FUJINO OMORI
ILLUSTRATION BY
KAKAGE
CHARACTER DESIGN BY
SUZUHITO YASUDA
1
Is It WRONG to TRY to PICK UP GIRLS in a DUNGEON?
TALES of HEROES
ASTREA RECORD
THE RISE OF EVIL

ASTREA RECORD
THE RISE OF EVIL
1
FUJINO OMORI
ILLUSTRATION BY KAKAGE
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SUZUHITO YASUDA
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Astrea
Gojouno Kaguya
Lyu Leon
Iska Bra
Neze Rankett
Celty Srowa
Alize Lovell
Lyra
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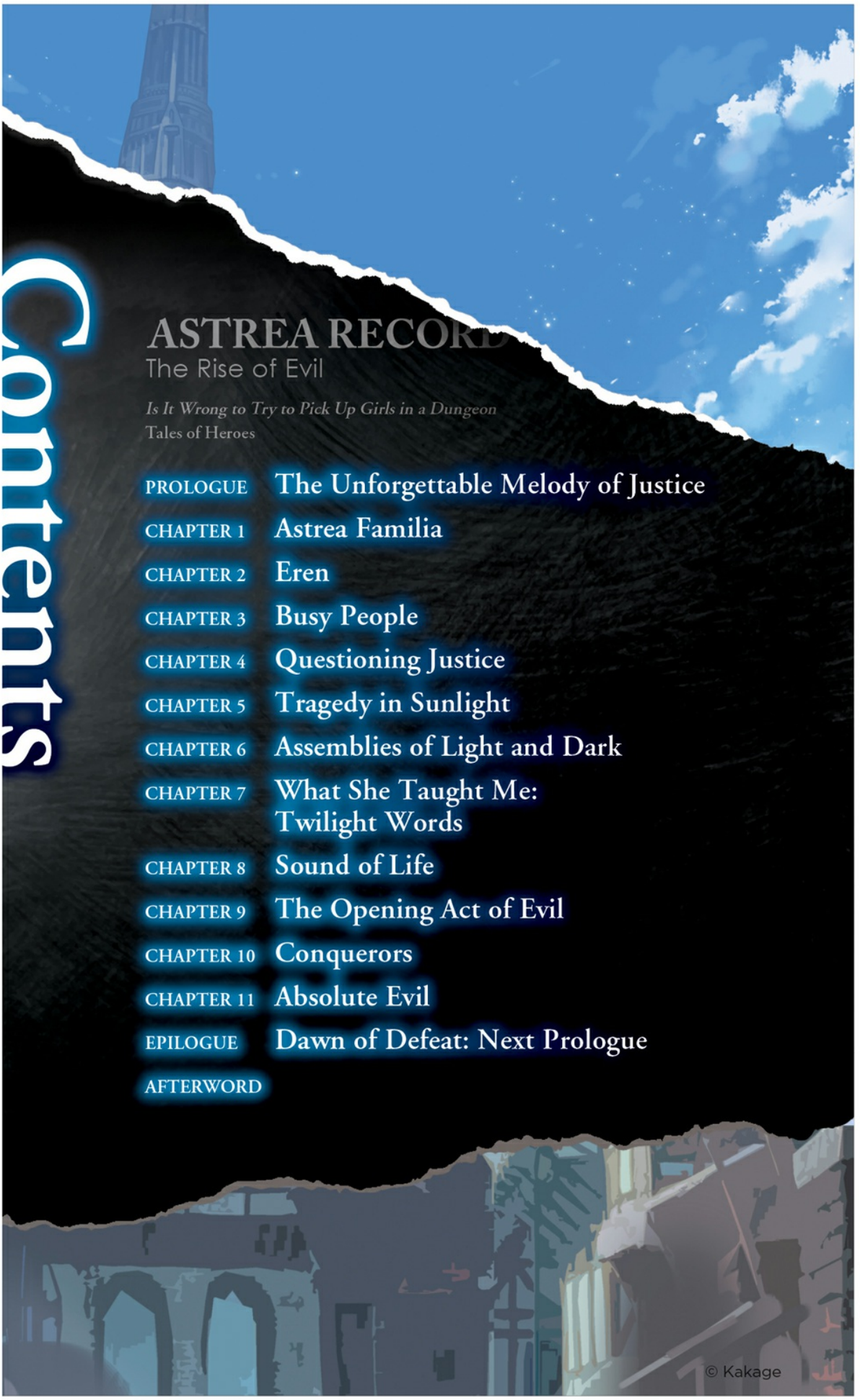

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Is It Wrong to Try to Pick Up Girls in a Dungeon? Tales of Heroes

Astrea Record

The Rise of Evil

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ILLUSTRATION BY KAKAGE

YEN ON
NEW YORK

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Astrea Record, Vol. 1 -The Rise of Evil-Is It Wrong to Try to Pick Up Girls in a Dungeon? Tales of Heroes FUJINO OMORI

Translation by Jake Humphrey

Cover art by Fujino Omori

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ASTRAREA RECORD vol. 1 -JAAKU TAIDO—

DUNGEON NI DEAI WO MOTOMERU NO WA MACHIGATTEIRUDAROUKA EIYUTAN

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GARETH LANDROCK
Senior member of *Loki Familia*.
Dwarf.

RIVERIA LJOS ALF
Vice-Captain of *Loki Familia*.
High Elf.

FINN DEIMNE
Captain of *Loki Familia*.
Prum.

LOKI
Goddess of *Loki Familia*.

RAUL
Adventurer of Freya Familia.
Human.

FREYA
Goddess of *Freya Familia*.

ALLEN FROMEL
Vice-Captain of *Freya Familia*.
Catman.

OTTAR
Captain of *Freya Familia*.
Boaz.

THE FOUR GULLIVER BROTHERS
Senior members of *Freya Familia*.
Prums.

HEGNI RAGNAR
Senior member of *Freya Familia*.
Dark Elf.

HEDIN SELLAND
Senior member of *Freya Familia*.
Elf.

SHAKTI VARMA
Captain of *Ganesha Familia*.
Human.

GANESHA
God of *Ganesha Familia*.

ASFI AL ANDROMEDA
Vice-Captain of *Hermes Familia*.
Human.

HERMES
God of *Hermes Familia*.

VITO
Lieutenant of the Evils.
Human.
A defective man known as Faceless.

OLIVAS ACT
Lieutenant of the Evils.
Human.
Nicknamed Vendetta.

VALLETTA GREDE
Lieutenant of the Evils.
Human.
Nicknamed Arachnia.

EREN
A mild-mannered god that Lyu and company run into in Orario. Takes a keen interest in the concept of justice.

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GOJOUNO KAGUYA
Vice-captain of *Astrea Familia*.
Level 3.
Her alias is Yamato Bellflower.

ALIZE LOVELL
Captain of *Astrea Familia*.
Invited Lyu to join. Level 3.
Her alias is Scarlett Harnell.

LYU LEON
Elf from *Astrea Familia*.
Level 3.
Her alias is Gale Wind.

ARDEE VARMA
Ganesha Familia.
Level 3.
Her alias is Vyasa.

ASTREA
Patron divinity who rules over justice and law.
A kind and merciful goddess.

LYRA
Prum from *Astrea Familia*.
Level 2.
Her alias is The Slyle.

Characters

CELTY SROWA
Astrea Familia.
Elf.

ISKA BRA
Astrea Familia.
Amazon.

NEZE RANKETT
Astrea Familia.
Werewolf.

MARYU RÉAGE
Astrea Familia.
Human.

NOIN UNIC
Astrea Familia.
Human.

ASTA NOX
Astrea Familia.
Dwarf.

LYANA LIETZ
Astrea Familia.
Human.

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PROLOGUE

The Unforgettable Melody of Justice

PROLOGUE

The Unforgettable Melody of Justice

Be troubled.

For that is how you grow.

Journey alongside your worries and fears.

And at the end of it all, tell me what you have learned…

…Of the light of justice, the light that glistens like stars in the night.

“Thanks for helping me load all this luggage, Bell.”

“No problem! Always happy to lend a hand.”

Bell flashed a smile to the grateful merchant and peered up at the sky. It was so clear and cloudless over West Main Street, he could almost see the stars.

He pulled his eyes away from the heavens and picked up another box. The man Bell was helping was someone he had become acquainted with as a novice adventurer—not that he considered himself much more than a novice even now—and he had supplied Bell and Hestia with Jyaga Maru Kun when the two were destitute. Bell was all too happy he could repay the favor.

“…Hmm?”

“What’s up, Bell?”

“Oh, nothing. It’s just…” Bell glanced around. “The city seems…different today.”

The streets looked the same as they always did. A little sparser than usual, perhaps, but not without braying horses and rattling carriages. Shops and stalls lined the streets, selling fresh fruit and vegetables to passersby. It was a common place for gods and goddesses with time on their hands to enjoy a leisurely stroll.

But the usual hustle and bustle of the Labyrinth City seemed strangely absent today. Much like the sky above, all was calm—the calm before a storm.

“Ah, I guess you’re still new to Orario,” the merchant remarked.

“Yes…I suppose I am,” Bell replied. “Is there something I should know, Bogan?”

“There ain’t a single person in this city who don’t know what today is,” replied the man, his eyes fixed on some distant spot. Bogan gazed up at the sky in silence for a few seconds, then, just as Bell was about to inquire further, he turned back.

“Sorry, Bell,” he said, “but I’ve gotta get a move on. Thanks again for lendin’ a hand.”

“Oh, um, you’re welcome. Good-bye…”

Bogan departed with a smile and a wave, but the interaction weighed heavily on Bell’s mind. He stopped and took another look around, wondering what on earth could warrant the solemnity he saw. Like a service without ceremony, like churchgoers huddled in prayer, the people went about their days in silence.

“…What’s going on?” he asked aloud. “I’ve never seen the city so quiet.”

Bell was all alone. There were no plans for venturing into the Dungeon today, so Lilly and the others weren’t with him. There was no one to answer his questions save the stone-faced pedestrians or the large number of veteran adventurers gathering around Babel and in Central Park.

It was only upon seeing them that Bell finally realized what this reminded him of.

“It’s like the whole city is in mourning…”

A feeling Bell knew all too well. As he pondered it, a familiar god emerged from a side street and spotted him.

“Oh, Bell? Fancy meeting you here.”

“Lord Hermes…? Wh-whoa, what’s with all those flowers?! There’s so many!”

The sight took Bell by surprise before he could even return a decent greeting. In Hermes’s arms was a splendid bouquet of white lilies.

“Ah, well, you see, I’ve got a laundry list of places to visit. There’s lots of people to thank for giving us what we have today.”

“What we have today…?” Bell repeated.

Hermes noticed the uncertain look on his face and said, “Oh, of course. You don’t know what happened seven years ago, do you?”

Seven years ago? thought Bell, but Hermes went on before he even had to ask. The god narrowed his eyes, focusing on memories of days long past.

“A period of untold chaos unlike any this city has seen before or since: the *Age of Darkness*.”

Hermes’s fleeting, lonely words became one with the air and swept over the

city.

“Many died…”

A trickster goddess, a prum hero, a high elf mage, and a dwarven warrior set the table in a mansion courtyard, filling glasses with wine.

“Many fought…”

A boaz and cat person sparred, their weapons a blur as each sought to prove their oath. Four dwarven brothers and a pair of black and white elves stood nearby while a silver-haired goddess watched from the top floor of her home.

“Many wept…”

A god in an elephant mask waited beside a woman from his familia. Her tears long since dried, she stood before the single upright sword in silent prayer. There seemed no end to the graves around them.

“And it all culminated in the events of what many call the *Great Conflict*, on this day, seven years ago.”

Hermes dropped his gaze from the sky and pulled his mind away from the scenes happening all across the city as he spoke. When Bell looked into those rubellite eyes, his breath was stolen.

“The Age of Darkness,” he muttered. “Eina and Lilly mentioned it once. They said there was this organization called the Evils…”

According to the stories, it was a time when lawlessness and chaos gripped the Labyrinth City, brought about by the rise of an evil power.

Hermes nodded. “Yes, a confluence of several evils, you could say. It was a terrible time. A terrible, awful time.”

Bell had rarely seen the frivolous god so serious. He wasn’t sure how to react. After a moment, though, Hermes flashed a smile.

“Luckily for us, there were those who stood up in the name of justice and beat back the darkness. It’s such a shame they aren’t here with us anymore…”

“Huh, they aren’t? …So you don’t mean Lady Loki and Lady Freya?”

Bell had assumed they must have had some part in ending the Age of

Darkness. After all, fifteen years ago, their familias were the two major forces in Orario. Bell had heard that from none other than Hermes himself.

But the god only smiled, as if giving a gentle nudge to a struggling schoolchild, that he might reach the answer on his own.

“You know, Bell, I just ran into Lyu on her way to the Dungeon. What do you suppose she’s doing there?”

“Huh? Oh, could it be…?”

Bell gasped as he remembered something. Something the elf girl had told him once in a Dungeon paradise, of a group of people devoted to justice above all.

“Yes,” said Hermes. “She’s going to see her friends. After all, she was a disciple of justice herself, once upon a time.”

Deep underground, the light of myriad crystals lit up the gloom. Shards of blue and white shaped like chrysanthemums glittered in the ceiling overhead. This was Under Resort, a paradise of forests and lakes found on the Dungeon’s eighteenth floor.

“…I’m sorry it’s been such a long time,” said Lyu, a bouquet of white flowers in her arms.

The grave opposite her stood silent. A multitude of weapons, including swords and staffs, stuck into the ground, many long since succumbed to rust or rot. Though the forest had begun its attempt at reclamation, the grave was still recognizable for what it was—or rather, for what it was not, as no bodies lay beneath the soil.

Lyu knew this, and yet she spoke to the silent collection of mementos as though her friends were right by her side.

“I always shirk my visits around this time. I wonder if perhaps I’ve lost the right to fight for justice…The right to come and see this place…to come and see you.”

The grave was hidden away in the eastern forests of the eighteenth floor. There was no one to hear her speak—to hear her confessions.

Though painful and tragic, her memories of the past were precious. Lyu had tried to move past them, but she failed to take a single step forward. Five years ago, she dyed her golden hair a pale green, and everything since then felt like one long, failed attempt to regain everything she lost.

She had abandoned justice, taken up the mantle of revenge, and all it had done was leave her with scorched wings.

“I still don’t know if I have the right,” she said. “I feel like I’m going nowhere—like I’ve *been* going nowhere—ever since that day seven years ago. I haven’t even spoken to Astrea in all that time.”

Lyu lifted her sky-blue eyes. Amid the silence of the dead, she mustered up a smile for her fallen comrades.

“If you could see me now,” she said, “would you be angry? Would you be sad to see what I’ve become? Or…would you smile for me?”

Of course there was no answer. Her friends were gone. But Lyu could never forget their names.

“Kaguya…Lyra…”

The rebellious rival, the dry-witted prum.

“Noin, Neze, Asta…”

The optimistic human, the sisterly werewolf, the lovely little dwarf girl.

“Lyana, Celty, Iska, Maryu…”

The adept and novice mages, the booze-loving Amazon, and the big sister of the whole group.

“…And Alize.”

Finally, the name of the one Lyu respected above all others.

Memories unrooted themselves from the depths of Lyu’s heart. A slumbering sense of justice steadily awoke, and Lyu’s mind was whisked back in time seven years, to a battle with evil she would never, ever forget.

ASTREA RECORD
THE RISE OF EVIL

The night was aflame.

Thick pillars of smoke rose and became smoldering clouds, and flashes of hellfire lit up the dark. People were fleeing from a large factory engulfed by flames. Screams issued from within—the laughter of chaos, of those who would see order fall.

As the fire turned a whole stretch of the city into ash, another sound rang out in the streets. The unmistakable clash of blades. This was the war cry of order, the melody of justice fighting to retake the day.

“Gwaaah?!”

A bladed boomerang whirled through the night, ripping through those who stood on evil’s side. Its victims slumped to the ground that was already slick with their blood. The boomerang returned to the hand of its prum wielder.

“Alize!” she shouted. “Warehouse number three is clear!”

“Move on to number four!” came the reply. “Lyra, take Iska and Maryu and clear out the next section!”

Flames and sparks continued to spill from the factory windows as smoke billowed from every door. Yet the brave and nimble footsteps never once broke stride.

“Sure thing. Your orders?” asked Lyra.

“Use ice to freeze the enemies and the flames! Stop both of them at once! Go, go, go!”

The marching beat of justice was unstoppable. Glinting steel vanquished their foes, while a fierce blizzard extinguished the fires. With silvery blue flashes all around them, the fighters descended deeper into the heart of the factory.

The scarlet-haired girl giving the orders raised her eyes as a smile sprang to her lips.

“Kaguya, Leon! Take care of the enemy’s main force!”

A pair of footsteps echoed off the floor. The first belonged to a raven-haired human wearing a scarlet kimono, an odd sight this far west. Beside her ran a

blond-haired elf in a cloak and mask.

“Our captain really loves working us to the bone,” muttered the first. “Make sure you don’t fall behind, elf.”

“Enough talk, Kaguya. We move.”

Their speed took their opponents completely by surprise. Despite their slender physiques, the two girls were instantly in the enemy ranks, slashing wildly.

Their weapons flew with meticulous precision, like the choreography of a delicate dance. The foes in their milk-white robes struggled to survive, much less fight back. Their swords and spears left openings, their axes moved too slowly, and even their shields broke apart under the unrelenting assault. The only thing left to decide was whether they’d be cut to ribbons by Kaguya’s blade or broken by Lyu’s wooden sword.

The men had strength in numbers, but it availed them naught. The two girls tore through the band in an instant like a whirlwind. It was a ballet of violence played out against a complex backdrop of fire and blood.

“Gyaaagh?!”

Soon, the final enemy fell to Lyu’s wooden sword. Beside her, the girl in the kimono raised a hand to her cheek and let out a despondent sigh.

“How disappointing,” she said. “It beggars belief how these hideous weaklings can cause so much misery and pain.”

Behind her feigned smile lurked a smoldering anger, as unruly as the flames themselves.

It was then that a man, concealing himself for an opening, finally emerged from his hiding place and attacked.

