Lefiya was no exception.

The instructors and deities constantly introduced Lefiya to the unknown and things she never knew.

Every time, her eyes would sparkle. Gaining knowledge and learning something new was just so much fun. For Lefiya, learning was not a means to an end. She wanted to learn for learning's sake.

And one day, she was asked the question.

"What do you want to become, Lefiya?"

"Eh...?"

"I'm going to be Professor Leon's right hand as an instructor here! Bardain wants to be an imperial knight. Nassen wants to be a researcher in Altena... Everyone's finding their dreams. What's yours?"

In the end, Lefiya did not answer the question.

Experiencing the world and meeting so many people had moved her heart countless times, but she had never discovered what she wanted to be.

While continuing to work on her studies, Lefiya turned inward, trying desperately to imagine what she wanted to be, not wanting to be left behind by her friends.

"There is no need to hurry...though that may not sound convincing now. In which case, go ahead and try fretting for once. This is the School District, the place to discover your path and the determination to pursue it. There is no better place to fumble in the dark for an answer."

Balder had told her that with a smile and added, "At the same time, do not forget to rely on others."

And so three years had passed since she enrolled, and around the time she reached Level 2 after Bardain and the others dragged her into all sorts of adventures, she arrived at the center of the world.

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"I can see it, Lefiya! That's it!"

"Waaaah...!"

Stepping out onto the deck beneath a cloudless blue sky, Alisa and Lefiya raised their voices when they looked across the crashing waves and saw land coming into view.

Like the other students around them, they leaned out over the railing, entranced by a single scene.

"So that's Orario...!"

The center of the world.

Home to Babel, the tower of the gods.

And the Dungeon.

At the time, Lefiya knew nothing of the Labyrinth City that she had dreamed of, and her innocent heart raced with excitement.

CHAPTER CLASS IS IN SESSION Пачатак навучния

CHAPTER 3

CLASS IS IN SESSION

"How is it here after three years, Lefiya?"

"It's nostalgic...However, the situation being what it is, I'm more disoriented than anything."

"Ha-ha, an honest answer, I see."

After a night spent in a room set aside for visitors, Lefiya was starting her morning with a walk through the halls alongside an instructor.

He had hair the color of a lion's mane and long enough to cover the back of his neck. This teacher was tall, probably 180 celches at least. At a glance, he seemed slender, but Lefiya knew that his body was like tempered steel. She had not noticed as a student, but now that she had been an adventurer for several years, she could tell how extraordinary his sense of balance was from a single step. Even though he wore no armor and carried no weapon, he still evoked the image of a knight.

His back was always perfectly straight as if his spine were a sword.

His eyes were the same color as his hair and were as imposing and dignified as a lion's.

Many girls would blush bright red in misunderstanding if he looked into their eyes or smiled carelessly at them, just like her old friend Alisa.

He was the top professor in the School District and the captain of *Balder Class*, Leon Verdenberg.

"Of course, accepting whatever situation you find yourself in and responding accordingly is crucial for all people in every walk of life. Those who are fastest to adapt will broaden their horizons the most."

"Society is a never-ending process of turning confusion into comprehension."

"I am pleased you remember. If my lessons have enriched your life even a little, I can ask for nothing more."

Leon glanced at her with a soft look in his eyes. Those were the eyes of a teacher pleased with their student's growth.

True to his reputation as the top professor, he was fairer and more honest than anyone else aboard the School District. His lessons were easy to comprehend, and if he was ever unsure of something, he would discuss it with students. He hoped to grow with his students while explaining that he was anything but an infalliable teacher. Because he never forgot his roots, children who were not yet mature, either, could empathize with him and look up to him.

Righteous and without arrogance. Admonishing and guiding.

Lefiya did not know anyone worthier of the title of teacher than he. When she came to him with her worries as a student, he thoughtfully discussed them with her, thinking through things with her.

Lefiya's story was far from uncommon. The students' nickname for him was Ultra Page due to the way he responded to his students' problems and stuck with them to the end. Even if it meant going five days without sleep, he wouldn't bat an eye.

He was, without a doubt, the most popular teacher among all students, male and female.

Indeed, it would be more correct to say he was popular worldwide.

It feels like he's gotten even cooler than before.

I know what you mean, Lefiya! He's a paragon of style that just keeps improving!!!

Please don't break into my thoughts telepathically, Alisa...

Lefiya was already feeling weary as she made eye contact with Alisa, who was walking behind them like an aide as Leon explained the plan for her going forward.

"I touched on it yesterday during guidance, but your seminar will be scheduled later. We would like you to focus on instruction first, Lefiya."

"That isn't a problem for me, but...is there a reason I haven't been given the students' files and grades? I think it would be easier if I learn a little about them first."

"I would like you to see them without any preconceptions and ask you to share your impressions and general thoughts."



They were on their way as they spoke. The elites who Balder had told her about yesterday were waiting.

Lefiya peered up at Leon as he spoke. Suddenly, her feet stopped.

"Teaching these students...is that something I'm really capable of?"

Leon and Alisa stopped and looked at her.

It was not humility but genuine doubt.

"Are you concerned?"

"No, it's not that...I have always been a student here, even after joining *Loki Familia*. I can't quite picture myself teaching... I find myself questioning whether this will really be of any use to the students I'm about to meet."

She calmly expressed her doubts while meeting Leon's gaze. Alisa watched quietly as if trying to gauge what her old friend had experienced these past three years and assess her mental state now.

Leon smiled.

"I see. Having experience is certainly an important thing. It helps build confidence, and likewise, confidence not founded in experience can lead only to arrogance. That you are aware of this means that you have an aptitude for teaching," Leon reassured her and then continued as if giving her advice. "Therefore, you can simply remember the faces of those who guided you."

"Hm?"

"What did they say, or what did they communicate through their presence and actions? Your teachers remain in your heart and can be both a guide to follow and the ultimate teaching resource."

"ļ"

"'Projection of others is the first step toward realization.' Precisely because you have always been the student, you possess enormous potential as a teacher. Please don't forget that."

Lefiya's eyes widened.

Alisa looked moved and proud.

Leon, wearing the black instructor's uniform that naturally contrasted with the white student uniform, smiled kindly. He was the very model of a teacher.

I see.

It was as if the fog closing in around her had completely dispersed. At that moment, Lefiya thought of Leon, Riveria, Aiz...and the pure elf no longer in this world who had stood at her side like an older sister.

Pushing the loneliness and grief away in the back of her heart, Lefiya realized once more that she was still a student in Leon's eyes and had much, much more to learn.

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Joining one of the top familias was difficult, even for students who were in such great demand among midsize and minor familias.

It was obvious that the higher the rank of a familia, the more difficult it was to enter, but individual familia members or the patron deities could also be extremely demanding.

Goibniu Familia, with its single-minded focus on smithing, was a prime example.

Unlike *Hephaistos Familia*, *Goibniu Familia* tended to not be as widely known, but many students were charmed by Goibniu's pure devotion to plain old craftsmanship. The last time the School District returned to Orario, all the students in the Smithing Department wanted to join. But when they challenged the old god's test, every single student failed. It was a well-known story of how all those hopeful boys and girl had been left in tears.

Loki Familia was also one of the factions that was exceedingly difficult to join.

But the reason for that was a little different. Loki despised Balder so much that she threw out all the School District's recommendations.

As someone who had actually managed to join, Lefiya could not help thinking that any girl Loki happened to like could probably get in, but there was a strict examination involved, too. Finn and the other leaders were also present, so students needed to demonstrate some level of ability.

Lefiya had managed to meet their standards. That thought made her proud—indeed, she had been brimming with pride at the time—but ever since joining, she had experienced a long string of setbacks and disappointments. The other members of the familia were so incredible that she spent many nights muffling herself with her pillow while venting her regret and disappointment at how useless and pathetic she was.

"Uwaaaah...! Loki Familia's Thousand Elf! I-it's an honor! I-I'll be in your care, Lefiya!"

When she saw the students who had come up behind her staring at her with such glimmering eyes, she felt a little out of sorts.

They were in an empty classroom inside one of the academic layer's many multipurpose buildings.

The students waiting there as Lefiya entered alongside Leon and Alisa were in high spirits.

"I joined the Combat Studies Department because I wanted to become a mage like you! It is an honor to meet you!"

"Ah, that's not fair, Mimi! It's an honor for me, too!!!"

"Your fame has reached far beyond Orario! I've decided I'm going to join *Loki Familia* for sure!!!"

A pampered, high-class-looking elf girl, a human girl who seemed almost childish, and an androgynous werewolf boy had come up to passionately greet Lefiya. Her response was neither shock nor bewilderment but a smile.

When she saw their excited, bright-eyed determination to join *Loki Familia*, she felt like she was seeing herself from three years ago. She politely coughed rather than express her less-than-enthusiastic inner thoughts.

It is not nearly as glamorous as you think.

They all cocked their head at the hollow smile the alum they looked up to had on her lips.

"As you know, Lefiya, those who choose combat disciplines are arranged into four-man cells in addition to their individual classes. You will be instructing

Seventh Squad."

Leon smoothly explained the situation as she met the students for the first time.

She looked with genuine nostalgia at the 7th Squad wearing their accustomed white uniforms. She had always struggled with fighting, but the massive amount of magical power she could call upon drew attention, and thanks to her rowdy friends, she and Alisa got pulled into a combat squad. They regularly fought monsters and clashed with rough characters. She couldn't even begin to list all the incidents she had faced as a student.

As she fondly remembered those times, Alisa added, "These children have all leveled up. And two of them are Level Three."

"Two Level Threes?"

Lefiya's deep blue eyes widened.

She was genuinely surprised.

There were many second-tier adventurers in Orario, but only a handful could be found beyond its walls. For the rest of the world, Level 3 was a clear dividing line separating the strong from the ordinary. Such people were desperately sought after by every organization across the entire world, not just familias in Orario.

That was why Balder had been so confident they could be useful in combat right away.

If they had the strength of second-tier adventurers, then they could get by in *Loki Familia* as well.

"Why don't you introduce yourselves to Instructor Lefiya? Nano, Luke, as Level Threes, you can take the lead."

"Y-yes, Professor!"

At Alisa's direction, the human girl answered with a squeaky voice, and the human boy who had not joined the welcome earlier stood up from his seat as well.

"I am Natalinoe Cladfield. Please, call me Nano!"

She was smaller than Lefiya and sported soft, strawberry-blond hair that was a more vibrant color than Misha's, who was a receptionist at the Guild. Her self-introduction was nervous but cheerful.

"...I'm Luke Fowl."

The ashen-haired boy's introduction could not be more different. He exuded a tough, dauntless air, even as he appeared to be a handsome, almost pretty, young boy.

Lefiya could tell by the way they carried themselves that the girl had a backline role while he was a vanguard fighter.

It was not what Lefiya had expected.

Between Nano's garbled speech and how young she appeared, she did not seem like a Level 3. Given the nature of falna, there was an iron rule among adventurers to never judge a book by its cover, but given Nano's general demeanor, Lefiya had assumed she wasn't Level 3.

The remaining two were the elf Miliria and the werewolf Cole.

"Level Three as a student...that's incredible. How long have you been enrolled?"

From Orario's perspective, the options for leveling up in the outside world were extremely limited—all the more so when trying to reach Level 3. Lefiya had leveled up before joining *Loki Familia*, but Level 2 was her limit.

Even as she wholeheartedly praised it, she suspected it was not something that could have been achieved in a mere year or two.

"I've been here for five years. In fact, I'm older than you, 'Instructor.'" The student straddling the line between boyhood and manhood answered her curtly.

"L-Luke!"

Even as Nano warned him he was being rude, he looked straight at Lefiya and continued.

"You may not have known about us, but we sure knew you, Ms. Model Student."

"...My apologies. However, I would prefer it if you do not call me that."

Even Lefiya grimaced at having her embarrassing school-era nickname brought up. Alisa, who had hung back thus far, could not keep from interjecting:

"Luke, Lefiya is most certainly your senior by virtue of her accomplishments, and she has taken time away from her familia in order to provide instruction here. That attitude is unreasonable."



"I'm sorry. I simply was unsure how I should interact with an instructor who is younger than me."

"You...!"

Alisa's eyes flared as an argument brewed between her and Luke.

Nano, the other students, and Lefiya tried to stop it, but he refused to budge. Leon watched without comment.

Before the mood could grow any tenser, Lefiya quickly changed tack and finished the introductions before calling their brief meeting to a close.

The whole time, Luke watched her with cold eyes.



"That is Balder Class's Seventh Squad! The current elites!"

After returning to Leon's private office, Alisa's voice rose sharply.

"Seventh Squad...even with students coming and going so often, it's always a collection of impressive Combat Studies students."

Of course, there were only as many classes in the School District as there were patron deities, and students were divided into squads within those classes. Due to the nature of the curriculum, there were always openings and new students. Squads were formed by deities and teachers picking students they thought fit best together—though on occasion, students who were wildly unbalanced in some regard were grouped together in hopes of a catalytic interaction.

The 7th Squad of the Balder Class was known for being particularly elite.

Lefiya had, for better or worse, been part of the 7th Squad as well during her time as a student.

"We don't make any assignment decisions with that kind of intent, though. Regardless, students who belong to the squad invariably get worked up about its supposed history. As a result, it has unfortunately acquired a reputation as an elite group," Leon said with a wry smile.

"It isn't the elite squad part that bothers me! It's an attitude problem!" Alisa erupted in annoyance. "Specifically that Luke Fowl! Really, he's the only one who's an issue! Even if he is older than you, Lefiya, I'm his senior in age and school year! If that's the attitude he's going to take, then he should be especially polite with me!"

Lefiya smiled awkwardly, able to tell Alisa had clashed with him many times now as prefect.

"But he...isn't a problem child, is he?"

"Oh? Why do you say that?"

"Natalinoe...Nano and the others' trust in him is impossible to miss. He is the leader of the squad, isn't he?"

Alisa looked surprised, while Leon smiled.

Perhaps pleased to see how much keener Lefiya's perception was now, he nodded in satisfaction and handed her the records and grades of the members of the 7th Squad.

"That is correct. Luke's marks are excellent. I have no complaints about his work in written or practical courses, and it would be safe to say he is the best student with a sword. And above all, he is a hard worker. His chemistry with Alisa is poor, but he is trusted not only by his squadmates but by other students and teachers as well."

Of course.

Even if there were an issue with his personality, Level 3 was not a realm that could be reached by superficial routes.

Even if Luke was cold, he appeared to be a respectable person...At the very least, he was better than some of the troublesome members of *Loki Familia*. Particularly Bete, and Bete, and Bete...

Though she could not understand why he looked at her like that.

"What did you think of them, Lefiya?"

"...There didn't appear to be any discord in the squad. At least, I did not sense anything in their current state that would demand an outsider's instruction. Nor

any sort of problem that you might be concerned about."

Thinking back to what had happened earlier, she gave her honest opinion.

Putting her hand to her chin, she decided to continue, even though it was nothing more than intuition.

"However, Luke came across to me as irritated...impatient."

Perhaps he was disgruntled seeing everyone make such a big deal about an alum?

At the same time, it didn't feel like such pointless envy was lurking in his eyes...

As Lefiya mulled over it, Leon didn't indicate whether she was right or wrong.

That said, she suspected the smile on his lips was his answer.

"You are correct; it's not something that rises to the level of a problem. But there is a latent powder keg that cannot help but explode at some point. And they are—or rather Luke is—harboring something that, while absolutely not mistaken, is also the reason he has become intractable."

"Not mistaken?"

"Yes. Something that we teachers would ordinarily praise."

Is that why they have their hands full with the Seventh Squad?

But...

"Couldn't you reach out to these students, Professor Leon?"

If this was really a problem that even a teacher as capable as Leon could not handle, then what chance did Lefiya have?

As a troubled look crossed her face for the first time, Leon looked out the window. Outside was a bright blue sky and wide open sea that knew nothing of anguish or turmoil.

"Let us set aside the question of whether I could resolve this myself or not. There are two reasons why we thought to ask you to handle this instruction, Lefiya."

"Two reasons?"

"Yes. The first is because we judged that, as an adventurer, your words would have more of an effect on them than us teachers." Looking back, he met Lefiya's gaze. "And as for the second, I was told that this would be for your own sake by none other than Lord Balder."

"Me?"

"Yes. And I thought so as well. That you could become a guidepost for them, and they could be a light that can hold you back." When Leon said that, he was clearly speaking not as a teacher, but as the individual, Leon Verdenberg.

Lefiya was visibly surprised, unable to understand what those words meant. But she could tell that he trusted her and cared about her future.

"In other words, just go smack that cocky Luke upside the head and give him a bloody nose, Lefiya!"

"That's a little too much, Alisa..."

Lefiya could not quite manage a wry smile as her old friend leaned forward heatedly to offer her suggestion.

"If you need anything, don't hesitate to let me know!" she said, letting her student council president persona shine through, even as Lefiya looked down at the profiles in her hand.

There were four sheets of paper with four student portraits. She stared into the eyes of the ashen-haired boy, who was listed as sixteen years old.

"I understand. I shall do as much as I can."

Leon and Alisa both smiled at that.



The next day, Lefiya's instruction began in earnest.

Though it was not as if they would be going straight to Orario.

Even if she were instructing students who wanted to become adventurers, it would be beyond thoughtless to go straight to the Dungeon. She was responsible for their instruction, but she was also responsible for their lives, and

she couldn't let anything happen to them. Leaping right into a den of monsters without confirming the students' true strengths first would be nonsensical from a safety standpoint.

The official Dungeon practical would begin in two days' time. It wouldn't be too late to take them then.

That was why the first order of business was training at school.

Nano fights from the rear as a mage, as expected. Miliria is an archer who covers the center, Cole is a knife-wielding scout, and Luke is an overwhelming frontliner...

They were in an arena hewn from valmars ore, a practice ground in one corner of the academic layer also used for interclass competitions. Lefiya was sitting in the stands while watching the 7th Squad go to work.

This was a Combat Studies lesson in the form of mock battles. The squads of Balder Class and Vár Class were taking turns fighting all around the field.

And the 7th Squad was dominating.

Wielding a longsword with a dulled blade, Luke tore into the enemy formation while a half beat later, Miliria and Cole, and then Nano wreaked havoc. The opposing squad could not hold out against a Level 3's charge followed by waves of attacks.

"Drop back, Cole! You're getting in the line of fire! Milly, come quickly! Plan Element! Nano, you give the signal with your magic!"

"Got it, Luke!"

Luke's abilities, including his ability to give directions even from the front, were certainly impressive. He had good battlefield awareness, and the keenness of his attacks was head and shoulders above the rest of the students.

Meanwhile, just when it seemed they were a little too reliant on his ability to break through, Nano showed that she was a powerful cannon in her own right.

Their opponents were used to them from all their training sessions, so they had come up with several different strategies for dealing with 7th Squad, but even so, they couldn't be stopped. In the blink of an eye, their defenses had

been defeated.

Luke and Nano are certainly Level 3, but Miliria and Cole are skilled, too, coordinating closely while providing cover and support. It's thanks to them that the squad doesn't get split apart during combat. They clearly all trust each other. They make a fine party.

This was the current generation's elite squad.

They could achieve far greater results in their four-man cell than split up among various Dungeon-diving familias. But as she came to that thought, Lefiya's spirits flagged.

She could not help wondering where she got off analyzing them like that. As if she was so superior.

She was just middle of the pack in *Loki Familia*, if even that. Unable to endure the self-loathing, she again felt the urge to complain about Loki sending her here.

However, she also felt that she needed to adjust her perception of herself as a teacher.

"It's difficult being an instructor..."

Realizing it again, she left the stands as the training came to an end.

First, a teacher had to work on communication to establish a better connection with her students.

"How were we, Instructor? I was nervous thinking of you watching us, but thanks to Luke and everyone, I managed to move like normal! And we all decided we wanted to blow away the high-and-mighty Thousand Elf—wait, what?! Never mind! Pretend you didn't hear that!!!"

Nano was a talkative student.

She ran her mouth like a young girl, saying things that need not be said (and Lefiya was a little bit disheartened to hear that she came across as pretentious). She leaped around energetically, emoting with her entire body. It was charming. She appeared well loved by her fellow girls, even outside the squad. Their explanations went along the lines of "She's sort of like a little sister. At

first, the way she talked was too pushy, and we didn't think we would ever like her, but she was so stupid that we were worried about what might happen if we didn't look after her."

She, like Luke, was older than Lefiya, but there were not many people who better fit the image of an impressionable younger student than her.

Apparently, she was an old friend of Luke's, who hailed from the same hometown, and she had come along when he tried to enroll—without telling her parents. Lefiya could guess she was a noble of some sort by her last name, but she appeared to be quite the tomboy.

"Also, um, Lefiya...d-don't seduce Luke!"

And it was—to be blunt—plain to see that she thought of Luke as more than just a friend since she had put Lefiya on the spot and constantly glanced over at him.

"Luke is reliable, but once something is decided, Nano only looks at him, so we correct her course as needed since her head is normally empty."

"M-Milly...that's a little harsh..."

Miliria and Cole had a good eye for people.

Miliria did not have the distinctive elven prickliness—as with other elf students, it had been worn away by the School District's communal living—and she had even given Lefiya permission to call her Milly.

Cole was a humble, frank boy. So much so that it was hard to believe he was a werewolf like Bete. Lefiya could also tell that he was in the same position as Raul, well versed in the difficulty of dealing with the strong personalities of the squad.

The two of them were clearly the glue that held the party together.

"...Rather than just watching, could you demonstrate some of your magic, Instructor? I can't obey someone who hasn't proven their strength."

Luke was still sharp and prickly.

He smiled in front of Nano and the others, but his tone stiffened whenever Lefiya came into view. As Milly took every opportunity to warn her, they were a bit on edge.

So Lefiya fired off her magic in a corner of the arena, which made Nano and Milly even more attached to her.

"Please teach us magic!!!"

Taken aback, she remembered how she had been the same with Riveria, and with a wry smile, she agreed to give a little lecture. Many more students swarmed them, wanting to join, and it turned into a much bigger event.

And seeing all that, Luke looked annoyed.

But still...it's not just the Seventh Squad. The other students seem to be on edge as well.

In the personal room provided to her, Lefiya ran her quill pen across the parchment like a true teaching-in-training, and she organized her observations.

The Level 3s stood out, for sure, but the students' overall abilities had unmistakably gone up in all measures.

The School District was an island of study and diligent training. Abilities were always to be improved, and it was a welcome sight, but it felt like something more than just that.

At least, that was what Lefiya felt.

They travel all around the world, so they have plenty of experience. It would be fair to say they are almost full-fledged fighters. What I can teach them as an adventurer is...

Reflecting on what Leon had said, Lefiya firmed up the stance she should take with them while improving their individual abilities and connections as a squad.

Two days passed in no time, and the main event came.



The Dungeon practical was a core part of the school's curriculum.

It occurred only in the years when the School District returned to Orario, and those who expressed interest were permitted to advance to a floor appropriate to their status.

In order to graduate, a certain number of credits were required. During the Dungeon practical, credits could be gained by gathering drop items from designated monsters. Students were also required to provide written reports, so anyone not exploring the Dungeon properly would be caught.

The Dungeon practical was required training for every student in the Combat Studies Department.

"Looks like everyone is here. Let's head to Orario."

Once the 7th Squad had gathered, Lefiya set out from Meren.

After providing the entry permission slip, they passed through the southwest gate and the giant city walls of Orario.

While Nano and the others were in high spirits about seeing the Labyrinth City again after three years, Lefiya deftly guided them around adventurers eager to mess with the well-behaved little students. They filled out some necessary paperwork at the Guild and promptly entered the Dungeon.

The 7th Squad was indeed skilled, reaching the middle levels without issue.

"We'll focus our activities on the fifteenth floor today."

After several encounters with monsters, Lefiya stopped in an open chamber and turned around.

The members of the 7th Squad were wearing their gear atop the combat uniform provided by the school.

Nano wore a long, hooded robe and carried a long staff.

Milly had a partial breastplate that covered the right side of her chest, and carried a long bow.

Cole carried two daggers and wore a pair of goggles.

And Luke was wearing light armor, the combat uniform, which he had customized himself, and carried a longsword.

They spoke far less upon entering the Dungeon.

Now, as ever, standing in the Dungeon was a unique experience. Even students who had been in secluded, unexplored, and wild lands all over the

world could not hide their nervousness.

Nano peered all around uneasily, wondering if a monster might crawl out of a wall at any moment. Milly and Cole moved only their eyes while paying close attention to their surroundings.

Most of the squad was noticeably tense.

"Let's go to the twenty-fifth floor."

Luke was different.

The others were taken aback, and even Lefiya's eyes widened slightly.

All the other students were not allowed to go any farther than the fifteenth floor, and Lefiya had intended to have them eventually proceed to the eighteenth floor over the course of her time with them—with the permission of Balder, Leon, and the other School District staff, of course.

All of that had been decided with consideration for the strength of the 7th Squad, but...

"...No, I cannot permit that."

"Why? We've been to the Dungeon so many times already. We've finished exploring the Cave Labyrinth already."

"That was three years ago. You mustn't make light of a gap like that. And more than anything, it is too soon for you to be going to the lower levels."

Lefiya shook her head, not mincing words as she rejected the proposal.

Luke's face twisted. The defiance that he had restrained thus far was coming to the surface.

"Nano and I are Level Three! We easily meet the Guild's guidelines! We should be able to handle the lower levels!"

"No matter how high your level, the first time you challenge a new floor is always risky. Even if I'm simply accompanying you, I do not want to have to leave my safety in your hands."

"...Gh!"

She said it out of earnest concern for Nano and the others, but Luke did not

take it that way. Indeed, it had probably felt like she was looking down on him.

His ashen hair quivered, and he bit his lip while raising his voice.

"You went all the way to the deep levels as a Level Three, didn't you?! All the way to unexplored territory that no one other than Zeus and Hera have seen! We've heard plenty about it even outside Orario!"

"...Yes. You are not wrong."

She understood what Luke wanted to say. Even though it was a major expedition mounted by her familia, ignoring all guidelines, she had been brought to the deep levels and the Dragon's Urn. They should be allowed to do this much if Lefiya had thrown herself into far more extreme situations already. That was what he wanted to say.

"But that was because I was a mage of Loki Familia."

That was the answer to it all.

Lefiya was still alive today because Finn and everyone else had been there with her. She had been able to survive a tremendous series of deadly encounters because they'd protected her. And right now, Lefiya and the 7th Squad did not have *Loki Familia*. She was just a lone instructor, and they were students.

Luke's brow furrowed deeply at Lefiya's concise answer.

"None of you know the Dungeon as well as I do, and I am not so great an adventurer that I feel confident about protecting you no matter what happens. I'm not particularly happy about admitting my lack of skill, but... please give up on that."

She finished with a quiet voice.

Nano, Milly, and Cole said nothing, watching with bated breath.

Luke looked down, and his fists trembled.

"You... Because you adventurers are like this!!!" He looked up, his emotions bursting out. "Why do you not even try to realize there's no time to be taking things slowly?!"

"Slowly ...?"

For the first time, Lefiya's eyes arched dubiously.

As if even that annoyed him, Luke shouted back.

"Do you even know what's happening outside Orario...all around the world?!"

With that, Lefiya finally grasped what he wanted to say.

"The suffering caused by monsters is increasing everywhere! Accelerating year by year! Humans who have lost their homes, animal people whose towns are ruins, elves whose homelands have been erased from the map! We've seen it over and over!"

"..."

"It's the valley of dragons! More and more vicious dragons appear, making countless people suffer! The entire mortal realm is falling apart!"

The School District was a place of learning and one of the most powerful forces in the world, supported by Orario. One aspect of that was their role as a volunteer army, or even a mercenary group, taking requests from countries and towns it visited and sending its teachers and students who volunteered into battle.

They intervened in monster attacks, natural disasters, and even regional conflicts from time to time. On his many missions, Luke had surely seen tragedy play out time and time again across the world.

"Do you know how many people are crying out? Can you imagine the people weeping for joy just because we came? We aren't adventurers from Orario! We're just a bunch of students!"

His eyes were burning with anger, but sadness and a deep sense of powerlessness were behind it.

Luke had been shaken by the things he had seen.

"The world has always been waiting for adventurers...for you!"

The Three Great Quests.

The wish of everyone in the mortal realm.

The final one, slaying the black dragon, was the duty the Labyrinth City was expected to fulfill.

His heart ached after seeing the tragic state of the world.

He felt the danger more clearly and intimately than Lefiya or any of the adventurers in Orario.

Lefiya finally understood the source of his discontent.

He was angry at all the adventurers in Orario who still could not save the world.

"Something that we teachers would ordinarily praise."

She also understood what Leon had meant.

Luke's righteous anger was just and noble.

"If you are going to waste time, then I'll become a hero! We'll get stronger and save all the people suffering even now! So don't get in my way!"

Luke Fowl was surely a kind boy.

His heroic ambition was not for his own sake or out of a desire for fame and fortune. It was selflessness, a desire to wipe away the sadness of others.

Lefiya thought it noble even.

But...

"In that case, all the more reason I cannot allow you to do that."

"What?!"

"I think it is wonderful that you care about others like that. But you are rushing to your own grave for the sake of the people you want to save."

She did not change her stance.

The difference between his resolve and suicidal self-sacrifice was paper-thin. Though she did not think of herself as an adult, Lefiya could see it clearly. Luke was hurrying to his death.

It was a safe bet that if he became an adventurer at this rate, he would absolutely lose his life. People like him were the most likely to die. It had been

only a few years since she had become an adventurer, but Lefiya knew that much.