“Diiiiiiie!!”

In a last-ditch attempt to go out in a blaze of glory, the man swung the enchanted crimson sword in his hands. A blossom of fire erupted from its tip. This was clearly the weapon responsible for the inferno.

“An explosion?! It’s an ambush!” cried Lyu.

“It came from…Oh no! Alize!” said Lyra, the color draining from her face as she realized where the fireball had wrought its merciless destruction.

The man watched on with glee, his shoulders heaving with every breath. But just as he was about to raise his voice in victorious laughter…time stopped.

The fires parted, and a figure emerged from the sea of flames, unharmed.

“B-but how?! Impossible!” the man stuttered, shuddering with fear. Before him, the girl combed her fingers through her long red ponytail.

“Next time you fling a fireball, make sure your target isn’t *Scarlett Harnell*!” she jeered, wearing the smuggest grin in the world. “The flames of evildoers leave no marks on my fair and beautiful skin! He-hem!”

“Alize, your clothes are on fire!” yelled the prum girl. “Put it out, or we’re gonna see that fair skin sooner than later!”

The girl, startled, noticed the flames at her back and dashed to and fro until the speed of her movements extinguished them.

“Phew,” she said once the fire was out. “Well, these things happen! Failure is the mother of success! Now I’m one step closer to perfection!”

Lyra looked at her in disbelief. “That’s a lotta words to avoid saying you made a mistake…”

“It must be lovely to smother all those inconvenient truths with optimism,” Kaguya added. “Perhaps we should all take a leaf out of the captain’s book.”

“I won’t hear another bad word against Alize,” said Lyu. “She’s just a little… you know.”

“At least try to come up with somethin’,” came Lyra’s incredulous retort.

“Y-you, it can’t be…” said the man, breaking the comedic atmosphere. He raised a trembling finger at the scarlet-haired girl.

“Oh, you’ve heard of us?” replied Alize with a beaming smile. “Should we do our introduction, then?”

The girl raised her voice theatrically, as though she had been patiently waiting for this exact moment. She was fearless, unflinching, even in the face of the

very evil she swore to destroy.

“Protectors to the weak!” she declared. “Confounders of the strong! And sometimes, vice versa! Arbiters unfettered and unchained, weighing all atop the impartial scales of truth and law!”

Their leader, Alize Lovell, was flanked by her ten compatriots. Elves, humans, and prum, all young girls, and yet the light of justice burned within each and every one of them.

“Our wish is order, our every dream a smile! Our backs and our hearts shine with the sword and wings of justice!”

Their emblem sat conspicuously on the girls’ cloaks and clothing. Four sets of wings, and a sword that resembled a set of scales. It was the symbol of justice and synonymous with their lady’s name.

“We are *Astrea Familia*!!”

Zeus and Hera’s defeat at the hands of the Black Dragon was the harbinger of the Age of Darkness. Evil thrived, order devolved into chaos, and blood was washed away with more blood. Villains reigned supreme while the innocent suffered.

These are the chronicles of a certain family and their efforts to change the darkest chapter in Orario’s history.

CHAPTER 1
Astrea Familia

ASTERIA RECORD
The Rise of Evil
Story by Fujino Omori · Illustration by Kakage
Character Design by Suzuhito Yasuda

CHAPTER 1

Astrea Familia

It took some time before the flames were fully extinguished. While Lyu and company had managed to preserve much of the factory's structure, in other places, the walls had partially collapsed and the scorched interior was visible even from the outside. However, the greatest priority had been to prevent the fire from spreading, and mercifully, these efforts had succeeded. While the townspeople celebrated in the street, the girls of *Astrea Familia* remained inside the building to clean up the aftermath.

"Stopped the fire *and* rounded up the Evils! All in a day's work! He-hem! I'm so great!"

The redheaded human girl proudly puffed out her relatively modest chest. Her name was Alize Lovell, and she was the captain of *Astrea Familia*, a group dedicated to the pursuit of justice.

She swept her hair with her hand, a gesture that was clearly meant to charm her audience. "Even in the depths of a burning factory," she said, "pretty and purehearted girls like us can always bring a crisis to a swift conclusion!"

"What is that even supposed mean?" interjected Lyra, the prum. The girl had a all-knowing air that seemed deeply at odds with her cute prum features. "I don't know how you manage to stay so optimistic," she sighed. "I'm gettin' tired of fightin' all the time. It never seems to end."

Those words seemed to dampen Alize's spirits. She dropped her head a little and said, "Yeah, we didn't manage to stop the Evils before they put their plan in motion. If only we'd arrived a little sooner, maybe we could have saved the factory as well."

Her voice that had been full of sunshine shifted to a subdued whisper in an instant. Lyra held her tongue and said nothing more. However, the awkward silence lasted only a moment, before a voice like treacle joined in.

"The captain cannot be held to blame," it said. "If anyone, it was that elf

holding the rest of us back.”

These words belonged to their human comrade, Gojouno Kaguya. Her long dark hair was smooth, like silk, and her voice was as fluid and light as a musical performance. She was elegant and refined, a shining example of what those in the Far East termed a *yamato nadeshiko*—the embodiment of modest femininity.

“Did you find some fault in my actions, Kaguya?” Lyu Leon refused to let that insult pass without comment. Though she kept her face hidden behind a mask, it was impossible not to notice the radiant and natural blond hair that flowed down her back. Their racial differences aside, when she stood side by side with Kaguya, the two often looked like sisters from behind. In truth, the two were bitter rivals—or so they might be called if the relationship were mutual. Instead, it was mostly Kaguya who kept finding new and inventive ways to get on Lyu’s nerves.

“Why, yes. Did you not notice?”

“I’m the one who cut through the enemy lines!” Lyu roared back. “I’m the one who secured the warehouse before anyone else! Tell me, where did I fall short?!”

But Kaguya’s rude insinuations were the least of Lyu’s annoyances.

“And drop the facade,” she said. “Just listening to you is making me sick!”

“Very well, very well. In that case, as you wish, I shall speak freely.”

Lyu’s outburst did little to faze her. Without breaking her perfect smile, Kaguya dropped the hand she’d been pressing to her cheek.

And then.

“You moroooooooooon!!”

Her personality changed completely. Her deranged smile and leering eyes put even Lyu on edge.

“Did I find fault?!” She scoffed. “You bumbled your way through everything!”

“Wha…?!”

“Who do you think has to clean up after you every time you let your emotions get the better of you? Me! So don’t get uppity with me, you trash pixie!”

“Trash?!”

A pair of wild eyes and an unending stream of abuse. This was Kaguya’s true self, behind the “facade” Lyu had been referring to. Her spittle sprayed Lyu as she raged like the saltiest of sailors. The *yamato nadeshiko* was nowhere to be seen now.

“You oblivious, tunnel-visioned, mindless little numbskull! How dare you speak as though you’ve done a good job, you child!”

“I—I wasn’t the only one who went on a rampage out there! I would very much like to know what part of *your* response you considered proportionate punishment!”

“Now you’ve done it, you trash pixie!!”

“Stop calling me that!!”

A fight promptly broke out between the two second-tier Level 3 adventurers. It was a fearsome exchange of punches and kicks almost impossible for the eye to follow.

“Oh, here we go again,” sighed Lyra. “Another swearin’ match between our hardheaded elf and our far-eastern princess. I wish you’d spend all that effort buildin’ each other up instead of tearin’ each other down!”

“I like it!” said Alize, hands on her hips. “They make a good match for each other, don’t you think?”

“Please stop them instead of lookin’ so proud, Captain…” said Lyra with an even deeper sigh. Just then, another voice called out, and into the factory strode several high-tier adventurers led by a strikingly beautiful woman.

“Sorry I’m late, Alize!” she said.

“Ah, Shakti, you came!”

Her azure hair was cut rough and short, and her battle clothes had a deep slit cut into the side. She was taller than Lyu and the others, with sharp features that paired well with her wise leadership.

This was Shakti Varma, the captain of *Ganesha Familia*. Her appearance put a smile on Alize's face. It was fair to say the two were bosom friends.

"Oh, well, *you're* just in time; we've just finished doin' all the hard work," scoffed Lyra. "You call yourself the city watch?"

Indeed, *Ganesha Familia* was the other group besides *Astrea Familia* dedicated to upholding law and order in Orario. Following the will of their god, the Lord of Hosts, Shakti and company took it upon themselves to ensure that laws and customs were being followed all over the city. In the current Age of Darkness, Orario would have long since succumbed to violence and mayhem were it not for their constant efforts.

"Lyra!" Alize chided, "*Ganesha Familia* are very busy watching over other parts of the city! Don't say things like that."

"Well, someone has to, and you guys are all too goody-goody."

Alize was just about to reprimand her fellow adventurer when Shakti shook her head as if to concede the point.

"It's okay, Alize," she said. "Lyra's right. And though it won't make up for our negligence, we'll handle things from here." She turned and barked some orders to her followers. "Take the unconscious Evils into custody! Hurry! Keep an eye out for any stragglers!"

""""Yes, ma'am!""""

The members of *Ganesha Familia* moved out with perfect coordination. They were both more numerous and better equipped than *Astrea Familia*, so the latter had no cause to object.

"This is the fourth attack on magic stone factories so far," said Lyu, resting in a corner of the burnt-out factory as *Ganesha Familia* got to work in the background. "Could it be mere coincidence?"

"Four attacks is no coincidence," replied Kaguya. "The Evils are plotting something, and no matter how many we put down, more always seem to crawl out of the woodwork."

"And the ones we round up never seem to know the full plan," added Lyra,

clasping her hands behind her head. “Wonder if we’ll learn anything this time…”

Just then, one of Shakti’s subordinates came over and whispered a report in her ear, after which she turned to face Alize’s group.

“So what are we looking at, Shakti?” asked Alize.

“At first glance, the same as the previous raids,” Shakti replied. “An attack on Orario’s all-important magic-stone-item production industry.” She turned her sharp-witted eyes on the members of *Astrea Familia*. “But thanks to your timely intervention, we managed to survey the factory before everything burned down. That means that this time we noticed that something had been *stolen*.”

“And that was?” asked Lyu.

“A batch of magic-stone ignition pieces,” Shakti answered.

“Ignition pieces…?” asked Alize, cocking her head in confusion. At her puzzled response, Shakti launched into a careful explanation.

“Think of them as the switches that activate a magical device,” she said. “They’re an integral part of all magic items, right down to the humble magic-stone torch.”

Lyu pondered the meaning of Shakti’s words. The item in her example was something any adventurer knew how to use. They came in all shapes and sizes, but the internal mechanisms were largely the same, or so Lyu understood. Of course, she wasn’t an expert, so this was just based upon what people said. The point was, the stolen part was vital to the construction of any magic-stone item.

“What do you suppose the enemy wants with them?” asked Kaguya.

“Who knows?” replied Shakti, closing her eyes.

“Are they building something?” asked Lyra.

“I don’t know that, either.”

“Well, some good we are, then. I hate bein’ kept in the dark. What does it say that neither us nor the watch have an answer for this?”

As harsh as they were, Lyra’s words came from a place of genuine concern more than anything else. That didn’t stop Lyu and the other familia members

from stiffening up when she spoke her mind so frankly.

"…I'll report this information to the Guild, and advise them to bolster their security," said Shakti after a moment of silence. "I'll inform *Loki Familia*, too."

"Let's beef up patrols around the city," Alize added. "We don't need to know all the details of our enemy's plan to stop it from happening."

As the two familia captains compared their plans, a third voice chimed in.

"The remaining Evils have all been rounded up, sis."

Cute was the word that came to mind upon seeing Shakti's younger sibling. The tomboy cut of her pale blue hair lent her less of the adult beauty of her elder sister and more of a childlike innocence. She was also more amply endowed than the likes of Lyu and Alize, with a petite build that was apparent even under layers of clothing. Her blue battle gear, however, was similar to Shakti's.

But the captain seemed to take issue with her sister's casual tone. "Ardee," she said. "I thought I told you not to call me that in front of others."

"Oh yeah. Sorry, sis," Ardee replied, sticking out her tongue. Shakti sighed and left it at that.

"We'll take things from here," she said, turning to Alize. "We'll keep the Guild appraised, so you can all go home and rest."

"Really? We'll take you up on that, then," replied Alize with a smile. "Neze! Go tell the others we're pulling out!"

"You got it!" came the wolf girl's eager reply, and she ran off to relay her captain's orders. Just as the rest of *Astrea Familia* turned to leave, Ardee piped up.

"See you soon, Leon."

"Indeed. See you soon."

Lyu gave a friendly smile before turning to leave. Alize took one last look at her comrades and declared, "Justice has been served! Let us return triumphant into the arms of our Lady Astrea!"

By the time *Astrea Familia* left the destroyed factory, it was already night. Thick clouds were gathering in the moonless skies above, allowing only a smattering of starlight to filter through. It was this scant light that illuminated the way home for Lyu and the others. Though quite some time had passed since the end of the battle at the burning factory, there were still grateful citizens in the streets who congratulated them as they passed. Lyu was awkward and unsociable at the best of times and never knew how to act at times like these. She hid behind her comrades, allowing them to bask in praise instead.

After leaving the main street and passing down several side roads, the group arrived at last in a quiet little neighborhood in the northern part of Orario.

This was where the members of *Astrea Familia* called home—Stardust Garden.

It was an elegant white mansion, but by no means extravagant. When they entered the lobby, a charming goddess greeted them.

“Welcome back, everyone,” she said.

It was clear to all who saw her that this was a woman of grace, warmth, and compassion. Such was the purity and dignity with which she composed herself. Long walnut hair flowed down her shoulders, and her eyes were a deep blue, like a sea of stars, with a fascinating clarity even more striking than Lyu’s.

Her smooth yet supple skin was wrapped in a pure white robe that had never seen a stain in its life, and she moved and spoke with perfect modesty. The only feature that might tempt a man to sin was the deep ravine that ran between her breasts.

The word *goddess* was invented for women like her. Such was her beauty, her grace, her magnificence.

She was Astrea, patron deity of *Astrea Familia* and goddess of justice.

“Lady Astrea!”

Upon seeing her divine mistress, Alize let out a cry of elation. The captain of the familia was so full of love and respect that she looked like a little girl

running into the arms of her mother.

Afterward, the other members of the familia walked through the door, one at a time.

“It’s good to see you again, Lady Astrea,” said Lyu simply.

“Sorry to come back all at once like kids,” said Lyra. “What’s for dinner? Just kiddin’.”

“My, for our Lady herself to greet us at the door. What did we do to deserve this honor?” asked Kaguya.

While everyone had something different to say, all of them shared the same joy when they laid eyes on their goddess.

“Must it be an honor, Kaguya?” replied Astrea. “I am always happy to see your safe return. Celebrating that is universal, whether god or mortal.”

A benevolent smile played on her lips. Surely, Lyu thought, this was what everyone imagined a goddess to be, back before the Age of Gods began.

“Especially in times like these,” Astrea went on. “To see my beloved children all come back safe, it makes my heart soar like a newlywed virgin!” she added with a playful smile.

“A—a newlywed…virgin?! Lady Astrea, you sure know how to get the blood pumping!”

“And what’s got you all hot under the collar, Neze?” retorted the industrious and no-nonsense Lyu with a sigh.

Astrea gave a lovely smile before looking over the members of her familia.

“You are all weary, I expect? Would you like some supper? Or a bath?”

“Or you, Lady Astrea?” said Kaguya with a grin, casting her eye toward Astrea’s bust—the largest of the group by far save for Maryu’s.

“K-Kaguya?! You lecherous, impudent…”

Lyu confronted the troublemaker in a display of that famous elf temper.

“Oh? What’s got you so bothered?” Kaguya retorted. “Don’t tell me a pure and upstanding elf such as yourself took my innocent words as something

scandalous?”

“Y-you…!”

A smug smile spread across Kaguya’s lips as Lyu fell right into her trap. The look in her eyes said “Come on, let’s hear what you were thinking, you trash pixie!” Lyu could do nothing but tremble in rage and grit her teeth as a single tear rolled down her cheek.

“I guess I’ll take a bath first!” said Alize, ignorant of the war being waged right under her nose.

“That’s our captain for ya,” remarked Lyra. “Doesn’t read the mood at all!” Then, with a tired sigh, she exited the lobby. It was a day like any other in the *Astrea Familia* household.

“Oh yeah, why don’t you join us, Lady Astrea? Then I get to make my bath time my you time as well!”

“““?!”””

Every member of the familia—even Lyra, who was halfway out the door—turned and stared in shock.

“Oh my. It seems none of you are so forward as our Alize here,” Astrea chuckled. Alize bounded over to her and, with an energetic smile, took her hand.

“Come with me, Lady Astrea! Let’s get you—”

“““No!! You can’t!!”””

The other girls shouted out in anger, and yet another of their daily quarrels began.

“Now that we’ve finished with our baths and our dinner, it’s time for the debriefing! Let’s go over what we’ve learned today!”

The night was drawing on, and the familia members gathered in a spacious meeting room, seated in a circle on couches and armchairs. Alize, her skin still

glossy from her bath, led the proceedings in a rousing and energetic manner, earning resentful glares from her exhausted compatriots.

“How can she stand up there after what she just did…?” asked Lyra, slung over the armrest of her couch.

“It *is* quite a punchable face,” agreed Kaguya with a smirk.

“Don’t hate me just because I’m the perfect cutie on the inside as well as the outside!” came Alize’s reply. “Don’t worry, though, you’re plenty pretty yourself! *Wink!*”

“Grrrh…!” growled Kaguya, her smile struggling to stay on her face.

“You’re going to pop a blood vessel if you aren’t careful,” offered Lyu, but the far-eastern girl either didn’t hear or was willfully ignoring the elf’s words.

“Tee-hee,” giggled Astrea, sitting down in her prepared seat. “I shall never tire of watching your lovely banter, but I fear we must be pressing on. Alize, do you have anything to report?”

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“I do, Lady Astrea! The factory may have been severely damaged in the blaze, but I’m pleased to report there were no casualties! That’s including us, of course!”

Alize proceeded to direct the meeting while the other familia members each stood up and gave their own reports and voiced their opinions on the matters under discussion.

“We’re dealing with riffraff,” said Kaguya, annoyed but nonetheless keeping up her polite persona. “An organized riffraff, but a riffraff nonetheless.”

“Yeah, someone’s clearly in command,” said Lyra. “Quantity over quality isn’t really up to snuff these days.”

“Even so, the attacks keep coming,” said Lyu, visibly frustrated. “Whoever’s behind this is laughing at us while we run around putting out their fires.”

“I understand where you’re coming from, Lyu,” said Astrea, “but we mustn’t rush into danger. Don’t forget that members of the Evils have been hiding in the city ever since the days of the two titans.”

“*Zeus Familia* and *Hera Familia*…”

Lyu intoned the names with a sense of reverence and awe.

“They epitomized the Age of Gods, and they were what every familia aspired to be,” said Alize, uncharacteristically serious. “Zeus and Hera ruled over Orario for a thousand years without a single threat to their existence.”

“Even the Evils were too afraid to make a move during their reign,” added Lyra, slouching messily in her seat. “So they must have been pretty strong, huh.”

“They were the most powerful familias ever to exist since ancient times,” said Astrea, causing Celty, the youngest of the troop, to gasp. Lyu’s face stiffened as she picked up the remainder of the tale.

“But the Black Dragon defeated them both…”

The Three Great Quests.

Orario’s duty, placed on its shoulders by the rest of the world. The slaying of

three powerful beasts that predated the Age of Gods. Together, Zeus and Hera defeated the first two of these monsters—Behemoth and Leviathan—but they failed to vanquish the third, a dragon so mighty it was known as the apocalypse incarnate.

What kind of force could have been responsible for the fall of not one, but two of history's greatest familias? Other gods and their followers could only dream of coming close to matching their splendor. A hush fell over Lyu and the others as they contemplated it.

After a few moments, it was Neze who said what was on everyone else's mind.

"If they couldn't beat it, who will? No one's ever gonna put an end to the King of Dragons…"

This time, the room fell deathly silent. It was a fear shared not just by her fellow familia members but all of Orario and quite possibly the entire world. The Black Dragon was a living symbol of death and destruction, a harbinger of demise that slept at the northern tip of the world. Lyu and the others could not help but feel a sense of primal dread at the mere mention of its name.

A gloom had fallen over the late-night meeting. Of course, the one to attempt a return to form was none other than Alize.

"We've strayed far enough, I think. Let's get back on topic! Ignite your righteous hearts, everyone! Burning justice!!"

Everyone looked up at their hotheaded captain. "Remember, nobody died today, and that's thanks to all of you!" she went on. "And we figured out another step in the Evils' plan! As long as we keep making progress like this, we'll get there in the end! Let's celebrate the small victories, people!"

She put on a beaming smile as though sheer enthusiasm could banish the gloom from her comrades' hearts. "And every step we take brings us that much closer to the golden days of Orario when Zeus and Hera ruled the city!"

"Alize…" muttered Lyu, wide-eyed.

"So don't lose faith!" said Alize, beating her right hand to her chest. "Remember, the fastest way forward is through! Our persistence will force the

Evils to crack! And once they're dealt with, we move on to defeating the Black Dragon! Mm-hmm, we can't fail!"

Her huge leaps of logic, if such reckless optimism could be called that, left something to be desired. The rest of *Astrea Familia* just stared at her, mouths agape. Even Astrea simply blinked a few times in mild-mannered surprise. The room fell silent once again, though for a completely different reason than before. It was Lyra who spoke up first.

"'We can't fail,' she says. There's bein' optimistic, and then there's this."

Her exasperated tone failed to hide the smile forming on her lips. Next to speak was Kaguya. She wasn't as easily swayed by her captain's words.

"I find it hard to accept such idealistic platitudes," she said. "It's fine to speak of the future, but we can't look away from reality in the meanwhile."

Once again, Kaguya had discarded any pretenses of humility to speak her mind outright. She wasn't quite the wide-eyed maniac she was when making fun of Lyu, but her pragmatic and stern words were still a departure from her usual composure.

But Alize only turned and gave the far-eastern girl a curious look. "I don't know what you mean, Kaguya. I'm not being idealistic at all. We won't fail. We can't afford to. That means all there's left to do is get it done!"

Then she smiled. A clear, almost blinding smile, as though what she was saying was the most obvious thing in the world.

Kaguya was lost for words. She froze, an astonished look on her face. Then she smiled as well.

"…I never can win against you, can I? I'm starting to think this is a bad matchup for me."

Kaguya conceded and allowed Alize's soothing words to wash over her. Even Lyu, unwise as she was to the subtleties of the heart, could see in the girl's face that this was one debate she didn't mind losing.

"Hey, it's not like we've never seen Alize be optimistic before," said Noin, smiling fondly.

“That’s right! We never would have joined her if it weren’t for that unbeatable enthusiasm!” added Maryu.

“All right, we’re gonna beat the Black Dragon!” cheered the Amazon, Iska, raising a fist above her head. “I dunno when or how, but we’re gonna do it!”

The place erupted into smiles, banishing the girls’ fears in an instant.

“……. ”

It was looking at this scene that made Lyu think.

You’re amazing, Alize.

When they look into your eyes, everyone finds the courage to believe. From cynical Lyra to pig-headed Kaguya. Noin and Neze, Asta and Lyana, Celty and Iska, and Maryu, too.

And me.

You reached out and took my hand and earned my unending respect. You are my hope. My inspiration.

So long as we have you and Astrea leading us, we will never lose sight of what’s right.

Lyu thought back to the day the two first met. She could not quite explain why she felt so proud.

However, in an apparent *screw you* to Lyu’s introspection, Alize puffed out her modest chest and displayed her smuggest face yet. “Once again, everyone kneels before my overwhelming justice!” she declared. “He-hem! I’m so great!”

“““““““““Grr!”””””””””

Everyone save Lyu and Astrea looked ready to blow a fuse.

Her only flaw is that she doesn’t know when to stop talking…, thought Lyu, burying her face in her hands.

“Anyway! Our mission is to wipe away people’s tears and bring back their smiles! That’s why we fight!”

Astrea nodded sagely at her captain’s commendable words. “That’s right,” she said. “There are as many struggles for justice as there are stars in the sky.

Have no doubt that our cause is one of them.”

“See? Lady Astrea agrees!” Alize grinned. “Now then, let’s do our usual, and then we can all get some rest!”

At the mention of this “usual,” a few of the members grew weary looks.

“Do we have to?” moaned Lyra. “I find it a little embarrassing, to be honest…”

“You’re not alone,” agreed Kaguya.

“Be serious, you two!” reprimanded Lyu. “I—I don’t find it embarrassing at all! Not one bit!”

So she claimed, but Lyu’s cheeks had already begun to redden at the thought of what was to come.

First, Alize beckoned the whole group to rise. The eleven girls stood in a circle while their fiery-haired leader extended one hand into the center.

“We do our duty! We balance the scales! Until the day we join the stars!”

She recited the words all in attendance had sworn by. This oath was their proof and pride that they were followers of Astrea.

“Like comets racing across the sky, we leave our starry trails on this earth wherever we go! This I swear, by the sword and wings of justice!”

“By the sword and wings of justice!!”

Lyu and the other girls repeated the oath, and before their smiling goddess, they renewed the vows that had brought them together.

Ten days until the Great Conflict…

CHAPTER 2
Eren

CHAPTER 2

Eren

The blue sky overhead was completely gone, replaced with a layer of ash-colored cloud.

It was early morning, and the constant gray above was beginning to reflect in the people's faces as they walked the streets.

However, one particularly noisy—or rather, *energetic*—young woman was determined not to let the melancholy weather keep her down.

"It's time to keep our promise to Shakti and patrol the city!" the flame-haired maiden declared. "We'll catch all the bad guys!"

Alize was accompanied on this occasion by Lyu, wearing her usual mask to hide her face.

"I doubt they'll attack another factory so soon after the last," she said, "but I suppose it couldn't hurt to keep an eye out."

"Absolutely!" Alize beamed.

The two began their patrol. Patrols were one of the many duties the members of *Astrea Familia* took upon themselves these days. In this age of darkness, crime and corruption were rife, and the Evils weren't the only ones they had to look out for; even ordinary people could fall to dark temptations. It was important that strong enforcers, and in particular, adventurers, take to the streets and keep an eye out for any wrongdoing.

Of course, keeping the peace was primarily the role of *Ganesha Familia,* who acted as the self-appointed city watch. However, Lyu and the others often took part as well. After all, no one could deny that the girls of *Astrea Familia* had the city's best interests at heart.

"There doesn't seem to be any pattern to the attacks," said Lyu, "but the first and second districts seem to have suffered the brunt of the damages."

"This area is the heart of Orario's magic item industry," said Alize. "I heard

they're managing to hang in there for now, but it won't be long before the remaining factories are completely overwhelmed."

The two had teamed up to patrol the northeastern quarter of the city. The other girls were elsewhere, patrolling other districts in the hopes of warding off any further attacks.

In addition to making the rounds, Lyu and Alize also questioned civilians. Alize was terrifyingly adept at getting people to open up, so she was perfect for the job. The only problem was that she talked the ears off anyone willing to listen, regardless of whether it seemed relevant or not. While she focused on canvassing the populace, the relatively unsociable Lyu kept a vigilant eye out for anything or anyone that seemed out of place.

As their investigation proceeded apace, the clouds above grew thin, eventually giving way to the orange glow of evening. It was at this time, while the pair walked down an ordinary little side road, that Lyu mentioned what had been bugging her ever since that morning.

"…The city feels lifeless," she said. "Orario is supposed to be the capital of the world, but who would believe that after taking a walk through these streets?"

"Everyone we meet looks sad, the shops have barred windows to deter thieves…" Alize agreed. "No one feels safe or like they can relax, and it's affecting them inside and out."

People walked the streets with their eyes cast downward, or they would leap at shadows, peering nervously over their shoulders. The usual clamor that filled the streets, of peddlers hawking their wares, was completely absent.

"The Evils have everyone spooked," said Lyu, the frustration apparent in her voice. "They're all on guard for whatever might happen next. Despite our best efforts, people don't feel any better. What can we do?"

A flicker of uncertainty crossed Alize's brow. "If nothing else, this is definitely an improvement," she said. "Remember how bad it was when we first met?"

It's been three years already. Three years since Alize saved me and led me into Lady Astrea's care…

It had happened not long after Lyu had first arrived in Orario. To an elf who

grew up in the forests and didn't know her streets from her avenues, the Labyrinth City was a maze that lived up to its name. However, for all its size, the place seemed like a ghost town, and the face of every passerby was dark and stormy. In those days, the Evils did as they pleased, and public order was essentially non-existent.

At the time, Lyu had not yet received her Falna and was accosted by dangerous kidnappers. A good-looking elf girl like her was bound to fetch a princely sum on the black market.

However, it was none other than Alize who had come dashing in to save the day like a fairy-tale prince.

"I couldn't believe how unreasonable you were back then," said Alize. "After I saved you, you still looked at me like you'd bite my hand off, like a stray cat!"

"I—I did not! I-it's just, I'd only recently left my village, and I was a wreck… Anyway, I—I wasn't behaving that way on purpose!"

"I still remember what you said to me, you know! After I chased off Jura, you said, 'If you only saved me to satisfy your own ego, don't expect a reward. Hmph.'"

"Aliiiiize…!"

Lyu could only whine in response to her captain's unflattering imitation. It was obvious even through the mask how embarrassed she was to see her awkward past reenacted. Even the very tips of her long ears were beginning to turn red, and Lyu hoped the ground would just swallow her up so she wouldn't have to hear any more.

"He-hem! Oh, I know all about your weaknesses, Little Miss Leon! But I think you're wrong about one thing."

"Hmm?"

Lyu was taken off guard by Alize's sudden shift in tone. She lifted her gaze, but at that very moment, a girl on the street called out to them.

"Ah! It's *Astrea Familia!*" she cried.

"That's right, we're *Astrea Familia*, champions of justice!" declared Alize,

turning and striking a pose. “And you must be little Leah, that girl I helped the other day, no?”

“That’s right! You remember me!” The girl beamed, hugging the teddy bear in her arms.

Lyu recalled the girl as well. Alize had pulled her out of the way of a horde of stampeding civilians after one of the Evils’ attacks had caused a panic in the streets.

Just then, the girl’s mother came over. “Oh, you don’t know how grateful we are to you, Miss Adventurer,” she said, bowing her head respectfully. “How can we ever repay you…?”

“Don’t worry about it,” said Alize. “I was only doing what’s right! We’re always happy to help!”

“Thank you for saving me, nice ladies! Bye-bye!”

The girl waved one of her teddy bear’s arms as she and her mother departed. Lyu watched, astonished, as they left.

“…I don’t believe it…”

“Those are the smiles we’re fighting for, Leon. There may not be many of them, but they’re out there. We shouldn’t forget that just because not everyone has the strength to smile all the time. That’d be an insult to the work we do every day.”

“…….. ”

“We’ve seen what change justice can bring. All we have to do is keep fighting the good fight, don’t you think?”

“…You’re right, Alize. Of course you are. There’s no time to be standing around feeling sorry for myself when we have a job to do.”

Looking at her leader’s gentle smile, Lyu couldn’t help but feel heartened herself. It was as if all the fear and doubt was banished from her mind at once. She lifted her head and, in a proud voice, declared, “We need to do all we can for the sake of peace in—”

“Ohhhh noooo!”

It was at that very moment that a melodramatic male voice called out, and the two girls turned to see a low-life hoodlum running away.

“Ha-ha! Yoink!”

“My 444 valis! But that’s my entire life savings!” the man squealed. “Somebody, stop that thieeef!!”

“Huh, is that a god?” observed Alize. “What’s the world coming to when even the divine have to worry about getting their purse snatched?! Also, how is 444 valis your entire life savings? You’re a god!”

“Now’s not the time, Alize! Let’s go!”

Keeping her partner from uttering any more tactless remarks, Lyu leaped into action. The street was busy, despite the city’s languor, and the hoodlum wove his way through the crowd with practiced ease. However, he hadn’t counted on Alize and Lyu. Without hesitation, they cut through the sea of people, sometimes leaping up onto buildings and running along walls to gain on their quarry. The man very quickly found the pair closing in on him.

“You can’t escape us!” Alize yelled. “Prepare to be cuffed!”

“That girl in the red hair…That’s *Scarlett Harnell*?! Dammit, why did I have to run into *Astrea Familia*?”

The opportunistic mugger cursed his rotten luck. He had skimmed a truly pathetic sum off his witless mark only to be spotted by perhaps the most famous pair of vigilantes in the entire city. When the alternative was confronting the physical prowess of a couple of upper-class adventurers, the hoodlum had no choice but to disappear down a side road in an attempt to get away.

“Gweh?!”

However, he wasn’t prepared for someone to be standing right there, which explained why he ran straight into them before falling to the ground.

“Come on, stealing isn’t right. We have to work for our money, don’t we?”

The girl who cut off the thief was just a little too young and adorable to be called a beauty like her sister. If Alize was a bouncing bundle of sunshine, then

this girl was the calm spring breeze. Even her soft, sonorous voice exuded a natural gentle quality.

“Ardee!” said Lyu with surprise.

“That’s right!” said the girl the pair had met the night before. “Who’s your fellow Level Three adventurer and the kind and upstanding Shakti Varma’s younger sister? It’s me, Ardee!”

“Who exactly needed that exposition…?” said Lyu with a fed-up look.

Displaying a sunny disposition that seemed a little strange coming from a member of the city watch, Ardee bounded over to Lyu like an excited puppy.

“Hey, Leon. You’re looking pretty as ever. *Sniff*…and you smell nice as well. Mind if I hug you?”

“Listen to me when I’m talking.”

“He-hem!” Came Alize’s proud, boastful voice. “*I* got to hug her yesterday when I slept in her bed! You should have seen her blush, it was adorable!”

“Both of you, focus on the job!” yelled Lyu, but she was hopelessly outnumbered, with the triumphant red on the one side and the touchy-feely blue on the other. Tears formed in her eyes as she was reminded of the embarrassment of the previous night while Ardee grabbed her with both arms.

She heard the voice of the little girl, Leah, who had apparently run after them to watch the chase. “You’re all such good friends!” she cried. That only made it hurt even more.

“Ah-ha-ha. Well, enough playing around,” said Ardee, releasing Lyu and spinning to face the mugger. “Let’s see that wallet you stole, mister.”

“Guuuh…”

The hoodlum had taken a big fall and was only just now scrambling to his feet.

“Argh, dammit!” he cursed, beating his fists against the earth. “I’m screwed! My life’s over! Just throw me in a cell and leave me to rot already!”

“Wow! What a refreshing change of pace!” said Alize, awestruck. “I’ve never met a criminal who volunteered to be arrested before!”

“Please don’t make this worse than it already is,” Lyu muttered at her. The hoodlum, meanwhile, continued his rant.

“The strong could never understand what we gotta go through just to put food on the table! We can’t work, we can’t sell shit, and we can barely breathe without someone blowin’ up a buildin’ halfway across town!”

The human man’s clothes were nearly as ragged as his outlook on life. He was fairly old, with a stubbly beard, and while he clearly wasn’t an adventurer, he wore armor across his shoulder and stomach, presumably to defend against a stray knife on the street. It was a wise choice during times like these.

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“It’s all right for you lot, who’ve got work comin’ outta your ears! Why don’t you go after the real villains instead of pickin’ on little guys like me?!”

Lyu cast an embarrassed eye downward at the man’s words.

We haven’t done anything wrong…but he has a point. As long as there’s a lack of public order, upstanding citizens will keep falling through the cracks.

It was neither right nor wrong. It was simply the reality of the situation. There was much Lyu could say, but none of it would console the man, so she simply ground her teeth in frustration.

The petty thief, meanwhile, staggered to his feet. “That’s right,” he said, empowered by their failure to respond. “You made us like this! This is all your fault! I’m the victim here!”

At this, the girl who had been standing quietly beside Lyu took a step forward.

“That’s your excuse?” she demanded.