With all the questions she had felt about the 7th Squad answered, her eyes flared.

"Even if, just for the sake of argument, I accept the proposition that it would be fine for you to die, given that you have made up your mind, I cannot allow you to bring your comrades down with you in your self-righteousness."

Luke stopped moving, taken aback.

"I thought it strange. How did Nano, who isn't especially enthusiastic about fighting, reach Level Three? The answer is because she was dragged along in your rashness."

The rebuke in her eyes shook not only Luke but also Nano standing beside him.

Her shoulders and strawberry blond hair trembled.

Because she loved the boy who was her childhood friend, she had desperately chased after him as he fought for the sake of the helpless and suffering masses, supporting him throughout. Her magic had undoubtedly saved Luke countless times, and she had surely put herself in harm's way. If not, there was no way a backline mage, who would struggle to get excelia as easily as a vanguard, could have gotten to Level 3. Even in ways that Luke had never realized, Nano had continued to cover for him and sacrifice herself for him.

Even if they did not acknowledge what she said, the way Miliria and Cole pursed their lips said all that needed to be said.

Luke was speechless as he turned to Nano, and she immediately looked down at the ground.

"Others will die because of you. Have you ever once considered that possibility?"

"...Gh! I can do it alone! I don't need them; I'll do it myself!"

"That is out of the question. The Dungeon is not something that can be faced alone."

Desperation crept into his voice as Lefiya calmly rejected him, but Nano raised her voice, unable to bear what he was saying.

"Just stop it, Luke! Lefiya is saying she's worried about you, too! I don't want you to become an adventurer all by yourself, either!"

"Gh...!"

"Let's calm down. If we work together, all of us, without getting flustered... with Mimi and Cole, I'm sure we can realize your dream, Luke!"

It was not hard to imagine that the rest of the squad had long since realized that Luke was rushing and were worried about him.

A faint sheen of tears filled her eyes as Nano clung tightly to his sleeve.

Luke, who had been at a loss for words, jerked his hand away.

"Stop it! No one told you to chase after me! You're just a clumsy screwup, so leave me alone! You don't have to get dragged along behind me!"

Nano winced in obvious pain at the rejection.

Milly raised her eyebrows, and Cole's expression sank, too.

As they tried to draw closer to Luke—Lefiya glimpsed an old memory as she watched Luke and Nano.

...Did she feel that way, too?

Lefiya was trying to do something rash, and Filvis was trying to stop her.

The failures of her past and forlorn regret transformed into a pale mist eating away at her heart.

"—You should listen to your comrade's advice. Especially when you're mistaking childish selfishness for independence."

"What'd you say?!"

So she became aggressive.

Her voice was so cold and overbearing. She could hardly believe it had come from her. She shot back before Milly and the others, stunned by the sudden change, could reach Luke.

"You are pathetic, whining like a child. You cannot see yourself objectively because of your stubborn determination. Don't speak of heroes while demonstrating such unsightly behavior."

Lefiya's anger at her past self seeped in, and then she caught her breath.

"Gh...!!!"

Luke's face was redder than she had ever seen it.

His eyes stared at her with open animosity.

It was too late, even as she realized what had happened. The antagonism had become decisive.

Lefiya had gotten worked up and added a new regret to her growing collection.

And there was also that to consider.

She had, somewhat intentionally, tried not to think about it, but...Luke's hair color resembled that of a particular rabbit.

Even if Luke himself was blameless, she could see traces of her rival in him, and each time she did, it sparked her annoyance. It was entirely unreasonable from Luke's perspective, of course. And being targeted with an animosity she did not have any reason to expect, Lefiya's annoyance was amplified.

Though, I guess Luke is far more handsome, at least? Maybe it would be unfair to compare him to that rabbit. But their naiveté is the same. That rabbit is far more reckless and good-natured, and there are aspects I wouldn't say I don't sympathize with. But anyway, his foolhardy heroic ambition certainly overlaps with that white-haired boy's. And it's...annoying.

Either way, it would be difficult to resolve this with words after escalating so much.

It's not impossible, but it's a hassle. That was what she thought, unfortunately.

The time spent on him alone like this was not worth it. At the very least, it would not help Nano and the others, who were nervously looking back and forth.

More precisely, if she had been able to make herself understood through words, it might have been worthwhile, but it was not something that should have been done here. Discussion and debates were for a classroom, not the Dungeon.

Restraining the urge to sigh, Lefiya made up her mind.

This was the Dungeon, so they would have to settle it like adventurers.

"Very well. Luke, let's fight."

"|"

"A one-on-one match. If you win, I will allow you to progress into the lower floors."

If he wanted to hold his claim, he would have to prove his strength.

She could not turn a blind eye to determination that wasn't backed up by strength, but if he demonstrated a strength that matched his resolve, she wouldn't stop him. Without saying as much, that was what she was offering him.

All of them, Luke included, looked stunned.

"A duel in the Dungeon? Are you mocking me?!"

The thought of a duel in the Dungeon where monsters infinitely spawned sounded absurd from their perspective. The instructors in the School District would never teach them something so ill-conceived.

But an outlaw's feast did not care about time and place. For most, the Adventurers' Baptism happened here, in the Dungeon.

Though it would be a bit much to call this "prep" for the test to come.

Aware that she was picking up more of the traits of an adventurer than a student, she continued: "I've decided it is too dangerous to continue exploring with you holding all that pent-up frustration."

"...!*"*

"If you're going to break down somewhere I can't see you, then just self-destruct here and now in front of me. At least I can do some damage control

that way."

Without realizing it, she was speaking like a certain high elf.

Facing her furious student, Lefiya delivered the clincher.

"If I win, you will stop trying to fight me on this topic going forward... You can obey someone who has proven their strength, can't you, Luke?"

Faced with his own words, he clenched his fists.

"Don't regret this..."

"I won't. Let's wrap this up this quickly. As you said, this is the Dungeon."

While Luke trembled with rage and determination to fight, Lefiya spoke to the others.

"You three, keep watch, please. Take care of any monsters that come near."

"L-Lefiya...!"

"Don't worry, I won't hurt him... Sorry for getting you involved in something strange like this."

Nano looked unsure what to do as Lefiya apologetically gave her instructions.

She looked like she wanted to say something, but Milly quietly took her arm, and Cole said, "We should do what she said."

Grateful that they trusted her even though they had just met her, Lefiya faced Luke in the center of the room.

"The first person to land a blow on the other wins. That should be sufficient."

"Yes...I won't hold back just because you're a mage."

"I'm Level Four. My status is higher than yours. On paper, you are the one at a disadvantage, you know?"

"That doesn't matter."

Luke smiled almost derisively as he pulled the sword from the sheath at his hip.

"Even if your level is higher, there's no way I'll lose to a mage at this range."

He had no doubt he would win.

Holding his weapon in both hands, he lowered his hips, erasing any opening.

Lefiya nodded to herself, accepting his determination, and then drew her sword and wand.

"Let's begin... If you can't defeat me, then you are far from becoming a hero."

That was the signal.

"Haaaaaaaaaah!"

Luke blurred as he advanced.

The first attack came from over his right shoulder.

Unable to perfectly match the speed of the slash, Lefiya chose to evade.

She stepped back, letting the silver sword slash through the space she had been standing in not a second earlier. Luke followed up immediately.

"Hiiiiyah!"

He launched a string of attacks without pause.

It was fast and sharp. The sound of the air splitting right beside her evoked a chill. His swordsmanship was built on a foundation of extreme training, and his attacks were keen enough to easily deal a mortal blow even to a second-tier adventurer like Lefiya.

Despite what he said, Luke Fowl was not foolish enough to underestimate a superior adventurer. He attacked without holding back.

He was threatening Lefiya not with a practice sword but with a weapon meant for killing.

"Gh!"

Lefiya responded by mixing in parries with her dodges.

She knocked aside Luke's slash with her friend's Tear Pain.

There was a sharp sound, and sparks flew as his sword's course was deflected, but he just sneered.

"Is that all you've got?!"

The sword dance accelerated.

Lefiya couldn't match his skill with the sword, and he was using it to corner her.

Lefiya's sword arm undoubtedly looked shoddy to him.

She knew it herself, now that she had begun seriously studying how to use a sword in her training with Bete. Even if she called herself a magic swordswoman, she was still green. Meanwhile, Luke was a dedicated frontline swordsman. Given how much he had polished his swordplay since enrolling, he was far superior to her in hand-to-hand combat. Luke had accepted this match because he was sure he could defeat a mage at close range, even if she had a superior status.

However...

"H-he isn't hitting her...!"

"Even though he's been attacking the whole time!"

Cole and Milly murmured in disbelief, forgetting to watch for monsters.

Luke had been on the offensive from the start, yet his sword couldn't reach Lefiya. Tilting her head, bending over, crouching, she dodged everything and even deflected his attacks with the sword in her right hand without issue.

"Luke ...!"

Nano could not cheer for either of them as impatience crept into Luke's expression.

"Damn it ...! Why?!"

It was simple. He was lacking in speed and strength. He was lacking in tricks and techniques. And more than anything, he simply wasn't a threat.

He was indeed superior in melee skill. But compared to Aiz or Bete, the way he fought was like a child. The people Lefiya had trained with were first-tier adventurers, true beasts who stood at the summit.

Even if she was inferior in hand-to-hand combat, Luke's flurry of attacks paled in comparison to the intensity of those world-class adventurers.

Lefiya's eyes easily picked up on where his eyes were looking, where he was exerting his strength, and even his emotional state.

If I couldn't manage this much, Bete would kick me right into the heavens...

Her situational awareness was much better than when she was a dedicated mage. Her heart was also terribly calm. That she could keep up with this high-speed combat was perfect proof. Lefiya's body was being molded into something new.

Quietly demonstrating the fruits of her training, she had the wherewithal to even imagine a certain werewolf's face as she bantered a bit with herself.

That she could be so at ease was proof that she was in control of this fight.

And after staying on the defensive this whole time, she spun the wand in her left hand.

"Unleashed pillar of light, limbs of the holy tree. You are the master archer."

Shock consumed Luke in that moment.

Even as they were fighting, Lefiya began to sing.

"Concurrent Casting!"

As Nano and the others watched on with stunned faces, the magic circle that unfurled across the ground swelled with an amber glow of magic power.

The pinnacle of a magic swordswoman. The ultimate technique that set them apart. The speed and precision far surpassed anything the 7th Squad had ever seen before, and the sheer volume of magic power was on a completely different level.

Nano and Milly, who were well versed in magic, were both speechless.

"Loose your arrows, fairy archers."

"D-damn it...!"

Sparks flew as the longsword and the shortsword clashed several times, but Lefiya's chanting never faltered even once.

Countering, defense, evasion, casting. As he watched her handle all four of those simultaneously without delay, impatience engulfed everything in Luke's

eyes.

The magic power was far too enormous. There was no way a single attacker could block it. If the spell were completed, Luke would lose. He pushed his body to the limit to try to stop her chant.

And Lefiya carefully took note of his impatience.

Channeling magic power ostentatiously, she laid out a bomb before his eyes. It was a feint to evoke impatience and unbalance her opponent. Manipulating the enemy's actions and luring them out was the true essence of the decoy tactic Riveria had taught her.

It was easy to read Luke's agitation. She also knew exactly what he was going to try next.

"Ugh, uwaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!!"

A reckless charge when he could hold on no longer.

As expected, he stepped in from the right.

I got you.

With that murmur beneath her breath, she also rushed forward, right where Luke was going.

"?!"

She stepped into his range, into the dead zone where his sword could not hit her, and slashed.

Her sword knocked his weapon aside as she thrust her wand right into his face.

"Pierce, arrow of accuracy."

She had reached the final line. Easily completing her chant, Lefiya finished the fight.

"Arcs Ray."

The knockout blow...did not erupt from the wand.

She dispersed it just before activation—scattering the magic power gathered

in the shining wand as countless light particles. The accompanying magic circle disappeared from around her feet. A second later, the sword she had knocked aside slipped from Luke's hands.

She canceled her magic the moment it was clear that she could have landed her blow if she wanted to.

Luke froze like a statue, staring at the wand right before his nose. The others, watching with bated breath, stood in shock.

"This is my win, Luke. I will have you obey my instructions now."

Lowering her wand, Luke staggered one and then two steps backward.

It might have been closer if they had been at the same level, but Lefiya would still have won. Their experience levels were different. The carnage they had made it through was different.

Luke and the rest of the squad, too, had not yet experienced true, overwhelming absurdity.

That was the decisive difference.

"...That's..."

Luke mumbled in vacant disbelief.

Lefiya was concerned she may have overdone it. She had intended to persuade him, but she might have shattered his pride in the process. Ditching her attempt to come off as cool and collected, she wanted to see if she could comfort him somehow—when her ears perked up.

"This sound...agh, come on. What awful timing."

Even while fighting Luke, Lefiya had been watchful for swarms of monsters or the early signs of an irregularity. As she grumbled, she spun suddenly in a different direction.

It was one of the entrances leading into the room.

Moments later, she saw a certain band of adventurers rush through.

"Mord! This is bad! There's a ton of them!"

"I know already! We're gonna git while we still can...oh-ho-ho!"

At the head of the pack was the spitting image of a scoundrel, and seeing the five of them, he smirked nastily.

"Hey, brats! Here's a present from us to you!"

With that, they cut past the 7th Squad and Lefiya's reproachful glare. The students looked confused, not understanding what was going on. Lefiya was the only one who grasped the situation.

"Luke, pick up your sword! Everyone, form up!"

"Huh ...?"

"Now!"

She shouted when they did not move immediately.

Raising her sword and wand again, Lefiya stared down the path the adventurers had come from.

"We've been tagged!"

The next moment, a massive swarm of monsters poured into the room.

"Y-you don't mean ...?!

"A pass parade?!"

Finally understanding the situation, they gasped.

It was a common practice among adventurers to escape danger. Realizing they had been used as decoys, the top students paled in the face of so many monsters.

"Attack!"

The only active adventurer among them, Lefiya, was calm even as she led them into battle.

That was right. This was normal in the Dungeon.

Nothing special, just an everyday occurence.

Back-to-back fights were no big deal.



"Form up! Standard four-person cell!"

Lefiya quickly barked orders.

Luke leaped to grab his sword sticking out of the ground and quickly linked up with Nano and the others as a procession of monsters befitting the term *parade* swelled before them.

A long, winding line of monsters of all types shifted their target from Lefiya to the 7th Squad and roared in anticipation of a feast. Faced with an absurd number to even begin to count—the sort of swarm that even School District students rarely had the chance to see—Nano recoiled and whimpered, "Uuuugh...!"

Lefiya had considered just running away with the adventurers earlier, but she had just concluded her fight with Luke, and if all they did was run, nothing would be resolved, so she chose to meet the monster parade head-on here.

If the alternative was putting parties of third-tier adventurers in danger, then she and the 7th Squad would just have to exterminate the monsters themselves.

That was her decision after gauging the strength her party could bring to bear.

A pack of liger fangs in front! And behind, minotaurs, hellhounds, and tomahawk-wielding al-miraj!

Her eyes narrowed as she quickly grasped the makeup of the parade. The larger ones were dangerous, but the small al-miraj and medium hellhounds in the back could not be ignored, either. Or more precisely, their ranged attacks and fire breath deserved caution. The 7th Squad wasn't lacking in raw power, but mistakes could happen with longer-range attacks.

And so Lefiya immediately decided to erase the enemy's back lines.

"I'll hit the monsters in the back! You focus on the head of the parade!"

Without waiting for acknowledgment from the students, she immediately leaped into the air.

"I beseech the name of Wishe."

Floating high overhead, stealing the attention of the stunned students and

the monsters looking up, she began to cast her spell.

The verses of an incantation rang out as she traced a gentle arc through the air, dismembering an al-miraj and hellhound upon landing, just as she had announced.

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"Giiii?!"
"Guaaa?!"
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Wielding Tear Pain like a conductor's wand, she slashed three times in quick succession, drawing a chorus of death cries.

She immediately continued her charge.

Rushing through the middle of the swarm, she struck down hellhounds before they could unleash their deadly breath attacks and batted away all the tomahawks the al-miraj had hastily thrown her way. Their rabbit eyes widened, seeing their weapons shatter, only for a silver flash of metal to claim multiple heads in a single sweep.

"Ancestors of the forest, proud brethren. Answer my call and descend upon the plains!"

Scattering the end of the procession, she hunted down her next prey while Concurrent Casting.

Her powerful voice and the violent eruption of magic power forced the monsters to focus on her. She kept the back and center of the parade busy all alone with her flashy display, entrusting the students to handle the monsters at the front while she performed a beautiful and sublime dance.

It was a complete rampage.

"I-is she really a backline fighter?!"

Consumed by awe ever since the fight with Luke, Miliria shouted even as Lefiya, without worrying about the particulars, cut a crystal mantis in half. Its crystalline body shattered into countless shards as she finished off enemy monsters without even resorting to magic.

"Come, ring of fairies. Please—give me strength!"

With her unbroken chanting, she prepared the spell Fairy Ring and then placed it on standby. Due to the effect of her skill, Double Canon, the magic circle became a ring around the wrist of her left hand.

"Unleashed pillar of light, limbs of the holy tree."

As she proceeded to load up the next spell to deal with the unexpected, a hellhound slipped out from behind a minotaur and leaped at her from the left.

"|"

"Gaaaaaaaaaaah!!!"

Enraged by the one-sided domination, it hugged the ground as it charged, eager to tear into Lefiya's soft flesh.

Her right hand wouldn't make it in time to stop the monster since she had just cut down another enemy moments earlier. Somewhere in the corner of her mind, she felt it was improper even as she mercilessly kicked the hellhound in the face.

"Ghhhg?!"

She had taken inspiration from Bete's wild kicks, which she had experienced firsthand countless times in training.

It was nothing more than a pale imitation, but that was enough to turn her Level 4 legs into deadly weapons. The hellhound's jaw and head shattered in a spray of gore as her skirt fluttered, revealing her pale, slender thighs.

It is poor manners, but screw manners. That Lefiya Viridis is long dead.

As she said farewell to her past self, a single image burned itself into Lefiya's mind. She traced it, copied it, and projected it onto herself.



She was steadily getting closer to Maenad's movements.

She was resurrecting the form that lived on inside her with her own body.

"00000000000000000000000!!!"

As she sought her ideal movements, minotaurs boldly charged toward her with massive stone axes, intent on crushing her with size and numbers.

Lefiya's response was simple.

"Canon."

She gracefully thrust the wand in her left hand forward.

"Purge, cleansing lightning. —Dio Thyrsos!"

With her skill's trigger, the magic circle ring around her wrist transformed into the mouth of a cannon.

She called upon Maenad's iconic magic, unleashing a white flash.

A mighty bolt of lightning reduced the herd of minotaurs to ashes. And not just the minotaurs. Even the monsters behind them in the path of the spell were obliterated, magic stones and all.

A wave of destruction stretched to the wall of the room, making the students fighting in the distance jump and the monsters cower in terror, even as Lefiya pushed on.

She continued to fight, wielding blade and spell, relishing the opportunity to gain live combat experience as a magic swordswoman.

I can still increase my reaction speed. And my decision-making can use more work... But I can do it. I can become a magic swordswoman.

It wasn't arrogance.

It was the almost palpable feeling of pushing against the door that stood before her and forcing it open.

The old Lefiya had been a mess of assumptions.

It was a given that she would use summon burst—but because of its extended

cast time and the enormous amount of Mind it consumed, the magic she chose to summon had to be both large in scale and high power. Or more precisely, she believed it would be a waste to do anything less.

However, that assumption was mistaken.

That was not the best application of the spell that was the origin of her alias. It provided flexibility with infinite options for attack, defense, buffs, and recovery, making it capable of dealing with every situation. By keeping it on standby, she could evaluate the state of the battle and select the most appropriate spell. It was an all-purpose counter. So long as she could grasp the situation and filter her choices in time, she could deal with any target at any range at any time, just like how she had used *Dio Thyrsos* just now.

It was not only for ultra-long chant bombardment. It could be used for rapidfire ultrafast spells as well.

She had learned with great pain that, as her options grew, the value she could provide in battle skyrocketed as well.

Up until now, it had been Lefiya herself who had stifled her own potential.

While she regretted narrowing her the possibilities of her growth in the past, she was also thrilled that she finally realized something.

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I can still grow stronger.

She was able to assure herself of that.

"Luke!!!"

"I"
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Lefiya was whittling down the number of enemies in the blink of an eye, but hearing Nano's cry of concern, she immediately focused her attention toward the students. Past the wall of monsters surrounding her, the 7th Squad was in a brutal fight with the group of monsters that had been at the head of the parade.

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"Luke, fall back! Switch out!"

"What are you hesitating for?!"
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"Gh?!"

Cole's and Miliria's panicked voices rang out as a liger fang put Luke on the backfoot.

It was one of the more powerful monsters in the Cave Labyrinth and certainly deserved caution, but it was an opponent a party with a Level 3 should have no difficulty with. Even if there were many in the swarm, they would have been able to handle it without issue.

Or rather, because Lefiya was keeping most of the monsters busy, they should have been able to handle the rest.

However, their brilliance on the training field was badly lacking in the current 7th Squad.

Luke's movements are off, and it's disrupting the party's coordination!

The effects of him losing to Lefiya were showing. Luke was not displaying even a tenth of his true strength. He was failing to manage even a single monster.

He was the core of the 7th Squad. When he was fired up, they would be, and when he was off-balance, so were they.

And now that he was busy dealing with himself, he couldn't muster the leadership he ordinarily would have provided.

This is my fault!

"Luke...!"

More than anything, Luke's poor condition affected Nano.

She had become so distracted that she wasn't even casting magic anymore.

Miliria and Cole had their hands full just keeping her and Luke covered.

The 7th Squad's standard battle plan was to push in fast and hard, relying on their powerful Level 3 vanguard and mage to obliterate their enemies. In the worst case, if Nano could not act for some reason, Luke could figure something out, but the reverse was simply not possible. If Luke collapsed, the party would fall like dominos. Miliria and Cole took up the center of their formation and acted as facilitators for Nano and Luke, ensuring they could do their jobs

unmolested. But they lacked the decisive power needed to break the party out of sticky situations. They had focused too much on support, and the downsides of that were showing.

It was out of place, but Lefiya could not help thinking they resembled *Loki Familia*.

The familia members were gathered around the ultra-capable Finn, and if he ever fell, it would spell disaster. In Knossos, they had come close to total annihilation as a result of that weakness.

That was why Finn always paid close attention to his condition, but it would be cruel to demand a first-tier adventurer's steely heart from a student like Luke.

"00000000000000000000000000!"

"Ghhh?!"

And just as a liger fang was about to slam into Luke...

Before the students could even shout, Lefiya unleashed the magic she had already finished casting.

"Arcs Ray!"

The beam deftly avoided the students and tore through the liger fang it had homed in on.

"...L-Lefiya..."

"I beseech the name of Wishe. Ancestors of the forest, proud brethren. Answer my call and descend upon the plains!"

Lefiya continued Concurrent Casting as they watched dumbfounded.

Cutting through the enemies before her, she raced to relieve the squad, taking on the swarm of liger fangs while quickly weaving her next spell.

The malice of people and monsters.

The absurdity of the Dungeon.

She originally wanted them to overcome it on their strength alone, but plans had changed.

Annihilating the enemy fell to her now.

"Frozen skies, heaven's rain. Forest-adorning white ice, drive out the wretched barbarians."

Using Elf Ring, she borrowed the spell she had learned from her fellow elf in *Loki Familia*, Alicia Forestlight.

The ice magic was the specialty of the woman who hailed from the Frozen Woods of Fanache in the north of the continent.

"Freeze, chains of winter!"

When she completed the chant, a blue-and-white sphere appeared over her head.

The hail gleamed, casting light on the students and monsters alike. An instant later, those fragments showered the entire room.

"Hail Dust!"

Countless chunks of ice rained down.

The magic missiles fell from every angle, unleashing a dreadful chill as they accurately tore into only the monsters. Like a furious storm sent by the heavens, it shook the battlefield even as it froze the air.

It blew away every remaining monster in the room. Minotaurs and liger fangs froze without even getting out a roar before shattering into glittering dust and ice shards.

Hail Dust. It was a wide-area attack spell like Lefiya's Fusillade Fallarica. One was imbued with the ice element and the other fire, but they were similar in that they both launched a massive number of magical projectiles at once. However, Fusillade Fallarica could only fire forward in a cone. At the same time, Alicia's Hail Dust could target everything within its range, unleashing its hail from the sphere above her head in a full three hundred and sixty degrees in whatever direction she chose.

Just like Lefiya had demonstrated, moving to the center of the battlefield and eliminating every single enemy was possible.

Its range and raw power were lower than *Fusillade Fallarica*, but it was far more versatile. It was a highly valued spell even within the Fairy Force led by Riveria.

Both spells had their merits and drawbacks, but Lefiya could use whichever the situation called for. Thousand Elf was allowed to cheat like that.

"Whoa?!"

They were not hit by the magic, but Luke fell backward to the ground, still swallowed up by the blast of cold air.

Miliria managed to remain standing somehow, but Nano, who was also a mage, slumped to the ground, seeing the elf mage turn the large room into a frozen plain.

"... Unexpectedly, it seems I've found homework to assign."

Lefiya confirmed that the fight was over in the chilled, frozen room and then turned around. Her bright blond hair swayed, and fragments of ice danced through the air as she walked over to the 7th Squad.

"Luke, you have to always remain calm. If you're in command, then you are the party's lifeline. You can never let yourself fall, and you must always keep in mind the responsibility you have toward your party members as a leader."

"..."

"And the rest of you, work on keeping your party functioning even without Luke. You have become a little too dependent on him. You should, of course, address your individual abilities, but you should also focus on developing the flexibility to change positions as needed."

"""O-okay!"""

Luke, who could not manage a reply, and the other three, who answered in unison, all looked at Lefiya with different eyes.

Meanwhile, without changing expression or stance, she stopped in front of the boy sitting on the ground.

"Luke, I believe that it's too soon for you to join the ranks of the dead. Your loss would put this party in danger. And above all, they would be sad."

"...|..."

Luke looked up as Lefiya peered down at him.

She couldn't get through to him before, but her words were certainly reaching him now.

Now that he had been shown what his actions might lead to, he bit his lip in shame.

Shouldn't be impatient, huh...?

As she mulled over what she said to Luke, Lefiya lowered her gaze as well.

Thinking carefully about what she should say now and what answer she could give now, she added, "So...let's get stronger as fast as we can. You and me both."

"Huh?"

Meeting his widened eyes, she smiled.

"People around the world are suffering... Honestly, until you mentioned it, I didn't think much of it. My own concerns took everything I had."

"...Instructor..."

"I shall strive to become stronger, too. So that you won't have to be angry anymore. And I'll teach you as much as I can so that you'll be able to achieve whatever your heart desires."

Her words were sincere.

After she survived a terrible battle and lost something precious, she had become obsessed with becoming stronger. Now, for the first time, Lefiya acknowledged that her heart had changed.

She could not say if everything had gone exactly as Loki had intended. But by instructing these students, she had gained a new outlook on life, and she felt like she still had room to grow.

"Luke, if there's something that is bothering you, then don't hold it in. Just say it. You seem depressed, but the way you are able to state your opinion without fear is part of your charm."

"Wh-what?!"

Luke let out a wild shout.

Lefiya had always been a people pleaser.

When Anakity and Alicia came to recruit, she had never once thought to disagree with anything they said. She had just nodded happily like a puppy. And it was the same after entering *Loki Familia*, which made it something of an extension of her time as a student.

Luke was different. He was willing to stand by his beliefs, and if he didn't agree with his superiors, he wouldn't hesitate to challenge them. And on top of that, he could acknowledge his own mistakes, like now.

Lefiya was genuinely jealous and thought it was incredible.

So even if he was depressed about looking so pathetic, Lefiya respected him.

"I-isn't that the opposite of what you just said?! You didn't want me going against you...!"

"I did not say never argue. If you have a question or something feels wrong, then please say so. I will always answer to the best of my ability."

In doing so, we students of the School District can grow even stronger.

Leaving that bit unsaid, Lefiya put away her sword and wand. Crouching down, she reached out her hand to the boy who peered up at her in bewilderment.

And remembering an old memory that fit the moment perfectly, she put her feelings into words.

"It's all right. I will advise you and correct you as much as you need."

Lefiya smiled as she held out her hand.

It was the unclouded smile of a kind, caring senior.

And seeing that, the boy...suddenly turned incredibly red, as if he had fallen ill.

FAIRY CANON 2

FAIRY CANON

<u>2</u>

With superb piloting, the School District made its way through the lake channel and docked in Meren after three years away—though for Lefiya at the time, this was her first visit.

"They're baaaaaack!!!"

"Welcome back!"

"What sorts of adventures did you have this time?!"

When they entered port, Lefiya was moved by the heart-pounding scene.

A great crowd of people lined the bay, waving hands and banners and playing music just to welcome them home.

The School District's return to port was the biggest event for Meren, and plenty of visitors from Orario had come to see the spectacle as well. And they weren't just lining the harbor. People were standing on platforms and rooftops, leaping and waving flags, and little children were running alongside, waving.

This was the port that gave birth to the ship that traveled the world with its students. But today, Meren seemed like a proud parent celebrating its child's homecoming, marveling at how much it had grown.

"This is amazing, Alisa! We were welcomed in the other towns we stopped at, but this is the first time I've seen so many people come out to see us! This is our triumphal return! Just like the stories!"