“Uh…”

“Bad things are still bad. If stealing is okay as long as someone else stole from you first, what’s stopping your victim from turning around and robbing *you*, hmm?”

It was Ardee. There was no blame in her voice. It was as if she was simply explaining the way things were.

“Your crime just now would have put somebody in the exact same situation if we hadn’t stopped it.”

“W-well…”

Though the man was not being pressed to explain himself, he flustered with his words anyway. Ardee gave him a gentle smile.

“So I want you to promise me something.”

“What?!”

“Promise you’ll never resort to crime again. Promise me that, and we can forget all this nastiness ever happened.”

The man looked dumbfounded, but it was Lyu who cried out in surprise first.

“What?!” she shrieked. “Ardee, you can’t do that!”

“Why not?” the girl replied.

“Because he committed a crime, and he needs to be punished! If you let him off the hook, what’s to stop others like him? How would we ever uphold public order if everyone was as lenient as you?!”

But Ardee wouldn’t change her tune so easily. “Hmm, I think I have the right to take extenuating circumstances into account,” she insisted. “This man isn’t lying, and I know stealing is wrong, but…” She smiled. “…We got the money back, so no harm, no foul, right? And nobody got hurt except our friend here.”

“Still, a crime’s a crime!” Lyu bellowed. “Ardee, you call yourself a member of *Ganesha Familia*?!”

That furious accusation wiped the smile off Ardee’s face. She closed her eyes in contemplation.

“The carrot…and the stick. Isn’t that what they say?”

“Hmm? What’s that got to do with anything?”

“I’m just trying to be the carrot to your stick. After all, too much of the stick wears everyone out.”

“…!”

Ardee opened her aqua-colored eyes and stared straight at Lyu. The city watch girl had struck upon something Lyu had not expected to hear.

“Y-you mean…”

It was something Lyu had never even taken the time to consider. Her brutal crackdown on crime was only making the problem worse.

Perhaps she could have blamed the age of darkness they lived in. Because of it, she didn’t have the luxury of turning a blind eye even if she wanted to. But the fact was, she *didn’t* want to. She’d been content to impose her own ideas of justice upon the entire population.

This revelation had shaken Lyu. She couldn’t find the words to respond.

Suddenly Alize, who had been intently listening to the debate, stepped in.

“You know, I think I agree with little Miss Ardee here!”

“Alize?! Not you as well?!”

Alize walked right over to the confused gentleman and pointed a finger at him.

“But you won’t get a third chance, understood? You can bet your life as a free man on that!”

“Y-you’re really letting me go?”

“Yep,” said Ardee. “Although I’m probably going to get in trouble for it later… Oh, and take this.”

Saying this, Adree offered something she had been holding in her hand the entire time. It was a baked yam, steaming and wrapped in paper.

“I can’t give you money, but I can let you have my Jyaga Maru Kun,” she explained. “Don’t worry, I haven’t taken a bite yet.”

With that, the girl flashed her usual, sunny smile.

“Eat it while it’s still warm!” she said.

The man was flabbergasted. He stood stock-still, grinding his teeth in frustration. And then…

“…You think you’re so bloody good…Well, screw you!”

Then he grabbed the food out of Ardee’s hand, turned, and fled, unwilling—or perhaps ashamed—to spend a second longer in her presence. The trio watched him go in silence.

“I think what he meant to say was ‘Don’t get the wrong idea! I’m not grateful to you or anything!’” said Alize. “I mean, he wasn’t shy about taking the Jyaga Maru Kun, right? Let’s see if he changes his tune once he gets some decent food inside him!”

“I don’t see why he would,” said a dejected Lyu, her emotion showing on her face. “And I don’t think there’s much chance he talks like that, either. Is this really going to help make things better?”

“…Leon,” said Ardee, turning around. “I think you’re in a very privileged position to be able to speak like that.”

“…Huh?”

“He was right. The only reason we can afford to be worried about justice is because we’re the ones with all the power.”

“…!”

Lyu was petrified with shock.

“I’ve been thinking, Leon,” Ardee went on. “Do you think forgiveness can be a part of justice?”

Framed against the sunset, the girl wore an unsure smile. The other two, and even the little girl’s mother, gazed at her in wonder. Leah also tipped her head in curiosity as she considered Ardee’s words.

“I…I…”

Lyu struggled to piece together a coherent response. Her lips flapped open and shut wordlessly. It was at that moment that a hollow series of claps rang through the street.

“Bravo! Oh, I say, bravo!”

“It’s you…!”

“The god who was robbed…?”

Lyu and Alize both turned to look at the newcomer. It was the very man the purse snatcher had accosted mere minutes ago.

“What an excellent display from the champions of this city’s justice!” he said.

“Sorry to have caused all this fuss. He came at me from behind; I never saw it coming!”

The light of the sun drew long shadows across the cobblestones. The owner of the voice, it had to be said, did not strike the trio as a particularly powerful god.

He had a blithe grin on his face and his dark hair was long for a man, and noticeably unkempt, with stray hairs poking up this way and that. There was even a gray streak. Overall, he had a somewhat sloppy look about him.

"Are you hurt, sir?" asked Ardee.

"Not a scratch, cutie," the man replied. "Thanks for getting my wallet back."

It wasn't really what you would call a wallet. It was more like a small cloth drawstring bag. In any case, Ardee handed it back to the man, after which he introduced himself.

"My name is Eren," he said. "And what are your names? I overheard this young lady was from *Ganesha Familia*, but what about the rest of you?"

"I'm Alize Lovell!" Alize declared. "Captain of *Astrea Familia*!"

"…And you may call me Leon. I'm also part of *Astrea Familia*."

As was evident from the way she always wore a mask when out and about, Lyu did not want people finding out about her heritage. There were many reasons for this, but for the most part, it was simply an elvish custom. Even though Lyu despised her own race, by and large, she still followed tradition in the act of keeping her real name hidden from all but her closest confidantes.

The Guild also knew her name, of course, as Lyu had submitted it when becoming an adventurer. But with times being what they were, the Guild took the security of identifying information very seriously, as it was impossible to know when an innocent slipup could inadvertently aid the forces of evil.

The point was, whenever Lyu had to introduce herself, she did so using her family name only. Alize and the others also upheld this custom when they were out in public, so it was quite unlikely that anybody else knew her first name at all.

"*Astrea Familia*," the man called Eren mused. "The followers of the goddess of justice…"

He had paused after Alize and Lyu had introduced themselves and began to ponder something under his breath. He appraised the two girls for a moment, then a smile appeared on his lips.

“…I see, I see! Real, live emissaries of justice, then! It’s a good thing we met, I tell you!”

“…Hmm? What are you talking about?”

Lyu furrowed her brow, while Eren raised his arms playfully.

“I’m saying, it’s a good thing you two saved me. I know I already said this, but bravo, really. Bravo.”

Ignoring the look of mild concern on the girls’ faces, the god went on.

“As for *what* I’m impressed by, it was that discussion on justice the two of you had. The morality of gray, beyond good and evil…I couldn’t stop listening! Especially to you, elf girl.”

“Me…?”

“Yes, you. Noble and uncompromising, yet unable to come to a clean solution. Like a baby bird, struggling to make sense of the world. Your heart is the purest here by far.”

Eren was a strange god. Unlike others, he almost seemed to revel in uncertainty. However, his divine charisma was the real deal, and it was impossible to stop listening to him. He continued his speech as the streets turned redder and redder with evening’s light.

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“I want to see what you make of this age—and what this age makes of you. Ahhh, I just can’t wait to see what answers you reach.”

Lyu saw a tiny spark in the eccentric god’s eyes as he stared deep into hers.

It’s not hostility, it’s not hate, and it’s not disdain. But whatever it is, I don’t like it. Just who is this man?

Even Lyu was unable to put the feeling into words before Alize quickly leaped over.

“I don’t like the way this guy talks!” she said, stepping in front of Leon and stretching out her arms. “Get back! I bet he’s a freak whose laugh sounds all *Bwuh-huh-huh!*”

“Oh, don’t say that! I’ll really be offended! I’m not like those other two-bit gods, I tell you!”

“Yeah, that’s what they all say!” yelled Ardee.

“Oof! What a blow!” said Eren, doubling over as though he’d been punched in the gut. “I had you pegged for a peppy tomboy, but to think you’re an airhead to boot…”

Even Lyu was somewhat disappointed by the husking, raspy voice that came out of the god now, a stark contrast to his earlier theatrics.

“…In any case,” he said, dropping the act and returning upright. “I’d love to stay and have some more fun with you girls, but it’s getting late, and I have things to do.”

“Will you be all right by yourself?” Lyu asked. “I don’t see any of your followers around. Perhaps we could escort you back to your home.”

“Oh, that won’t be necessary,” the man replied with a grin. “I’ll see you around.”

He gave a light wave and walked off, disappearing down shadowy streets.

“The Guild is always telling gods not to wander round by themselves,” Alize sighed, “But he isn’t the first to break the rules, I guess.”

“Many gods aren’t willing to listen to rules set by mortals,” Lyu agreed, “but

even for a deity, he was an odd one, don't you think?"

Ardee nodded, her light blue hair bouncing. "Yes, he reminded me a bit of Lord Hermes," she said. "Oh, Leon, I almost forgot. It looks like branches from the holy tree in your village really are here in Orario. We didn't manage to get our hands on any, but we did pick up a few smugglers who spilled the beans."

"…!! Really?"

"Yeah. Apparently, the Evils have been going around to other elf villages, too, pillaging branches and sneaking them into the city."

This wasn't the first time Orario had seen this kind of shadowy trade. Each elven village possessed its own sacred tree, and their branches were extremely valuable. They could be used to make weapons and staffs, but most of these were gifted to elves leaving the village and rarely sold to outsiders at all. The elves were a very protective race, especially when it concerned the objects of their worship.

"Black market trade," mused Alize. "I can't believe we're seeing that sort of thing right here in Orario."

"Well, Orario is the crossroads of the world, so it makes sense," reasoned Ardee, her expression grave. "All sorts of dubious items end up here. There's a lot of dealers involved, and squashing them all is like pulling weeds. There has to be somewhere they're keeping the goods when they're not being sold, though. Some kind of warehouse or something…"

As Ardee suggested, smuggling activity was rife in Orario these days, yet another consequence of the Age of Darkness.

"I'm sorry we couldn't find your village's treasures, Leon…" she said apologetically.

"…It's okay," Lyu replied. "It's not my village anymore. I don't care what happens…"

"There you go again," said Alize, noticing how much the elf girl struggled to keep a straight face. "You care about them still, don't you?"

Ardee stared at Lyu's face for a while, before clasping her hands in front of

her. “Just you wait, Leon!” she said, with twinkling eyes. “We’ll catch those rotten Evils and take back everything they stole!”

Lyu wasn’t sure what to say.

“I know I shouldn’t play favorites,” Ardee went on, “But still, I want to help those I care about first! I’ll see you around!”

Then, with a wave, she left, bounding off down the street without a care in the world.

“Ardee! You’ve got it all wrong! I really don’t mind what—she’s gone…”

Lyu let her arm limply drop, and Alize gave a smile.

“She’s trying to be nice, so just let her do you a favor,” she said. “After all, you’re just as deserving of kindness as everyone else!”

“…Right.”

There was no greater symbol of the innate goodness of mortals than the bright and sunny Ardee Varma. Lyu already felt as though a tiny part of her burden had been lifted, and a warm smile worked its way onto her face.

“Right, back to the patrol!” Alize declared. “It’s time to clean up these streets and bring peace to—”

“Alize,” came a voice from overhead, and a small figure dropped from the rooftops. It was Lyra, apparently in some rush.

“What are you doing here?” asked Alize. “Have you finished your rounds already?”

“Sure have,” the prum replied. “And now we’ve got our next job. Keepin’ an eye out for any suspicious behavior.”

Lyra must have come all this way to spread the message, Lyu reasoned, but she still had one question.

“Who did these orders come from?”

“Who else? My hero!”

“Captain, I’ve just returned from our scheduled meeting with *Ganesha Familia*. The details are all here in this scroll.”

The voice of a young man rang throughout the office of the Twilight Manor, *Loki Familia* headquarters, located in the north of Orario. Finn took the report and ran his eyes over it.

“Thank you, Raul,” said the prum man. “Good work.”

“Not at all, sir!” said the young adventurer with a youthful smile. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, sir, I’m off to join Noir and the others on patrol!”

But just before he reached the door, Finn called out. “Raul,” he said. “Remind me how old you are this year?”

“Hmm? Fourteen. Why…?”

Finn smiled, his azure eyes as deep and blue as a pool at night. “I see. No reason. Sorry to stop you. Go on and join your patrol.”

“O-okay. Thank you.”

Raul turned and left the room. It was then that a tall elf who had been standing in the room spoke up.

“Finn, why did you ask Raul his age?”

“I just felt like we’ve grown a little too complacent lately,” answered Finn, leaning back in his seat, which let out a splendid creak. “We don’t even hesitate sending out youths like him onto the lawless streets where danger lurks around every corner and death comes as easily as your next breath.”

“True, it’s not a problem we can simply brush aside,” replied the green-haired high elf, Riveria. “But Raul, like Aki and the others, are just supporters. It’s not like we send them to fight on the front lines.”

Finn was a seasoned adventurer and spoke from bitter experience. Riveria challenged his assertion not because she doubted the truth of his words but to offer an alternate perspective.

However, as if spotting an opening in his vice-captain’s words, Finn grinned.

“You know, the girls from *Astrea Familia* are much the same age, Riveria.”

"…That is different. They are highly skilled and have convictions strong enough to match. I have no doubt that great things will come of them in the future."

Riveria was a Level 5 adventurer, one of the strongest in Orario, so hearing this from her was high praise indeed. *Astrea Familia*'s efforts in preventing the arson attack in the industrial quarter the other day had inspired the populace to believe in hope again, and the high elf princess was sure they would go on to do much more.

It was then that the other person in the room, the old dwarf Gareth Landrock, shared his thoughts on the matter while stroking his magnificent beard.

"Agreed. Those girls might be some of the last few beacons of hope this city can count on. It's not for us dusty old heroes to deny the future generation their chance to change the world, and in times like these, we can ill afford to."

The first-tier adventurer, a man known as the Peerless Wall, cracked an aged smile. Noticing the sadness in Finn's expression, he attempted to cheer him up with some more pleasant memories.

"Raul came to this city to be an adventurer, just like the rest of them. Though I daresay he bit off a fair bit more than he could chew at the time."

"So he did. I remember it well," said Finn, cracking a smile.

"And don't forget," Gareth continued. "You were not much older than him when you established *Loki Familia*. Age is just a number on the battlefield."

"Things were different then, Gareth," Finn objected. "…But I suppose you're right. That kind of sentiment won't do us any good in times like these. Perhaps I should rely on a warrior's wisdom and bury my sentimentality for now."

With the help of the other leaders of the familia, Finn rooted out the seeds of sorrow from his heart. The three of them shared a smile before turning to more serious matters.

"Now," said Finn. "As for our regular meetings with *Ganesha Familia*…"

He lifted the sheet of parchment on his desk and scanned it. After he absorbed every last letter of the Koine script scrawled across its surface, Gareth

raised a query.

“We’ve been meeting with Shakti quite often recently. Is something the matter?”

“Grief and terror still plague the city,” added Riveria, “but things are far better compared to eight years ago when this age of darkness began. There have been marked improvements in public order, and it seems that the Evils are on the back foot for the moment thanks to the efforts of the peacekeepers working with the Guild like us.”

Without looking up from his parchment, Finn answered her. “I’m concerned about their recent activities. At first glance, it doesn’t look like there’s any pattern behind the attacks, but that’s just because the Evils are hiding their true intentions. They’re taunting us, daring us to find out what they’re up to.”

“…You think Valletta’s behind this?”

“Most likely. Either she’s confident we’ll never figure it out, or she’s confident that even if we do, it won’t matter.”

The name Gareth brought up was that of one of the Evils’ most senior, most dangerous individuals. Blacklisted by the Guild, she was even said to be responsible for the highest number of adventurer deaths in history. Finn shuddered as the old dwarf’s words caused him to recall her unsettling grin.

“…According to Shakti’s report, the Evils made off with a shipment of ignition pieces before burning down that factory the other day,” Finn continued.

“Now, what would they need with those?” pondered Gareth with a frown. “Switches and buttons alone do not a magic item make.”

Riveria narrowed her jade-green eyes. “Any news on smuggling activity?” she asked, changing the subject. “I accept I have a personal interest in the matter, but I still think the circulation of holy tree branches in the city is cause for concern.”

“Plus, it seems we’ve caught wind of some shady dealings outside the city as well,” added Finn, reading the parchment in his hand. “We don’t yet know if it’s directly related, but another organization working with the Evils is probably responsible.”

“So, what’s our angle?” asked Riveria. “We don’t have the numbers to follow up on every lead.”

Finn thought for a moment. “We’ll let *Hermes Familia* handle the investigation outside the city. As for us…” He paused. At that moment, the door swung open, and their goddess walked in.

“Sorry to disturb ya while you’re talkin’,” Loki said, “but it’s an emergency. We’re gettin’ reports of someone attackin’ adventurers in the Dungeon.”

“Again?” growled Gareth at the contemptible acts of their foe. “Overground, underground…they just won’t let up. Is this all part of a plan to wear us down?”

Riveria walked over to the wall where her staff was leaning and picked it up.

“Shall we head out, Finn?” she asked. But the familia leader held out his hand to stop her.

“Ah, that won’t be necessary,” he said, a flicker of foresight flashing in his astute eyes. “I figured this would happen. Those girls are already on the job.”

Droplets of bright crimson filled the air.

“Waaaaagh?!”

An adventurer screamed. The underground paradise’s clear blue sky was marred by the scent and sounds of death.

“I-it’s the Evils!”

“Dammit! Can’t they just let us explore the Dungeon in peace?!”

“R-run for it!”

Blood pooled on the ground, and the Level 2 adventurers scrambled to escape.

This was the eighteenth floor of the Dungeon, the level known as Under Resort, where no monsters spawned. Amid the crystals and greenery of this floor, one man’s bloodred hair stood out like a severed thumb.

“Oh, don’t tell me you’re going already? Leaving your friend to die? That’s not very nice, is it?”

Flanked by an army of servants, the figure cried out after the fleeing adventurers. In his right hand, he clasped an ordinary dagger. Ordinary, that is, save for the fact it had drunk so much blood that was stained a deep scarlet.

Walking over to his fallen victim, he first checked the unfortunate soul was still breathing…then stepped on their neck with a sickening crack. As he did so, a sadistic grin crept across his face.

“Stand and fight, you cowards! You don’t have to be heroes, but at least show you’re worthy of being called adventurers!”

The man was twisted, demented, insane. He reveled in a sea of blood. He lamented the disappointing sight before him even as he snuffed out more lives. He was an avatar of purest evil.

His name—Vito.

“And if you can’t do that,” he wailed, “then at least cheer me up! Let me see the color of your blood!!”

“W-waaaagh?!”

Like an opera dancer or a bloodthirsty demon, Vito lunged for his next victim. The hunted adventurers let out a scream of despair.

“Hands off, stupid.”

“…!”

A flash of steel deflected his bloodred blade. Vito leaped back as two women leaped into the clearing.

“Can’t believe Finn was right on the money!” cried the first. “What’s goin’ on in that head of his?! Makes me think about marryin’ the hero of our people for real!”

“It’s not going to happen! Finn’s a respectable prum; he won’t go for a sleazy, cunning little brat like you! Also, shut up when we’re fighting!”

Kaguya, the one who had parried the blow, spat a surprising amount of vitriol

considering she was still in her polite persona. Of course, rather than look at Lyra, she had fixed her eyes on their foe.

“Leave this to us,” said Alize, the last to appear on the scene, pointing westward. “You and your friends, get out of here!”

“Th-thank you!”

After the last straggler scrambled away, Vito cast an appraising eye over the newcomers.

“Who are you?” he mused, almost to himself. But Alize didn’t pass on a chance to give her introduction.

“We’re champions of justice!” she declared. “No evil goes unpunished under our watch!”

“Justice…? Ah, you must be *Astrea Familia*,” said the man, managing to fit an impressive amount of scorn into his gentle voice. “I see, I see. What a foolish, simplistic, and pretentious group.”

“Better a pretentious fool than a miserable worm,” came Kaguya’s scathing retort, delivered with such force it was like she had spat on him. “These foolish boots shall be the last thing you see.”

“Hah! What a savage thing for a champion of justice to say! You girls are far less boring than I was led to believe.”

Kaguya kept her guard up as she studied the man. However, there was little to work with, as he was almost completely unremarkable. His eyes were as narrow as a fox’s and they betrayed nothing. His lips were turned up in a fixed smile. The dagger in his hand appeared to be his only weapon, and even his black clothes looked more like a priest’s robe than anything made for combat.

It all struck Kaguya as some twisted joke. After all, the only salvation this man had to offer was found at the business end of a knife.

“…Why are you hunting adventurers?” asked Alize, looking down at the corpse by her feet. “Money? Magic stones?”

But Vito seemed puzzled by the very question. “Why?” he repeated. “I’m not sure I follow. Do you need a reason to gaze upon beauty?”

“Huh?”

Lyra raised a dubious eyebrow. In response, Vito made a grand, sweeping gesture, indicating first the sky, and then the ground.

“Why do you turn your head to the blue heavens above? Why do you admire the flowers at your feet? What I do is no different. Only…in this imperfect world, it is bloodshed that I wish to behold.”

The man’s creepy grin was beginning to unnerve Kaguya.

“…You’re defective,” she spat.

“Defective. Ohhh, yes, I like the sound of that. Of the many monikers my acts have earned me, I think I like that one the best!”

He laughed and laughed, as though there were no funnier joke on this earth. Then his right eyelid lifted almost imperceptibly, allowing a terrifying glimpse of his scarlet iris, as if he were searching for a drop of blood as he scanned a blank canvas.

“Hmm. Yeah, you need to be in a cell for the rest of your life. No doubt about it,” said Alize, giving a calm-headed nod. She drew her sword and pointed it at Vito.

Vito deftly flipped the dagger in his hand as though it were an extension of his arm. “I’d rather not.”

“Then we’ll have to take you there…”

Alize, Kaguya, and Lyra all readied their weapons, poised to attack. The tension in the air grew like a bowstring, ready to snap, until…

“…by force!!”

The three girls shot toward their foe in unison. Vito’s lips crept up into a smile as he rushed to meet them.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

The man’s wild laughter was a prelude to the fierce clash of blades and the ensuing shower of sparks. First came Kaguya’s gently curved blade; then came Alize’s sword. And finally, Lyra’s boomerangs sliced through the air. However,

the man wielded his single dagger like a beast's fang, parrying all three strikes with ease while still managing to launch his own attacks in response. Their quick feet and the man's bloodstained boots moved faster than the eye could follow as they danced around one another in a deadly rondo.

"Lord Vito!"

Then the man's allies joined the battle, calling their leader's name. The skirmish was quickly evolving into a pitched battle.

"Krrh!"

The three girls held their own even against this overwhelming force. Vito continued to cross blades with them even as the Evils soldiers were cut down to the left and right of him. He welcomed their hostility and seemed especially happy to embrace Kaguya's desire to kill him.

This was a battle between good and evil, between order and chaos, and neither side seemed to have the edge, until…

"I see. You *are* strong. Perhaps there's more to you than I thought, *Astrea Familia*," said Vito with admiration after encountering these delicate young girls on the field of battle for the first time.

"Big talk," scoffed Lyra, calmly surveying the battle from the rear a short distance away while tossing boomerangs and bombs into the enemy ranks. "But I guess you're clearly not some mook if you can take on Alize and Kaguya without breakin' a sweat."

She spat with disdain for the man's despicable tactics. While the battle still raged, Alize spoke up.

"Are you one of the leaders of the Evils, by any chance? I've never heard of them having someone like you!"

"As much as it pains me to admit, I've often been told I have a forgettable face," said Vito with a melodramatic shrug. "Because of that, my friends all call me Faceless."

Indeed, apart from the man's bloodred hair, there was very little that could be used to pick him out from a lineup. His permanent smile and narrow eyes

almost seemed like a mask. His nickname fit him perfectly: He was a faceless shadow, a man in the crowd whose features would be all but forgotten by the next day.

He cracked opened his scarlet eyes ever so slightly and spoke again.

"…Of course, the other reason is that very few who see my face live to tell the tale."

""""Rgh…!""""

His barbaric smile drew a look of disgust from the three girls, and they once again realized just what kind of monster they were dealing with.

Just then, someone called out to them.

"Alize! Lyra! Kaguya!"

It was Lyu. She and the rest of the familia had just finished assisting the fleeing adventurers.

"Ah, your companions have arrived," said Vito without a hint of worry as he watched the girls dash down the hillside like a gale. "I'm afraid I don't much fancy my chances against the lot of you."

"We must retreat, Lord Vito. Remember our objective."

"Yes, yes, I know. Well then, to you girls who dance to the tune of justice, I bid you farewell."

Vito turned and led his troops to the east, into the forest. Alize called after them and made to follow.

"You're not going anywhere!"

"Wait, Captain. They want us to go after them. We won't be able to defend against an ambush in those trees."

It was Kaguya who offered those words of advice. She watched as Vito's band unhurriedly left the clearing. Alize and Lyra both saw the sense in her words. In recent years, the three of them had become painfully familiar with how low the Evils were willing stoop, and when it was best to let sleeping dogs lie.

"Are you three all right?" said Lyu as she arrived beside them. She peered out

at the forest edge for any sign of the retreating enemy, while Lyra cracked her neck loudly.

“All good here, not even a scratch,” she replied. “Lost our chance to capture one of their chiefs, though. How about you?”

“We took the adventurers to Rivira and came back to find you,” answered Neze. “All of them are safe, except the ones who got attacked before we arrived…”

The girls cast a glance around at the bodies of fallen adventurers that littered the grassy plains. Their blood painted the green blades crimson.

“Curses!” said Lyu with righteous fury. “If only we’d been here a few minutes sooner…!”

“Know your place, you cocky elf. You fancy yourself a hero of myth and legend? Nobody could have possibly saved them all, and you know it.”

Kaguya brought her harsh, yet sobering words down on Lyu’s misplaced self-pity. But Lyu could take no more of her fatalist attitude.

“Just because my standard isn’t attainable doesn’t mean we shouldn’t strive to be better, Kaguya!” she roared. “How can you possibly save the people who need saving if you write them off before you’ve even begun?!”

“Save it, Leon! Now’s not the time!” cried Neze in an attempt to dissuade the pair from their pointless argument.

“Come on, haven’t we heard enough?” added Lyra, fiddling with a finger in her ear without even bothering to look over. “I know you two are such good friends, but can’t you have this debate somewhere else? C’mon, Captain, say something.”

But Alize was kneeling over by the bodies of the fallen adventurers.

“…First, we need to carry the bodies back to town,” she said in a solemn voice. “We’ll return them to their parties and let their comrades decide what should happen next.”

She closed her eyes, her heart a flutter of emotion. Once it had settled, she stood up.

“And after that,” she said, “there’s someplace we need to go. Somewhere that’s just the thing for times like these!”

Alize and company made their way through the forest, keeping a watchful eye out for any members of the Evils, of course, but also any far roaming monsters that might get the drop on them. Soon, they reached the eastern part of the forest on the eighteenth floor. The sound of a babbling brook reached their ears. As they crossed it, their faces were reflected in large blue and white crystals that looked like swords discarded by giants.

Despite their captain’s propensity for wandering off track, the members of *Astrea Familia* soon arrived at their destination.

“Mm! This place is always so pretty!” exclaimed Alize.

It was a decent-sized clearing, nestled among trees and otherworldly crystals, while overhead the branches framed an opening in the canopy, offering a splendid view of the chrysanthemum-shaped crystals that beamed in place of the sun, radiating a warm glow.

A forest of crystals bathed in light. We stumbled upon this one time while we were exploring the eighteenth floor…

Lyu thought back to the last time she had been here. It hadn’t changed a bit since then. The group had found the place by chance, and it had soon become one of their favorite spots. However, thanks to the constant threat of the Evils, they hadn’t had much cause or opportunity to make use of it, and Neze and the others seemed overjoyed to be back at last.

“Now,” said Alize. “Leon, Kaguya! Take a deep breath! That’ll calm the two of you down!”

She stretched out her arms and, almost proudly, took several deep breaths. As she did, her face immediately mellowed.

“There’s nothing wrong with pragmatism,” she said, “and there’s nothing wrong with being ambitious, either. Now that we’ve settled that, do you think the two of you can relax a little?”

“”……..””

Lyu and Kaguya glanced at each other. The fire that drove them had started to wane, and they regarded each other not with disdain, but with acceptance.

“…I suppose, for the sake of our captain and this beautiful place, I can forgive you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” said Lyu, pouting. But already their quarrel was behind them. The other girls grinned as they watched the two of them make up, while Lyra gave a tired shrug.

All was well. It was easy to forget, surrounded by lush forest, that they were in the Dungeon. The glittering crystals and the not-quite-sunlight streaming through the branches combined to create a calm and healing ambience. Even the distant cries of monsters in place of birdsong sounded peaceful.

“Nicest place in the whole damn Dungeon by far,” said Lyra, sitting on a tree branch and clasping her hands behind her head. “If only the monsters didn’t come here, I’d build a house.”

“Oh, that’s a good idea!” Noin chimed in. The human girl, a little older than Lyu at sixteen, had short dark brown hair and a sunny smile. She was answered by another human girl, Lyana, whose hair was tied up in twin braids. She was one of the older girls in the group and a mage.

“That would be nice, this place is paradise…If I die, make sure to bury me here, okay?”

“Wha—?”

Lyu didn’t know how to respond to the girl’s unusual suggestion. It was clear Lyana wasn’t planning to go any time soon, but her words didn’t sound like a joke, either.

“Oh, so a grave instead of a house,” Lyra responded, a morbid smile on her lips. “Not bad, not bad. Who cares about monsters when you’re dead? Count me in.”

“Me too!” came the quiet voice of Maryu, another of the older girls. Then came Iska, the Amazon, and Celty, the elf.

“Make it a cool-lookin’ grave, okay?”

“I have no complaints if it means we can stay together…”

Lyu could barely keep up with the madness. “Lyra! Noin! Lyana! Maryu! What’s gotten into you all?”

“Don’t get so upset, Lyu, we’re just jokin’ around. Well, half jokin’.”

It was Lyra. She hopped down from her tree branch and shrugged.

“Besides, we’re adventurers,” said Lyana, wearing a deprecatory smile. “It could happen to any one of us.”

“That…that’s true, but…”

Lyu didn’t want to hear her friends talk that way. She didn’t want to even think about it.

“So you’re not prepared to die like the rest of us, greenhorn?” came Kaguya’s condemning remark.

“Of course I am! Of course I am, it’s just…”

“We’re only saying what-if, Leon,” said Neze. “It may not be the Dungeon or the Evils that get us, but we all gotta go someday.”

“Yep!” agreed Iska. “We’re just saying where we’d like to be buried when it happens. You don’t have to worry, Leon.”

But despite her companions’ attempts at reassuring her, the barbs around Lyu’s heart refused to go away.

They should want to see the age of darkness come to an end. They should be thinking of the bright future that lay beyond, not acting like it was only a matter of time before the inevitable.

“…It’s not right…”

She didn’t want it to end. She didn’t want to see this moment erased. That was Lyu’s deepest wish.

“I don’t want that,” she said, her voice weak. Then, in a stronger tone, she declared, “And I will do everything in my power to prevent it—to protect what we have now.”

All her comrades’ eyes were on her. Alize gave a big smile.

“Is that your wish, Leon?”

“Yes. You’re my only friends. Is it strange to want to be with you all forever?”

Alize beamed. But before she could answer her, the other girls all began tittering, especially the pink-haired prum.

“…Lyra? What’s so funny?”

“Oh, nothin’. I wasn’t thinkin’ about how sappy this elf was soundin’, that’s for sure.”

“I’m quite certain there is no other elf in this world as stubborn and troublesome as you,” said Kaguya. “Is there no cure for that thickheadedness of yours?”

“What’s that supposed to mean, Kaguya?! Are you mocking me? You’re mocking me for caring about my friends?!”

Without realizing the warmth in Kaguya’s words, Lyu flew into another rage. It was then that the other girls reached their breaking point and erupted in laughter.

“They were being nice!” said Alize. “Your sense of justice is beautiful, Leon. Hold on to that.”

“Well, it sure didn’t sound like it…” muttered Lyu, unusually sullen. Letting out another laugh at her reaction, Alize smiled like she was gazing at the most brilliant stars.

“Oh, Leon,” she said quietly. “Promise me you’ll stay like that forever…”

“Hmm? Alize?”

Hearing her oddly subdued words, Lyu turned to Alize, but she was already her usual sunny self again, smiling like a scarlet flower.

“It’s nothing,” she said. “Break time’s over, everyone! Let’s head back to the surface through the Dungeon and make the next day even brighter than this one!”

Roused by her voice, the members of *Astrea Familia* all stood up and followed her away, leaving only a promise burning inside each and every one of them.

Eight days until the Great Conflict…

CHAPTER 3
Busy People

Story by Fujino Omori · Illustration by Kakage
Character Design by Suzuhito Yasuda

CHAPTER 3

Busy People

The sound of footsteps echoed in the darkness. Amid the broken magic-stone torches that lined the hallway, two animal people stopped and surveyed the carnage.

"…There's nothing left," said the sturdy boaz, while the skinnier cat person by his side clicked his tongue in frustration.

The two upper-class adventurers of *Freya Familia* stood in the shadowy wreckage of another destroyed factory, an ocean of silence beneath the moonlit sky.

"A whole squad of tier-twos, taken out before we even got here," spat the cat person, Allen. "Figured they were just pushovers, but these guys are tough shit."

Before his eyes lay a sea of bodies.

"All these wounds were made by the same blade. Was this all done by one person? It's unlike the work of any the Evils we've met so far."

Going by the slash marks, it was probably a large greatsword of some kind. An unblockable, unavoidable swing that tore through shields and armor, severed limbs and heads. The room was awash in blood, but miraculously—or more likely, intentionally—not a single victim had breathed their last. As familia members investigated the wreckage, healer and herbalist girls ran between the fallen guards, performing first aid before carrying them off to be treated.

Ottar cast his eyes about the scene, whittling down the possibilities in his mind. What had happened here this night was not a battle; it was a slaughter.

"Well, whoever they were, they were stupid strong, just like you," said Allen over his shoulder, standing among the fallen adventurers.

"What?"

Confused, Ottar walked over to his compatriot and beheld what he saw.

“This…”

A huge hole had been torn in the walls of the factory, as if made by the jaws of some great beast.

“These are adamantite walls,” Allen explained. “Not many people can bust a hole through them…”

“No finesse, just brute force,” said Ottar, examining the edges of the massive rift. Was this how the attacker had gained access to the factory? Or was it how they made their escape? Either way, it clearly hadn’t taken much effort. The hole was crude, like the attacker simply couldn’t be bothered to use the door.

“Never heard of the Evils havin’ a freak like you on their side,” said Allen.

“A new recruit, perhaps,” stated Ottar, his solemn voice disappearing into the gaping hole.

The clouds in the air were like torn cotton. The moon was faint in the pale sky, and a single figure stood atop the city walls.

He was huge, at over two meders tall, and though his face was cloaked in shadow, the man exuded a threatening aura from every pore.

At the same time, it was almost comical the way his cloak and hood struggled to conceal his monstrous frame, but no one would dare laugh at him, for his greatsword, stuck into the flagstones at his side, still dripped with the blood of his most recent victims.

The man was clearly dangerous. His silent eyes surveyed the town below.

“What are you doing?” came a voice.

A man with dull, silvery hair emerged from the shadows cast by the clouds.

Sadistic, inhuman, fanatical. One glance was all that was needed to know this was not an honest and upstanding individual. But now his face wore a twisted frown.

“I am looking,” the man replied. “This place is just like I remember it. Perhaps

you could call it…nostalgia.”