"Yes, it is. I enrolled after the last time it left Orario...so it's my first time seeing something like this, too!"

Lefiya and Alisa were standing among the excited students lining the outer edge of the academic layer. Their chests swelled with the expectation that something wonderful might begin here.

"Orario is off-limits until the practical begins, but you have permission to enter Meren starting today. It has been a while, so please enjoy your time on land...is what I would like to say."

"We expect Orario familias to be in Meren, scouting students before the official recruiting season begins. It's only natural to get a little hasty with this much excitement in the air. As long as you choose your own path, the faculty will have no complaints. However, take care not to be carried away in the heat of the moment."

The School District's return was a special event. Unlike at any of their other stops, a full school assembly was held, with the principal, Balder, and the top professor, Leon, providing warnings and official guidance.

It was startling to learn that there was a harbor anywhere capable of berthing the entire School District, and after being overwhelmed by Meren's welcome, Lefiya braced herself for the next shocking development. She would only learn later that their arrival also sparked numerous complaints from ships from many different countries, much to her chagrin.

"All right, it's the night before we head to Orario! Time to cut loose! There's apparently a brothel in Meren, too!"

"If you go, I really will sever all ties with you, Bardain."

"Wh-whoa, that's actually scary, Alisa! Your eyes are filled with disgust! Don't make me develop a new fetish! I'm a boob man through and through!"

"Lefiya, lend me some money. I spent too much on research."

"I don't mind, but...where are you going, Nassen?"

"Meren Raaamen."

"R-Ramen?"

"No, Meren Raaamen. Despite being a port town, it is a restaurant that takes the most heretical, unorthodox approach of making a pork-based dish instead of using a seafood base. But it's delicious. Words can't begin to describe it. Even knowing that I'm partaking of something malignant...that oil...my body craves it..."

"Wh-what...? And what is this raaamen anyway?"

"A soup-based noodle dish with various ingredients added is all I can say. There are many noodle dishes throughout the world, but there are none as addictive as this one. Even I became enthralled during the last return to port."

"Huh...w-wait?! So you were enrolled three years ago, too?! Wait, are you saying that you're older than me? With that baby face?!"

"Who are you calling a pretty little boy, you jerk? I'll kick your ass."

"Ugh?!"

Impatient to see the alabaster-white tower piercing the heavens, the students flooded into Meren with frenetic energy that made it seem like the night before a festival, just like Bardain said. (This was where Lefiya learned so much about the shops in Meren.)

The School District would stay docked in Meren for an extended time to undergo its overhaul. That vague notice was all that they were told, and the specific length of stay had not been announced.

It might be half a year or maybe even a full year.

Without flawless preparation, it wouldn't be possible to travel the world for three full years, and if it stopped functioning and sank somewhere along the way, it would negate everything they had set out to do. (Ultimately, it would turn out to be a one-and-a-half-year stay, its longest overhaul ever. During that time, Lefiya would enter *Loki Familia*.)

Because it stayed in Meren the longest of anywhere, it was customary for student hopefuls to crowd into Meren and Orario. In fact, the most common homeland for students attending the School District was Meren and Orario. Part of the reason such an enormous crowd gathered to welcome the massive vessel home was because many of them were their parents. More than a few students would return home and spend this eve with their families.

In many ways, the School District's return to Meren was a milestone. It was also when the closest thing to a graduation ceremony was held, which was the source of so many of Orario's adventurers—though more precisely, it was an all-school party to celebrate people like Lefiya who had enrolled during the past

three years as well as send off those who were graduating.

And that graduation ceremony would be held after the special practical in Orario.

Or rather, in the Dungeon...

"Everyone, stay in line. Advance carefully...wait, Bardain! Nassen! What are you doing?!"

"You're too high-strung, Alisa! Just charge forward like we always do for fieldwork! It's only the upper floors anyway!"

"I came last time as well. More important to collect samples. The ground, the walls, and other parts of the Dungeon. I've already used up the samples I gathered last time in my experiments. This time for sure, I'll uncover the true nature of this absurd maze..."

"Nassen! Monsters are coming!"

After they were given permission to enter Orario, the four of them had immediately challenged the Dungeon.

Lefiya had heard countless stories about the Dungeon back in Wishe Forest. In ancient times, it was called the Great Pit, a den of monsters that had once pushed every inhabitant of the surface to the brink of extinction.

The first time she explored it, she had been nervous.

And then...she quickly became used to it.

She had been really surprised to see the monsters being born from the walls and had even been caught by surprise attacks several times, but she was able to defeat low-level monsters like goblins and kobolds in a single blow. They were certainly stronger than the monsters aboveground, but Lefiya and her friends had fought many dangerous monsters during their travels around the world.

Having attained Level 2, they were superhuman.

The residents of other lands and towns lauded them for their strength, and they had no trouble traversing through many dangerous regions. And the Dungeon, one of the three great unexplored regions of the world, was no different.

While hunting goblins and kobolds on the upper floors, their view of the Dungeon changed. "It's nothing special."

"But something is different about the adventurers we pass. I'm embarrassed I can't put it into words, but maybe it's that they seem more efficient..."

"Yeah, the adventurers' boobs are bigger, too. Even if they're not enormous, a lot of them are still well shaped..."

"That has nothing to do with anything, Bardain. But I do get what you're saying, Alisa. Despite a disadvantage in levels and strength, some lower-tier adventurer parties make much more money than us at the exchange."

"The first major difference is the custom of gathering magic stones from monster corpses. After generations of breeding, the monsters aboveground have developed far smaller magic stones in their bodies. When dissecting their corpses, the magic stones can be so small that they're nearly invisible to the naked eye. But the originals are born directly from the Dungeon. Even on the upper floors, the smallest magic stones are between 1 and 1.5 celch—the size of a fingernail. With such a wealth of magic stones, anyone would focus on becoming more efficient. It also explains why they developed a culture of supporters. Specialized supporters appear to be disdained by adventurers here, but they are nonetheless useful in the exploration of the Dun—"

"Get to the point, Nassen!"

Setting aside a certain bull who was behaving exactly the same as always, Alisa and the others had discussed the subject several times in their dorm cafeteria while actively sharing their thoughts with other squads.

Nassen had a bottomless curiosity in the ecology and composition of the Dungeon, which could repair its landforms and birth monsters from the walls. Lefiya, on the other hand, felt her heart race at the scenery that kept changing as she went deeper into the mysterious labyrinth that was beyond the ken of mortals. Each new floor was another frontier waiting to be explored.

Lefiya was incredibly active in the Dungeon, almost to the point of recklessness. She boasted so much firepower that she was worthy of the title *cannon*. The 7th Squad's teamwork was excellent, and with directions from Nassen, who was extremely insightful despite only being Level 1, Lefiya's magic

ensured the monsters never found any openings to attack.

She reveled in the feeling of being all-powerful, maybe even omnipotent. It was difficult for Lefiya not to feel a sense of exaltation that she was achieving more than anyone else in the world-famous Dungeon.

"Incredible, Lefiya! Beating that big horde of orcs in a single blast!"

"I-it's thanks to your and Nassen's directions...Bardain rampaging up front is more incredible."

"That's not true! He's always saying that he can attack without worry thanks to your support."

Because of the nature of the Dungeon, frontline and backline roles had to be divided.

At the time, Lefiya possessed an extraordinary level of magic power, even for students of the School District, so it was only natural that she would enjoy the limelight on the battlefield.

"Aren't you pretty suited to be an adventurer?" Alisa excitedly asked.

Her words may well have been the reason that Lefiya started considering the path of an adventurer.



That day, the School District was enveloped in an excitement that matched its return to Meren.

"Hey, that's them, isn't it?!"

The students gathered at the railing and cheered as a carriage stopped in front of the ship. Two women stepped out.

"It's Loki Familia!"

"A black-furred cat person and an amber-haired elf... Alsha and Elleaf?!"

"They didn't send their top adventurers?"

"Idiot! They're both Level Four!"

"Level Four, and they're not even in charge..."

"Loki Familia's insane!!!"

The students were boiling over as they studied Loki Familia's recruiters.

The two of them seemed to be smiling awkwardly, but boys and girls alike screamed when they waved.

It was so incredible that when Bardain said, "The elf's boobs are just amazing! And they'd be even more incredible if she stripped! I can tell!" Alisa and the other girls battered him without mercy.

"Seriously, just curl up and die, Bardain!" "I mean it, just die in a fire!" "Don't you dare go anywhere near them, Bardain!"

It was so ferocious that Lefiya was actually a little scared.

She also knew about *Loki Familia*'s fame, and though she did not squeal or shriek like the others around her, she was secretly excited.

They were the new hope, and everyone hoped they would take Zeus's and Hera's places.

They stood on the very cutting edge of Dungeon exploration.

This was the grand familia led by a prum Hero, elven royalty, and a venerable dwarf warrior.

Those were just some of the many ways one of Orario's strongest factions were hailed around the world.

It was the familia that an esteemed and revered high elf had joined as well. It would be a lie to say she did not factor that in.

"We've come to recruit, but...as you know, this is the first time *Loki Familia* has participated. I imagine there will be moments where we are unfamiliar with how things are done here, but I hope you will overlook that."

"Of course, having come all this way, we will be giving all candidates serious consideration. I hope a follower who can stand at our side will emerge from among you."

After watching Anakity and Alicia address a seminar room filled to capacity, Lefiya thought they looked beautiful and capable. These were women she could not help but admire.

Loki was famous for not getting along with Balder and not accepting any graduates, and she had been quite reluctant to participate in recruiting this time around. Apparently, the Guild had made so many requests that she finally gave in, and it was true that Anakity and Alicia had come much later than the other recruiters.

But even with other factions getting a head start, there was always a crowd following the pair when they came aboard and held seminars. The students were brimming with a desire to talk with them and ask questions. The numbers exploded in the seminar held for Combat Studies students after a brief mock battle. Many, many people were enraptured by Anakity's sword techniques and Alicia's skill with magic and bow.

Given their insane popularity, Lefiya had assumed it would be impossible to have a more private discussion.

"Good afternoon, fellow elf."

"Eh...ehhhh?! L-Lady Alicia, Lady Anakity?!"

"You can drop the formalities. Adventurers aren't known for their manners."

She was working on schoolwork alone in the library when they came by just to say hello. As part of their recruiting, they were given permission to use the library and other facilities and even sit in on lessons.

Perhaps finding Lefiya's panic amusing, they pulled her aside to an empty terrace off Breithablik to talk.

"Oh, so you're in the elite Seventh Squad we've heard so much about?"

"W-we aren't elite...more like a collection of problem children...! Always breaking the rules... It's almost a miracle we haven't been split up yet...!"

"Heh-heh, adventurers are much the same. As Aki indicated, hardly any would be called well behaved."

Looking out across the academic layer with the breeze rustling her hair, Lefiya had been tense and nervous at first, but thinking she would probably never have an opportunity like this again, she decided to ask.

"Umm, Ms. Alicia, Ms. Anakity. Why do Orario's adventurers pour all their strength into just exploring the Dungeon?"

"That's an interesting question. I don't imagine 'because we're adventurers' is the answer you were looking for. Could you elaborate?"

"Umm...I know that the Guild has collected information regarding the Dungeon. They want adventurers to gather lots of magic stones to produce magic-stone goods so they can support the city. But I can't help wondering why there has been so little notable research into an unexplored region like the Dungeon..."

For Lefiya, who had become enthralled by the unknown at the School District, Orario's adventurers seemed almost unnatural.

There was something beyond mortal ken right in front of them, yet no one seemed to be focused on unraveling its mystery. Or rather, she assumed there were people doing that, but it certainly did not seem to be a particularly concerted effort.

Far more adventurers were exploring the Dungeon purely to earn their daily bread.

Lefiya understood the workings of familias as well. Patron deities provided blessings to their followers so they could earn money and fund their god's activities. She understood that the School District's arrangement was unique. But even so, how could they ignore such an incredible bounty just waiting to be discovered?

Even though he caused endless problems in his hunger for knowledge, Nassen's quest to discover the true nature of the Dungeon seemed far more reasonable.

"Why don't adventurers try to solve the mysteries of the Dungeon? ...It just seems strange to me."

Was it Orario's policy? Or the divine will of deities indicating that there was no need to solve it?

Lefiya spoke at length. The nerves and excitement were a big reason why, but also because she was a true student of the School District.

Alicia, who watched in amusement as she spoke, finally answered:

"Because what we seek is something different."

"Eh?"

"You are correct," Alicia continued with a quiet smile. "Many adventurers have their hands full simply keeping their heads above water. Some seek fortune and fame. Others have their own dreams and ambitions. Many who came in search of those things are struggling against the cruelty of reality."

""

"However, some...the higher-ranked factions, including our familia, seek strength above all."

"Strength ...?"

"That's right. There are many different reasons, but...they all circle back to the fulfillment of the world's greatest wish."

"[[]"

Lefiya gasped.

"The Three Great Quests. With Zeus and Hera gone, someone had to step up and complete them. And that duty fell to the adventurers of Orario."

Lefiya realized that she had forgotten.

Alicia was correct. What Orario sought now was the defeat of the living end, which had been unchanged from a thousand years in the past.

Of course, there were individuals who simply sought fame, fortune, or some other ambition. But the fundamental reason the city's greatest factions, *Loki Familia* and *Freya Familia*, continued to explore the Dungeon was the Three Great Quests.

"I hail from a village in the north, not far from the valley of dragons. I came to Orario to eliminate the infuriating dragons that threatened our homes and forests. Like Lady Seldia...would be an arrogant statement, but it is true nonetheless that I became an adventurer because of righteous fury and a sense of duty."

Sharing a part of how she came to be an adventurer, Alicia smiled as she added, "That I can fight alongside Lady Riveria, who bears the same royal lineage as Lady Seldia, is the greatest honor."

"I will not claim that everyone is fighting to save the world. However, we understand our role."

"Role..."

"And perhaps adventurers instinctively grasp that...with every new floor we reach, the deeper we go, the more we will understand the mysteries of the Dungeon. Just like how the mercenaries and explorers continually faced the unknown while building mankind's fortress in the era when the Dungeon was still called the Great Pit."

With that, Alicia finished her answer to Lefiya's question.

Stunned, Lefiya stammered a thank-you.

At the time, her heart raced for some reason. Perhaps she had experienced a moment of elation, having interacted with such glistening, noble adventurers as the members of *Loki Familia*.

Lefiya immediately asked her next question.

"U-um! Would it, um...be strange for me to aspire to be an adventurer?...As a possible career path...umm, not for half-hearted or impure motives, of course!"

Alisa had complimented her, saying she it seemed like a good fit. This was probably also why these shining examples of adventurers had taken notice of her.

It wasn't like Lefiya wanted them to tell her it would all work out. She had simply been inspired by their dazzling presence and wondered if she could become like them.

In response, Anakity, rather than Alicia, wore a pensive look for a moment before speaking.

"...Given we came to recruit, it's probably not my place to say this, but...I wouldn't recommend it."

"I'm not a god, so I can't say with any certainty, but if Alicia took a liking to you, then I'd bet you're an elf who can handle it. That said, if you're doing it for no particular reason or because of what someone else said, you shouldn't set your sights on becoming an adventurer."

Lefiya's stomach felt red hot. It was like she had read her mind.

Anakity didn't say tell her this out of spite, but to offer advice.

"Being an adventurer isn't a glorious job. It can be painful... If anything, there are more painful things than not. So I can't recommend it to you at the moment. Not unless you decide you want to become an adventurer for yourself."

Lefiya felt like she had been doused with cold water. There was an unmistakable air of experience to what Anakity said. She was absolutely correct, and Lefiya's motives were incredibly shallow. Her long ears burned in shame, and if there had been a hole nearby, she would have had a hard time resisting the urge to crawl inside it.

And they could surely tell exactly what Lefiya was feeling.

Alicia put her hand on Anakity's shoulder, and stepping right in front of Lefiya, she said, "It's all right."

"Gh...?"

"There is nothing shameful about being interested in something. And if it is your dream, then that should be cherished all the more. What matters is that when you learn the reality, you should not stop at mere interest or yearning. Instead, you should think and act. For the sake of something you want, for the sake of what you should aim for...or for the sake of discovering a goal."

Taking Lefiya's hand in both of hers, Alicia smiled. Like an older sister. Like someone with far more life experience.

"So if you ever don't know what to do, try jumping in feetfirst. And make as many mistakes as you need. The special privilege of youth is the chance to err."

"Within reason, of course," Alicia added with a playful smile.

Seeing Lefiya's eyes widen, Anakity shrugged and smiled.

"If you ever find yourself within earshot, I'll advise and correct you as much as you need."

Lefiya still remembered those words, even now.

Alicia may have been the first adventurer that Lefiya aspired to be like.

After that, Lefiya started thinking more seriously about her future.

After talking with Alicia and Anakity, her days of delving into the Dungeon in order to earn credits continued.

Gaining a pseudo-adventurer's experience, she thought about many things but still could not reach an answer. To be an adventurer or something else. The more she thought about it in such black-and-white terms, the more she became influenced by Orario.

"Wale! It's been so long!"

"Hey, Lefiya. So you did come. Ever since I got a letter from your mother that you had enrolled in the School District, I thought this day might come."

That day, Lefiya visited a certain café on her own.

It was a shop by the name of Wishe nestled on a narrow side street in the southwest of Orario.

As could be guessed by the name, it was a café run by an elf from the same hometown as Lefiya.

When she heard the name for the first time, she almost burst out laughing, but it was also true that she had been happy. Slipping into nostalgic memories in the shop that reminded her of home, she also felt her loneliness easing. She had come here in the first place to ask someone who knew her since her childhood about careers.

But:

"Wale, is that a relative of yours?"

"No, Hedin. It's someone from my village. A friend's daughter."

"That's what I thought. She does not resemble you."

That day, there was a single customer in the shop.

A bespectacled elf, just like the owner.

He had beautiful blond hair and pale skin so smooth that even Lefiya was jealous of him. His impossible beauty was almost unbelievable, especially for a man.

...Wait, Hedin?

She cocked her head when she heard that name. As he closed his book, he glanced over and stood, walking toward her.

"A student. Have you set your sights on being an adventurer?"

"Eh? Eh?"

"If you have not yet decided upon your future, then you should consider our familia among your choices."

"Wait a second, Hedin. If she chooses it for herself, that's one thing, but I'm against her joining *Freya Familia*. Your group is...rough...after all."

"As if there are any familias in Orario that are not rough. And I am not attempting to conscript her. Merely presenting the possibility."

Lefiya's eyes were spinning when he came to talk to her, and when she heard them speak, she gasped.

Wait?! Freya Familia's Hedin? Hedin Selrand?! The first-tier adventurer Hildsleif! One of the most famous elves in the world, like Lady Riveria?!

It was a miracle that she did not scream right then and there.

Lefiya was petrified by a chance encounter with one of Orario's strongest. It may have been an even bigger shock than running into Alicia and Anakity.

And there was the fact that the master here, who was known back in the village as an easygoing, laidback sort of person, had somehow become closely acquainted with a first-tier adventurer. Lefiya was panicking in more ways than one when Hedin looked at her:

"You have talent. If you are interested, then come. You would meet our lady's standard... My instinct tells me so."

And then he placed a gold coin on the counter and left the shop.

Lefiya could do nothing but stare vacantly at the café's door long after he had disappeared.

"It's been a long time. This one is on me," the master said lightheartedly while brewing some black tea.

Lefiya could not believe what had just happened.

And she never would have dreamed that the elf she had met there would be a senior member of a rival familia that she would oppose someday.

"W-was I just scouted...by a first-tier adventurer?"

It was the first scouting she had encountered in Orario, and a moment to be remembered.

Whether she liked it or not, she could no longer avoid thinking about the adventurer question looming over her.



"It is rare to see you coming to my office alone. So what did you want to talk about?"

"About...my future..."

Several days later.

Lefiya's mind had long since overheated, so she came to Leon to talk.

Out of consideration, Leon made sure it was just the two of them in his office. Sitting in the seat he offered her, Lefiya rubbed her hands together as she slowly began to speak.

About Alisa's recommendation.

About Anakity's warning.

About how she looked up to Alicia.

About being directly scouted by Hedin.

The very word *adventurer* was tormenting her.

She had been praised by others, been curious, misunderstood, and tried to settle her path.

It was probably the same thing countless other children were doing. Maybe it would turn out differently from how she thought, but if she made up her mind and tried, it might end up working better than expected. Or maybe she was just overthinking things.

But unable to picture what she wanted to do or be, Lefiya could not bring herself to plant her feet.

"I see...I should say this at the start, but there are many students with the same sort of worries as you."

"…"

"But in your case, it seems your surroundings won't leave you be. And that is becoming a secondary source of doubt."

"Th-that's..."

Leon had a wry smile as he listened carefully to Lefiya and offered her several options. He mentioned all sorts of internships available in Meren and Orario and the various different paths that other graduates had taken. He spread a large file of materials across his desk, covering an enormous range of information.

Unable to make a decision, Lefiya quailed like an al-miraj, unable to reach an answer.

But even so, Leon did not ever look unhappy and continued the discussion with her.

Leon simply sat in his chair with his feet on the ground, uncrossed, and his hand on his chin. Exhausted and feeling a bit out of it, she was struck with the odd thought that the more she saw him in his thinking pose, the cooler he seemed.

The professor had sharp and gallant features, handsome in a way that was very different from the beauty of elves, who were often compared to ice. She could almost understand why Alisa and many others could become obsessed with him.

One aspect of Leon's popularity was his chivalrous, knightly bearing.

If his patron Balder was the ideal god, he was the epitome of a knight. His beautiful posture alone was enough to charm people.

Leon was the model of a teacher, and though he was simply conducting himself as an educator, it had become a fitting look for him. He surpassed the standard image of a teacher, becoming linked with the image of a knight.

The way he treated everyone with grace and respect really did make him seem like a knight.

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"Lefiya, have a drink."

"Eh...? P-Professor Leon, this is..."
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"Our secret."

Their talk had become a marathon session, and it was now late at night. Lefiya still remembered how he put his finger to his lips while offering her a warm spiced wine.

If she had not known Alisa, who was a cringeworthy example of a maiden in love, her first love would surely have been Leon.

"Lefiya, I believe that the path you take should be something to think long and hard over, just as you are now."

"Eh?"

"So you are not making a mistake right now. Struggle and worry all you need. But do not let that become sloth."

Standing and leaning against the wall, Leon sipped at the steaming spice wine as he shared his own personal thoughts.

"Any failure that might come after that will make you wiser. However, failures that come without thought and consideration often do not become assets."

"Professor..."

"So think. If you cannot reach an answer, then take some more time and think some more. Just as Lord Balder said. And..." He offered one last bit of advice, saying, "...when your heart trembles, be true to yourself."

"When my heart trembles ...?"

"Yes. There was a moment when my heart raced and trembled uncontrollably. In that moment, I vowed to become a teacher."

His eyes, looking kindly down at her, were those of an adult. Yet she could see the unmistakable gleam of a child's eyes in their depths.

Someday, when she could decide what she wanted to become, she wanted to ask Leon what made him want to become a teacher.



After speaking with Leon, Lefiya thought more about herself.

She faced her heart in earnest because she knew that it was not wrong to do so.

"Lefiya, we're going to the eighteenth floor!"

"All right...wait, what?! What are you talking about, Bardain? Students aren't allowed past the fifteenth floor!"

"I want to see the Under Resort for myself! I already roped Nassen in, too! We have lots more allies, too. There's nothing that can stop our adventurous spirit!"

"Y-you can't do that! Professor Leon and all the other teachers were so adamant about not breaking the rules in the Dungeon, weren't they?!"

"Rules are meant to be broken!"

"That's not true at all! Wait, Bardain! He already left...argh, Alisa! Help!"

And as the Dungeon practical reached its climax, Lefiya came to know more deeply just what an adventurer was.

CHAPTER THOSE WHO **TEACH** AND THOSE WHO ARE TAUGHT настаўнік, вучань

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CHAPTER 4

THOSE WHO TEACH AND THOSE WHO ARE TAUGHT

After the first day of the Dungeon practical, things began to go much more smoothly for Lefiya.

The reason was entirely due to her establishing something that could be called trust with the 7th Squad. Having demonstrated how an Orario adventurer got things done, Lefiya was respected and even more idolized by Nano, Miliria, and Cole.

"In the event of an irregularity in the Cave Labyrinth, one possible response is to proceed to a lower floor."

"In the Dungeon, where it gets more dangerous the deeper you go?"

"I know there's the safe point, but...it definitely has to be easier to just go back, right?"

"Because it is the Cave Labyrinth, where its structure of caves and tunnels can produce both the worst and best possibilities. It goes without saying that it's safer to turn back, but...there are situations where that may not be possible. So just in case, keep that possibility in mind."

"...Escaping into the tunnels is crucial. They are supposed to appear randomly, but is there really no system or pattern to it...? Do you know, Lefiya?"

"That's a good question, Luke. The caves and tunnels within the Cave Labyrinth are always in the process of opening and closing. Rather than appearing at fixed points, they are concentrated in certain areas at certain times—"

After exploring the Dungeon every day, they would borrow an open room and hold a debriefing and discussion session.

The students eagerly spoke up and asked questions, and Lefiya answered

them.

Luke was embarrassed at first, but he carefully heeded Lefiya's instructions and began to ask her more about what she could teach him as an adventurer. He also made an effort to improve his tone.

His initial desire to save the people suffering around the world had not changed, but he had stopped seeking to advance at unreasonable speeds. He was grappling with what he could do now while trying to find the most efficient way he could achieve without pushing himself or his comrades to an early death. His steadfast earnestness was dazzling to Lefiya.

"You tend to be proactive and go on the offensive, Luke, but you should also learn some of the perspectives and techniques of those who focus primarily on defense. And Cole, you have a habit of hanging back, but you should try to be more aggressive and develop more offensive capabilities. Milly, you should work on more efficient Mind management and Concurrent Casting. And Nano, you should learn the spirit of the great tree...I can teach Nano and Milly, but Luke and Cole, you would do well to rely on Professor Leon and the other teachers."

And more than anything, Lefiya became more active as an instructor.

Of course, it was not as if she had been holding back before now, but things had changed after her recent epiphany about both the joy of teaching and the responsibility of providing guidance. Stopping by with a cup of tea, Alisa cheered the return of the old Lefiya when she saw her in the guest room, scrawling notes with her quill pen.

And as her instruction of the 7th Squad improved, next up was a full-blown seminar.

"There are adventurers who are much wiser and more experienced than me. Far more than I could count. So I can teach you the change in values that comes with becoming an adventurer after being a student here. Think of it as an update to a student's perspective regarding Orario."

She was speaking in a lecture hall.

Every seat in the conical room was filled. There were even some standing in

the back to listen. Students' eager gazes focused on Lefiya as she spoke from the podium.

Her seminar drew a large crowd of hopefuls.

Of course, students whose first-choice career was adventurer were given some priority, but many students seeking other combat careers responded eagerly, and the seminar ended up being moved to the largest auditorium on the academic layer on short notice.

Since she was a graduate of the School District, an active second-tier adventurer, and a member of *Loki Familia*, her seminar was undeniably popular. As an aside, the adventurers who came as typical recruiters usually did not hold seminars like this. This one was happening because Lefiya was especially in demand as an alum.

"The Dungeon is alive. Many scholarly treatises and papers have said as much, but it has a different meaning to us adventurers. The Dungeon possesses a will. There is a moment when the underground labyrinth that births monsters without end aims to kill adventurers."

"...!"

"In the course of your fieldwork, I imagine you have ventured into monsters' dens and ruins, but in the case of the Dungeon, it would be better to understand it as a place where nature—or perhaps it would be more apt to call it a natural disaster—is itself the enemy. Though adventurers might defeat monsters, we have all been defeated by the Dungeon."

When she first learned how many people had signed up, Lefiya was nervous, but standing at the podium and facing the great crowd of students, she was oddly not nervous.

With a calm mind, she recognized that she would have been only a few days ago, even as she had the presence of mind to observe their reactions while she spoke. The sound of chalk on the blackboard she had been provided filled the lecture hall as she neatly marked a diagram in elegant Koine.

"Other than the presence of the Dungeon, what makes Orario unique is the number of familias. The Labyrinth City boasts the largest concentration of deities, and it is not lacking in turmoil. When I first joined a familia, the thing that left the strongest impression on me was the warning to be careful of sneak attacks at night. Because we were *Loki Familia*. In later days, I would learn painfully just what that meant..."

As much as time allowed, Lefiya also tried to instill in them the psychological readiness needed to be adventurers in an Orario familia. She felt that her analysis and experience would be more valuable than what they could learn by looking it up themselves.

And that was probably correct.

What the students wanted from this seminar was not knowledge they could learn from teachers but the honest, frank voice of experience.

"I will take questions now. Is there anything you would like to ask?"

"Does what we learn here work in Orario, too?!"

"Do you think that the Dungeon-diving familias and production familias are balanced?!"

"It feels that many of the political policies underlying the Guild's city management have come under question! What do you think, Lefiya?!"

She set aside time for questions and answers at the end, and the questions just kept coming.

This was a common sight in the School District, or perhaps it would be better to say that this was its truest form.

The raised hands and questions were unending. Feeling a deep emotion at realizing she had once been on that side, Lefiya did her best to answer their questions.

"My personal belief is that the knowledge you gain, including but not limited to the teachings here, will serve you well in some way. However, transforming that knowledge into wisdom requires effort. Regarding craft familias, they may be less visible due to the nature of their work in the background, but there are many of them in Orario. And regarding the Guild, it is impossible to say they have done a perfect job in upholding public order; however, considering the

reason for Orario's existence, I believe I can express a certain level of understanding."