The giant spoke calmly, still looking over the city. There was no emotion or passion in his voice. It was like he was simply stating facts.

This seemed to bother the silver-haired man, who wrinkled his brow. At this point, the giant finally turned to face his visitor.

“And who are you again?”

“…Olivas. Apostle of chaos, Evils commander! And now, your compatriot!”

The silver-haired man, Olivas Act, raised his voice as he greeted the giant. His disdain for his supposed ally was quite evident.

“And as such,” he went on, “I would like to pose a question. Why did you let those fools live?!”

“…….”

“That factory was guarded by second-tier adventurers, threats we should seek every opportunity to eliminate! With your strength, it should have been a total massacre!”

It was Olivas who had sent this man out earlier that night. It had been meant as a test, which he had handily passed. However, Olivas couldn’t believe it when he heard the giant hadn’t taken a single life, and thus came to demand an explanation in person.

“If you shrink at the thought of murder, then what am I to think—”

“Have you ever eaten ants?”

The completely unexpected question caught Olivas by surprise.

“Wh-what…?!”

“Spiders, then? Wasps? Scorpions?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Have you ever had to survive off the flesh of monsters? Slake your thirst with their ash?”

The giant turned back to the city. Olivas trembled with rage. He didn’t know

how to react to the man's inexplicable line of questioning, and yet his forceful tone had stunned Olivas into silence. He had come here to upbraid the man, but now Olivas found himself on the back foot instead.

"I have," the giant said at last. "I have eaten everything, save my brothers-in-arms."

This unsettling revelation sent a shiver down Olivas's spine. "What?!" he exclaimed.

"To me, eating and killing are much the same. We do both to extend our own lives. While the means may differ, the results do not. The only difference is whether we bathe in blood or drink it."

The man had eaten much in his storied life. Ants, spiders, wasps, scorpions. Monster flesh and ash. And he didn't consider the dead to be his comrades, so once they died, he thought it was only natural their corpses were fair game.

"Wh-what are you trying to say?" asked Olivas, his voice quivering with a sense of primal dread.

"It is my appetite that has brought me here," the giant said, without turning around. "I have the right to choose how I sate it. Your diet, on the other hand, is feeble. You only devour women and children and avoid those stronger than you. All you've ever tasted are other maggots like yourself."

"Grrrh?!"

"Feast on maggots, if that's all you know. But if that's what you want to feed me, then at least give it to me all at once so I can get it over with."

Olivas couldn't find the words to respond. He was a Level 3 adventurer, and one of the top members of the Evils to boot. Yet the man before him saw him as nothing more than a lowly worm.

A chill gust of wind fluttered the giant man's cloak as he continued. "Maggots taste terrible. I would rather tear out my own throat than let them become my flesh and blood."

Olivas looked ready to snap, but a wide grin crept across his lips.

"…Ha. Ha-ha. Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

His fear turned to awe. Sweat coated his brow, and his heart started pounding as though he had been bitten by a wild animal. Never until that moment had he been more ready to trust the man before him with his life.

“A maggot? A maggot! Me, a Level Three, no more than a maggot to you! Not even a beast?! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

Olivas could already see how this man would propel the Evils to greatness. With him at their side, no piddling adventurer could possibly pose a threat to their glory.

“…Very well,” he said. “You may leave these maggots to us, for now. However, I expect not to be disappointed when the time comes.”

There was a strange excitement in Olivas’s voice. He promptly turned and left without another word.

The man was alone once more, staring out across the city. Beneath his hood, old scars ravaged his face.

He spoke as though to the town itself. “A thousand years of history died here. The disappointment may be too much for me to bear…”

“Destroyed an adamantite wall?”

A new day had dawned, and once again, the sky was full of clouds. It was a little past noon when Hermes got the news.

“Yes. We heard as much from Ottar and Allen of *Freya Familia*. They surmise there must be a warrior of great skill working with the Evils.”

The one who brought Hermes this information was a blue-haired young girl on the cusp of womanhood named Asfi Al Andromeda.

She was fifteen years old. Level 2, but very close to her next Rank Up. Brilliant and talented, with a honed mind. An egg that would one day hatch into a fine aide.

Hermes shrugged emphatically. “That’s saying something coming from the most powerful adventurers in the city,” he said. “I don’t even want to think

about how strong our suspect must be."

As always, the attitude on the streets was as gloomy as the skies above. People walked with their eyes down turned, grim expressions on their faces. Women and children cast paranoid glances over their shoulders as they hurried about their business.

The streets Hermes walked now were no different. As he listened to the report from his follower, he searched for signs of change in the city itself.

This had always been Hermes's way. A messenger, an arbitrator, a neutral observer. He needed to keep his fingers on many different pulses if he wanted to maintain his reputation as a purveyor of information, and right now the information he sought wouldn't be in any report or documentation. It could only be found in the slight perturbations in the atmosphere outside.

Asfi served as his escort for this excursion. "Also," she went on, "*Astrea Familia* has reported contact with what they believe may be a high-ranking Evils commander on the eighteenth floor of the Dungeon. However, they were not able to apprehend the suspect."

"Ah, our rising stars," said Hermes with a smile. "They're well on their way to rivaling the likes of Freya and Loki. Haven't you made friends with one of their members lately, Asfi? The Gale Wind or something like that."

"I wouldn't say *friends*…More like kindred spirits…"

It was only by chance that Asfi had first met Lyu. In the wake of a certain Evils' attack, Asfi had been sent to provide aid using her magic items. Even at this young age, she had already made a name for herself as a crafter. Arriving on the scene, she encountered a noisy bunch of girls who turned out, of course, to be *Astrea Familia*. Three of them—a red-haired human, a far-eastern beauty, and a prum girl—were teasing a fourth, a masked elf named Leon. When Asfi approached, Leon glared up with tears in her eyes and demanded…

"What? Have you come to look down on me, too?!"

But Asfi only flashed the merciful smile that could only come from enlightenment.

"It's hard, isn't it?"

“…You mean…you too?”

It was the birth of an alliance between two long-suffering attendants.

Not a day went by where Asfi wasn’t pushed around by the likes of Hermes, or the captain, or Hermes, or also Hermes. The fact there was another soul out there gave her strength. Lyu must have also seen something in that smile, world-weary far beyond Asfi’s years, and sensed a kinship.

So despite Lyu being as unwelcoming as a stray cat, she and Asfi quickly warmed up to each other. While they weren’t close enough to be comparable to her friendship with Ardee, she could at least call Asfi a fellow sufferer. Recently, the pair had even begun to share information.

“You do both have the same mood,” said Hermes flippantly. “Impossible to take a joke. Maybe I’ll go pay their goddess a visit. As your patron deity, eh?”

“Please don’t ruin what little trust I’ve managed to build,” sighed Asfi, roused from her happy reminiscence by her god’s mischievous remark. She placed a finger to the bridge of her silver-rimmed glasses, pushing them up her nose. “Besides, their goddess is much like Lyu: purehearted, noble, and nothing like you.”

Just as Hermes and Asfi were debating her merits on the other side of town, the goddess in question was over in district one, scurrying through the streets in quite a rush. She finally arrived at her destination: the terrace fronting a cozy-looking teahouse.

“Sorry I’m late!” she exclaimed, out of breath, to the two other goddesses waiting there.

“What time do ya call this?” demanded the first, an androgynous-looking redhead. “Somethin’ tells me you’re gettin’ a little too big for your boots, huh?”

“Is hooliganism in fashion these days, Loki?” remarked the other, a silver-haired beauty sipping tea from a cup.

Loki and Freya. The two most influential gods in Orario.

“Were you looking after the children again?” Freya inquired. She was dressed head to toe in a robe to avoid bewitching the people on the street with her

beauty.

“Yes,” replied Astrea, taking her seat. “I was just over at the orphanage. Then we all went over to the market to hand out soup.”

“Oh, here we go,” Loki groaned, leaning back in her chair. “Is that what y’all call justice these days? Virtue signaling? Not that we’re exactly the perfect role models, but you should really try to act more like a goddess sometime.”

Astrea gave a strained smile. “Everybody needs a hobby, don’t they? Like how you enjoy getting drunk and complaining.”

A pair of deep blue eyes, dark as the night, peered back at the mischievous trickster god.

“Besides,” Astrea went on. “My children are out there fighting for the good of this city. I can’t stand by and do nothing.”

“That’s exactly what I hate about ya. You’re so sweet, I’m gonna be sick. You remind me of Artemis, ’cept at least she has the decency to get violent once in a while.”

It didn’t seem like she was just joking around anymore. The venom in Loki’s words was all too real.

“How’re we supposed to be fair to everybody when we ain’t omniscient no more? That ain’t justice, it’s just self-satisfaction.”

Astrea’s nonplussed smile was her only response to Loki’s brazen comment. However, she was accustomed to scorn, and nobody knew what constituted justice better than she did. Therefore, Loki’s words didn’t bother her in the slightest.

“Well, I think it’s rather romantic,” said Freya. “Struggling endlessly for an ideal that can’t be attained. Perhaps I should try it for myself and see what all the fuss is about.”

“Ugh, I’m surrounded by idiots,” lamented Loki. “What’s the world comin’ to when the gods kids look up to are a Goody Two-Shoes and a nymphomaniac?”

Astrea simply continued smiling. “Quite right, quite right. But if I may, to what do I owe the pleasure of this invitation? My familia is far below your great

houses in terms of influence, as you are both surely aware."

"Just a little tea and gossip," Loki reassured her. "You've been keepin' up patrols; perhaps you could fill us in on a few things we slackers mighta missed?"

"We're also more than a little interested in your affairs," Freya agreed. "Your followers, in particular, are quite excellent. Why, if they weren't already yours, I'd love to take them for myself."

"Seriously, you gotta learn how to reel it in!" Loki reprimanded her. "You keep up this obsession with ownin' everythin', and you're gonna butt heads with Ishtar one day!"

But Astrea calmed her. "I shall take that as the compliment you surely intended it to be, Freya. However, if that is the case, then what about Ganesha? His children are just as committed to maintaining order as mine. Why not talk to him?"

The two goddesses responded to that in unison.

""Because he's annoying.""

"Oh…"

Judging from Astrea's smile, she had already known the answer.

Why does he shout? If you asked him, the man would say only this:

"I am Ganeshaaaaa!!"

At the end of the day, there is no reason.

"I am Ganeshaaaa!"

"Whoa, shut up! But hey, I feel better already! Thanks, Ganesha!"

"I am Ganeshaaaaaa!"

"Shut up already! Ah, but suddenly my worries seem so insignificant now! Thank you so much, Ganesha!"

"I! Am! Ganeshaaaaaaa!"

“Shut the hell up! Oh, but look, you scared that mugger right off! Cheers, Ganesha!”

“We are Ganeshaaa

“Using violence to spread faith has always given me the creeps,” said Hermes. “Even us gods find it off-putting.”

“And pitiful?”

“You said it, not me.”

Hermes flicked the brim of his traveling hat.

“Anyway, if Orario’s civil unrest starts spreading, then our reputation as the capital of the world is gonna plummet. We still haven’t regained the goodwill that we lost along with Zeus and Hera.”

“All those judgmental eyes,” Asfi said. “I’m worried. The others tell me not to let it bother me, but I’m not sure I can…”

“That’s because you’re a sensitive girl, Asfi! But don’t worry! In just seven years, you’ll be a jaded, weary PA, and it’ll all wash over you!”

“I will not! And what’s a PA anyway?”

Hermes’s oddly specific prediction gave Asfi the chills. Behind her silvered frames, the girl’s eyes turned serious.

“Seriously…Now, if that’s enough digressions, I had one further matter to raise. Among the worshippers of the Evils, we’ve identified one group in particular we should keep an eye on.”

“Where are they located?” asked Freya, after Loki had finished relaying the information she learned from Hermes’s assistant.

“Far south of Orario,” Loki replied, “in a place called Dedyne.”

“Dedyne…that name brings back memories,” said Freya, turning it over in her mind. “Memories I’d sooner forget.”

“From what Hermes’s kids sniffed out,” Loki went on, “they’ve been keepin’ their business on the down-low, nothing high-profile so far. But they’re up to somethin’, that’s for sure. Apparently, the place is crawlin’ with activity, almost like…they’re preparin’ for somethin’.”

The three around the table absorbed this unsettling new info.

“…What could they be up to?” asked Astrea, tipping her head. “What could

the Evils be doing in the lands outside Orario?”

Asfi frowned as she summarized all they knew.

“Ignition pieces from Orario, holy tree branches from the elven villages, and now, something down in Dedyne, too…Our enemy is planning something, but what?”

Hermes scanned the streets with his eyes, but his mind was on his assistant’s words.

“Hmm, lots of dots, but not many lines,” he said. “Nothing jumps out at me. Guess we just don’t have the information to draw a solid conclusion.”

Beneath the brim of his hat, his citrine eyes narrowed as the god smiled.

“Looks like you have some more work to do, Asfi,” he said. “Get out there and find us some actionable intel, *Vice-captain*.”

“I’m only vice-captain because you forced me to be! Falgar was much more suited to this!”

“And you should be captain, but for now, Lydis is in that role. Try to get along with her, won’t you?”

“I can’t work with someone like that!” shouted Asfi, growing increasingly frustrated. “She tires me out! She’s like a female version of you, Hermes! Just the other day, she was all, *‘Hey, hey, I’m Lydis! That means you have to do all the boring work, Asfi! Buh-bye!’* and ran away!”

Asfi’s imitation of her direct superior was complete with gestures and poses. “It’s honestly scary how much of her brains went into her beauty!”

She sounded like she was being forced to interact with a creature of another species. Tears collected at the corners of her eyes.

Asfi’s skill had earned her a reputation she found hard to live up to. Even at her tender age, she felt the weight of the world bearing down on her, perhaps even more so than Lyu.

Hermes closed his eyes for a moment, then in a clear, dashing voice, he declared:

“You should see how she looks in bed. That makes it all—*Guhhh?!*”

No sooner had the words left his mouth than Asfi’s right fist found its mark in his cheek.

“Scum!” she swore, her face bright red. “I can’t believe you would seduce your own familia! You’re a disgrace!”

Her fists of judgment reduced the god to a smoldering wreck. Ah, Hermes. You know what your problem is? You keep making innuendos in front of impressionable young girls who haven’t had a chance to mellow out yet!!

“I-it was a joke! A joke! I just went to wake her up one time, that’s all!”

“That still means you went into her bedroom, you perv!!”

“Gwaaaaaaaagh?!”

Hermes’s tortured scream could be heard several blocks away.

It was only a short while later that Asfi finished doling out punishment, her shoulders heaving with exertion.

“Haaah…haaah…Still, there’s one more thing I wanted to ask…”

She glared at the dying god with murder in her eyes. Inches from death, Hermes got on his knees and begged.

“I’ll answer! Anything! So lower your bloodied fists! Have mercy!!”

Asfi relaxed her posture, turned to the side, and took a deep, calming breath.

“…The Evils have been oddly active of late, whether it’s stealing goods or gathering followers. But who in the world is supplying them?”

“Well, that’s simple,” replied Hermes, scooping his hat off the floor and replacing it atop his head. “They’re getting them from all the merchants who come to do business with Orario.”

“Wha—?!”

Loki explained as she refilled her glass.

“Some people wanna bring anarchy to Orario. There’s nothin’ they’d love more than to see the Guild collapse.”

Her face screwed up in bitterness. And it wasn't just from the wine.

"Because, while everyone is free to haggle over Drop Items," observed Astrea, "free trade of magic stones is entirely prohibited."

"Exactly. The Guild controls all Dungeon-related business. To some merchants, they're nothin' but a pain in the ass."

It was Freya who laid out the logical conclusion. "So they believe that by overthrowing the Guild, all those profits can be theirs."

Orario's magic-stone industry made it the center of the world. The economic benefits were incalculable. This was all made possible by the limitless supply of magic stones upon which the city sat. Could any merchant contain their jealousy, imagining the business ventures that golden goose could make possible? The answer, of course, was a big fat "No." These were merchants, after all. People who saw business in war, people who put a price on life and death itself.

"There's not much I can say except…it really is sad," said Astrea. "They're so blinded by profit, they would plunge Orario into chaos."

"Damn right," said Loki. "I ain't got enough sighs for those fools. Wish they'd look at the big picture once in a while."

She opened a single scarlet eye and asked a question.

"If the Guild falls, who'll manage the Dungeon? If adventurers die out, who'll beat the Black Dragon? Who'll save us then?"

It was Freya who summed everything up. "If Orario falls, the world goes with it. Even a child can see that."

The silver-haired goddess gave a thin smile, like a witch.

"So blinded by desire that they bring about the destruction of the very world they live in…What a fitting way for mortals to meet its end."

"But this raises a question," said Hermes. "Namely, why are merchants only investing in the Evils now?"

"Hmm? What do you mean?"

“There have been plenty of other chances to wage war on Orario. If it were me, I would pick eight years ago, after Zeus and Hera fell and the Age of Darkness began. Orario was in chaos then, even more so than it is now. Yet we never saw any merchants buddying up with the Evils. Why now?”

“I…I suppose you have a point,” replied Asfi, looking puzzled.

“Now, this is just a guess, but what if they’re poised to replace adventurers entirely?” suggested Hermes.

“Replace them…?”

“Remember the first thing you told me? What kind of person could possibly be capable of breaking through an adamantite wall?”

Asfi gasped. “Then the reason merchants are only investing in the Evils now… is because some powerful force is backing them?”

“It’s a bit of a leap, but it would explain everything we’ve seen so far,” said Hermes. “And sometimes the simplest explanation is the right one.”

The intuition of a god. The most reliable and unreliable force on this earth. Asfi gulped.

“A force beyond any adventurer…strong enough to rule Orario in the Guild’s absence. Could such a thing really exist?”

“Ya have to admit, it does make a lotta sense,” said Loki.

In fact, there was no other possibility worth fearing. Without saying as much, Freya gave her support to Loki’s theory. And she also shared her suspicions as to the identity of the culprit.

“The Evils’ strange actions of late. The collusion between them and the merchants…and a powerful leader able to coordinate it all.”

“It’s all connected,” said Astrea. “Even the goings-on outside of Orario.”

She glanced at the other two goddesses. They both returned her nod.

“There has to be one, doesn’t there?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

Meanwhile, across the city, Hermes came to the same conclusion.

“Yep, there’s gotta be. Coordinating the whole thing from behind the scenes.”

Then, all four deities chanced to look up at the same ashen sky.

“”””“There’s a god behind all this.”””””

“Hey! Leon!”

Lyu turned at the voice.

“Eren?” she said, recognizing the man who called.

“What a surprise to see you.” He smiled back. “Still on patrol? No rest for the righteous, eh?”

CHAPTER 4
Questioning Justice

Story by Fujino Omori · Illustration by Kakage
Character Design by Suzuhito Yasuda

CHAPTER 4

Questioning Justice

Kaguya turned and treated Eren to her signature thinly veiled insults.

“Oh? Who’s this god again? I’m sorry, you’re just so forgettable I can’t seem to place you.”

They were in the south of the city. Lyu was just on early evening patrol with Kaguya and Lyra.

“Ain’t this the weirdo Alize told me about? The one who almost lost his entire life savings?” asked Lyra. By now, all of *Astrea Familia* had heard the tale of the “444-Valis God.”

“Gah!” cried Eren. “You girls seriously don’t mince words! I thought you’d show a little more compassion to a deity!”

There was an odd sort of enthusiasm to his voice. It seemed like he was used to being a hopeless god.

“You *are* followers of Lady Astrea, aren’t you?” Eren inquired. “As virtuous as Lady Artemis, and twice as gentle? That Astrea? You girls ought to follow her example!”

“Oh, you know our goddess, do you?” Kaguya shot back.

“Of course! She’s a kind and loving soul! A paragon of purity among the disappointing philanderers of our pantheon!” Eren’s speech quickened, until before anyone knew it, he was practically shouting her virtues from the rooftops. “Filled with love and affection! A goddess among goddesses! Top of the list of ladies whose lap I’d like to lay down my head on!! Oh, if only she would be my mother, all my problems would be solved!!”

““Disgusting,”” replied Kaguya and Lyra as one.

“Ouch! Say how you really feel, why don’t you?!”

This god was starting to give the girls the creeps. They struggled to think of a

punishment harsh enough for his apparent obsession with their beloved leader.

Lyu looked at the pitiful, teary-eyed god, unsure whether to be bothered by his presence or amazed by his persistence.

“I don’t know where to begin,” she said, “but I guess I’ll start by asking…why are you talking to us?”

“No reason. I just *happened* to see my old friends while out for a stroll and figured I’d strike up a chat. Is there anything wrong with that?”

“There’s nothing more bothersome than a god with too much time on his hands,” said Kaguya. Eren simply threw his hands up in defeat and gave a muddled grin, saying nothing in his defense.

“I’m sorry,” said Lyu, “but we’re on patrol at the moment. You’ll have to excuse us.”

But just as the girl turned to leave, Eren called out to her.

“So, these patrols. How long are you going to do them for?”

Lyu stopped in her tracks and turned.

“…What do you mean?” she asked, looking back at the god’s hopeless smile.

“Well, you girls are working so hard for the sake of the city. When will it stop?”

“When evil is destroyed, of course,” replied Lyu. “Our jobs will become unnecessary once Orario knows true peace.”

“Don’t you mean, when your sense of justice withers?”

The god smiled the same dopey smile. But Lyu felt that sense of unease again, more strongly this time. Her eyes grew sharper.

“…What are you implying?” she demanded.

The god replied as though missing the pointedness in her tone completely. “Well, it can’t be easy working such a thankless job, and without pay to boot. I don’t think it’s healthy. In fact, I’m worried about you,” he added, as if voicing his concerns to a reckless child. “You’re all gung ho about it now, but what happens after you burn out? Would you still say the same?”

“Do you find fault with our work, my Lord?” asked Kaguya, in as cold a voice as the steel of her blade.

“Not at all. I think it’s amazing. You guys do what I could never, and you do it with pride.”

There was no lie in the strange god’s words.

“When I think of how you’ll look when this world leaves you tattered and broken, why…I just think it’s so sad…and a little exciting, if I’m honest.”

The man *was* being honest. A little too honest, as far as Lyu and the others were concerned. From his lofty position, it was as though he could see how it would all play out, and he wasn’t shy about letting *Astrea Familia* know how futile it seemed to him.

“I think you’ve said too much, my Lord,” said Lyra. “I might be willin’ to sit and listen to this, but these two girls are on short leashes, so how about you leave before you get bitten, yeah?”

“Hmm, interesting,” said Eren, peering into Lyra’s cold eyes. “You know what I’m talking about, don’t you? I’m glad they have someone level-headed on their side.”

Lyra turned and made to leave without listening to a word more.

“Let’s go, you two,” she said to Lyu and Kaguya. “We’re just wastin’ time here. No sense in givin’ this guy the attention he so desperately craves.”

“Sorry, sorry,” replied Eren, rushing around to cut Lyra off. “I’ll make this question the last, then. One more, then this big bad bully will disappear. I promise.”

Lyu sighed and, hoping it would at least get rid of him for good, asked:

“…What’s your question?”

It turned out to be an exceedingly simple one.

“What is justice?” he asked.

“What do you mean?” said Lyu.

“Well, I’m just wondering,” explained Eren. “What’s this *justice* that all you

mortals seem to go crazy for? I mean, I'm a god, and even *I* wouldn't be comfortable trying to judge everybody fairly. Maybe that's just because I'm not a very good god."

It was a simple question, but one that even a deity claimed to struggle with finding a satisfactory answer to.

"So," he went on, "I figured I'd ask you guys. After all, your goddess is all about justice, isn't she? Surely, you must know what it is, then."

"Ignore him, Leon," Lyra advised. "He's just messin' with you."

"Do you not have an answer?" Eren pressed her. "Does that mean you don't know? You don't know what it is you're fighting for?"

"Grr! All right, fine," said Lyu. "The answer to your little question couldn't be any clearer in my mind!"

"Idiot…" muttered Kaguya, but Lyu had already taken the strange god's obvious bait.

"Okay, then, tell me," replied Eren. "What is justice?"

"Justice is virtuous deeds done without promise of a reward. It's upholding that value at all times…And it's striking down evil wherever it rears its ugly head."

A silence lingered, broken only by a chill gust of wind that blew between the pair. Eren seemed to turn Lyu's words over in his mind for a second, occasionally nodding or tapping the side of his head.

"Hmm…I see. So the people down here are guided by what they call virtue. Whatever comprises this virtue must be upheld, while anything that crosses it must be destroyed."

Then Eren's lips curled up into a smile.

"With violence if necessary. A sort of *Justice by force*, if you will."

Lyu exploded at him. "That is not what I'm saying! Without us, evil would reign supreme! If we didn't use force, people would be hurt or killed!"

"Whoa! I'm sorry, I didn't mean to offend. There's some truth to what you're

saying. And I think the world needs people with a more simplistic outlook. Not everyone wants to engage with philosophy, after all."

Despite his apologetic words, however, the god was still grinning. Lyu wasn't sure whether it was just her imagination, but it felt as though he was mocking her.

"It's just…" he went on. "Well, your logic could apply just as well to evil as it does to good. I wonder what would happen if the roles were reversed?"

The god smiled as though he were a poet listening to a pleasing melody. Then he turned his pity-filled eyes upon Kaguya, Lyra, and Lyu.

"Well, I, for one, can suffer this fool no longer," said the far-eastern girl.

"I'm sorry about that," Eren replied. "My fine ladies, your souls are as beautiful as your faces. I'm sorry to have taken up so much of your time, but it was very worthwhile, for me at least. Thank you."

"We're done entertainin' you," said Lyra. "Next time you wanna talk philosophy, take your creepy smile somewhere else."

The two girls left without another word. Lyu, meanwhile, seemed fazed by what she had heard, like there was a knot in her throat that wouldn't go away. But she turned to follow her friends, and that was when Eren called out to her.

"Leon," he said. "You really are the purest of the lot. It has to be you."

The others were already out of earshot. Neither of them heard his voice or saw the look in his eyes that Lyu saw. His face was cast in darkness by the setting sun, leaving only a dazzling smile. The shadows seemed darker, somehow. Darker and longer than should have even been possible, and they lingered right up until the man was swallowed by the crowd.

"…I didn't sense any hostility at all. If anything, he almost seemed fond of us," muttered Lyu. "But…"

Whatever she thought next, she didn't say it. She could only stare, her sky-blue eyes trained intently on the empty spot where the god once stood.

"Who is he anyway…?"

◇

Dusk fell, and the curtain of night descended on the city. In district seven, to the northwest, there was nary a single light, and a pair of adventurers peered through a window in one of the buildings, both holding their breaths.

“Are you sure this is the place?” whispered one.

“Yes,” replied the other. “We’ve seen some shady types going in and out, all using some kind of item to cloak their scent so even animal people noses can’t track them.”

The two girls crouching by the window were none other than Shakti and Ardee, the Varma sisters. The building under their surveillance was a dusty old church that nobody used for worship anymore. Above the front doors, which now lay closed, was a stone portrait of a goddess, half of which had been worn away or destroyed.

“Looks like we’ve finally found where the smugglers are storing their goods before selling them on the black market,” said Ardee, fists clenched. “It wasn’t in the trade district at all!”

“Away from prying eyes, I assume,” said Shakti. “They’ve eluded us for this long, but that ends tonight.”

Soon, the two girls were joined by another from their team.

“Captain, everyone is in position and ready to begin on your mark.”

“All right. Let’s make this a clean operation, people.”

Members of *Ganesha Familia* were hidden all around the church. They awaited only Shakti’s signal. She took a deep breath, then yelled:

“All units, chaaarge!”

A battle cry erupted as every last adventurer hopped out of cover and descended on the church. After they kicked down the door, Ardee, the fleetest of the group, led the others inside.

“This is the watch!” she declared. “We have the place surrounded! Come out with your hands…up?”

However, Ardee soon discovered that her speech was not warranted. For every last person within the church's walls had already been completely incapacitated.

"…Uh…Ah…"

Men and women. Humans and dwarves and animal people. They lay broken, atop cracked tiles, as though crushed by some incredible force. There was no blood, and all were still breathing, but they had been reduced to such a distressing state, it was a wonder they were still alive.

"There are merchants…and Evils, too!" said Ardee in wonder.

It was then that Shakti entered, right after her sister "They've all been wiped out? Who did this? And how did they get here before us?"

Gripped by an inexpressible feeling of shock, the familia members began investigating the scene, when all of a sudden, a voice reverberated around the room.

"It's become so noisy again."

""?!""

At first, no one noticed to whom the gloomy voice belonged. Outside, the clouds allowed a moonbeam to shine on one of the stained-glass windows, illuminating a corner of the church and bringing into stark relief the silhouette of a woman wearing a thick robe.

The hood was up, her face obscured, but ash-gray hair fell down her shoulders, and coupled with the unholy image of the church at night, she looked almost like a witch. Shakti and Ardee both wheeled around at the sound and were struck dumb by the sight of her.

"The distractions never end," the stranger said, her grieving voice echoing off the walls. "Orario now is the same as it ever was. I can't even sleep in peace. Ahhh, now I remember why I hate this land."

The members of *Ganesha Familia* all stopped and stared, as though trying to work out what the displeased woman was doing here.

Who is she? An adventurer?

Ardee was perturbed. The woman was only standing in place, yet she gave off a pressure unlike any the girl had ever felt.

Shakti, meanwhile, shuddered with fright.

Where did she come from? Or, no—How long has she been standing there?!

The *Ganesha Familia* captain had failed to notice her. Her voice, her presence, her very being…they were all so faint that, if Shakti wasn't looking straight at her now, she would struggle to say whether the woman was still in the room at all.

"…Did you do this?" Shakti asked.

"Who else could it have been?" the mysterious woman replied.

As Shakti opened her mouth to inquire further, Ardee butted in.

"Why?" she asked.

"They were annoying me. That's all," was the woman's reply, completely aloof.

"What? What do you mean?"

"This rabble ravaged the elven forest far too much and damaged the sacred trees. They even tainted this holy place. I simply gave them their just deserts."

The woman spared not even a glance for the fallen Evils around her, and the disdain in her voice was enough to suggest why. That single fragment of hate in the sea of tranquility put Ardee on edge.

"This place…you mean, this church?"

"Yes," the woman replied. "My sister loved this place."

It was impossible to see what she saw, her eyes hidden beneath her cowl, but the emotion in her voice as she spoke those last words was obvious.

"H-help…" one man groaned on the floor. "Help me…!"

"I ought to kill the lot of them, that they might never again taint this place with their vulgar words," said the woman, her voice as icy cold as the shards of moonlight streaming in through the window, "but to soil this holy ground with their blood would be even worse. I'll let you clean up this mess."

Then she turned to leave.

“You think we’re just going to let you go?” Shakti shouted after her.

“Catch me if you can, child,” the woman said without a shred of care.

“Sh-she called big sis a child?!” said Ardee, shuddering.

“This isn’t a joke, Ardee!” yelled Shakti. “All troops, capture her!”

“Wroaaaaaaaaah!!”

On one side of the church, the combined might of Shakti’s forces, numbering over twenty and including multiple Level 3 adventurers. On the other, the woman single-handedly responsible for the collapse of Orario’s black market trade.

It was she who whispered the single word that ended the battle in an instant.

“Gospel.”

Her spell produced a wall of noise that radiated out and scattered the group. It was an utterly destructive sound, like a thunderclap, an earthquake, and an explosion all rolled into one. It flung the combatants off their feet and rattled every eardrum like the tolling of church bells. Even Shakti and Ardee were dashed against the back wall alongside splintered wooden pews and a cloud of dust.

In all the chaos, the mysterious woman vanished like a phantom in the night.

“M-magic?!” cried Ardee, staggering to her feet. “She’s gone!”

Shakti lifted herself off the ground, using her spear for support. She was wearing a deeply sour look. The spell must have produced some kind of vacuum wave, she reasoned. The force, enough to crack the flagstones underfoot, had left her ears ringing and her balance unsteady.

“What do we do, sis?” Ardee asked.

Though she wanted nothing more than to give chase and redeem her failure, Shakti shook her head. “…Leave her,” she replied. “We need to secure the church first.”

The black market was the priority. That was the mission that brought them

here. “Though I fear that job has already been done for us…” she added, in a voice so quiet nobody else could hear.

A little while later, *Ganesha Familia* were busy attending to their initially planned duty. Anyone hurt by the earlier mishap was quickly attended to by the group’s healers, and afterward, everyone got to work rounding up the suspects and investigating the church.

“All Evils members and black market traders accounted for!” reported one soldier.

“Good work,” replied Shakti. “The goods must be hidden somewhere in the church. Split up and begin searching.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

Shakti wasted no time in giving her next orders. While the Evils soldiers were being carried out of the building, Ardee came over. She had just finished taking down names and descriptions, and she had a question for her elder sister.

“Sis…Who was that woman, do you think? She took out the Evils, so does that make her our ally?”

“It’s hard to see it that way,” Shakti replied. “All I can say for sure is that she doesn’t obey orders…and she’s a force to be reckoned with.”

Still frowning, Shakti took a look at the enemy soldiers who were being removed from the church.

“Some of those she incapacitated were high-ranking Evils. *Rudra Familia* and other Level Threes.”

Ardee gasped. “You mean she took out a room full of second-tier adventurers, just like that?”

“Yes. Not even *Loki Familia* have anyone so strong. Where could she have come from…?”

The woman’s skill put her on par with a first-tier adventurer, at least. Even Ardee could tell that, though her sister had undoubtedly deduced even more. All this was clear from the deep furrows across her brow. Ardee put her brain to work as well, but she didn’t get very far before one of her subordinates

emerged from a back door, calling Shakti's name.

"Captain! We've located a stockpile of stolen goods! We've identified several items that were smuggled in!"

"Oh! Sorry, could I take a look?" said Ardee, reacting to the soldier's words. He showed her what he had found, which turned out to be a hole in the floorboards concealing a single wooden box. Ardee crouched and quickly but carefully rummaged through it.

"Here they are!" she cried at last. "The holy tree branches!"

Ardee pulled out a bundle wrapped in cloth. All in all, it was about as thick as a woman's arm.

"So those are what were stolen from Lyu's village?" asked Shakti, walking over. "I would have thought they'd all have been turned into weapons and staffs by now."

"Well, it's a good thing they weren't!" said Ardee cheerily. "Because I promised Leon I'd get them back!"

She beamed. Then her face fell as she suddenly realized something.

"I don't know which of these are Leon's! There's so many, and they all look the same!"

She picked up two of the branches, looking from one to the other, and back again, before giving up in defeat. Shakti gave a despairing sigh and smiled at her mercurial sister.

"We'll ask some of our elf friends to help us," she said. "They've often said that the holy trees have different auras. I'm sure they can tell the difference."

"Sis…You're right! Thanks!"

Ardee leaped to her feet, all smiles again, then all of a sudden looked quite timid.

"Also…Can I ask one more selfish thing?"

"What is it, Ardee?"

"Well…if any of these turn out to be from Lyumilua Forest, where Lyu is from,

do you think I could be the one to give them back to her?”

Shakti had deduced what her little sister’s question would be before it even left her lips. Thus, she didn’t take long to respond. However, as the leader of the city watch, she still needed to choose her words carefully.

“This is not our property,” she said. “It’s not for us to hand out as we please.”

“Ugh…”

“…Having said that, I have heard the elves of Lyumilua Forest are the most prideful of all. They are unlikely to accept the branches from us.”

“S-so that means…!”

“Yes. I see no problem in entrusting them to someone who originally hails from their village instead. But only after we’ve inspected them thoroughly, understood?”

“Of course! Oh, thank you! Thank you so much!”

Shakti smiled as her sister jumped for joy. Ardee picked up one of the branches, not even knowing if it belonged to Lyu or not, and muttered, “I’m so glad…I hope this’ll cheer her up…”

The pale light of the moon shone in through the stained glass, bathing the child in a soft glow.