"What do you think of the Record Holder?!"

"...Well, he's working hard."

"How does the Sword Princess smell?! Haah, haah...!"

"It seems you need disciplining. Report to me later for punishment."

She could give only vague answers or smiles in response to some of the questions, but the question-and-answer session continued without end.

"What was exploring uncharted territory like?!"

"...Because of Guild rules, I cannot discuss the deep floors. However, if I were to give my personal impression, I would say it was hell."

"...!"

"It is on an entirely different level from the regions preceding it. The size is different. The level of danger is far too different. They are worlds apart. I learned that setting foot into uncharted territory for an adventurer means having one's common sense shattered."

And with time closing in, the final question.

"Is Orario's current stance regarding the terrible state of the world correct? What do you think?"

The same question as Luke had screamed in the Dungeon.

Lefiya did not immediately answer, looking around at the students watching her.

And then, so that the 7th Squad sitting in the back of the auditorium could hear, she shared her thoughts and the feelings that she could express now, having experienced regret and loss.

"The current state of the world is a result of Zeus and Hera's failure to complete the Three Great Quests. I do not believe that is a wrong way to look at it."

"Yes. That is all the more reason Orario has a duty to demonstrate its sincerity

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and respond—"
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"However, that means there are no more second chances."

"]]]"

As the questioner's eyes widened, Lefiya continued.

"By all accounts, the sheer amount of strength Zeus and Hera could muster was the greatest that has ever been seen since the beginning of the era of the gods and has yet to be surpassed. And still they failed. The black dragon gathered strength through the centuries that surpassed Orario's estimates and even those of the deities themselves."

It was one of the few old stories that Riveria had let slip.

Curious about Zeus, Hera, and the black dragon, Lefiya had investigated the records herself and shuddered.

The downfall of the two great factions who possessed a Level 8 and a Level 9.

What that meant was that no matter how Orario's present strength was calculated, there was no way they could defeat the black dragon.

Orario's vaunted Dungeon assault.

It was a strategy for encouraging familias to grow stronger and hopefully give birth to the heroes the world needed. Adventurers challenging the Dungeon, *Loki Familia* embarking on expeditions, and Lefiya trying to improve herself. They were all connected.

The reason for Orario's existence was something that she'd also touched on earlier.

Deities who loved their entertainment certainly evoked a certain image. Still, in addition to preventing the conflicts that demolished city blocks, there lurked within war games the goal of forcing familias to struggle against each other and aim higher. At least, that was what Lefiya had come to think.

When she learned of *Kali Familia* and the land of Telskyura, where Amazons fought and killed each other in their contests of strength, Lefiya felt it repulsive, but it wasn't especially surprising. That was a poison that existed in Orario, too.

Though the goals of deities intertwined, it could all be called part of the process of giving birth to the promised land of Orario's next generation of heroes.

"That is why we must be absolutely sure. Failure means the mortal realm's hope being snuffed out. Most likely, the next attempt will be our last. That is what I believe..."

The auditorium fell silent. Students gulped as they hung on her every word.

"To say this in my position may well invite misunderstanding, but I will say it, nonetheless. I would like you all to see yourselves as involved rather than bystanders."

Lefiya gave her answer to the question.

"Orario will slay the black dragon. Even if that is true, I do not think that means the people around the world should leave everything to Orario. We must support and help each other. With the barriers between races falling in the era of deities, that is our greatest weapon."

She thought back to everything leading up to today.

The cooperation of familias facing the unknown Dungeon.

The roars of adventurers from different familias facing Knossos together.

The backs of Aiz and the other first-tier adventurers who possessed the makings of heroes drew in even those who had not been chosen and inspired the whole world.

Lefiya was sure that was one possible answer.

"I am dedicating myself as well. I hope to answer the mortal realm's plea not with just the chosen few but with everyone joining together. That is all for me. With that, the seminar is over."

Putting a hand to her chest, she finished with an elven bow.

The students answered her with a thunderous round of applause.

"That was most certainly the gravitas of an educator."

After leaving the podium at the edge of the stage.

The hall was still filled with excitement as the students began discussing the lecture without getting up from their seats when Leon greeted her.

"You have the makings of a teacher, just like Alisa."

"You overestimate me. I am nothing more than a simple adventurer."

"That's right, Professor Leon! Just because I'm always at your side, saying I'm worthy of serving as your right hand in such a confessional tone is—!"

"Alisa, he didn't say that much—"

While she was exasperated to see Alisa shuddering and holding her red cheeks, Lefiya did believe that she had gained something.

When her time here came to an end, she would return to her days in *Loki Familia* as someone who was still being taught. But with the perspective she gained here as an instructor, she would be able to grasp what people were trying to convey and where they were trying to go faster and with a deeper comprehension.

As she explained key points to the students, she also learned new things.

Verbalizing the process that was usually unconscious and carried out on instinct.

Thinking through her actions and explaining them.

For upper-class adventurers who tended to act reflexively, it was a strategic review. That was a thing that Finn and Riveria were probably the best at in *Loki Familia*. And she could put it to use at the beginning of her next battle.

She could not afford to simply indulge in being taught. It would be a waste.

It felt like she had become just a little bit wiser.

She had been unhappy about this arrangement, thinking it calculated, but now she was grateful to Loki.

That was when she heard the voices of the girls in the hall.

"Lefiya is so dreamy!"

"I know, right?! I wonder if it's because she's an elf."

"Beautiful and dignified...I can hardly believe she's only a second-tier adventurer!"

"I want to be like her!"

Don't underestimate a second-tier adventurer's senses, please.

Leon smiled kindly as Lefiya's face flushed, and Alisa watched while stifling a giggle.

"I-I'm not the sort of elf who is worthy of such outrageous praise..."

"Modesty taken too far becomes disagreeable, Lefiya. And a perspective lacking in objectivity will only cause unhappiness for you and those around you."

She could not say anything to that.

In Lefiya's mind, the standard for praise was Aiz and the other first-tier adventurers.

But by the standards of Alisa and the others who were active outside Orario, she was more than remarkable enough to merit comment.

Neither was wrong. They were both correct.

The School District's greatest fighting strength was their teachers, and Leon, who as the strongest of them all understood Lefiya's perspective, too, said: "Accept it, Lefiya. A proper evaluation is necessary for you in your own growth."

"...Yes, sir, I shall try."

Leon smiled wryly at the way she answered.

Lefiya suddenly thought she was doing fairly well despite struggling with embarrassment.

Here time with 7th Squad and the seminar were both going better than she had expected.

Perhaps it was a result of her decision to change. She did not know, but she was happy and proud to recognize that she was growing.

However, even as she was being praised, issues were developing.



"Ughhhhhhhh...!!!"

The next day after the seminar.

As Lefiya prepared materials for her instruction of the 7th Squad, she was being glared at.

By a teary-eyed Nano.

"Umm...Nano? Did I do something to you?"

Her eyes were filled with reproach, but the way tears were welling in them was terribly adorable. It made her seem like a cute little animal trying to be menacing, almost making Lefiya want to pet her.

But even so, it was a little difficult to endure.

After she had been so fawning and friendly before.



When Lefiya carefully worked herself up to ask the question, Nano cried out like a woman whose lover had been stolen away from her.

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"Lefiya, you thief!!!"

"Eh?"

"I even asked you not to seduce Luke!"
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No, it was not *like* a woman. She was a girl who thought her crush had been stolen away.

Not having any clue where that came from, Lefiya answered with an odd noise.

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"W-wait a second, Nano. What are you...?"

"...But you did..."

"Huh?"

"Luke is totally head over heels for you!"

Lefiya had a dubious look as she watched Nano shout with closed eyes.

"Hah?"

Or rather, a look of incomprehension.
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Who had fallen for whom?

Seeing her confused look, Nano erupted angrily.

"Don't play dumb! Ever since that first day in the Dungeon, Luke has been looking at you differently! You're a devil toying with him!"

"I'm doing no such thing... Ah, but...it is true that Luke has seemed odd recently..."

She had thought he was acting a little distant lately.

Turning to look when she felt his gaze, he would turn red and hurriedly look away. When he seemed like he wanted to say something but was struggling to verbalize it, she would smile and ask what was wrong, and he would look away and stammer that it was nothing. She had thought that he simply didn't like her.

But it also felt like that when Nano started staring at her like a wraith who had died after being betrayed by someone close to her.

"Luke is totally in love with youuu!"

"Th-that's not—"

"It is true! As the childhood friend, I can tell! Luke is a pathetic virgin bewitched by the clichéd younger senior!!!"

"That is a little overboard..."

And unexpectedly nasty.

Lefiya could feel a headache coming on as she watched Nano breathing heavily in agitation.

"...Even if that is true, you don't need to worry. I don't have any feelings for him."

"That's just as aggravating! Luke is totally awesome!!!"

"What would you have me do ...?"

She was weary of this blazing fire that grew no matter what she said.

As Lefiya was at a loss for what to do, Nano, seemingly finally calmed down, suddenly looked sad and started mumbling, "You're only fifteen, but you're Level Four and a member of *Loki Familia*...as clumsy and tiny as I am, I could never match you..."

"Nano..."

"You're pretty, amazing, and dignified. Of course Luke would be attracted to you. Even I think you're the epitome of a noble elf..."

Lefiya was reaching out her hand but suddenly froze.

The words noble elf.

When she heard that, everything clicked into place—the doubts, the confusion, it all made sense.

She understood why the students were so noisy when they saw her, why they called her pretty, dignified, and stylish, descriptions that were so ill-fitting for

Lefiya Viridis not long ago.

What they were seeing in the current Lefiya...was Filvis.

In learning her fighting style and her determination not to forget her, Lefiya was influenced by the image of the noble elf that Filvis had been. Alisa saying she seemed more adult was also probably because of her desperation to chase after the phantom of Filvis.

If that were not the case, Lefiya could not think of an explanation for why they would describe her as a noble elf.

How absurd...

She had not considered that someone would look up to Lefiya Viridis just as she had looked up to Aiz—as she had looked up to Filvis.

There was no greater irony than becoming an object of idolization after having lost someone so precious.

And so she answered with a self-deprecating smile.

"...It's okay, Nano. That yearning is only temporary. Just a trick of the mind."

"Huh?"

"When he learns how pathetic, how ugly an elf I am, he will be disillusioned and snap out of it."

She had started to say "wretched" but stopped herself.

It was too depressing a self-loathing.

Looking away, she glanced out the window at the sky that was so blue and clear yet again. At the heavens where souls returned to rest.

She was too lacking to be called a noble elf in every regard.

She could not begin to match Filvis.

She was stronger, more beautiful, and more tragic.

Lefiya had loved her.

<u>"_"</u>

Nano was speechless when she saw the eyes of the elf before her.

Her body shuddered, and she turned pale.

But Lefiya did not notice.



"I wonder how Lefiya is doing..." Tiona murmured.

She was in Twilight Manor, Loki Familia's home.

It had been ten days since Lefiya left to be a recruiter.

Lounging lazily on the sofa in the parlor, she looked to the southwest, toward Meren, where Lefiya surely was.

"Unlike us, she's got a real education. I'm sure she's doing fine. It's her old stomping ground, right? She knows how things work there."

"Yeah...and Lefiya can get along with anyone..."

Tiona and Aiz answered from their own places on the sofa.

But Tiona's expression was still clouded.

"I'm not really worried about that... I'm wondering if she'll come back like that?"

"Of course not! ...Of course not, right?"

"But Lefiya...went to Bete, too..."

"Ugh."

Tiona and Tione both slumped at Aiz's dejected answer.

They had been like this all the time lately, ever since Lefiya left.

To be blunt, there was nothing to do.

Of course, Aiz was continuing her self-training. Tione was working hard to help Finn, and Tiona was going into the Dungeon with Narfi and the others. But maybe because everything had become so peaceful, the time they spent sitting around like this had increased.

They had been immersed in near constant fighting until the final battle in Knossos, so this was just an adventurer's rest, but recently...whenever they

were hanging around with nothing to do, they ended up thinking about Lefiya.

And fell into a negative feedback loop due to their excessive unease.

It just became normal that she was always around...

That's why it's so lonely...

Aiz glanced at the empty seat on the sofa.

"Don't worry, Tiona. If that dumbass Balder tries to keep Lefiya...I'll send up the flare and smash that whole stupid school to pieces."

"That's too dramatic... There's no need to destroy it."

"And the ones doing the smashing would be us."

They turned a cold eye on the fourth figure in the parlor, Loki, who had been drinking since the break of dawn.

"Hey, why did you send Lefiya there? I can sort of tell you're worried about her after her big image change, but could we not have stayed with her?"

"Hey, hey, always diving straight into the heart of things without any warning, Tiona. That's the naive, childlike character I took ya for! The innocent Amazon is definitely a top-tier trope!"

"Quit dodging the question," Tiona said with a pout.

Loki downed the last of the alcohol she was nursing and after a moment's pause: "Mmm...the thing about people who are students is, in a way, they can be forgiven for messing up."

"?"

"People who teach'll admonish 'em and correct 'em no matter what happens. They can be spoiled like that, which is maybe a bit over the top...but anyway, they can do whatever they feel like and keep rushin' ahead. They can mess up and fall on their face, and it's fine."

"...You mean Lefiya?"

Loki did not respond to Tione's question or Tiona's cocked head.

"But once you're on the teaching side, you don't get that anymore. And then

the people you've gotta guide, the ones who're there to learn from you, they become a mirror."

"A mirror...?"

Loki stared at her reflection in the empty glass as Aiz looked at her.

"When you stand in front of a mirror, you can suddenly see the things that you couldn't unravel no matter what anyone said... That's what I'm hopin'."

"Meaning? There's something she can't notice while staying on the side that learns?"

"I wouldn't put it that strongly. But when you're the mirror, there's nothin' that reflects you, right?"

"I don't get it at all!"

Loki just smiled at Tiona's and Tione's reactions and refused to give a clear answer.

"What do you think of Lefiya, Aiz? As her respected older sister in uncertainty."

She leaped into the open seat beside Aiz with a grin.

She poked her finger at Aiz's cheek. She tried to stop Loki, but before she could: "Well, it's true Lefiya's pretty adorable compared to Aiz."

"Yeah, Aiz is the most unsteady, for sure!"

Tione, sitting on the other side of Aiz, also started poking her cheek, and Tiona moved behind the sofa and grabbed her long, blond hair and spread it out. Surrounded by the three of them, unable to argue, she was transformed into a doll for them to play with.

Even though she had no idea what to do, like a hamster being played with, she did feel like what they were saying was correct.

The current Lefiya was not more unstable than Aiz.

All of them were in agreement on that.

But...

"Lefiya isn't dangerous...but she is...scary," Aiz murmured as she looked down at her hand.

"Scary? What do you mean?"

"Like she might...stop being Lefiya."

"Stop being Lefiya?"

"Mhm...I have a goal. But Lefiya...doesn't."

Loki watched quietly as Tione and Tiona expressed confusion.

Because the current Lefiya resembled her younger self, Aiz could understand. It was an instinctive feeling she could not explain well, but she was sure it wasn't wrong.

And she used the word *scary* because Lefiya was decisively different from Aiz's past and current selves.

"Lefiya has no goal, so she will never be satisfied. Even if we say it's enough... she won't be able to stop."

Aiz concluded that there was probably only one person who could stop Lefiya now, and she was no longer there.

But she could not explain it well. It was difficult to put her exact thoughts into words. Disappointed in herself for being so terrible at expressing things, she stared at her feet.

"Sorry...I can't explain it well..."

"It's fine, Aiz. I can get the gist, and the important thing is you're serious about Lefiya."

Loki's foolish attitude disappeared, and she patted Aiz on the head.

"The main reason I sent her back to that rotten ship was to return her to her roots...An alma mater can be unexpectedly good for helpin' ya realize some things."

"Back to her roots...?"

"That's right. Hopefully, Lefiya can remember herself. That's what I was thinkin'."

And as they looked at her, she slipped back onto the sofa and looked up at the ceiling.

"I'm just lettin' it ride, but...I wonder how it's goin'."



"Achoo!"

Lefiya covered her mouth.

"Lefiya, did you catch a cold? You caught a cold!"

"No, that shouldn't be..."

"That sneeze was so cuutte! I'm sure it's that someone was whispering about wanting to see your cute side!"

"Please don't tease me, Nano."

Miliria and Nano excitedly gossiped as Lefiya looked down to hide the red in her cheeks and tried to feign calmness.

They were on the west side of Meren, in front of the giant shipyard.

The School District was currently on the ground.

Though it stuck to sea routes to avoid overuse and natural safety concerns, Hringhorni could rise onto the land by cranking its flotation device to deliver maximum power, and was precisely what it was doing now to undergo a complete overhaul.

The technicians who usually worked in the industrial district of Orario were all called in to repair and rebuild the structures and armor covering the bottom of the ship. It was already almost winter, but the heat rising from inside the shipyard was enough to make them sweat. All sorts of brawny dwarves and men were walking around in work pants and tank tops, making it feel like they had stumbled into an industrial city. The clanking rhythm, different from a blacksmith's hammer, evoked something almost emotional in Lefiya.

"Getting back to the subject at hand. Today we'll be conducting a small expedition to the Dungeon's middle floors. The plan is to head to the eighteenth floor, the safe point."

The control, residential, and academic layers underwent maintenance during the overhaul.

The control layer was in the middle of significant repairs and renovations.

Its primary residents, the sailors, and mages, were forced out and in the process of setting up residence in the residential layer or at inns in Meren while Lefiya prepared to set out with the 7th Squad.

"The Under Resort...! Oooooh, I can't wait!"

"A mysterious floor that has day and night cycles even though it is inside the Dungeon...I always wanted to see it, at least once!"

"I've heard hardly anyone has reached the eighteenth floor while enrolled!"

"And those few were all people who broke the rules and almost died, from what I've heard."

Nano, Cole, and Miliria were getting excited. Luke was feigning his usual calm, but he was clearly looking forward to it, too.

Students were given permission to advance only as far as the Cave Labyrinth and only to the fifteenth floor.

With two Level 3s, the 7th Squad certainly had more than enough strength to clear the middle floors, but students and adventurers were different. They lacked the experience adventurers would have built up on the upper floors. As evidence, there was no end to the number of students who came back from the Dungeon practical with terrible injuries every time it was held. There were even deaths on rare occasions.

Even if they could make up for it with their status, Lefiya believed that the administration's decision to set the boundary at the fifteenth floor was correct.

And Lefiya herself was one of those people who had almost died during her time as a student here.

"It's perfectly fine to be excited about it, but this is no field trip." Lefiya took a sterner instructor's look. "I have no complaints about the amount you've grown this past week, and you have adapted well to the Dungeon. I can vouch that monsters in the middle floors will not catch you off guard. However..."

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""Don't let your guard down.""
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After she watched Luke, Cole, Nano, and Miliria repeat her warnings in unison, Lefiya nodded in satisfaction. They set out from the shipyard alongside countless other students headed to internships or to face the Dungeon like the 7th Squad.

Students were getting tired of going back and forth between Orario and Meren, and there were those still looking around excitedly the moment they passed through the gate, just as they had on the first day. While the students were in town, there were merchants and familias aiming to meet the students' special needs, creating an even livelier atmosphere than usual.

A chic candy shop with special nougats and honey all lined up.

A café had rare books set out on display.

Places rented out to tenants looking to provide something the students might like.

Around a corner, a stylish back alley came into view, and Lefiya could not help laughing a bit. "Is this really Orario?"

Nano and Miliria went out on their days off with other girls from the School District, apparently searching for interesting spots and discovering all sorts of places.

Moving past the market in the southwest that was particularly thriving, they headed northwest to Guild Headquarters to handle the paperwork for their Dungeon exploration and to double-check that there were not any irregularities reported in the middle levels, just in case.

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"—Heee?!"
"Hm?"
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When they were walking through the courtyard of the Guild building, a boy Lefiya walked past let out a little shriek.

[&]quot;"You never know what might happen in the Dungeon.""

[&]quot;That's right. It seems like there shouldn't be any problems. Let's go."

He was a student just like the 7th Squad, and he was wearing a school-provided combat uniform that was not yet broken in. He was a hume bunny. He had a fluffy tail at his back and long ears extending out of his brown hair, which was long enough to mostly cover his eyes.

She wondered why he would react like that since it was their first meeting.

...Hm?

He seems sort of familiar...

Lefiya's eyes narrowed, and she looked closer when he froze and suddenly looked away.

"Rapi, what are you doing? Let's go."

"R-right! Sorry, Nina!"

Called by a half-elf girl, he hurried over to a group of students who seemed to be a squad.

"That was..."

"Ah, that's the dropout squad."

"Balder Class Third Squad. They're the exact opposite of our Seventh Squad... nicknamed the worst party."

"It's sad since the squad leader, Nina, tries so hard. She's smarter than me and a good girl...and she's only thirteen!"

"It's less that they're failures and more that they're all so extreme, they can't really work together. That's what it seems like in mock battles, at least. Though...there was a new person who enrolled recently, they're currently a squad of five."

Lefiya cocked her head as Miliria, Cole, Nano, and Luke all explained.

There had not been any squad with the distinction of being called the worst party when she was a student, so this had to be quite the collection of problem children.

At the very least, she got the feeling from the hume bunny that he was capable...but maybe that was just her misinterpretation?

Either way, the 7th Squad she and Alisa were part of were both elite and troublemakers as well.

Perhaps it was just the thin line between genius and stupidity.

"They're going to beat us to the middle floors..."

After watching them until they disappeared from view, Lefiya and the 7th Squad entered the Guild.



After finishing the paperwork and stopping by Adventurers Way to pick up items for their little expedition, they entered the Dungeon.

Of course, they cleared the upper floors without issue and reached the middle floors.

"Growling torrent gleam, blessed censure. Shatter the noble with thy splendor. Swallow, jaws of lightning. —Luke, get back!"

"Got it!"

With that clear, crisp, and careful cast, magic power began to swell. A vivid magenta magic circle unfurled at her feet as sparks flew. Luke cleared the line of fire while Nano thrust her blessed iron staff forward.

"Zalga Amalda!"

"0000000000000000000000?!"

A flash of lightning erupted.

Twelve bolts overlapped and transformed into a torrent of pure energy that scorched the Dungeon and monsters. The three liger fangs disappeared without a trace.

"Control your magic a bit more, Nano! We can't gather drop items or even magic stones like this!"

"Huh?! I'm sorrrry, Mimi!"

"Wait, a cave. More are coming."

Just as Miliria and Nano were arguing, Cole, the party's scout, was watching

the surroundings even after the fight. His ears pricked up as he noticed an enemy, and Luke and the others turned to follow.

They handled the successive battles the Dungeon sent their way without wavering, calmly handling all the monsters.

"The liger fangs that were so much trouble the first time were like nothing. Not only do they not seem to have a lingering problem with them, but they are even using their tendencies to deal with them...hmm, they really are excellent, almost disgustingly so even..."

Lefiya watched at a short distance away from the party as she tore into the almiraj, which closely resembled rabbits.

It had been a week since the start of their Dungeon practical. They had reached the point where Lefiya could leave them to handle the combat alone. She would help out in emergencies, but a necessity like that had not yet occurred.

They are growing at a good pace...

Nano, who had a tendency to be timid and wait to see how her comrades were feeling, was starting to give directions more actively, not just signals for her magic. She was beginning to take command of the squad. She would naturally have the widest view of the battlefield since she was in the rear. With her being more active now, the 7th Squad would become even stronger.

The others trusted her, trusting her to watch their backs while focusing on their own movements. Lefiya was stunned to see Luke fall back to the middle of their formation and let Miliria and Cole take point on his own initiative. They had apparently been training when Lefiya was not around and had become able to cover more positions without issue.

It would have been perfect were it not for Miliria looking back at Lefiya with a smug expression.

"Mm, they are improving."

Turning their failure into nourishment, they were growing through trial and error.

It was not something that could be learned while focusing on other things. It was the result of diligently addressing the tasks they had been given and not compromising. They were dedicated and skilled.

All that was left was to build a sufficient amount of experience, and they would be standout adventurers.

Lefiya was genuinely pleased by their growth, as if she were the one growing herself. She grasped intuitively that this was the true charm of teaching.

However:

But...I have a bad feeling about the Dungeon today...

While she was pleased, Lefiya couldn't ignore a growing sense of unease that seemed to prickle the back of her neck.

Something felt off, and it was enough to set off an alarm in the back of her mind.

There are no abnormalities around us...no signs of dangerous monsters...so then why?

Should she wait and see? Explore the surroundings until she could be sure? Or should she take serious precautions and turn back?

They were currently on the main route in the fifteenth floor. She and the 7th Squad could react well enough to any irregularity on this floor.

With that presumption, Lefiya pondered what to do...

"Kikaaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

"Whooooooooooaaaaaa?!"

Nano's cry rang out, along with the sounds of rocks collapsing and creatures being born from the Dungeon.

Standing alone in the rear, she was suddenly threatened by dozens of bat monsters overhead.

"They're just bad bats! Don't scare me like that."

"I-I'm sorry, Mimi. Ugh, I'm just all over the place today..."

Just as they were mopping up the monsters, Miliria easily skewered a bunch with a single arrow. Luke kicked off the wall, unleashing a spinning slash that tore through the swarm.

They were strategically scattering the monsters—but that was when Lefiya's expression changed.

Her ears quivered, and she suddenly looked around.

"Kiiiiiaaaaaaaaaaa!!!"

"Kikiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii!!!"

"IIAAAAAAAAAAA!!!"

The sounds of countless monsters being born suddenly rang out.

"Wh-what?!"

"Bad bat shrieks everywhere...!"

"A mass spawning?!"

Ear-splitting cries tore through the caverns, erupting from their location well into the distance, in every direction, from everywhere. The students readied themselves hearing that.

Bad bats had hardly any raw combat ability. They were bat monsters whose shrieks disrupted adventurers' movements. Cole, with his superior werewolf hearing, covered his ears at the din of dozens, hundreds of shrieks filling the caves.

Luke was correct. It was a mass spawning of bad bats.

There was no mistake. This was what Lefiya had been sensing. They had not encountered any of a particular type of monster.

Bad bats were always lurking in the Cave Labyrinth's shadows, yet they had not seen any.

Other than an extreme irregularity, there was a set number of monsters on each floor of the Dungeon. They had not seen any bad bats because an entire number erupted all around the fifteenth floor at the same time.

Instead of coming out of the walls, they came out of the ceiling.

Oh no!

It was already too late when she sensed a clear and present danger.

The ceiling above Nano, where the bad bats had been born, collapsed like nothing was supporting it anymore.

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"Wha-?!"
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"Kyaaaaaaaaaaaaaah?!"

The ceiling was filled with holes from the birth of so many monsters, and with a crack, it suddenly fell.

A deadly shower of rocks poured down as those who had leveled up launched themselves into the air with a tremendous reaction speed. They cried out in shock as they did all they could to get themselves out of the way. The side effect of the mass spawning of bad bats impacted the entire floor and a chain of thundering booms rang out like a building collapsing.

And...

"Nano?!"

"Aaah—"

On one side were Nano, Miliria, and Cole.

On the other was Luke.

A massive mound of rubble fell between them, cutting them off.

Luke immediately reached out as their stunned faces disappeared behind the falling rocks.

"Luke, no!"

Lefiya wrapped an arm around his waist as he tried to pursue his comrades, and then she jumped.

It turned out her instinct had been right, because the ground itself collapsed as well.

Lefiya leaped into a tunnel and made an emergency escape from the tremendous cave-in.

"Nanooooooooooooo!"

His shout was drowned out in the thunderous rumble of stone.



"Loki! There's big trouble!"

Aiz and the others were still resting in the parlor when Elfie rushed in with frantic footsteps.

"There was a big collapse in the middle levels of the Dungeon! The Guild is in a huge panic!"

"|"

Everyone's eyes widened.

The word was that the Cave Labyrinth, particularly the fifteenth floor, had collapsed, and every route had been blocked off. Multiple floors had collapsed, and there was no way through from the fourteenth floor at the moment.

"What about students?"

That was where Aiz's mind went first.

The safety of the inexperienced students and of her friend.

"The students have to check in with the Guild before going into the Dungeon, so they know how many were down there... Almost all of them have made it back aboveground...but there are two squads that haven't come back yet, apparently..."

Elfie answered in fits and starts, her face turning pale.

"One of them is apparently Lefiya's Seventh Squad..."

Everyone stood up when they heard that.

"Let's go get Lefiya!"

"Yeah, we can dig our way through the rock."

Tiona and Tione were ready to charge straight in after hearing their comrade could be in danger, and Aiz started to follow them.

But Loki, who remained sitting on the couch, called out, stopping them.

"Calm down, girls. Unless she got crushed by the rocks, Lefiya'll be fine. She's a Level Four Super-Lefiya now, ain't she?"

"But, Loki, if anything happened...!"

"And the number of my blessings ain't gone down. At the very least, she hasn't bit the dust yet."

Hearing that, the hot heads started to cool off.

"If you force your way through the rubble, you'll just cause another collapse. This rescue mission needs specialized gear and help from mages. Ganesha should be movin' already, so work with them. You take the lead on this one, Tione."

"Got it!"

"I'll let Finn and the others know. Aiz and Tiona, you go, too. Take everyone here with you if ya want."

"Okay!"

"I-I'll go, too!"

Tione, Tiona, Aiz, and Elfie all rushed out.

All alone in the blink of an eye after giving her instructions, Loki let out a heavy sigh.

"This is an important moment for her...read the mood, why don't ya?"

Standing up, she walked over to the window. Looking toward Central Park, where a big uproar was already happening: "No matter how peaceful the city gets, the Dungeon's still the Dungeon."



"Luke, are you all right?"

The rumbling in the ground finally began to settle.

Lefiya addressed the boy who was kneeling beside her.

They were in a side passage on the fifteenth floor, a narrow little cave far

from the main route.

They had run quite far. The ceiling collapse over such a vast area was murderous, and even Lefiya, a second-tier adventurer, had no option but to run. She grimaced as clouds of dust still filled the air.

"Nano...Cole, Milly...damn it!!!"

Luke slammed his fist against the ground.

Breathing raggedly, distraught by his powerlessness, he trembled with an aimless anger. Watching him from the side, Lefiya found herself wanting to click her tongue at herself for the first time in her life.

Finn, Riveria, or Gareth would have noticed the missing bad bats and immediately given the order to fall back. They would not have been so foolish as to try to discover the source of their unease when they were responsible for the safety of students.

Did I think I could do anything now that I'm Level Four?

She still had so much more to grow. Lefiya berated herself for having left them in harm's way.

"...Luke, breathe in. And exhale slowly. Once your breathing is calm, answer my question."

Not letting even a trace of how she felt about her pathetic display show, Lefiya immediately shifted gears.

Hearing her voice, Luke's logic began to take over again, and he slowly breathed in and out like she said, standing up.

"Is this your squad's first experience with a cave-in? Have you experienced anything similar in your fieldwork?"

"...We have. We were in trouble once, in a ruin in Teresas. The ruins collapsed while we were inside... That time we waited to be rescued and somehow managed to survive..."

"In that case, I doubt they're panicking. Even if it is in the Dungeon, having experienced something similar before, they should be able to handle themselves."

That made an enormous difference.

Staying calm and composed led to a dramatic improvement in survival rates inside the Dungeon.

"The problem is that they have all likely fallen down to a lower floor. The floor collapsed beneath all of the rubble in that area. They were likely caught up in that collapse when they disappeared into the rubble..."

Just before she pulled Luke away and ran, she felt the floor collapsing beneath her.

Without her or Luke, they would surely not have been able to escape falling, too.

"...How...?"

As Lefiya calmly analyzed the situation, Luke's voice trembled, and his eyes flared.

"How can you be so calm?! You don't even know if they're safe!!!"

It was a reasonable question.

There was no reason Luke could remain calm when the comrades he had known for so many years were suddenly torn away from him. It would be hard enough just to stay calm. If she were in the same position as him...if she had been separated from Elfie and the others like that, she would have been more than a little shaken.

So, careful not to provoke him, she firmly held up a finger.

"There are two reasons why I am remaining calm. First, nothing about this situation would be improved by losing my composure. Throwing a fit is just a waste of stamina. And there is no point in exhausting myself mentally, either."

"Gh...!"

"We can't do anything other than work from the assumption that they are alive. They might be dead, but they might still be alive, too. So long as both possibilities remain, would you abandon them and head back to the surface?"

Of course not.

Luke looked at her, his brow furrowing as he answered without words.

Judging that his emotional state was improving, Lefiya held up a second finger.

"The second reason is that if I lost my composure, then you would, too."

"!!!"

"So even if it is a bluff, I will always look calm in front of you students."

Lefiya was not, in fact, agitated at the moment, but even if further absurdities pushed them to their limits, she would still have kept her cool.

Just as Riveria and Aiz and the others did.

Whenever she panicked and cowered at the irregularities that occurred in the Dungeon, they never lost their composure in front of her. They never said anything that would make her panic (though they did tease her on occasion).

Staying calm. Not letting communication fall apart. Even if it was just jokes and banter, just calmly speaking with each other was extraordinarily helpful. It was minor, but it allowed them to understand and reassure each other.

In the past, Lefiya had been the one saved by it, but now it was her turn to save someone else.

"...Sorry, Lefiya. I got heated again."

"No, the situation is what it is. That much is completely understandable."

After they'd looked at each other for a few moments, Luke's fiery temper had cooled, and he apologized.

He was embarrassed, having lost his cool again even though he had been warned about it after that first time in the Dungeon, but Lefiya shared with him a few words, not as an adventurer, but as herself.

"Luke, your tendency to get heated and blurt out whatever's on your mind might be a bad habit for an adventurer, but...I think the passion you feel for your comrades is a good thing. I don't hate it at all."

Lefiya smiled, sharing her honest feelings.

Luke's face reddened enough that it was visible even in the dark of the

cavern.

Though Lefiya didn't notice as she reached into her pouch and looked over the map she pulled out.

We left the main route quite far behind to escape. Fortunately, I know this area...but it is far from a connection to the next floor.

Memorizing the route they had taken, Lefiya carefully traced the way back to the main route.

In terms of escape, Knossos is possible, but...we can't use that. It is heavily classified, and even if Luke and I escaped, that would do nothing for them.

Daedalus's masterwork was connected to every floor, but without a key, there was no way for her to effectively make use of it. And the access door was far away as well. It could be used to send in rescuers by those who knew its existence, but that was about all the good it could do them now.

"...We should prioritize linking back up with them."

Putting her mind to work, Lefiya came up with a plan.

Fortunately, they had planned for a mini-expedition and camping out in the Dungeon, so they had prepared more food, water, and items than usual. Half of them were with Lefiya, and the other half were with Nano, who was acting as a supporter in addition to a mage. That the two of them were not together was a small silver lining.

At a quick calculation, if they were still alive, they could support themselves alone for around half a day.

If they holed up together and limited their exertion, it would be different. Still, considering the possibility of having to fight monsters in an endless stream and managing the timing for recovery, that would be their limit.

They would have to find the three of them in the vast area of the middle floors before time ran out.

"...What about other squads or adventurers who got caught up in it...?"

"Ignore them. Even if other squads were left behind, unfortunately we cannot take care of them. And all the more so for any adventurers. Just finding the rest of our squad that we were separated from will be exceedingly difficult. We don't have the leeway to try to save some unknown number of people who may or may not need help."

There was no time. They did not have the leeway or the time to make the wrong choice or flounder over what to do.

Luke pursed his lips when she announced it so clearly.

Take responsibility for your own party. It sounded cold, but it was the judgment of an adventurer who knew what she was talking about, and the kindhearted boy accepted it.

He was able to prioritize his desire to search for his own comrades.

And—despite what she said, if they did find someone suffering, she would absolutely help them without question. It was a dispassionate answer to help him clear away his doubt, and it was a lie of convenience.

"Luke, I believe I know what they would do when separated, but I would like to ask you since you have known them for far longer than I have," Lefiya said, leading into an important question. "Will they wait to be rescued or try to forge their own path? What do you think they will choose in this situation?"

Luke closed his eyes for a moment and then quickly looked up.

"If it were before we met you, we definitely would have waited to be rescued," he said, envisioning their past selves. However, he continued with a loud shout, "But after learning so much from you, I'm sure they will keep going deeper! They won't leave their lives to fate or luck! They'll make their own path!"

They would venture forward even if it were dangerous. They would become adventurers.

Hearing that, Lefiya smiled.

"Good. I was thinking the same thing. In that case, they will have set out for the eighteenth floor. Now that we know that, we can act, too."

"Yeah!"

There was the possibility that someone was injured and unable to move, but

Miliria could use healing magic. As long as it was not an especially bad injury, they would be able to move.

She would have to believe that they would choose to become adventurers and proceed accordingly.

"Let's go."

It was just five minutes from the time the floor collapsed.

Lefiya and Luke began to act.



"Mimi, are you all right...?"

"This barely counts as a scratch. Cole covered for me, though..."

"I'm okay, too...I can stop the blood. So don't cry, Nano. Don't waste even a drop of water."

They were in a dark space that would have been impossible to see in if they had not been given falna.

Nano, Miliria, and Cole were kneeling and gathered together.

Caught up in the collapse, the werewolf boy had protected the girl and had gashes across his head and around his right eye. His clothes were torn up, and the cloth wrapped around his head like an eyepatch quickly became scarlet. His right eye would be useless until they could get back aboveground.

But as he said, the bleeding had stopped.

Taking care of the first aid quickly himself, not wanting to use up any items, he understood their situation better than any of them.

They had suddenly been thrust into a survival scenario. They were cut off and had no support. Escape would be nigh impossible. It was a hopeless situation.

But the glint in his left eye proved he had not given up on returning to the surface alive with both of them.

Seeing him so brave and stout-hearted, Nano sniffled and forced herself not to cry.

To repay him for his kind self-sacrifice and courage.

"Cole, Mimi, do you remember what Lefiya said?"

"Of course. In the event of an emergency in the middle floors, if going back up is difficult, going down...retreating to the safe point is also an option."

"I was confused why she would tell us that at first, but...she really is an adventurer."

Cole and Miliria smiled together.

"I'm sure Luke and Lefiya will search for us. So...we should trust them and go forward!"

"Not going to consider the possibility that they died?"

"Of course not! It's Luke! And Lefiya!"

"Ha-ha-ha...true. That's right. There's still hope."

The elf and the werewolf nodded at their human friend's nonchalant smile.

As sweat trickled down their faces, they made up their mind.

"Cole, can you tell where we are?"

"Yeah, I've got a map. I remember the area we were in when we fell...I can't pinpoint it, but if we go forward some, I'll be able to tell where on the sixteenth floor we are."

"Fantastic. Then we'll go with a formation of three. Nano, it's time for you to work, too."

"Yeah! I'll fight from the front! I have to conserve my Mind!"

The second-in-command, Miliria, took charge in Luke's stead, and Nano dumped the backpack she was carrying and pulled a metal ball the size of a fist connected to a chain out from the pile.

By connecting it to her blessed iron staff, it transformed neatly into a makeshift flail—a so-called morning star.

"The teachers taught me how to defend myself, too, so it's okay! I can fight, too!"

"I still can't understand why you chose that for self-defense as a mage. You really are airheaded..."

"Calm down, Milly...Don't give yourself a headache... Calm, calm..."

Surprisingly calm, they carefully watched the surroundings as they stood up.

Cole pointed to one of the open routes in the maze of mine-like passages.

"I can smell monsters down all the other paths. If we're going, let's go there."

"Okay...let's do it!"

Just as Luke had declared, they chose to brave the danger.

THE MIRROR'S VOICE голас у люстэрку

CHAPTER 5

THE MIRROR'S VOICE

"Lord Balder!"

The principal's office.

Bursting through the doors, Leon and Alisa rushed in.

"Thank you for coming, Leon. You've already heard the report from Orario?"

"Yes, sir. A large-scale floor collapse occurred in the Dungeon. What is the current situation?"

With the large ash desk between them, Balder and Leon quickly confirmed what they knew.

Orario was dealing with a massive irregularity that affected an entire floor, and the School District was also starting to act.

"Almost all students were able to get out before being trapped, and no deaths have been reported yet... However, the Third Squad and Seventh Squad have likely been trapped by the cave-in."

The smile left Balder's face even as his eyes remained closed.

His voice was without emotion, and he said nothing more than the simple facts of the report.

"Lefiya..."

Alisa paled as Leon furrowed his brow.

Her heart raced in concern for the students and her old friend.

"I will go, too. We cannot leave it only to Orario."

"Yes, please. Take Malik and the others if you wish. I will leave it to your judgment."

"L-Lord Balder! I'll—!"

"Alisa, please remain here. If the others are going, it will be difficult to maintain control here. We will provide material support and, if necessary, open the Alchemy Department's stores."

Ordered to remain on standby when she wanted to volunteer to help with the rescue, Alisa could not argue against a god who could grasp the entirety of the situation.

"...Yes, sir," she forced herself to answer.

Leon nodded briefly and left the room immediately.

"Are they...safe?"

"There are alive. The number of my blessings has not decreased. I cannot say whether they are in perfect health, but...fortunately, the squads involved have Lefiya and *that boy*. They should be able to avoid the worst."

Balder's lips curled slightly as he replied.

Alisa found his seemingly meaningful comment mysterious, but his smile soon disappeared.

"If there is a concern, then it lies within Lefiya. How will her heart lean when put into a difficult position...?"



This is insane.

That was Luke's thought as he saw the scene unfolding before his eyes.

"A blaze shall soon descend. Approaching flames of war from which there is no escape. Battle horns blaring on high, all atrocities and strife shall be engulfed."

This was an ultra-long chant. The sheer scale and amount of magic power poured into the spell made Luke shudder, but Lefiya cast it repeatedly without batting an eye. And what made him doubt everything he thought he knew was that she was using such a large-scale annihilation spell not to attack.

"Incinerate, sword of Surtr—My name is Alf."

There was no trace of even a single monster anywhere around them.

As the final verse of the spell faded into the silence surrounding them, a jade magic circle suddenly expanded around Lefiya's feet.

It extended through the rocks, blocking off any number of passages, covering a circle with an 80-meder radius, and searching whether there were any monsters or people inside it. Confirming that no adventurers or students were nearby, Lefiya simply dispeled *Rea Laevateinn*.

And then she held the wand in her left hand forward.

"Unleashed pillar of light, limbs of the holy tree. You are the master archer."

Her voice rang out clearly as she recited her own original spell.

Her wand targeted the pile of rocks blocking their passage like a giant's corpse.

And there was also a ring-shaped magic circle glowing around her right hand, which was not being used for the spell she was casting.

"Loose your arrows, fairy archers. Pierce, arrow of accuracy—Arcs Ray!"

The enormous beam she unleashed swallowed up the pile of rocks.

There was a tremendous impact and booming explosion.

Not even drilling through the rock but annihilating it started a secondary collapse, but Lefiya immediately reacted.

"Canon!"

Her skill's key phrase.

She immediately activated the magic that she had preemptively cast before *Rea Laevateinn*.

"Wynn Fimbulvetr!"

Three furious torrents of snow erupted.

She held out her right hand this time, another jade magic circle forming around her feet as she unleashed an icy blast, freezing the collapsing labyrinth solid.

Precise control and enormous output. Freezing the deadly rocks, it held and supported them, creating a cavern. Shielding his face from the tremendous chill gale, when Luke looked up, he saw an ice tunnel.

A stout ice tunnel had appeared within the stone caves.

"Fuuuh...I can't ignore the Mind consumption when I use magic without holding back."

So she said, but she did not look particularly exhausted at all.

She had just used three different types of magic in succession.

The first was a wide-range detection spell. She expanded *Rea Laevateinn's* radius as far as possible because it could distinguish between people and monsters within its range, allowing her to check for the presence of adventurers or students, followed by *Arcs Ray* to clear the rubble once she was sure of no one else getting caught up in it. Then, the absolute zero temperatures of *Wynn Fimbulvetr* froze the passage that had lost all support, creating a pathway.

Blowing away the rocks blocking their path, preventing a further collapse, and simultaneously building a path they could continue down. It was easy enough to say. But how many adventurers could begin to pull off a similar feat?

It was not hard to imagine that excavating the Dungeon would take a large amount of time and work. Dividing the work between enough people and with specialized gear, they could finally carve out a tunnel after working with the utmost caution and care, and Lefiya had done it all by herself.

It was a preposterous use of magic and an absurd level of magic power.

This is a Level Four.

No, this is Loki Familia's Thousand Elf.

He had heard about Lefiya's fame any number of times during his travels with the School District, but Luke realized again that they were not fanciful tales.

He trembled in awe as he understood that she, too, was one of the potential heroes.

"...This is insane..."

As he murmured that after watching her make a tunnel of ice four times now, Lefiya turned back to him.

"I know it's inefficient, but it would be unbearable if any adventurers were caught up in it when I cast the spell."

"I know...I know, but...!"

A younger girl had saved his life several times now, and Luke was wrestling with his petty masculine pride.

The cave-in they had escaped had hit a large area, blocking every route. They were closed in. The simple truth was that Luke would not have been able to do anything alone. He would have had no choice but to wait for rescue.

Meanwhile, Lefiya simply said, "Let's move on."

And they had moved at a blinding pace with her repeated use of those three spells that would have made any mage faint.

As he muttered to himself questions like, "How much Mind do you have?" and "Even if someone thought to do it, could they pull it off?," Luke started to feel everything he considered common sense shatter around him.

"...If you can tunnel through the rock yourself, then wouldn't it be better to just make an escape route? Make a path to the fourteenth floor or..."

"Ganesha Familia and others should already be on the move after hearing the uproar. So I'll leave that to them. It's far more efficient to have many people digging rather than have me go at it alone."

As he just said the thought that crossed his mind, Lefiya calmly answered while walking down the ice tunnel.

It would certainly progress much faster if both sides were digging out the main route, but linking up with their lost squad members was a battle against time. And Lefiya and Luke had a massive head start, being so much closer to the event.

Lefiya's priorities were unwavering, and Luke acknowledged her logic.

"Still, though, we haven't had much luck. Finding a shaft leading to the next floor is difficult when you want one." Though they were proceeding through the collapsed Dungeon with Lefiya's nonsensical method, the extent of her Mind reserves was limited. As she said herself, this was extremely inefficient.

Lefiya was not blindly following the main route. She was searching for a shortcut down to a lower level through a vertical shaft. With that, they would be able to set course for the eighteenth floor without wandering through the entire labyrinth.

Luke had offhandedly suggested just making her own by shooting *Arcs Ray* at her feet, but that was a little too much, breaking one of the few unwritten rules of the Dungeon. If there were any adventurers below them, they would surely die, and even if there weren't any, it would likely cause another collapse.

Rea Laevateinn, which Lefiya had received from Riveria, could search laterally, but it could not search vertically.

"But this is already the sixteenth floor. We can reach the seventeenth floor if we can find one more passage."

"That's true, but...this has taken longer than I expected. Us aside, I'm concerned about them."

As Luke said, they were already on the sixteenth floor. They had somehow managed to reach here from the collapsed fifteenth floor.

Luke glanced at the pocket watch Lefiya pulled out. The 7th Squad had already been inside the Dungeon for just under half a day.

They were about to break their record for time spent in the Dungeon.

Ordinarily, this would be when his body and mind started to ache, but...

...I'm not tired at all.

Maybe because the Dungeon prioritized recovering from the collapse, but no monsters were being born. And, of course, inside Lefiya's ice tunnel—where even the labyrinth walls were frozen—there was no way for monsters to be born.

There were some monsters popping up that had managed to survive the cavein, but far fewer than usual. Lefiya was technically assuming a backline position, but she defeated monsters faster than Luke. He was starting to wonder if she could not just do everything herself.

Is there even any reason for me to be here...?

He started to wonder why he was there, why she needed a vanguard.

He started to feel even more worthless.

Of course, as a result, he started talking less, and silence began to fill the air between him and Lefiya.

"...Luke, can I ask you something embarrassing?"

"...What do you mean, something embarrassing?"

Maybe unable to take the silence anymore, Lefiya asked a question.

Luke had a dubious look as he answered.

"Conceited might be a better word than embarrassing, but either way... Luke, are you interested in me?"

BAM!!!

Luke's head slammed into the ice wall right beside him.

"Whoa?! Are you okay, Luke?! Did you slip?!"

Luke's face turned bright red as his senior looked at him with wide eyes, drawing the wrong conclusion.

"Wh-wh-what are you asking?! Of course not!!!"

"Ah, of course. Thank goodness. Given how hostile you were before, I wouldn't know how to respond if you said you were interested in me."

He lost control and shouted reflexively, but when she delivered her response with a smile, it tore so many holes in his heart that it probably looked like a beehive.

Not noticing Luke's wobbly steps, Lefiya had a genuinely relieved look on her face.

"The truth is, Nano said something strange, so I was wondering if you were maybe feeling self-conscious around me."

"...Did you think that was why I was being quiet just now?"

"Yes. If you brought emotions like that into the Dungeon, I would have to scold you. But thank goodness. I couldn't decide how to react to it."

Damn it, looking so happy.

Luke's fist trembled with all sorts of emotion as he struggled to figure out whether he was angry, sad, or just wanted to cry.

Who even just straight up asks someone that?!

It's not like I especially like her! It's not that I'm interested in her at all!!

But if I was, there's no way I could just say, "Yes, I do like you," to a question on the spot like that!!!

How bad at love can you be?!

I definitely hate you!

Luke glared red-faced at the foolish elf whose brain had shifted entirely into teacher mode to do the best job she could.

"Looks like you're in a better mood already."

"Eh?"

"Please don't get the wrong idea. It may seem like I can do anything right now, but that's only because of the experience I have built up."

Luke's eyes widened when she suddenly smiled.

"So you don't need to feel down. I'm your instructor, so it's only natural I would push myself for your sake."

That smile made Luke feel a different sort of shame from before.

He had been doubting his own reason for being here. She had seen right through him. She had put on a little act in order to cheer him up...No, he still felt like what she said was honest.

Damn it...!

But I was just arbitrarily assuming things about her again...

Looking closer, Lefiya always paid attention to her surroundings and diligently

checked the map. She was also regularly replenishing herself with small trickles of her magic potion.

They did not run into enough monsters that Luke needed to do anything because she was choosing the optimal and shortest route. It seemed like she had an infinite supply of Mind, but that was just because she recuperated at appropriate moments as they pressed forward.

She appeared powerful because she was doing what came naturally to an adventurer.

Luke couldn't do those obvious things and still didn't fully know what they were.

That was all it was.

He was being gifted with more lessons, and this time, he decided to cast away any sense of inferiority.

"Luke, are you still agitated?"

"...Honestly, yeah. I've never imagined a disaster or actively hostile terrain on anything on this scale. I imagine it's the same for the others, too."

After leaving the ice tunnel, they were attacked by a hellhound leaping out from a side path. They both attacked at once. They picked up just the magic stone and hurried forward.

"Then you have gotten a little bit wiser. This is the Dungeon. Even when we're higher level than what's suggested for the area, we can still be caught in dangerous situations and still lose our lives."

Luke gulped.

Even in the middle floors that were called the starting line, parties of secondtier adventurers could be pushed into deadly situations. They could even die.

In fact, without Lefiya, they would have been wiped out.

The Dungeon is out to kill you.

Luke understood well now what that meant.

This was the Dungeon.

This underground world was filled with deadly traps around every corner.

While they were taking their first rest since the collapse:

"... Have you ever come close to dying?"

Luke asked the question to quell his restlessness. Lefiya finished drinking water from her bottle and passed it to Luke.

"If it weren't for them...for my comrades in the familia, I would have died around fifty different times, I imagine."

"Wha-?"

Luke was speechless.

It was not a joke, though. She was seriously saying that she had experienced near death more than fifty times.

An incredible mage like her...?

What he was thinking was probably showed plainly on his face because she just flashed a knowing smile.

"When I was a Level Three like you, I was far more immature. It was bad enough that I tripped up my comrades many times."

"...Even though you're so strong now?"

"Yes. Having almost died fifty times, I've finally reached where I am. That's why I have to continue improving."

The elf, stronger than Luke and more grown-up than Luke, smiled again.

He was so stunned that he could not bring himself to drink from the bottle when her voice suddenly changed. She turned her attention to their surroundings.

"Luke, if you think that I am strong, please share what you have learned from me with others, too. Share whatever becomes a part of you with one or many people."

Finishing their break, they continued forward as she went on.

"Carry what you've learned into the future. That is the duty of students...

That's what I believe after my experience here as an instructor."

Those sounded like none other than Lefiya's own words. What she felt in her heart of hearts, shared without reservation.

Because it felt so real, so full of emotion, it hit him hard.

"And save whoever you can. Keep as many people from suffering as you can. Don't lose the people precious to you."

That was why he shuddered.

It was so passionate and heartfelt, Luke felt a shiver run down his spine. Forgetting all caution for a moment, he glanced at her.

Her eyes looking straight ahead did not reflect anything.

What are you watching? Where are you looking? Who are you?

At that moment, Miliria and Cole crossed his mind. And Nano, smiling.

His childhood friend, foolish and always needing help, and yet always trying to act like an older sister.

Looking Lefiya in the eyes, he saw the scene of the people he cared about most, battered and broken, sinking into a lake of blood.

Luke's lungs froze, and his lips quivered.

"Did you...let someone die?"

He asked the question before even realizing it.

"I killed her."

His breath stopped.

"With my own hands. There was no other choice, but even so, I killed her."

It was not a confession. Not penitence.

It was just the truth.

It was as if the labyrinth's darkness had pulled the information from her heart and given it to Luke.

Luke did not know the context.

Maybe she had been badly wounded, and she put an end to her misery.

Maybe she had tearfully had to cut her loose so that everyone else could survive.

Luke did not know. But that did not matter now.

Did she know the face she was making now?

Did she know what her eyes looked like?

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"...!!!"
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There was something that he had thought for a while now.

She was strong.

But at times, her strength...was scary.

She pushed herself with complete composure.

She always seemed to be calmly weighing the line between life and death.

There were times when she stopped being the Lefiya Viridis who the others looked up to and who he had feelings for.

The change in her eyes could not be expressed as a simple transformation, and there were times when Luke found it terrifying and nerve-racking.

But what bothered him the most was...

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"Luke?"
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"...No, it's...nothing."

Noticing his gaze, Lefiya turned to look at him.

Her deep blue eyes were reflecting Luke.

He looked down, trying to escape them as he balled his hands into fists.

He wanted to save the others. He wanted to meet them again. As soon as possible.

To keep the woman beside him from being alone.

That was what he thought.



"Eeeeeeeeeeh?!"

They ran away.

For the umpteenth time, they had sprinted into a passage in the Cave Labyrinth in the face of an encounter with a swarm of monsters.

"That many isn't faaaaaaair! What's the point of a formation with that?!"

While Nano whined, right behind her, Cole shot back with a tense voice.

"Just keep running, Nano!"

An immense mass of minotaurs, hellhounds, and the squad's archenemy, liger fangs, was barreling down on them.

The Dungeon was clearly out to kill them with its greatest weapon: sheer numbers.

If they had not been missing Luke, if they had been the full 7th Squad, then it might have been possible to control the situation through force. But being forced into a constant series of fights, their stamina was badly drained, to the point they could not face the monsters straight up.

A predicament underground. An unforgiving fight for survival.

The Dungeon practically salivated as it steadily and surely drove their backs against a wall.

"Sprout new leaves and verdant light. Grow, grow, grow, ascend trees, dampen flowers, adorn the forest."

Miliria boldly began to cast a spell.

Compared to a dedicated mage like Nano, she lacked magic power. In her Status, Agility and Dexterity were her best abilities. She was a forest hunter skilled in bow and song.

Though she was still only Level 2, remembering what Lefiya had taught her, she focused on casting and moving, performing a basic Concurrent Cast.

"And bind. Admonish the savages. This is the forest shrine kept by its

guardian."

A crumbling wall and an outcropping of rock.

As she placed her hand on various parts of the labyrinth they sprinted past—like planting a seed—a bit of light appeared, transforming into a small magic circle.

Just before the roaring monsters passed, she activated her spell.

"Silva Vine!"

Multiple whips of light—magic vines—sprouted from the magic circles simultaneously.

The greenish vines were like traps, stringing up and binding the monsters mindlessly chasing their prey.

"W000000?!"

"GAAAAAA?!"

Wrapping around their limbs and torsos, the vines brought the swarm of monsters to the ground with a loud rumble.

A carefully placed binding magic.

There wasn't enough time to spare to cheer how perfectly they fell into the trap, so Miliria simply twisted her upper body while running, taking aim.

Spinning as her feet hung in the air, she rapidly fired the three arrows she had nocked to her bow.

They landed perfectly, shattering the skulls of monsters struggling to escape their bonds.

"Ghhh!!! Nano!"

"Yeah!"

As she displayed that elegant hunter's technique, Cole, sprinting full speed, put a hand to the ground and turned around. He spun with Nano, tearing into the necks of a hellhound and a minotaur struggling to escape.

"AllIIIII right!"

And Nano's morning star was the finisher.

The chain traced a high arc overhead, and the fist-sized steel ball absorbed her magic power, turning into a glowing sphere the size of a human head and sprouting spikes of magic power.

The magic star hammer, developed by the School District's renowned Alchemy Department, tore into the monsters.

"G0000000?!"

Though she was a mage, it was a crude but powerful blow unleashed with a Level 3's status.

The monsters lying on the ground were shattered as cracks formed in the ground from the impact.

The monsters' roars faded, and the only sound left was the squad's breathing.

"You did it, Mimi—"

She started to run over to the MVP, who had gotten them out of a dangerous spot, but her voice faded.

Miliria was breathing heavily, hobbling toward the monster's corpse, before grabbing the arrows she had fired and pulling them out.

Of the three, one had snapped.

"Just five left now..."

She grimaced, looking at the two arrows in her right hand before putting them back into her quiver.

Nano and Cole didn't say anything.

Her current state spoke volumes about their situation.

"Cole...how many items do we have left?"

"...One potion and half a magic potion...we're out of food and almost out of water."

The three of them gathered up, catching their breath in the middle of the passage, leaving the monsters' corpses be.

Miliria and Nano, sitting face-to-face, looked even more exhausted when they heard the quiet voice of the boy who had taken the backpack.

They were currently on the seventeenth floor.

The collapse repeatedly blocked their path, forcing them to turn around and go back. They had somehow managed to get this far, but they were approaching their limit, and fast.

They had burned through items at a heavy rate. Far more than usual.

If Cole's estimates were right, then they would soon run out of what little supplies they had left.

It was an emergency in the Dungeon.

They had underestimated it. The physical exhaustion of being in a situation like this. The mental strain. The massive stress.

Constantly threatened by the labyrinth, they were about to run out of the water, food, and recovery items they had prepared for the expedition.

It's already been one day since we entered the Dungeon...

Stopping his fingers before they started to quiver, Cole pulled out the pocket watch that Lefiya had given them.

"A Level Two can remain active inside the Dungeon for one day without supplies."

That was what Lefiya had said. But with the caveat that applied to adventurers:

The three of them, nothing more than students who hoped to become adventurers, were utterly lacking in experience. The exhaustion of even a single exchange with monsters was enormous. They needed to switch to tactics of aiming directly for magic stones for a one-shot kill, setting aside whether they were even capable of that.

He desperately struggled to control his ragged breathing.

He knew he already had one leg firmly planted in the quagmire of panic. His sense of time was completely warped. There was no sky overhead to reference.

Instead, they only had the grimy, dark underground labyrinth, and it was oppressive. It had been only one day. That meant it would take even longer for relief to come from the surface. Would Lefiya and Luke find them? No. He could not do that. They could not count on anyone else. But, but, but...

Although Cole was only fifteen years old, he could say without doubt that this was the most difficult situation he had experienced in his short life.

He was desperately fighting with the other him, who wanted to whine and complain. Miliria and Nano, who were quietly trying to recover, were surely the same.

Not good.

Without Luke, Cole was the who was constantly keeping an eye on the squad's condition. That was when Nano realized something.

"Mimi, Cole...use the items. I don't need the water, either. I'm Level Three. I can handle this better than you."

"...What is that cocky nonsense, you klutz? Who do you think is always protecting you? You replenish yourself. There's nothing worse than a mage who can't act when the time comes."

Cole was taken aback hearing Nano's proposal. Seeing her smile so awkwardly, Miliria glared and pushed back.

An argument over supplies. They refused to fall that low. They didn't even consider it.

In the previous squad Cole had been in, though, it had happened.

They had run into trouble during fieldwork that was far less dangerous than this, and students started attacking each other. Cole could do nothing more than stare in shock. That squad was split up.

Cole loved the 7th Squad.

They respected each other, helped each other, and forged a deep bond with each other. Elf or human—stuff like race did not matter. He loved them. And he would do anything to not lose them.

Cole forced Miliria to take the potion and Nano, the magic potion.

As they looked at him blankly, he stood up and smiled. The head wound that should have stopped bleeding ached beneath his makeshift bandage. Acting tough was a badge of honor for a guy. Cole emulated Luke, the boy he looked up to like an older brother.

"Let's go... Just a little bit more, and we'll reach the eighteenth floor."

His words probably contained more than a little wishful thinking, but even so, they trusted him.

Finishing the final resupply he had given them, they stood up and nodded with determination.

Cole took the lead as their scout and started walking.

This is the last route. If the collapse blocks this, too, it's over. My heart will break, and there won't be any going back.

Gripping the rolled-up map in his hands, Cole prayed.

We can't go on like this.

Please.

Just let us through.

The prayer he just made was the most foolish thing possible, something an adventurer should never fall back on.

When clinging to hope, the shock of failure was immeasurable. Veteran adventurers always forged ahead while imagining an even worse scenario than whatever predicament they found themselves in. Cole had slipped the noose around his neck.

But perhaps in a moment of caprice, the Dungeon let them go.

"...! Yes, yes! Milly, Nano! We're out on the main road! It's a straight shot after this!"

"R-really?!"

"Ha-ha...a reward for all my daily hard work."

They had stumbled upon the main road that led into the big clearing at the end of the seventeenth floor.

The massive road big enough for a giant to pass through was not fully blocked, even after such a large cave-in. Parts of the Dungeon walls had crumbled here and there, but if they could get past this, it would be a straight path forward to their destination.

As Nano cheered, Miliria smiled with relief. Cole also gained a bit of strength, and tightening up their formation to defend against any monster attacks, they increased their pace.

Seeing the light at the end of the tunnel, they pressed on with smiles on their faces. On and on.

They continued their march forward. The impacts and roars that gradually started to reach them erased their smiles, but even so, they had no choice but to keep moving.

And then they were struck—with utter despair.

*u*_____*"*

They had reached the massive room at the end of the seventeenth floor.

The Great Wall of Sorrows.

The seamless, massive stone wall had crumbled from the inside out, turning into a mountain of rubble, and the master of this place rampaged beyond their field of vision.

The seventeenth floor's monster rex.

It was Goliath, the first floor boss they had ever seen.

The giant that boasted by far the greatest strength of any monster they had ever encountered was swinging its massive, treelike arms at the prey far below it.

"Gaaaaaaaaaah?!"

"Damn it, it's strong?!"

"We can't get through this!"

A party of upper-class adventurers was crying out.

They had also been caught up in the collapse and had no way to return to the surface.

They had made up their minds faster than the three students. Thinking quickly, they had raced here at top speed—and ran smack-dab into the floor boss.

Goliath stood guard in front of the passage leading down to the eighteenth floor on the other side of the room. There was no slipping past. There were dozens of other monsters, too, making it even harder to force their way through.

"...Weren't there still two days left until Goliath's interval?"

"The adventurer who reported it got it wrong...or the Dungeon is feeling particularly malicious. Which do you think?"

As she thought back to the reports on the board at Guild Headquarters that they had checked with Lefiya before taking on the middle floors, Miliria's elven features twisted in aggravation. Cole could manage nothing but a hollow joke that even he did not find funny.

The crumbling Wall of Sorrows had made significant progress on its repairs.

A large amount of time had passed since Goliath's last birth. So even if they had gotten here faster, their fate was settled.

With every swing of its fists, it broke everything in its path. With every step it took, the entire room quivered. The 7th Squad stood dumbfounded at the sight of a giant monster whose very existence was a cataclysm.

"H-hey, kids! Quit starin' and help! Help us!!"

One of the adventurers noticed the students. After a moment, they realized it was the rough-looking man who had led the pass parade to them a week ago. He was shouting at the 7th Squad standing at the entrance of the room.

Their shoulders twitched.

The desperation was stark on his face, in his voice.

This was a predicament that even an adventurer with far more experience than them could not escape. Seeing a man who looked so much bigger, so much

rougher, and so much stronger than them pleading for help was bloodcurdling.

They were being held hostage by the Dungeon yet again—not by despair, this time, but by a terrifying choice.

"...Mimi, Cole..."

None of them could move.

It was Nano who spoke.

"We...should help them."

The two of them spun toward her.

She was the palest of them all, and she still mustered up the courage to say that.

"I can't...watch them die...!"

"Wait! Do you understand the situation?!"

"I know! I know how exhausted we are, how strong that monster is. How could I not know?!"

Nano shouted back when Miliria raised her voice.

The combat uniform she was so proud of was in tatters. Her weapon was battered and warped. Her face red with blood. In that state, still, she raised her voice.

"But even so, we're School District students!"

Their eyes widened.

"We've seen the world! We've helped so many people! We shared Luke's sadness and worked so hard to become able to save people who are suffering! So how can we abandon someone in the Dungeon?!"

"Gh...!"

"I don't wanna do that!"

Their pride and duty as School District's students. The vow they had made as the 7th Squad.

"...Do you remember what Lefiya taught us?"

Her voice suddenly softened.

"No matter how scary, no matter how much they might reject it, there comes a day when people have to take a risk."

"...And you're saying that's now?"

"I dunno! But if it was Lefiya! No matter how exhausted she was, no matter how difficult it was, she would definitely go save them!"

Nano smiled.

Her arms and legs trembled like a newborn foal's.

But even so, she had a big smile on her face.

"I want to become an adventurer who can feel proud facing her."

Cole smiled.

There was nothing else to do.

His heart quivered in agreement.

"...Let's go, Milly."

"...Argh! Nano! Cole! You idiots!!!"

The elf girl shouted and started running. Nano and Cole followed close behind, stepping onto the battlefield where the giant's roar thundered.

The truth was that all three understood they had no choice but to fight. Even if they ran, they had no future if they couldn't reach the eighteenth floor. And as students who sought out truth and put their faith in righteousness, they could not bear to use the adventurers as a decoy and flee to safety by themselves.

In which case, Nano was right. This was the place, and now was the time for them to risk it all.

"Lightning, heaven's name. Betray thy earthly kin, share not thy voice. Grant me the blessing of lightning—Zalqa Yell!!!"

Nano unleashed the opening salvo.

As she moved to the center of the room, a magic circle expanded overhead as

soon as the monsters were in range, and she hit them with a lighting rain.

The surprised adventurers dodged, and several bolts hit some of the mob monsters as Goliath, a section of its massive, gray-brown body scorched by bolts, turned its furious eyes on the mage.

"Scary...! It's scary, but look here!"

As terrified of the monster rex as she was, Nano still cast her spell, dispersing her magic power as obviously as possible. Evidently, even Goliath could not completely ignore a Level 3 mage's ultimate magic because it picked up a boulder at its feet and threw it at her.

Nano canceled the cast in surprise and ran away in a panic as Miliria and the adventurers immediately moved.

"Get away quickly while our stupid mage draws its attention!"

"You guys...! You students really are a bunch of softies, aren't you?!"

Most of the mob monsters had disappeared with Nano's spell, and Miliria provided support with her few remaining arrows. Seeing that, the adventurers shouted for joy in an almost insulting tone.

With Goliath distracted, they beat a hasty retreat without needing to be told. Supporting those who were injured, they cut through the smaller monsters, passing by the giant's feet and into the passage at the end of the room.

"000000000000000000000!"

That only enraged Goliath.

With Nano in front of it and the adventurers at its feet, it dealt with both piecemeal. How it stomped its feet in a tantrum at being scorched by magic was ridiculous, but it was a monster rex. That was more than enough to shatter the ground, creating a lethal spray of rocks.

Dodging the hail of stones, Miliria bit her lip, trying to keep her footing as the ground quaked beneath her, landing the best shots she could.

"You're useful after all! You should join our familia!"

"Spare me the jokes! It's bad enough seeing your face again!"

The rough adventurer who seemed to be the leader of his party grabbed a quiver of arrows from one of his comrades and tossed it to Miliria.

After all the adventurers had retreated, he stayed as the rear guard at the exit. The only ones left were the students.

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"Let's go!"

"Yeah! Cole!"

"I'll be right behind you! You go ahead!"
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Cole shouted as he cut into the monsters that had separated from the pack, protecting Nano.

They ran at Miliria's call, approaching the terrifying floor boss.

//	1112
·	111"

Goliath roared like it was declaring it would not let them escape.

Summoned by its voice, monsters poured into the room from the passage behind them. The primordial, most dangerous action: summoning help. Seeing the wave of monsters approaching, their eyes warped as they picked up speed.

The monsters were furiously chasing them down, but that was fine. They had a head start, so they would reach the passage to the next floor first. They just needed to time it right. They would get only one chance— At that moment, the three of them made eye contact.

The elf hunter was running around the giant, unleashing arrows to distract it. The mage held her staff at the ready, saving her strength and building power.

And the werewolf scout judged the range to Goliath's and reached into the pouch at his hip.

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"Three, two, one...go!!!"
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When he triggered the item he pulled out, magic power flowed, and he threw it.

The item he threw arced through the air, and right in front of the giant's eyes, it exploded in a dazzling bloom of light.

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"<del>_____?</del>!"
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It was a light flower, a quality magic item produced by the School District's famed Alchemy Department.

The flash grenade exploded high overhead, blinding Goliath. While it writhed in pain, the two girls raced off at Cole's signal and immediately began their pellmell sprint to the passage.

"Ha-ha, you guys are great!"

They moved with a level of coordination that put adventurers to shame, and the leader of the rough adventurers shouted joyously as the students ran toward him.

The 7th Squad was brilliant.

The School District's assessment of their fighting ability was not mistaken, and even upper-class adventurers could acknowledge their skill as they boldly overcame a difficult situation that would make most people cower.

Absorbing Lefiya's teachings, they made the optimal choice, and though it was only for a brief moment, they got one over on a floor boss.

But...

They were still students lacking in experience.

"00000000000000000000000000!!!"

Cole, at the back of the group, got ambushed from behind by a single liger fang.

"Cole?!"

Cole immediately turned around, only for the monster to bite his hand as he was brought to the ground. Nano and Miliria, who were about to leap into the passage, stopped short.

As he heard their cries, Cole desperately fought off the monster trying to tear into him with a furious strength.

It caught up?! Just this one?! From that distance?! How...?!

He quickly confirmed the other monsters chasing them were still far away.

Consumed by terrible confusion...Cole suddenly realized something.

His hand creaked under the powerful jaws, trying to tear off his arm even now.

The monster's hair was standing on end. It had sickly, bloodshot, feral eyes.

The flesh of its last meal was still hanging from its fangs, and he couldn't fail to notice its glistening purple crystal.

An enhanced monster...!

Cole was struck by shock as it dawned on him.

The encounter earlier.

The swarm of monsters they had defeated and then left lying there.

In their exhaustion, they had failed to deal with the magic stones in their corpses...

"Damn it!!!"

Cole cursed himself as he continued struggling.

The liger fang had feasted on the corpses of the monsters they had left lying there. All of those magic stones. And with its now enhanced body, it had chased down Cole with ease.

He had forgotten to take care of post-battle cleanup in the haze of his severe physical and mental exhaustion.

A careless mistake in a terrible situation.

A simple and trivial failure.

But that was life and death in the Dungeon.

Cole cursed their blunder.

And after Lefiya had told them so many times always to be sure to deal with magic stones, no matter what.

"Kh?!"

Turning back, Miliria unleashed an arrow, shooting through the liger fang's temple.

Still not falling, Nano smashed it with her staff, finally killing it.

It was the briefest exchange of blows.

They immediately helped Cole up, but even so, it was too late.

"0000000000000000000000000!"

Goliath swung its arms in pain, and almost as if aiming for it, it fell backward onto the wall where the passage was.

"Whoooooooooaaaaaaa?!"

The adventurer yelled as the rocks started falling, and they ran deeper into the passage.

The next moment, there was a loud noise, and the wall over the passage to the next floor crumbled.

"...That's..."

The rumbling and quakes continued as Nano murmured.

The giant slowly sat up, revealing no trace of the passage that had been there before. The one and only cavern leading to the next floor was warped, collapsed from the inside, and covered with a mound of rubble.

The labyrinth wall was warped, as if it had failed beneath the giant's weight.

Losing their path out, Nano slumped to her knees.

Cole and Miliria forgot to breathe as despair filled their eyes.

"0000..."

Standing up, its vision restored, Goliath glared at the pitiful students.

The swarm of monsters had caught up, too.

There was a terrifying giant ahead and an enormous horde of monsters behind.

They were surrounded, and at that moment, they could practically hear their spirits breaking.

Goliath's ground-shaking steps drew near. The monsters' encirclement grew tighter.

Soon they would tear into them without mercy, body and soul.

"Fusillade Fallarica!"

That moment.

A rain of magic more furious and vicious than the monsters poured down all around the room.

"______?!"

Countless fiery missiles pierced the monsters' backs and exploded, burning them alive.

Even Goliath faltered before this enormous display of firepower. In the blink of an eye, a string of death cries filled the air as the students spun around.

At the entrance to the room, far in the distance, stood a boy wielding a longsword and an elf with a wand outthrust.

"Luuuuuuke! Lefiyaaaaaaaaa!"

Miliria and Cole stared as Nano burst into tears.



They had made it in time.

When she confirmed that all three of them were there, Lefiya raced forward.

"Luke, heal them! Use all the items if you need to!"

"Got it!"

The Level 4 and Level 3 closed the distance in the blink of an eye.

Lefiya leaped out ahead of Luke, carving through the swarm of monsters rocked by the sudden barrage.

"Hah!"

"Ghgaaah?!"

Cutting through a minotaur with Tear Pain, she leaped with one leg, dancing through the air as she dismembered a group of al-miraj. She took aim at the liger fang that jumped at her with a roar even as its body burned and mercilessly slammed it with the hilt of her sword, breaking its neck.

Lefiya drew the attention of every monster that managed to survive her spell as she went on a rampage, thanks to her Level 4 Status.

"Potion, Milly! No time to waste!"

"...Right, right!"

"You, too, Nano, quit crying and stand back up!"

"Luuuuuuke!"

While Lefiya held their attention, Luke broke through the line of monsters and linked back up with his squad.

There were cuts on his face. His armor was damaged and nicked all over.

They had forced their way through the seventeenth floor at top speed when they heard Goliath's roar. Catching the bottle tossed her way, Miliria had tears in her eyes, and Nano rubbed her drenched face.

"Luke..."

"Whoa, Cole, you've gotten pretty manly while I've been away!"

Luke grinned at the werewolf boy with a bloody bandanna around his head.

After a moment, Cole broke into a smile and poured the potion he was given over his head.

His smile fading, he turned to cover his injured comrades. Anger filled his face as he wiped away the approaching monsters.

With the items we have on hand, full recovery is probably impossible, but I can leave them to Luke for now.

Confirming their condition out of the corner of her eye, Lefiya calmly assessed the situation.

There were around fifteen mob monsters around them, including the floor boss.

The floor boss was a different story, but she could make quick work of the other monsters. The problem was...

...It's looking over here.

Goliath did not immediately attack as it stared at her.

It seemed to be watching them like an inquisitive baby, and then its massive chest swelled, unleashing another thunderous shout.

The roar reached into the farthest corners of the labyrinth and made her want to cover her ears.

It was the same summoning call that had trapped Nano and the others earlier and the same echoing howl Lefiya and Luke had heard before racing here.

The next moment, her second-tier adventurer's senses once again detected the scrambling sound of monsters on the move. Reinforcements were beginning to gather in small groups at the entrance to the great room.

With the Dungeon unable to birth more monsters in the vicinity with its structure so damaged, the remaining monsters across the seventeenth floor gathered instead.

With a single move, the situation was quickly changing.

That Goliath...is intelligent.

The others would surely have nodded if they had heard Lefiya's thoughts.

The floor boss before them, who had thrown a boulder at Nano and blocked their escape route, was special.

There were weaker and stronger individuals, even among monsters of the same species. That rule also applied to floor bosses born across longer intervals.

And this Goliath was apparently extraordinary.

Now of all times. Lefiya furrowed her brow.

If monsters are going to pour into this room, there is no point in running back that way. We'll just get caught by a giant swarm somewhere along the way.

Even if the rest of the 7th Squad had recovered their stamina, they were surely still worn down mentally. She wanted to avoid dragging them on a death march with no end in sight.

And the road leading to the Wall of Sorrows was big enough that Goliath

could follow them there. A giant melee with Goliath and swarms of monsters in an even smaller space would be a disaster.

With the passage to the eighteenth floor crushed, defeating the enemy's leader was the most reasonable way out.

Lefiya exchanged looks with the giant staring at her.

I have one summon burst precast already. A superlong chant right now... would be a bad idea. It's waiting for me to start...

To be safe, she had prepared a spell before entering the room. That explained the magic circle around her left hand.

Unfortunately, monsters were already gathering.

And even now, the giant's eyes were watching her.

Considering all of that, Lefiya decided to not risk a massive magical bombardment to turn everything around.

In a pincer between Goliath and the other monsters, odds were that she wouldn't be able to finish a long chant while also protecting the 7th Squad. Lefiya made her decision and set her priorities.

"Luke, take the others to the Wall of Sorrows!"

"The Wall of Sorrows?! What do you mean?!"

"No monsters other than Goliath can be born from it! Take up positions with your back to that wall!"

Luke glanced at Lefiya as he cut down more attacking monsters.

The boy interpreted it as a way to prevent an attack from behind.

Even if they had recovered somewhat, having them covering her back was dangerous. And Luke's breath was starting to grow ragged, too. It was natural, all things considered. Counting the time before the collapse, they had been fighting monsters in the Dungeon for over a day. Just as the three of them had burned through supplies at an alarming rate, the latent stress was weighing heavily on Luke, too.

Rather than fighting in the center of the room and having to deal with all four

sides, having their backs to a wall and being able to focus on just three sides would certainly decrease the burden.

But is that back-footed plan really the best idea right now?!

Turtling up here without attacking?

As Luke reflexively looked back, Lefiya shouted sharply.

"Quickly!"

Even a slightly shorter chant would become difficult if more monsters started surrounding them.

Her deep blue eyes argued that, and Luke had no choice but to believe the adventurer with far more experience than him.

"Get ready to run!"

"Y-yeah!"

Forcefully ripping through the wall of monsters with a Level 3's brute strength, he cut a path across the cavern.

The moment the 7th Squad started moving toward the wall, Lefiya immediately began casting.

"I beseech the name of Wishe. Ancestors of the forest, proud brethren!"

"00000000000000000!"

As expected, Goliath reacted to the increase in magic power and started moving.

Lefiya watched the giant coming straight at her as she wove a second summon burst, calling on the strength of the great high elf.

"Harbinger of the end, white snow. Gust before the twilight."

Though the charging calamity attacked with unbelievable ferocity, Lefiya cast her spell while carefully evading its blows as the students reached the wall at the western edge of the room.

"We made it!"

As Lefiya had said, it was a giant wall incapable of birthing any monster other

than Goliath. And with the giant out rampaging already, no more monsters would be coming from it.

Luke turned around, standing in front of the rubble of what had been the wall.

"Hurry up and get over...!"

His words trailed off.

She completed her chant, fighting and dancing around the fearsome floor boss and the other monsters all the while. Then Lefiya thrust her left hand toward the students.

As time froze for them, the wand became the mouth of a cannon, unleashing a wall of ice.

"Wynn Fimbulvetr."

The blue ice's gleam filled their vision.

They braced themselves, not believing their eyes, but this magic was not one that froze them or damaged them. Shivering from the cold, they nervously opened their eyes and gasped.

"Ice...covering everything...?!"

In front, to the right and left, even above, pillars and massive hunks of ice blocked everything.

From the outside, it was a twisted, giant pyramid of ice.

Several monsters attacked it. Some even unleashed breaths of fire, but the thick ice wall did not falter.

The three blasts of ice had become a barrier, sealing them in.

"We can't get out, Luke!"

"We can't break it from inside, either!"

"...What is this ...? Don't gimme this—this bullshit!"

Cole and Miliria tested the ice several times with their weapons. Luke stood there stunned, his voice trembling and then roaring in anger.

"Why?! Why, Lefiya?!"

Nano's weepy voice could not reach her outside, either.

"I'm sorry for the rough treatment."

After unleashing the ice barrier, Lefiya retreated, putting a considerable distance between her and Goliath and the other monsters.

The ice barrier would not be easily broken. It would last even if Lefiya died. If the worst did happen, she would have to pray for the arrival of a rescue team from above or reinforcements from below once the passage was cleared from the eighteenth-floor side.

She was unsure of her ability to protect the 7th Squad in the current situation, so she moved them to a safe zone and locked them in a barrier.

Because their safety was more important than her own life.

Or more specifically, she chose to make that her priority.

And more than anything—she wanted to try fighting.

Just as Aiz had fought Udaeus alone, she would face this monster.

"I don't intend to die, and I don't intend to lose...If I fall here, the goal of being able to protect myself and save everyone would be nothing more than a distant dream."

Her eyes narrowed as she restated her reason for choosing this path.

She could have fired the spell at Goliath instead, but it would not have been enough to finish it. Not unless she stopped moving and focused everything on delivering a devastating blow. At her current skill level, the force and precision of her magic dropped a great deal during Concurrent Casting. She still couldn't reach the same heights as that beautiful, monstrous girl that she had so loved.

So she girded herself with the resolve of becoming a magic swordswoman.

A ferocious giant and a mob of monsters in front.

New monsters trickling in from behind.

Standing in the center of the giant chamber, Lefiya readied the sword in her right hand and raised the wand in her left.

The giant roared, not allowing her any time to indulge in sentiment.

"G000000000000000000000000000000000001"

With the shout of a single enemy, all the monsters moved into action.

Lefiya began to sing.

"Proud warriors, marksmen of the forest. Take up your bows to face the marauders. Answer the call of your kin, nock your arrows!"

One versus many.

In such an overwhelmingly disadvantageous melee, the moments where she could Concurrent Cast were limited.

All she could use were *Arcs Ray*, which had a short chant, and *Fusillade Fallarica*, but only for her first attack.

It was safe to rule out summon bursts that required longer chants.

She would save the precast spell remaining on her left wrist for the decisive moment. That was her trump card.

"Bring forth the flames, torches of the forest. Release them, flaming arrows of the fairies. Fall like rain, burn the savages to ash!"

As the enemies rushed her and Goliath threw a stone, Lefiya ran.

She completed the chant and unleashed her spell as she surged forward.

"Fusillade Fallarica!"

"______?!"

She fired it at ultra-close range.

The torrent of fire arrows blanketed a wide area, incinerating the monsters charging her. It was not just the monsters that shattered. The ground did as well, and a massive cloud of dust rose as Goliath grew confused after losing sight of Lefiya for a moment.

"—Unleashed pillar of light, limbs of the holy tree."

Using that moment's opening, she raced ahead.

When she exited the dust cloud right in front of it, the floor boss was clearly

stunned.

The wall of monsters that had been between them was no longer there. It swung its massive arms at her after allowing Lefiya to get close while casting. But Lefiya did not falter.

She accelerated as if mimicking her rival bunny.

"Hiyah!"

"Ghhh?!"

Faster than Goliath's arms, she sliced its right leg as she passed.

There was a dull thud like her sword had slammed into the trunk of a tree. Its skin split, and she carved into flesh, drawing a spray of blood. The arm swinging down behind her tore into the ground, unleashing a torrent of destruction.

Despite Goliath's tremendous durability, her sword's blade did not so much as chip. But it was not a large weapon and could not deal a decisive blow.

Lefiya would have to seize victory with her magic.

"You are the master archer. Loose your arrows, fairy archers!"

This was a situation where she would have to begin her next round of magic the moment she finished the last one. Her mind shuddered at the prospect of how many consecutive spells she would have to endure, but that didn't matter. Really, if this wasn't an emergency, she would have been grateful for the opportunity.

As a magic swordswoman, this was undoubtedly the ultimate test and the strongest enemy.

Goliath's estimated potential was considered an even match for Level 4. Just like Lefiya. If she could overcome this, she could become even stronger. Sure of that, Lefiya's heart roared.

Her face was cold as ice, even as her heart burned hotter and hotter.

She boldly slashed with her sword, keeping a careful distance from the giant, never staying still.

The previous me could never have done this...

Could the Lefiya from three years ago, or even a few months ago, have imagined it?

Fighting alone at close range with a floor boss.

No matter how much her desire to fight roared, though, a corner of her heart always trembled.

No matter how much she changed, there was always a feeble Lefiya Viridis she could not totally erase.

Her heart shook at the giant's howl.

It brought back memories.

She could hear the pathetic sounds from her memories.

The voice of the old Lefiya, the weak, crybaby Lefiya that she so hated...

"Ah, aaah..."

Three years ago.

In the same place, the great chamber of the seventeenth floor that was flanked by the Wall of Sorrows, Lefiya blanched and trembled.

"Nassen...Alisa...everyone..."

Her comrades lied on the ground in bloody heaps as she faced the terrifying giant with chattering teeth.

That day, the 7th Squad again broke the school's rules.

Because of Bardain's desire to see the eighteenth floor, they had enlisted the 1st and 2nd Squads, challenging the Cave Labyrinth with twelve students. Of course, Alisa and Lefiya wanted to stop. But Bardain was not yet satisfied, and Nassen was curious to see the Under Resort so he joined in as well. And so it went. They left that day before Alisa and Lefiya had a chance to report them to Leon or the others, so Lefiya and Alisa reluctantly followed them.

It was pure optimism. Everything had been fine so far, so it would be fine this time, too. They had explored the Cave Labyrinth dozens of times before. And with two more squads, they were practically a midsize party. They were almost all Level 2 even, so it was almost like an expedition of adventurers.

So even if they had been concerned, somewhere in the back of their minds, they were sure they would make it to the eighteenth floor somehow.

Until they saw that absurd giant.

"No way...no way...!"

They had heard that some adventurers had already taken care of it, but there it was, alive, lurking in the big passage where it attacked them.

They screamed as they ran into the big chamber. That was when the ghastly festival began.

The prum Nassen was the first to fall. He had not even been hit by a direct attack. The giant had just swung its hand down, splitting the ground, and some flying debris had hit him. He stopped moving, bleeding like a squashed tomato.

The next was Alisa. She tried to rescue Nassen since he was still breathing, but she was surrounded by monsters and ravaged.

Bardain tried to protect her as she cried and screamed, leaping in with a furious shout and, at the cost of one of his arms, managing to rescue Alisa and Nassen.

And that was that.

"Run! Run, Lefiyaaaaaaa!!!"

Self-reproach and regret filled his voice as he shouted, swinging his great ax wildly with just one arm. He was surrounded by a herd of minotaurs, a candle soon to be snuffed out in the wind.

The other squad members were caught by the floor boss's howl and immediately taken down once they were immobilized. The giant's swinging arm was devastating and their shattered bodies performed a grotesque dance.

Tears welled in Lefiya's eyes as she stood there, unable to do anything.

Somewhere in her heart, she thought they would somehow manage as long as they had Bardain.

He was a problem child and easily carried away, but he was dauntless and reliable, watching over them like an older brother. He was incredibly strong,

and she thought they could make it through any difficult situation as long as he was there.

But Bardain had lost an arm, and his face was filled with despair. He was on the verge of being killed by minotaurs.

They had mocked the Dungeon. Wondered why this promised land was called the center of the world, forgetting how many lives had been stolen by this den of monsters ever since ancient times. Now it was belittling them, tracing their cheeks with a cruel hand, about to snap their necks in its grip.

Lefiya's heart shattered.

"Unleashed...pillar of...light.....limbs of the...holy tree..."

Tied down by terror, her voice trembling in despair, she let out a gasped chant.

Her legs refused to move. She could not flee. She almost slumped down on the spot. But Bardain was fighting alone, Nassen was lying in a pool of his own blood, and Alisa was bloody and battered as well. If Lefiya couldn't use her magic, they would all die.

With tightly gripped fingers that refused to let go, she held up her trembling rod as the giant's shadow loomed over her.

The nightmare slowly raised its fist.

Right as her heart was about to burst, Lefiya completed her chant and unleashed her magic.

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"A-Arcs Ray!!!"
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The flash of light hit the giant's fist straight on.

A searing ball of light blinded her.

There was a loud blast, and Lefiya was blown backward.

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"Agh?! ...Gh?!"
```

Goliath just recoiled backward a bit.

Its fist was raised overhead, knocked back by Lefiya's full-power spell.

Smoke was rising from it, but there wasn't even a scratch.

Lefiya's magic had only just managed to defend against the giant's most minor of attacks.

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"Ah...aaah...aaaaaah...!"
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Goliath slowly adjusted itself, staring at the quivering, fragile little fairy with its cold, emotionless eyes. That was the moment when Bardain's strength gave out, too.

Lefiya was powerless.

There was nothing else they could do to resist.

At that moment, Lefiya's 7th Squad was tragically and mercilessly wiped out.

...How much have I changed since then?

A white-hot emotion welled within her as she recalled those memories.

Her patheticness, her powerlessness, her inability to do anything but cry—the current Lefiya did not doubt for one moment that the extension of that was why she had lost someone precious to her.

She shouted as if to blot out the unsightly memories, like she was trying to unleash all the hatred and anger she felt when she thought about her past self.

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"Pierce, arrow of accuracy!"
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"00000000000000000000000!"

The rampaging Goliath swung its heavy fists as her cast rang out.

Its right fist hurtled toward Lefiya. The same fist that had hammered despair into her heart.

As she overlapped with the girl from her memories, Lefiya's eyes flared.

How much stronger had she gotten since then?

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Let's find out!!!
```

"Arcs Ray!!!"

A large white flash erupted from her outstretched wand as Goliath's fist closed in.

As magic and fist met, a violent flare of light illuminated both of their faces.

After a brief struggle, Lefiya's magic blew the giant's entire right arm and shoulder away.

"______?!

It let out a terrible howl.

The giant clutched the smoldering wound with its left hand, the black hair on its head swinging wildly as its writhing shouts filled the room.

The deafening voice terrified even the students sealed off by the ice barrier.

And realizing full well who had just caused that terrifying monster to scream in such pain, the students went pale.

"Unleashed pillar of light, limbs of the holy tree. You are the master archer!"

Lefiya didn't feel anything in particular. She simply confirmed the results and prepared her next spell immediately.

Sprinting as she Concurrent Cast, she prepared to finish off Goliath, but the reinforcements finally arriving at the entrance interrupted her.

"Don't! Get in! My way!"

Her eyes opening wide, Lefiya began her slaughter.

She swung her sword, tearing monsters limb from limb, breaking bones with her knees and elbows, and using her magic unceasingly as the monsters tried to latch on to her. A tremendous flash left great gouges in the swarm, but even so, the reinforcements flowed in without end. Goliath's eyes were bloodshot as it attacked in a painful rage, not caring that its attacks were scattering its reinforcements, too.

The situation changed in the blink of an eye.

A single enemy with outrageous strength and a horde of almost forty.

Though she managed to block one of the giant's attacks, the force still sent Lefiya's slender body flying, and fangs and claws tore at her body from every direction.

Her lungs ruptured, and blood flew.

The ends of her ears were torn, and a part of her bright blond hair was ripped away.

The fearsome roars of the monsters took on the tone of sadistic laughter. That was how it sounded. However, even so, Lefiya's expression remained unshaken.

She did not despair. She did not quiver. She did not flinch.

She did not stop moving, continuing to sing even as she tirelessly swung her sword.

All that filled her heart was a questioning voice.

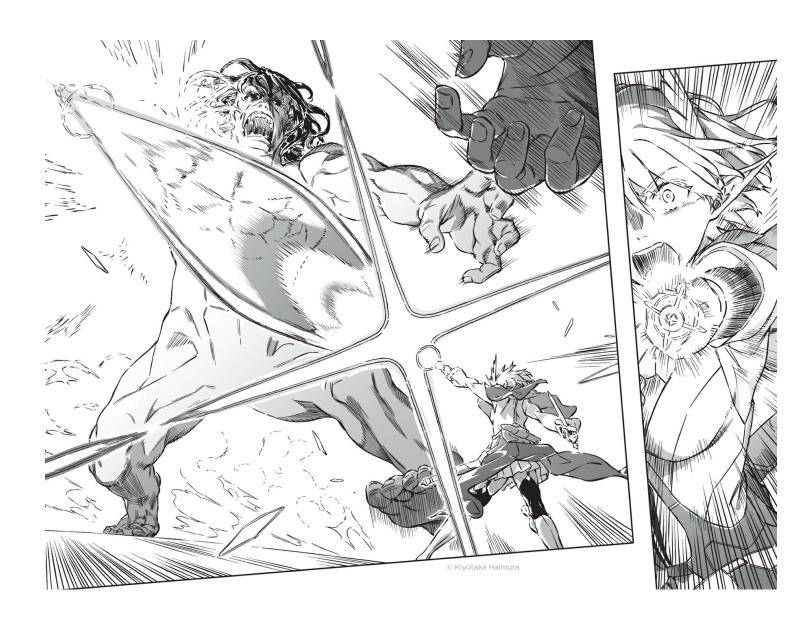
How would she move here?

How would she deal with this?

How would Ms. Filvis approach this?

Her body answered by using her movements, stances, and techniques. Lefiya faithfully emulated those actions with her body, projecting them on herself.

"Haaaaaaah!"



She kept accelerating. And accelerating. And accelerating.

She split al-miraj in two. She obliterated minotaurs with magic. She used hellhounds' flames to scorch liger fangs and then baited Goliath's attack to splatter the pack of hellhounds. She raced, chanted, danced, and flashed, swinging her wand and sword.

Even as fangs tore into her cheeks, even as claws shredded her thighs, she pushed all of her fighting to the next level.

I'm doing it.

I'm becoming a magic swordswoman!

I'm fighting without giving in to the giant or the monsters!

I'm becoming someone strong who can protect myself and save others!!

And yet...

Darkness lurked in the depths of her heart.

A white elf was standing there in the corner.

A vision of *her* that had become visible at some point.

She refused to smile.

Even though I'm becoming like you, becoming strong, you look so sad to see me.

Why?

Why do you look like that?

I don't know.

I don't know, but if I do better, I'm sure she will smile.

If I get closer to her, I'm sure she will smile and praise me!

"Yes!!!"

Her magic erupted, turning a dozen more monsters to ash.

On a battlefield billowing with blood, Lefiya performed a grim, tragic melody as she let her sword sing.



"Loki."

Loki was looking out at Babel—or rather the Dungeon spreading out beneath it—from the manor's skyway when a voice called out from behind her.

Turning around, she saw Riveria standing there.

"Oh? You good to be here, Riveria? I thought you'd go there for Lefiya."

"Gareth went. Digging in the ground is not an elf's job, as he put it."

Makes sense.

No one could match a dwarf when it came to excavation. Compared to a race inseparable from mines and shafts, elves didn't even count as competition.

It was not just familias, either. The School District had also mobilized, so too many people were involved as it was, risking a secondary collapse. As big as the Dungeon was, the collapse affected only three floors in total.

"So what, you come here to entertain me since you had time to kill?"

"That is half of it."

"And the other half is to check whether any of my blessings disappeared?"

"...If you already knew, then spare me the runaround."

Riveria closed her eyes and sighed as Loki chuckled.

Then the high elf stared at her goddess's discerning eyes in annoyance and pressed her for answers.

"So how many?"

"Don't worry, none missing. Lefiya's safe."

"... Safe for now would be the correct response, given the situation."

Loki's smile disappeared as she looked back at Riveria.

"You think Lefiya's gonna up and die?"

Riveria was silent for a moment.

"Whenever she went to the Dungeon, I always took precautions. Asking Elfie, Alicia, or others to never allow her to be alone."

"Because she would go overboard?"

"Yes. Or become possessed by a phantom that is no longer here."

Understanding what she was getting at, Loki quietly listened.

"Sealed away in the Dungeon in what is almost surely isolation...even with the students at her side, they can no longer stop her, I imagine. The moment she runs into a deadly encounter, it will be the perfect excuse to unleash everything she's built up so she can confirm whether she's made the right choices."

All the necessary conditions to push Lefiya into action were currently present in the Dungeon.

Once she finished that preface, she finally responded to Loki's earlier question.

"Those who offer themselves to their delusions will surely be consumed by the Dungeon someday...I have seen it any number of times before."

Babel reflected in her jade eyes as she stared into the distance.

Loki did not agree or disagree.

She only said, "That's right. Right now, Lefiya is tryin' to stop bein' herself."

"Lord Balder, what do you mean by saying Lefiya's heart will start to lean?"

In Breithablik at the center of the School District.

When they had given what instructions could be provided, and there was nothing left but to leave things to those on the scene, Alisa asked Balder about what he had said earlier.

The god slowly answered.

"In the course of her time as an instructor, I believe she has gained a degree of flexibility in how she sees things, but...even so, the scales of Lefiya's heart are swaying, though she herself is unaware of this."

And so, even if he had pointed it out, she wouldn't notice.

Whether *Loki Familia*, Balder, or Leon and the teachers admonished her, it would have no effect because she had not noticed it herself.

Alisa's confusion became apparent as she struggled to follow the god's words.

Balder smiled softly.

"Alisa, what did you think when you met Lefiya again?"

"...She seemed like a different person. She cut her hair, seemed more mature, fairer. I thought she had become an adventurer..."

"I see. To me, she looked, truly, like a different person."

"111"

Alisa's eyes widened. But at the same time, she remembered.

"I didn't recognize you."

He had said as much when he met Lefiya again. If that was not a figure of speech, if he meant it literally, then...

Lefiya appeared to be someone other than Lefiya in even a deity's eyes.

"When I heard Loki herself had sent Lefiya as a recruiter, I had some expectations. They solidified when I met her. Anger, regret, or perhaps penance...whatever it may be, Lefiya is attempting to become someone else."

Alisa's shoulders trembled.

She had seen it several times in the past week—Lefiya staring off into the distance. In those moments, Lefiya had definitely looked like someone else entirely. There were moments when an elf with long, jet-black hair, who Alisa had never met, seemed to overlap with Lefiya.

"Likely she is chasing after the phantom of someone she lost, attempting to offer up her own body for that person's sake."

As Alisa gasped silently, the god spoke without emotion, as if simply stating the truth.

"If she catches up to that phantom in body and soul...then even if she returns alive, it will not be as the Lefiya Viridis that we know."



The screams of countless monsters echoed and merged.

The giant groaned like the ground itself was roiling.

A single elf's sword dance and opera continued without end, evoking strings of cries and showers of blood.

Lefiya roared.

Her chanting continued without end, and her voice never faltered. She overlapped with that beautiful yet monstrous girl, steadily transforming.

Her chanting accelerated, growing clearer, stripped of anything extraneous.

Her song, nobility, and sublime beauty were overwriting her existence.

Just a little more. Just a little bit more.

I haven't won yet. But I can now.

Just a little more, and I can kill the weak me. If I can get just one step closer to her, I can cross this terrifying sea of monsters and claim the giant's crown.

What's left to cast aside?

What can I still replace?

Filvis had allowed her arm to be eaten for Lefiya's sake.

So maybe Lefiya should lose an arm herself.

If she could understand an arm's worth of her pain and sadness, the girl standing in her heart would surely smile.

Let's go.

I can make it.

I can reach the true Filvis. I can become a true magic swordswoman.

The magic circle was waiting around her left wrist for the perfect moment. She began the countdown to the decisive moment, when she would play her trump card.

Glaring at the monsters, aiming at Goliath, she thrust her hand out for the

one magic that allowed her to fight on alone.

"Canon!!!"

Just as she prepared to hammer home her choice in the Dungeon:

"Lefiya!!!"

With a howl of magic, the barrier of ice shattered.

"?!"

Stunned, Lefiya and the monsters turned to the west.

At the foot of the Wall of Sorrows, glimmering diamond dust and balls of electricity scattered as the battered and injured 7th Squad appeared.

There was no way it should have broken. It should have been impossible.

Students shouldn't have been able to shatter the ice barrier that she had built.

They must have fired it—Nano's magic cannon.

Ignoring the obvious risk, they unleashed her lightning multiple times at close range to break the barrier from inside.

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"Why ...?"
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Her sword and song both stopped as she watched, dumbfounded, but they didn't give her a chance to finish as they rushed over.

"To help you, obviously!"

Even as blood poured from open wounds burned all over their scorched bodies, the 7th Squad charged through the monsters surrounding Lefiya. They had been focused entirely on her so they were caught completely off guard with their backs exposed.

"What are you doing? What are you getting so smug about? If you're gonna scold me, then don't try and join the dead yourself!"

Luke roared as he slashed into the wall of monsters.

"Did you not teach us that adventurers help each other?!"

"You said yourself that the Dungeon is not something to face alone!"

Miliria nocked an arrow, and Cole thrust his knives into the monsters, pleading with her.

"No! Don't go off alone! Don't leave us behind! We don't want to be bystanders! Let us fight with you!"

Nano was wobbly as she ran over, scraping the bottom of the barrel while shouting tearfully.

They faced Lefiya with her own words. Her own teachings that she had thought up and used to guide them. The true and honest lessons she had taught them were now coming right back to her.

As she stood there dumbfounded, those words became a mirror.

"Listen to us! I wanted to save people! I got full of myself because of that brash sense of duty!"

His gray hair swaying, Luke charged Goliath alone.

He drew the furious giant's attention to himself, his hands clenching his sword and trembling from the pressure, even as he turned his thoughts into words and roared for Lefiya's sake.

"But now I look up to them! To adventurers! To you!"

Lefiya's hands quivered.

Her heart was composing a single melody.

"I don't want to just be protected!!!"

He was a reflection of the old Lefiya.

Weak, naive, and a crybaby, but still chasing after her dreams.

The starting point for Lefiya Viridis, who experienced failure, fell countless times, but still refused to stop aspiring for more.

"Where are you looking, Lefiya?! Who are you looking at?!"

Her disheveled strawberry blond hair swayed as Nano moved through the path Miliria and Cole had opened for her. She could barely walk and every breath was a struggle, but her eyes were focused on Lefiya as monsters' howls rang out all around her.

"I'm scared! Even though you're you, sometimes you turn into someone else! You seem like you might go someplace far away, and it's so scary!"

Frozen, unable to move, she stopped right in front of Lefiya and shouted: "Don't look at someone who isn't here! Look at us, Lefiya!!!"

Nano did not even reflect Lefiya's past self—she looked just like Filvis. Lefiya could only look on in shock.

A false white elf, chasing after a phantom, wearing her skin, putting on a mask of her face.

The images in those two mirrors forced Lefiya to realize everything.

Those simple, polished mirrors hit Lefiya with the truth.

"Lefiya is Lefiya!"

Alisa shouted.

Even if they were the words of a god, she rejected them for her friend and did all she could to hold onto that bond.

"She's kinder than anyone, willing to be hurt for others, to cry for them! No matter how talented or how clumsy she is, she's honest! She can't be anyone else!"

Tears fell from her eyes, glimmering with her feelings for her friend.

"Yes. That is correct, Alisa. No matter what path she might follow, no matter the mask she might wear, the result will be nothing more than a twisted thing. It is an end for the still living that is more gruesome, more pitiful than clinging to a rotting corpse."

As Alisa leaned forward emphatically, Balder agreed with a sad smile.

Distressed for the child and student who was even now lost, he raised his face, turning his thoughts to her.

"She cannot become anyone other than Lefiya."

"But still, as much as she might attempt to stop being herself, Lefiya cannot be Filvis Challia."

Riveria's answer, the same as that of a certain god of light, was carried by the

wind as she, along with Loki, looked to the Dungeon, where the girl was fighting.

"The current Lefiya will arrive at a single result. However, that is nothing more than self-satisfaction. A contradiction will inevitably arise, and she will selfdestruct. The answer is obvious."

That was what made her different from Aiz.

Aiz was undeniably unsteady. But she was not trying to become someone else. She was simply seeking the strength she needed to achieve her own goal. Unlike Aiz, in chasing someone else's phantom, Lefiya was attempting to obliterate herself.

"That's right. I bet Lefiya's got a contradiction brewin' in herself right now. And now that she has to look into the mirror of those students of hers, she's been hit with somethin' she can't untangle."

That was the reason why Loki had sent Lefiya as a recruiter and Balder had placed her with the 7th Squad. Knowing she would try to be honest and proper when facing the students, they wanted her to notice the contradiction building in her own self. To realize her misguided path as she became aware of the truth.

"A teacher is a person who guides students while at the same time being taught by them."

To borrow Leon's words, that was the crux of the matter. Lefiya needed to become a teacher capable of understanding what was right instead of a student who could continue onward even as she committed to making a mistake.

"Notice, Lefiya!" Alisa shouted out the window.

"Remember, Lefiya," Riveria called while looking at the labyrinth.

"Reclaim yourself, Lefiya," Balder declared, his eyes still closed.

"Mm, just a bit more, Lefiya," Loki said as she opened her eyes to the shifting breeze.

"""You are not anyone other than Lefiya Viridis.""""

In different places, from various perspectives, four voices overlapped.

Inside a labyrinth where anyone would continue to wander lost, Lefiya heard a throbbing sound.

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"I'm begging you, Lefiya!"
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"Please!"

Luke ran up Goliath's arm, losing his footing as the arm swung. He landed hard on his back but thrust his sword into the ground and stood back up.

Nano cried, dropping her wand and gripping Lefiya's battered shoulders as she stood in front of her.

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""Let us protect you!!!""
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The mirror shattered.

The old Lefiya, the false Lefiya disappeared, and when she was forced to confront the reality of her contradictions, Lefiya was pummeled by her students' raw emotions.

Her deep blue eyes wavered.

The stubbornly bound resolve and determination came undone.

A warm light rose from around her wrist.

The magic circle around her left wrist—the elf ring was waiting.

Borrowing Filvis's and Riveria's voices, it questioned her.

"What will you choose?"

"[..."

Her mind was blank as her lips uttered the final answer.

As countless emotions swirled inside her battered and wounded body...

"GRAAAAAAAAAAAGH!"

"Gh!"

"Kyah?!"

A hellhound leaped out, dodging through Miliria's and Cole's attacks as Lefiya and Nano stood there. Lefiya pushed Nano aside, cutting through it with a

single slash.

There was no time. The monsters—the Dungeon—would not wait for her to anguish and agonize over an answer. It was time to make a choice.

Surrounded by fearsome monsters, while the students observed with twisted faces, in a soft voice as if absorbed within herself, she gathered the fragments of the song she chose.

And she shouted:

"Gather, breath of the earth. My name is Alf!"

This was her answer.

"Veil Breath!"

A jade light bloomed.

What came forth was neither a lightning to scorch the very stars nor a shield to shatter an enemy's attacks.

The light that enveloped her comrades was defensive magic that came from Lefiya's master, who had always guided her and shown her the way forward.

Stunned, Nano, Luke, Miliria, and Cole were imbued with a blessing of green light.

They had been clad in a magic shroud that healed their bodies while protecting them from both physical and magical attacks. The 7th Squad looked at the adventurer who had cast the spell in amazement.

As time seemed to compress and slow down, Lefiya finally uttered the words.

"Please protect me."

That was her answer to the dumbfounded students.

"I am a mage, so if you protect me—no, since all of you said you would protect me—I will save you!"

Those were the words they had been waiting for.

With tears in their eyes, and their faces a mess, they all smiled.

""""Got it!""""

Their four voices answered in unison as they roused themselves.

Their bodies were pushing past all limits as they overflowed with emotion. They picked up their fallen weapons, clenched them, and borrowed the strength of the blessed light protecting them.

At that moment, their hearts were one.

"Circle formation! Hold out for three—no, just one minute!"

Standing in the middle of a sea of monsters, Lefiya made her request.

The battle on the twenty-fourth floor flickered through her mind. During that desperate last stand surrounded by countless carnivorous flowers, Lefiya had also asked for three minutes.

But it was different now.

Filled with determination, she vowed to close in with the city's most powerful mage.

"Milly! Cole! Hold back the minotaurs on the left and right! Nano, start casting, but save it for the end!"

Gathering his strength, Luke dashed forward with an iron resolve.

Shouting instructions, he pulled away from Goliath for a moment, jumping back into formation. Miliria and Cole answered with a shout while charging into the enemies on either flank. Meeting Lefiya's deep blue eyes, Luke rampaged through the monsters threatening her from in front.

Combining the destructive strength of an attacker with his newfound defensive techniques he'd been learning as the party's bulwark, he put on a more rousing performance than anyone in the squad.

"I beseech the name of Wishe!"

Lefiya began to chant, putting Tear Pain back in its sheath and taking out the rod she had kept on her hip the whole time.

Holding it like a one-handed sword, she linked it with the wand she had shifted to her right hand.

They snapped together, combining into a magic staff taller than she was,

much like Riveria's Magna Alfs.

This was the twin staff Fairy Dust, Lefiya's new weapon.

The wand, made from Filvis's Protector's White Torch, and the rod, made from the remnants of Lefiya's Forest Teardrop, were the first weapons made in Orario with a dedicated linking function.

"Ancestors of the forest, proud brethren. Answer my call and descend upon the plains. Connecting bonds, the pledge of paradise. Turn the wheel and dance!"

It was a custom weapon made utilizing even the knowledge she had gained as a student, allowing her to unleash her true strength not as a magic swordswoman but as a dedicated mage.

By linking her weapons together, the magic jewels in the wand and rod synchronized, bringing forth a roiling, explosive magic power.

"Come, ring of fairies. Please—Give me strength!"

Taking a wide-legged stance, she held the staff parallel to the ground in both hands with a chant that seemed to hang in the air.

An enormous amber magic circle appeared, illuminating her guardians' faces with dazzling light.

"Elf Ring!"

As she completed the summon burst and prepared to throw her knockout blow, Lefiya recalled a certain moment.

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"Aaa... aaa...ggggg...!"
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The seventeenth floor in her past. When she was too powerless, unable even to struggle.

As the giant prepared to slaughter them all, what had saved the students was a vivid, golden gleam.

"Huh ...?"

The giant's hand that was looming, about to squash her, was severed with a slash, and the heads of the monsters trying to eat Bardain and the other

students were suddenly rolling.

Slumped on the ground, Lefiya met her golden idol as Goliath recoiled and screamed in pain.

"...Are you okay?"

A girl who was hardly any different from her.

She had beautiful blond hair and gold eyes. That was the famed Sword Princess Aiz Wallenstein.

"Whoa, this is a huge mess!"

"School District kids? We've got to help them!"

Aiz was on her way back from deeper in the Dungeon with Tiona and Tione and just happened to run into the students when they were on the verge of being completely wiped out.

But Lefiya's eyes, and even her mind, were stolen away by Aiz's beauty, and her overwhelming strength.

"...Are you a mage?"

"Eh...ah, y-yes! I am!...But I wasn't...any help...at all..."

Lefiya answered with quivering shoulders, immediately looking down.

She could only cower, unable to help anyone. The magic she had cast had not even done anything.

Overwhelmed by a debilitating sense of powerlessness, her heart was cracking beyond all repair, "Use your magic."

Looking up with wide eyes, she saw Aiz looking closely at her.

"If you don't, you won't be able to stand up again... That's bad. I think."

Aiz was speaking her instinctive thoughts directly, without clear explanation.

They were irrelevant, yet they shook Lefiya's heart, which was crumbling under the strain of utter despair.

"I-I'm weak...a coward! I can't even cast my magic alone...!"

"But there are people you have to help, right?"

Terrified of her weakness, Lefiya tried to resist, but Aiz just cocked her head, quickly countering. Following her gaze, Lefiya saw Bardain groaning as Tiona held his severed arm to the wound. There was also Alisa and Nassen, who were being protected by Tione, sporting her long, flowing hair. And all of the other students collapsed around her.

The three adventurers could not cover everyone by themselves.

"We protect you from monsters. You save us from monsters. That's what Riveria taught me."

With those final words, Aiz became like the wind.

She was gallant. Heroic. Overwhelming.

She was so incredible that it made Lefiya wonder how a person could become so beautiful and strong. Her long, blond hair traced a glittering path, and her silver sword cut a miraculous and lethal arc, lighting the flare of hope on a battlefield that should have been hopeless.

She was facing the terrifying giant all alone and holding her own.

She was driving back the monster, like a scene from a story.

It was the valiant figure of one worthy to be a hero.

Lefiya almost couldn't believe that Aiz was overwhelming Goliath all by herself.

The light of yearning set her heart racing—just like Leon had said it would.

Feeling like she finally knew what she should do, Lefiya stood up.

"Proud warriors, marksmen of the forest...!"

It was a spell she had just learned. A song that encapsulated everything Lefiya was at the time.

In that moment, Lefiya admired them.

Of course, that included the powerful and hearty Amazon sisters. But above all, she looked up to the blond-haired, golden-eyed swordswoman who was more heroic than anyone.

In that moment, her desire to become something turned into the seed of a

wish to be like them.

That was the origin of the Lefiya Viridis who admired and looked up to adventurers—to Aiz, Tiona, and Tione.

"Fusillade Fallarica!"

Lefiya's arrows pierced the monsters, saving Alisa and the others.

The fiery missiles arced over a wide area, lighting Aiz's face clearly as she defeated the giant.

"Wooow! It's like Riveria's magic!"

"Looks like you've got a knack for this. If you're interested, why not join our familia? I'll recommend you to the captain."

While the massive sparks danced through the air, Lefiya slumped to the ground as Tiona and Tione smiled.

"...You did it. It was incredible."

And as Lefiya's eyes watered and she sobbed, Aiz beamed at her...

I had forgotten what I felt then.

Who she was. What she thought. Why she had wanted to be here, in this place.

"A blaze shall soon descend."

As she remembered her starting point as an adventurer, Lefiya recited a staggering chant with far more sophisticated magic control. Embracing the emotions she'd felt for the first time back then, her heart and body trembled. And despite all of her failures, despite all the times her knees gave out, just by remembering how she felt in that moment, Lefiya discovered that she could stand back up no matter how painful it was.

"Approaching flames of war from which there is no escape. Battle horns blaring on high, all atrocities and strife shall be engulfed."

She returned the gaze of the boy who had called out to her earlier.

The mirror that had reflected her weak self.

The pathetic, pitiful self who could not fully abandon her dreams, no matter how long passed.

She had reclaimed what made her Lefiya.

I am Lefiya Viridis.

An elf of Wishe Forest.

A member of this Labyrinth City's grandest, proudest, strongest familia who has exchanged vows with the goddess, Loki.

She had left her home village, studied at the School District, and reached Aiz and them. Her curiosity, desire, and adoration were all bound up in the current Lefiya.

Even after losing someone precious and coming to hate her past, not even she could deny the path she had taken.

"Come crimson pyre, merciless inferno. Become hellfire."

Ms. Filvis.

Ms. Filvis.

I really am hopeless.

I wanted to be an elf who could protect herself and save anyone, yet here I am being protected.

I'm letting myself be protected.

I'm still just Lefiya Viridis.

As she looked at the students fighting around her, she confessed this in her heart.

But it felt like the Filvis in her heart smiled.

Sensing an unparalleled surge of magic power, Goliath's roar took on a note of urgency. The intelligent giant gave the order to take down the elf no matter what it took.

"And bind. Admonish the savages. This is the forest shrine kept by its

quardian. Silva Vine!"

As the wave of monsters tried to envelop Lefiya, Miliria—who had set magic circles while fighting—activated her magic with the last of her Mind.

The vibrant green magic circles unfurled like flowers blooming in five locations, protecting Lefiya. Magic vines reached out, binding monsters, tying them down, and holding them back.

"Ghhh?!"

Even without finishing them off, the monsters bound together became a wall blocking the rest of the swarm that was desperate to tear into Lefiya. While they attacked the wall of flesh, enraged shouts echoed as monsters began killing each other.

"Great job, Milly!"

The horde would not be able to lay a hand on Lefiya before she finished her chant. As Luke praised her, their attention was focused on their final enemy, the giant.

Luke and Cole leaped at the one-armed Goliath, who had begun advancing as it gave its order, and Miliria nocked an arrow with trembling fingers.

A Level 4 floor boss. There was no way students who were not even adventurers could finish it. But even so, the 7th Squad faced it with every bit of their knowledge, quick wit, and strategy they could summon.

Since Goliath didn't even bother looking at him, Luke used all of his Level 3 strength to unleash an attack on its leg—aimed right at the wound Lefiya had carved earlier.

And when its movements faltered, Cole used the chain from Nano's weapon that he had borrowed to wind around both its legs.

For the final push to knock the one-armed giant off-balance, Miliria fired an arrow into the monster's eye.

It howled and fell with an earth-shaking impact.

"Purge the battlefield, end the war."

"GAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!"

Enraged and roaring, it tore the chains and charged forward. Luke, Milly, and Cole leaped at it but were knocked aside.

She only needed ten seconds to finish the chant. But that was still not enough.

Goliath's outstretched hand would close around Lefiya first.

The last stand on the twenty-fourth floor.

The countless carnivorous flowers.

She needed protection back then, too.

Suddenly, Lefiya experienced a terrible déjà vu.

What had ultimately saved her from the charging monsters desperate to tear her apart was the white shield that Filvis had conjured.

No matter how elaborately she tried to deny it, that girl was no longer here.

And right when Lefiya's concentration frayed and almost broke—

"Ooooooooooooooooooo!"

Blood seeped from their heads as Luke and the others grabbed the broken chain, pulling with all their might, even as the skin of their hands ripped open.

That wasn't enough to stop the giant's charge. Not even close.

But for just a brief moment, it delayed Goliath.

And that moment was enough.

"""Nanoooooooooooooo!"""

Their shouts reached the girl who had been chanting the whole time inside the magic circle in front of Lefiya.

Her eyes had been shut tight, but now Nano opened them wide as she thrust her staff forward at the looming giant.

"Zalga Amaldaaaaaaaaaaa!!!"

Ten bolts of lightning twisted and merged, becoming a single massive arc that slammed into the dumbstruck Goliath.

The impact knocked the giant off its feet, sending it flying backward with a thundercrack.

It's all right.

Nano collapsed, having used every last bit of Mind she had left, and Luke and the others followed suit.

Lefiya's eyes widened, sure she heard a certain someone's voice behind her.

Tears quietly welled in her eyes, and a faint smile crossed her lips. She felt a warmth in her shoulder, like someone had just placed their hand on it.

"Incinerate, sword of Surtr—My name is Alf."

The next moment, her eyes flared.

Her twin staff, Fairy Dust, exploded with magic power, and the magic circle expanded with a sharp ring.

It didn't stop growing until it covered the entire chamber.

Time froze for Goliath and the monsters caught in the grand spell that Lefiya was weaving.

"Rea Laevateinn!!"

Evil-purging hellfire roared to life with a crimson gleam.

Countless pillars of flame erupted from the ground, piercing the monsters, charring or scorching them, and dragging them down in a howling blaze. Even Goliath was no exception. The floor boss's massive body was skewered and burned from the inside out, disappearing before it had a chance to writhe in pain.

Total annihilation. A sea of flames that erased everything.

The students were speechless. They were the only ones who had been spared by the pillars of flame. Though their lungs were untouched, they still forgot to breathe as they stared in awe at the sparks dancing overhead.

This was Riveria Ljos Alf's wide-area extermination spell.

Its defining characteristic was its precision. The spell could distinguish between friend and foe within the massive magic circle, making it the ultimate attack that obliterated only enemies. It had incinerated the monsters and silenced their roars, transforming the entire chamber into an inferno.

"...Nano..."

"Ah..."

Lefiya held her hand out to the girl who had fallen and was looking up, entranced by the sparkle of that crimson realm.

The wounded elf mage and adventurer had carried a shadow that scared Nano.

But that shadow was now nowhere to be seen as she smiled.

"Thank you for protecting me... From the bottom of my heart, I thank you all."

When she saw that beautiful elf smile, Nano burst into tears.

Despite her Mind Down state, Nano climbed up like a little animal, reaching past Lefiya's outstretched hand and hugging her.

Ignoring her surprise, Nano buried her face in the elf's neck and started sobbing.

"Uwaaaaaaaaaaaaaa...! Lefiyaaaaaaa...!"

"Nano? Nano? I'm all right. You're more injured than I am. Please don't hurt yourself..."

"Noooooooooo!"

Like a child clinging to her mother, she cried and wept and whined.

"Thank goodness...Thank goodness," she murmured between sobs, tears soaking into Lefiya's clothes.

Lefiya was entirely at a loss as the other three, battered and exhausted, shambled over, watching the two of them with warm smiles. Unable to hold back, Miliria cried, too, as she hugged Lefiya.

Agah, you don't have to resemble this part, too.

Without realizing it, Lefiya started to smile as they overlapped with her past self, when she had been saved by Aiz and Tiona and Tione. And just a little bit, she became misty-eyed, too.



"We came all the way to the seventeenth floor, but...was this the right move?! Maybe they were waiting for help on one of the other floors!" Tiona asked, running with Urga in one hand.

"There'd be no end to it if we searched every nook and cranny of every floor!" Tione shot back as she ran in the lead. "Lefiya knows that, too! She'll be in a place where it's easy to find her!"

"Mhm...this is where Lefiya would choose to go, I think..."

"I—I think so, too, but...you're all too fast!"

Running diagonally behind Tione, Aiz nodded, and a bit farther back, Elfie shouted, too, breathing heavily as she struggled to keep pace. As she did her best to keep up with the first-tier adventurers, Tiona wrapped an arm around her and lifted her over her left shoulder.

"Hyaaah?!"

Their gear was dirty because they had been working hard at clearing the rubble for a long time.

Thanks to the labors of Gareth and the others, the main route had been made barely passable and the four of them immediately rushed ahead, racing all the way down here to the seventeenth floor.

"Anyway, let's go to the wall—gh!"

A powerful tremor interrupted Tione.

The world shook as if some incredible spell had erupted. Visibly stunned, they looked at each other and sped up.

Aided by the fact they did not encounter any monsters along the way, they raced through the great passage in a flash.

Soon, the floor's massive final chamber finally came into view.

"Į"

"Eh...who's that?"

"He got here faster than us?"

Aiz, Tiona, and Tiona were stunned again to see a person standing there with his back to them.

He wore silver armor over his upper body. Slender and tall, he held a large longsword in his hands.

Elfie squirmed down from Tiona's shoulder and tensed up. Aiz's eyes widened as she saw the man's hair and his gallant figure.

"Knight of Knights..."

Perhaps the man heard them because he turned toward them. It was Leon.

When he realized who they were, he smiled for some reason and stepped aside to let them see the scene inside the room.

"Ah...!"

"Lefiya!"

"That's a relief... Looks like the students are there, too."

"Thank goodness you're safe! But I don't know how I feel about you leaving your good old roommate Elfie behind and start getting along with some other girl!"

Aiz and Tiona were overjoyed, Tione was relieved, and Elfie complained like usual to hide her tears.

Lefiya was surrounded by students, one clinging to her as she patted her on the back.

"...Lefiya is smiling again."

"Mhm..."

Tiona broke into a warm, sunny smile, and Aiz nodded with a soft expression.

Seeing her true, albeit troubled, smile, they decided to just watch for a little



MY CLICHÉ ANSWER I GOT FROM YOU

Гэта казка іншага сям'і

ты даў мне мой мірскі адказ

EPILOGUE

MY CLICHÉ ANSWER I GOT FROM YOU

After she had defeated Goliath and the monsters and Nano and the others had finished crying over her, Lefiya forced open the passage to the next floor with help from Aiz and the rest of the rescue party. Then they all went down to the eighteenth floor together.

Lefiya's exhaustion was extreme, but the 7th Squad's fatigue was far more severe. To give them enough rest before returning aboveground, they headed to Rivira.

Apparently, the 3rd Squad had also been out of contact, which was the one remaining issue, but that turned out to be a needless concern.

"So why are you here?"

"Ah-aha-ha-ha..."

Lefiya turned a dubious eye on the human boy she'd encountered in Rivira—Bell Cranell, wearing a worn, tattered, school-provided combat uniform.

Apparently, due to some strange turn of events, he had been passing as a student and accompanying the squad of dropouts.

The hume bunny she had passed in the courtyard of the Guild Headquarters had been Bell.

The 3rd Squad, who had gone into the Dungeon first, had retreated to the safe point immediately on Bell's judgment, apparently without incident (though they had apparently been chased by the same Goliath that Lefiya and the 7th Squad had defeated).

Evidently, he had permission from Balder and the teachers to disguise himself and infiltrate the School District—if he hadn't, Lefiya would absolutely have beaten him to death with her staff while censuring him as the worst sort of pervert and enemy of all people who took out his desires on students—but apparently they had undergone an adventure of their own before Lefiya and the 7th Squad arrived. She couldn't help getting *annoyed* when she saw how the half-elf girl in the 3rd Squad kept glancing over at him with flushed cheeks.

"Can you not lay your hands on my juniors, you perpetually rutting rabbit!"

"I didn't do anything! I didn't! So please don't ask them what that means, Ms. Aiz!"

"And when we crossed paths at the Guild, why did you shriek when you saw me?! How rude! I should burn you now!"

"Noooooo! I'm sorry! But you do kind of scare me, so it was just on reflex!"

As they watched Lefiya growl and Bell wail, the students in the 7th and 3rd Squads were flabbergasted. The members of 7th Squad, who only knew the more mature Lefiya, were especially stunned.

Meanwhile, Tiona watched the two of them from a little ways away.

"It's nice how Lefiya really cheers up when Argonaut's around," she said with a cackle.

Aiz and Tione smiled as well.

Leon watched over them all fondly, seeing them with expressions appropriate for her age.

After a planned day's rest in Rivira, the 7th and 3rd Squads were escorted back to the surface.

Gareth and *Ganesha Familia*, who stayed behind, had restored most of the routes, so the return was quick and smooth.

Their long little expedition finally drew to a close.

"Welcome back, Lefiya."

When she returned and completed her report, Balder smiled and even commented about finally seeing the true Lefiya again.

Alisa had hugged her over and over, too.

After that, the 7th Squad completed their Dungeon practical without issue

and earned all their credits.

That also meant the end of Lefiya's term as an instructor.

When she left the School District, the 7th Squad members tearfully promised to join *Loki Familia*. Nano clung to Lefiya while weeping, and Miliria had tears in her eyes as she took her hand. Lefiya felt their reaction was a little over the top, but she couldn't deny feeling a bit moved as well after serving as a teacher of sorts for them.

Cole cried as well, the tears welling up in the corners of his eyes as he smiled and thanked her.

Luke looked like he wanted to say something, but in the end, he instead chose to declare, "I will definitely catch up to you. I'll become an even more amazing adventurer than you are."

"I'll be waiting. But I'm not going to lose."

Lefiya smiled and cheered him on.

And with that, Lefiya went home to Loki Familia.



She stared up at the blue sky.

It should have been the same sky she had seen after losing someone special, but for reasons she did not understand, it seemed clearer somehow.

And just like the chill, clear sky, the darkness looming over her heart had also disappeared.

"Finally back, huh? Didn't lose a step, did you?"

"...Mr. Bete..."

Waiting in their home's courtyard, Bete appeared before her.

She would continue her training with him starting today, honing the movements of a magic swordswoman by fighting him.

But the impatience she had felt before her time as an instructor was gone.

When he stood in front of her, he could tell she was neither tense nor

unmotivated, and the spirit that had once possessed her was gone. Bete snorted.

"You're back, huh?"

"..."

"I didn't care what you picked. Either way, you would've regretted it. I just beat you up so you wouldn't keep bawlin' in that grating voice."

Bete had known, too. Just how dangerous Lefiya's condition was. And having realized it, he had gone along with training her. To help her build the strength she needed to not have to grieve anymore, just like he had said.

She finally understood why Loki had sent her there. It was a journey so that she could become Lefiya Viridis.

A detour so that the Lefiya chasing after Filvis's shadow could remember herself.

Once she realized that, she asked a question that popped into her mind.

"Mr. Bete, did you get stronger after losing someone?"

It was just simple curiosity.

Lefiya did not know the past of the werewolf standing before her.

Had he taken a similar path as her?

After a moment's silence, Bete sneered at the question.

"What's it got to do with anything? I'm me, no matter who goes and gets themselves killed."

That was certainly true. And the number of scars covering his body would continue to grow.

Annoyed by her clear gaze, Bete shot back scornfully with his sneer still pasted onto his face.

"That sinister elf must be miserable. You got left behind and ended up doing everything half-assed without picking a side."

"Gh...!"

"And you go around swinging her weapons, making up convenient excuses for yourself. I never did like her, but I can empathize with her there."

Lefiya's eyebrows flared at his merciless contempt.

But then they immediately came down, and tears welled up in her deep blue eyes.

"...Ah? Wha—? Huh?"

Bete's eyes shrank into tiny dots.

"Why would you say something so meeeeean?!"

"You dumba— This is where you're supposed to hit back, idiot!"

"I know I'm selfishly using Ms. Filvis's sword, and I've been worrying about it the whole time!"

Bete was badly shaken, seeing Lefiya rubbing her eyes over and over.

From the outside, he looked no different from a boy teasing a girl until she cried.

Lefiya had been consumed by the intense desire to change, and with everything going on, she never got a real chance to feel sad—even as she had grieved terribly.

And now that she no longer preoccupied herself with her students, all of the heavy armor she had cinched up tightly around herself had come loose. The werewolf's thoughtless attack had shattered it easily, causing her emotions to spill out.

Bete was getting flustered. He had deliberately provoked her to peel away her armor, thinking she had some promise, and this was the thanks he got. If Gareth had been there, he would have said, "That's why I told you to quit being so twisted," with a heavy sigh.

As he watched Lefiya cry after he completely failed to do what he set out to do, Bete had no idea how to react, unable even to hug her or pat her on the head.

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"...H-hey..."
```

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"...Uuuuugh...you dummyyyy!"
".....""
"Stupid..."
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"...I don't think she'd wanna see you lookin' that lame..."

With his wolf ears and tail curling meekly, that was about the limit of what Bete could manage. Sobbing, tears still welling in her eyes, Lefiya peered up at Bete, who had an odd look on his face.

"Don't make Lefiya cry, you stupid wolf!"

"Gaaah?!"

"Lefiya, you should stop training with this piece of garbage. It's no different from hanging around a beast who don't understand the first thing about women."

Tiona hammered Bete with a fist of iron while Tione sidled up to Lefiya, rubbing her back as she unleashed a kick into the werewolf's side without looking.

Like before, they watched from the skyway and came running as soon as they heard her sobs. Aiz patted Lefiya on the head reassuringly, too.

"Piss off! Not like you're any different, you Amazons!"

"You're awful...Bete..."

"Gaah?!"

Bete immediately stood back up, only to catch Aiz's genuinely chilling glare and sustain heavy damage.

He looked gut-punched and like his knees might give out at any moment. Just this once, he was being pummeled not by their fists but by their utterly disgusted glares. Then suddenly, Lefiya ran away.

"Ah...Lefiya!"

She heard their voices behind her, but she leaped over the fence surrounding Twilight Manor. As the gate guard watched slack-jawed, she kept running.

The reason was simple.

She didn't want anyone to see her red, weepy face anymore.

Nooo.

I thought I could at least hold it together now.

Nothing's changed.

Nothing's changed at all!

She had reverted back to the crybaby Lefiya—pathetic, miserable, sentimental. She ran through the streets, arms swinging. She ran and ran, becoming like the wind as dozens of people looked surprised when she passed, wondering what had happened.

She rubbed her eyes repeatedly.

She didn't have a destination in mind.

She just kept running without aim.

And eventually, she arrived at a familiar overlook.

This place was difficult for her to visit, as it was where she had once promised to go see the crown of light with a certain someone.

This was the first time.

Totally out of breath, despite being an upper-class adventurer, she shuddered just before suddenly bending backward.

"Ms. Filvis, you dummy! Liar! Brute! Lying liar! You promised we would go see it together!"

Since no one was around, she squeezed her eyes shut and shouted to the blue sky overhead.

The resentment had built up, hidden beneath the sadness of all that had happened.

"I know things were painful for you! But you could have at least talked with

me a little bit, couldn't you? Maybe something could have been changed if you did!!!

"And why?! Always looking gloomy like something was wrong, making me worry! You drama queen!

"And then you would smile and be so pretty and cute! How could I ever ignore you?!!!

"And even though you said you worried about me, you still just indulged Lord Dionysus no matter what he asked! That's the perfect example of getting involved with a bad man, just like Loki said! You're the worst, Ms. Filvis! I'm disappointed in you! —That's a lie. I really do love you!

"But you followed your god! You chose a man over a woman's friendship! Well, fine, be that way! Hmph!!!"

The complaints became more groundless part way through, but she vented everything she had always wanted to say.

"Ms. Filvis! Ms. Filvis! I love you! I really do! I won't ever forget you! I won't let you have your way!"

With a nasty desire to trouble Filvis as much as she could if she could hear these words from the heavens, Lefiya shouted and shouted, pouring all her feelings out.

And as her tears began to dry, breathing heavily...Lefiya slowly smiled.

She stared up at the endless, clear blue skies:

"And...I will keep moving forward."

She could not return to her old self. She would not forgive herself if she did.

That was what she had thought before, and yet her heart was strangely refreshed. She had graduated from being a crybaby, becoming a bit more dignified an elf, but even so, she still cried sometimes.

By doing that over and over, she would become none other than a strong Lefiya.

Even after she had lost someone precious, Lefiya had kept her head up and

that was the clichéd answer she had found.

"Mr. Bete called me out on it, too, but...lend me your sword and rod. I did tell my share of lies, too, so this is enough to make us even, right?"

She smiled when she made her request, just as a breeze whistled by.

Her heart was clear and pure like a spring reflecting the blue sky.

It was already winter. This cold wind would bring a white frost to Orario that reminded her of someone, bringing about yet another change in Lefiya's heart.

Perhaps she would have even more juniors by then. In which case, she would have to become even stronger.

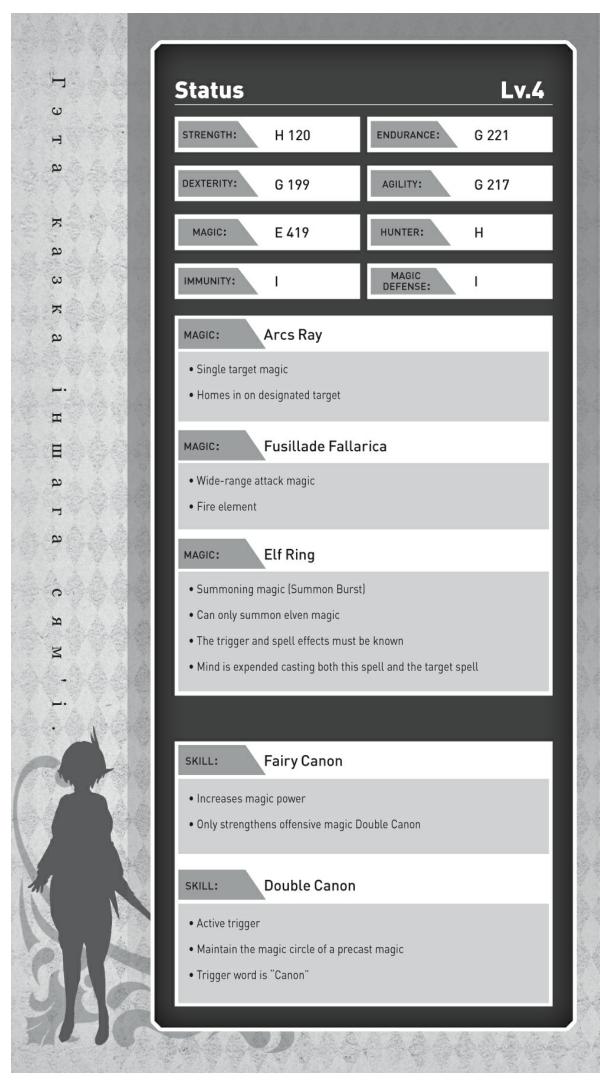
"You did say we'd always be together..."

Closing her eyes, she felt like she could sense someone nodding at that.

She put her hand on her shoulder, which still felt warm.

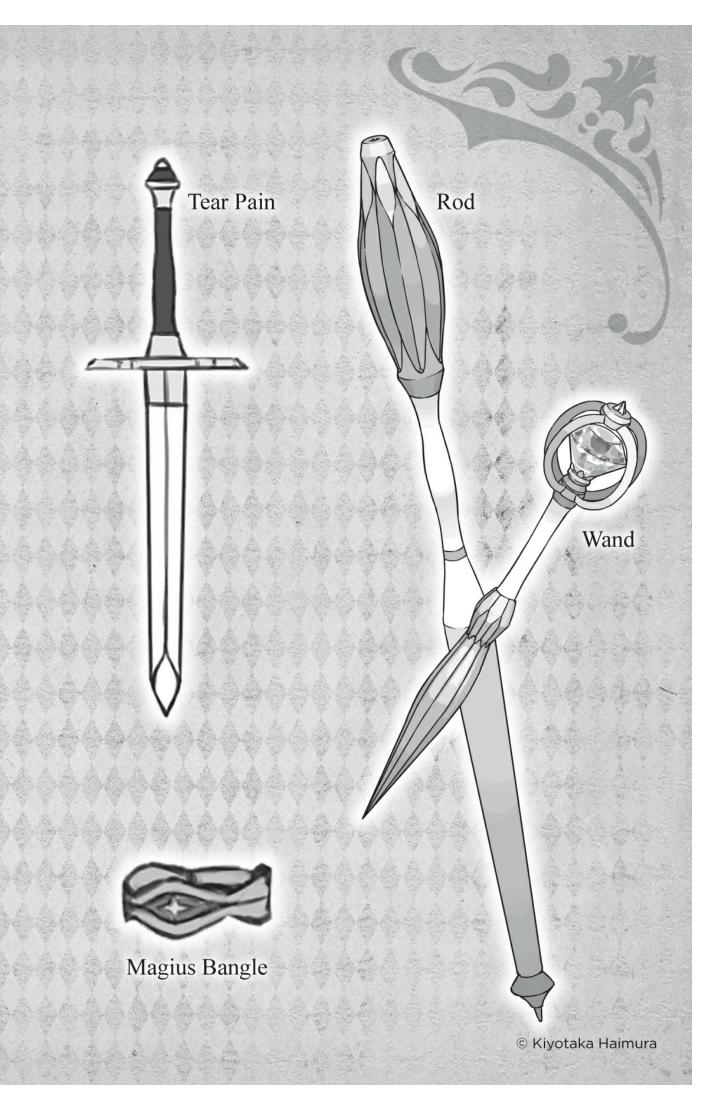
The girl, who would no longer become anyone else, clutched the sheathed shortsword to her chest and donned a sunny smile.



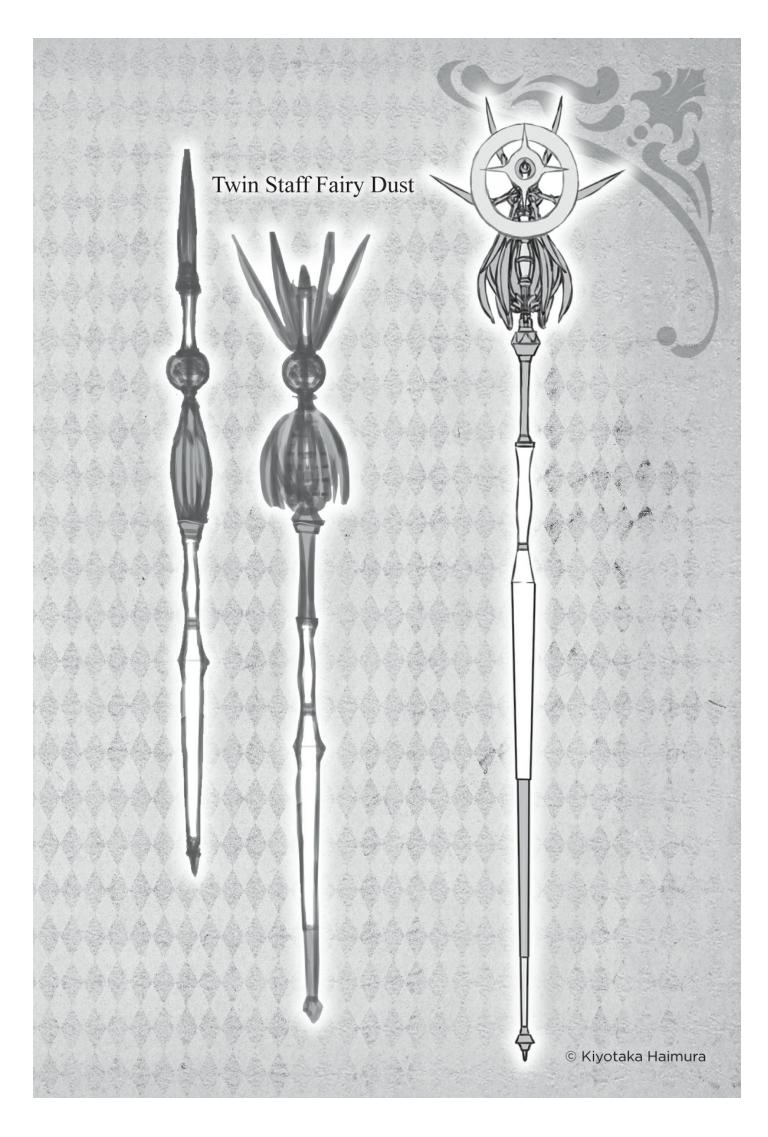




WEAPON: Tear Pain • Filvis's sword. • Resharpened by Lefiya after learning how from Gareth, she has taken it a • The reason why is unclear, but with its sturdiness comparable to a Durandal, she has started using it regularly. • There are traces of light in it, as if it was coated in a faint white ash. EQUIPMENT: Concertante of Light and Flame • A red-and-white magical garment. • Fibers of the sacred trees of a certain two elves' home villages are woven into it. • Inferior to Riveria's Fairy Queen's Robe, it still boasts powerful magic resistance as well as the flexibility and defensive strength of combat gear. EQUIPMENT: Magius Bangle • An adventurer's accessory with a special power. • Stores Lefiya's magic power in regular times. • Particularly when using barriers and such, by using it as a catalyst, Lefiya can maintain the spell even from a distance.



WEAPON: Twin Staff Fairy Dust • A single magic staff formed by combining a rod and a wand. • Orario's first variable weapon and first linked weapon. a • The wand is usable by itself. The rod is used by linking with the wand. • When linked, the magic stones in both pieces synchronize, greatly increasing magic power. Spell potency skyrockets. • She uses it as a wand when fighting as a magic swordswoman, and a staff when fighting as a backline mage. Custom ordered by her, the staff would allow her to protect anyone and rescue anyone. • The wand was made by reworking Filvis's Protector's White Torch, while the rod was made using the remnants of Lefiya's staff Forest Teardrop. Maintaining the unique qualities of both weapons, it demonstrates the compatibility of elven magic power. • Due to the previous weapons being used as material in the making, its cost, magic stones included, was 24,000,000 valis. • According to the mage Lenore, who made it, "For some reason, it boosts Lefiya's magic the most." It is effectively custom-made for Lefiya.



Afterword

Sorry for the wait. Here is the thirteenth book in the side story.

The time lines for the main series and side story are finally in alignment, and the plan is to have them connected as two sides of the same coin starting from this book and Volume 19 of the main series. Currently, in February 2023, due to various vagaries of convenience, the reverse side, this book, has come out into the world first, so there are some spoilers regarding the nineteenth volume of the main series, but I hope you will forgive that.

As announced in the last volume, a new arc has begun with this book.

The other protagonist of the side story, the elven heroine, has updated herself physically and mentally, demonstrating her resolve.

When I first considered the aftermath of the twelfth volume, I immediately thought that she would become a different person.

So after many discussions with my editor and Kiyotaka Haimura, the current version of her was born.

But during the writing process, it never really felt like I was writing a different person. She had changed so much from her past self, and yet mysteriously, some things remained the same. That is just how it seems to go, be it reality or fiction, human or elf.

I imagine this heroine will continue to grow so as not to lose to the protagonist of the other books, who found his own resolve in the twelfth volume of the main series. I am sure she, too, will slip from my grasp and surpass even my wildest expectations.

With the beginning of a new arc, I also included a new stage in the form of the School District. Bits of information about it have been included here and there, so it feels nice to finally be able to bring it out.

The design that Haimura drew is incredible—so much so that I would like to be able to show it to all the readers somewhere.

When I first saw it, I was thrilled. It was packed with enough excitement to match Orario, from the students and teachers to the deities. I look forward to doing my best to convey that excitement as much as possible in the side story as well as the main series. Also, I will not neglect the sword princess heroine and friends, who got the short end of the stick this time.

With that, please allow me to move on to my customary thanks.

To my editor Takahashi and to Usami, who has taken over for Kitamura as chief editor, you two have been a tremendous help yet again. I am sorry for all the corrections that kept cropping up for the sake of meshing this with the main series. And to Kiyotaka Haimura, who sketched a setting for the School District that was beyond all expectations, thank you very much. After seeing all your illustrations of the school and everything else, it reminded me again how grateful I am that you are responsible for this side story.

The design for the new Lefiya was fantastic. The effect of putting the blue rose on her chest was impressive! And I am really, truly sorry for making you have to provide a record number of character designs and sketches of concept art!

Thank you as well to Juri Kimura, who is the voice actor for Lefiya in the anime and game—thank you for taking part in the discussions. Thanks to your support, the resolutely short-haired Lefiya exploded onto the scene. Please continue to take care of her.

I am deeply grateful to everyone who was involved with this book. All of you readers may have been a little taken aback, but I hope you will continue to support this fairy girl as she keeps fighting while keeping memories of her fellow elf close.

Regarding the side story's next book, Volume 14, while I just talked about linking the story with the main series, I'm afraid that will get a little derailed straight off the bat. More concretely, it will be old stories of the three who have supported the familia from the start.

The fairy heroine's past will be featured this time, and that should be the last

of the old stories for all of the main characters other than the Sword Princess, so I hope you will pick it up.

Thank you very much for reading this far.

I'll take my leave here.

Fujino Omori

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