Six days until the Great Conflict…

CHAPTER 5
Tragedy in Sunlight

ASTERIA RECORD
The Rise of Evil
Story by Fujino Omori · Illustration by Kakage
Character Design by Suzuhito Yasuda

CHAPTER 5

Tragedy in Sunlight

For the past few days, the citizens of Orario had known nothing but ash-gray skies. The gloomy weather clouded their hearts like it clouded the heavens, a constant reminder of the Age of Darkness and all it entailed. No rain fell, nor storm clouds gathered. Only a somber and unrelenting atmosphere pervaded the streets at all times.

Today, however, citizens awoke to a clear blue sky, inhabited only by meager wisps of white. It was a bright, sunny morning, and Alize put her hands on her hips and, in an equally bright, sunny voice, declared:

“Now, it’s off to feed the poor!”

“Why do *you* sound so proud about that?” asked Lyra with a fed-up frown. “It’s *Demeter Familia* who organized the whole thing…”

“Because! We get to join forces with the Guild and other adventurers and show everybody the raw power of a cooked meal!”

“And what is that supposed to mean?” asked Kaguya, shaking her head.

The soup kitchen, as it were, was set up on a street in the northern part of town and run by volunteers. They dished out delectable yet inexpensive meals such as wine-drizzled gruel, oatmeal, and, of course, vegetable soup. The savory scent breathed new life into the streets, and the road was packed with the needy waiting to be fed.

“It means today’s going to be a happy day!” Alize beamed. “Now, get to work, everyone! Pitch in a hand wherever you can!”

“I’m not great with all this charity…” Lyra groaned, wandering over to the lines of people.

“And I am far too shy to deal with all these riffraff,” Kaguya added, heading toward the partitioned-off kitchen area. All the other members of *Astrea Familia* quickly found a task to keep them busy. Only Lyu remained behind.

“You’re with me, Leon,” said Alize. “We’re gonna turn all these poor starving people into fat little piggies!”

“Keep that language to yourself,” Lyu sighed. “We don’t want any complaints. Let’s just see where they’re shorthanded and help out.”

Alize and Lyu walked up North Main Street, surveying the soup kitchen. It was safe to say the venture had been a rousing success. In an age where death lurked around every corner, a stable job that could support a loving family was the stuff of dreams to many. For this one day, they could fill their bellies and their hearts.

A long line snaked down the road, culminating in a bubbling pot of soup. Each time a piping-hot bowl was served, its recipient’s face lit up with a smile. Children frolicked in the streets, sinking their little teeth into freshly cut fruit. It was a place for them to forget their hardships and austerity for a moment.

“The energy of these people is unbelievable,” said Lyu through her mask. “Especially after this place was so quiet yesterday.”

For the first time since its inception, the Goddess Festival—a celebration of good harvest, meant to take place the previous day—had been canceled. This soup kitchen was meant to make up for that in a way. The streets were filled with energy, merrymaking, and most importantly, smiles. Lyu looked on in wonder at the Guild staff, hard at work for the sake of the city’s people.

“The people are thankful, and the helpers are happy to help, too!” said Alize, wearing the biggest smile of all. “This is Orario at its finest!”

Then, all of a sudden, she raised her right arm and pointed overhead.

“Even the sky has cheered up!” she declared. “The sun is shining, just like everyone else! That means we’ve gotta burn bright, too!”

Just then, a single old dwarf came over.

“I thought it sounded lively around here. If it isn’t *Astrea Familia*. You’re as boisterous as ever, Alize Lovell.”

“Ah, old man Gareth!” said Alize, her face lighting up as she noticed him.

Lyu looked like she’d just watched a princess land a triple axel with her

clothes on back to front. “O-old man?! You’re calling Elgarm *old man*?!”

But Alize ignored her. “Are you here to help out, too, old man Gareth?” she asked, cheerily continuing her conversation.

“Yup. Me and all the young’uns from *Loki Familia* are here. Strictly speaking, though, I’m just the security.” Gareth stroked his long, impressive beard. “Besides, I’m sure these people would be much more pleased to receive their food from lively young girls like you rather than a dusty old dwarf like me.”

“Oh, Gareth! I can’t believe you just called me that!” said Alize, placing one hand to her cheek and waving the other in the dwarf’s direction. “A super-cutie whose staggering beauty charms all? You’re too kind!”

“That’s not what I said,” said Gareth, the smile disappearing from his face. It seemed he was well accustomed to dealing with Alize’s whimsy. Lyu, on the other hand, was left wondering just what in the world was going on.

I…I can’t make heads or tails of what I’m seeing…Is this some kind of coordinated attack on my sanity?!

To her, the venerable dwarf was the definition of a celebrity, one she very rarely got to stand in the presence of. Even now, the sight of him caused her to fidget restlessly like an awkward fangirl.

“A-Alize…Do you happen to know Elgarm…?”

“Not really, but we always have fun together!” replied Alize in good cheer. “And I’m so annoying, he doesn’t know how to get rid of me!”

“And here I thought it was just blissful ignorance,” sighed Gareth. “But yes, I suppose that’s the long and short of it.”

Alize, for her part, seemed immune to the thinly veiled scolding in Gareth’s words, either through hardheadedness or just plain stupidity. “You’re amazing, old man!” she squealed. “Whether it’s monsters or evildoers, you beat ’em all black and blue! I want to be just like you some day!”

“Ehhh…”

Lyu made a disgruntled sound, to which Gareth replied, “Your inner thoughts are showing, young lady.”

It was no secret that elves and dwarves were not on the best of terms. To hear her best friend praise one so unreservedly was proving difficult for Lyu, and she couldn't shake the disturbing thought that Alize might harbor feelings for the musty old dwarf that were best left unspoken, *if you get the drift*.

"Ah!" said Alize, noticing the look of internal struggle on Lyu's face. "You're thinking weird things again, aren't you? I've told you before, race doesn't matter! There are ugly bad guys among the elves, and there are proud, upstanding dwarf gentlemen like Gareth here!"

Alize *had* said that before, about three years ago. Lyu grew flustered at her lecture.

"I…Well…I mean…I know you're right, but…it just takes time to accept…"

"I can't say I entirely agree with the Gale here," said Gareth, "but at least she doesn't treat me as thoughtlessly as you always seem to."

"Well, that's because I always wanted to be born a dwarf!" Alize replied, beaming.

"……"

"Now, there's a face if ever I saw one, young lady," said Gareth to Lyu.

"Ah, no! I mean, well, I didn't…!"

Lyu couldn't even begin to imagine what a dwarf Alize would look like. She knew, of course, that there were cute female dwarves such as her associate Asta. But any attempt to fit Alize into that mold only resulted in something that couldn't even be called Alize Lovell—instead a stout and hardy name like Golize Lovell. In any case, what was she even thinking and…then the steam began to pour from her ears.

But Alize herself seemed mercifully blithe to all this. "Dwarves are stout and can protect a lot of people!" she chirped.

"…!"

"Of course, the whole world would weep the loss of my gorgeous figure, but what can I say? Sacrifices have to be made!"

Lyu finally started to realize what Alize was trying to say.

“There are already loads of pretty people in the world besides me anyway,” Alize went on. “So yeah, it wouldn’t be a problem! That’s why I wanted to be a dwarf!”

“Alize…” said Lyu, deeply touched.

“But,” said Gareth, offering a wise word. “Can humans not also save the many with their quick feet? Can elves not soothe others with their beautiful song?”

“Whoa, I guess you’re right! Forget it, then! I don’t need to be a dwarf after all!”

“Alize…!”

Lyu called her name again, though in a markedly less reverent tone, and with markedly more tears in her eyes than before.

“Hah-hah-hah!” the old dwarf chuckled. “What a funny little miss you are! You’ve all the confidence in the world, but no commitment!”

“That’s not true! I just change my mind when I make a mistake! That’s totally different!”

Alize seemed if anything more defiant in the face of her embarrassment. She puffed out her chest with pride.

“Well said,” the veteran dwarf replied. “Still, as sorry as it is to admit, I was happy to hear you’d rather be born a dwarf. It brought a smile to my face, just as you do to so many others. There’s nothing I can fault in that…Now, I’ll let you two get back to work.”

“And you too, Gareth! See you later!”

Gareth returned to his patrols. Alize watched him disappear into the crowded street, then turned to Lyu, who was standing there in silence.

“…….”

“What’s up, Leon? Caught you staring.”

“…There really is something amazing about you, Alize. Even the great Elgarm sees it.”

Alize cocked her head to the side. The light scattered off her crimson hair, and

she grinned a grin as bright as the sun itself.

“You think? I just said what I thought was true! That’s something everyone can do!”

Lyu smiled.

I think that’s the most difficult part for most people…and the most important. I’ll never forget that so long as you’re here.

No matter what strange words came out of her mouth, Lyu Leon couldn’t help but look up to her friend, Alize Lovell. She was so dazzlingly bright that Lyu felt that just being by her side would one day empower her to cast off the chains that bound her to her hated heritage. She was proud to call Alize a friend, and no matter what happened, Lyu would always count herself lucky that she met her.

Alize took one last look at the busy street, smiled, and took Lyu’s hand.

“Come on, Leon! Let’s go put some smiles on people’s faces!”

The sky was clear, the bright air filled with joyous cries, and the city knew peace. But in a corner of the street, a woman stood, watching the sun take its place in the heavens.

“Finally decided to show your face, huh?” she said, slowly and deliberately drawing out the words. “About time we had some good weather. Heh. Even the skies are givin’ me their blessin’ today!”

Just then, an animal man walked into her. It was a busy street, thanks to the soup kitchen, and a little bump here and there was to be expected.

“Oops, sorry about that,” the man quickly apologized.

The woman gently waved her hand. “No worries,” she said.

Then…her other hand reached for the sword concealed beneath her overcoat. The last thing the man heard was his own flesh tearing open. He managed to let out a rasping croak, before his eyes rocked back and his severed head fell from his neck. A fountain of blood rushed out, soaking the cobbles, then the lifeless

body crumpled.

The woman sneered. “You can pay me back with your life.”

There was a moment of silence where those nearby simply stared in shock at what they had just witnessed. The woman hoisted the crimson-stained longsword onto her shoulder and licked the blood from her lips.

Then, a scream pierced the air.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaagh!!”

Time started moving again. Her voice was joined by others.

“W-waaaah!”

“What happened? What just happened?!”

“She killed him! She murdered him!!”

Chaos and panic gripped the street. Men and women, young and old, pushed each other aside, fleeing the epicenter of violence by any means necessary. As crazed as they were, they knew what they had just seen. This was the Age of Darkness, and that meant only one thing.

Evil had arrived.

The woman paid no attention to the chaos her actions had just unleashed. She walked over toward the volunteers.

“Nice little kitchen you got goin’ on here. Gimme a taste, you Guild shits.”

Her hair was a toxic pink. She wore tattered underclothes and a pair of leather pants. Any adventurer recognized her at once. Only one person on the Guild blacklist matched her description. A human known as Arachnia, and the Evils’ top commander.

Valletta Grede was here, herald of the carnage to come.

“Let me help you all out,” she said. “I see some nice, ripe berries just waitin’ to be squeezed!”

Then she unleashed her blade upon the crowd again. Its edge danced, carving limbs, slicing heads, and drawing blood. She was a Level 5 adventurer, and there wasn’t a single man, woman, or child who could escape her.

“V-Valletta! What are you doing?!” cried a man, a member of the Evils who had been hiding in the crowd. He ran over to her, shouting, “We were told not to—*Gaaah?*”

The man was cut down like the rest. Valletta’s blade was indiscriminate in its slaughter. Between the terrified citizens and the rest of her bewildered allies, Valletta was the only one with a crimson smile on her face.

“Don’t tell me what to do, worm. Look at this beautiful blue sky! Ain’t it the perfect weather for turnin’ everybody into a mushy pulp?!”

Valletta spread out her arms and gazed heavenward, grinning madly. The natural-born killer, accompanied by evil and singing its praises.

“We gotta remind these idiots of the hell they’re livin’ in! They don’t get to smile and be happy! Now, get ’em!”

“Y-yes, ma’am!”

The Evils soldiers were quick to obey their brutal mistress. Not a single one of them dared object after what happened to their compatriot.

What followed was a barrage of violent explosions.

“Gaaaaaaaagh!”

“Eeeeeeeeeek!!”

The telltale gleam of magic filled the streets. The ensuing blasts shook everything: the roads, the buildings, tearing people apart in the streets. Flesh burned, stone walls crumbled, and the street, once bathed in sunlight, was bathed instead in blood.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! What a wonderful prelude to despair! This oughtta liven up your boring lives, adventurer scum!!”

The woman’s mad laughter echoed like thunder. It traveled down the streets, mingling with the sounds of chaos, and reached the ears of the two adventurers.

“I hear screams, and…explosions?!” said Lyu, spinning around. “What’s going on?!”

“Come on, Leon, let’s move!”

Before they even had time to be surprised, Lyu and Alize took off like the wind.

A violent scene unfolded under a blue sky. The adventurers were quick to respond. Those who had been running security for the soup kitchen swiftly drew their weapons and engaged. However, their enemy was numerous, and their targets indiscriminate.

Voices of terror filled the air, and all the while the buildings lining the street were turned to rubble. There was simply too much to protect, and not enough hands to protect it with. It was all the adventurers could do just to stop what was happening immediately around them, and Orario’s protectors were given no opportunities to strike back at their foe.

Valletta saw all this and grinned. “Die, die!” She sneered, basking in sadistic pleasure. “Let me hear your screams! Let me hear you beg!”

She stepped into the expired husk of one of Orario’s innocent townsmen.

“This city can send all the reinforcements it wants; none of them are gonna stop me from squeezing the life outta you!”

Her wanton disrespect for her victim drove a nearby adventurer into a rage. “Arachniaaa!!” he yelled, rallying his two allies to attack her in unison.

But none of them stood a chance. One moment, Valletta was standing there, and the next, her blade had decapitated all of them.

“There ain’t no easier target than some righteous prick with his head stuck up his own ass!” she cackled, as the bodies behind her sank into the pool of blood.

While positioning herself as a symbol of fear to drive the townspeople into a panicked frenzy, Valletta also did not neglect to draw out and eliminate her key targets. She was ruthless and cunning to the bitter end, like a venomous spider at the center of her cobwebbed lair.

Just then, she sensed two incoming attacks: one from above, and one from

behind.

“Demon!!” came a voice.

The attack speed was on par with a Level 4 adventurer. Valletta knew in that moment she wouldn’t be able to dodge, so instead she reached beneath her coat and drew out a dagger. Holding it in a reverse grip with one hand and her greatsword with the other, she wheeled around and parried the two blows simultaneously.

“Oh, well, if it isn’t *Astrea Familia*!” she jeered in a singsong voice. “I don’t remember invitin’ a pair of suckling brats!”

“Silence!” replied Lyu, furious. “This was supposed to be a joyous day! How dare you come and spill blood in this place!”

Any reservations Lyu might have had about stabbing a defenseless target in the back were gone when it came to this foe. Alize, meanwhile, landed a short distance away and immediately lunged once more with her straight sword to follow up her failed attack.

“You shall pay dearly for this!” she shouted, guided by a burning rage. “We will strike you down where you stand!”

Lyu’s wooden sword clashed with the dagger, and Alize’s blade met the greatsword. Valletta pushed back against both of her foes. As her eyes made contact with those of the two girls, her lips curled up into a grin.

“Idiots!” She sneered. “How could two Level Threes possibly hope to defeat a Level Five?!”

It was an impossibly powerful fist that answered her question.

“If numbers mean so much to you, then what do you make of mine?”

The sturdy old dwarf strode right up to Valletta and delivered a rock-solid punch while she was busy with Lyu and Alize. Despite her attempts to shrug off the girls’ weapons and extricate herself, the evil warrior was knocked clean off her feet and skipped along the cobblestone.

“Elgarm!” Lyu shouted in surprise.

“Are you okay, ladies?” he asked. “Curses, what was I doing? How could I

have allowed these deaths to happen on my watch? Finn and Riveria ought to be ashamed of me."

Gareth cast a horrified glance at the carnage, but it wasn't long before he returned his mind to the battle. A short distance away, Valletta had ground to a halt by driving her greatsword into the earth.

"Damn, that hurt!" she said, giving an ominous chuckle. "So *Loki Familia* finally decided to show, did they?! Where's your crew, old man? Is the great Finn Deimne too scared to come help?"

Loki Familia had a history with Valletta Grede. Or to be more specific, Finn did. In the past eight years, ever since the curtain rose on the Age of Darkness, these two commanders had crossed blades many times. They had foiled each other's machinations so often that Valletta had come to see Braver as her despicable archnemesis.

Gareth was unfazed, his voice like polished steel. "Sorry, but it's me you're dealing with today," he replied. "Finn's seen through your little distraction and is dealing with your true plan as we speak."

Valletta did not have to suspect the old dwarf's words for long, because soon a messenger ran up to her.

"Boss!" he cried. "There's smoke rising in the distance, where our allies are hiding! It looks they've been attacked before they could carry out the assault!"

Out over the rooftops, dark pillars of smoke loomed to the east and west. If Valletta had been versed in magic, she surely would have recognized its faint yet unmistakable traces.

When she heard the news, the smile dropped from her face, leaving only a bitter scowl.

"Man, fuck you. Here I am, swingin' my sword round like a lunatic, and there wasn't even any damn point."

Just as Gareth said, Valletta's actions had been a diversion, meant to draw the eyes of the Guild away from the Evils' true goal. But Finn had been one step ahead and had joined forces with *Ganesha Familia* to intercept their main thrust.

And now that her side's plan was in shambles, Valletta looked more fed up than ever.

"Shit, what's even the point? You guys, hold 'em off. I'm leavin'."

"L-Lady Valletta?" her mooks stuttered. "You can't be serious!"

"You can't expect me to screw around here like a moron when there's nothing happening anymore. I'm goin' home, and you guys are gonna be my meat shields, okay?"

Valletta was a bloodthirsty spider, but her lust for violence had not crossed over into madness. Her sharp wits were what made her such a terrifying foe, and she was ready to turn tail at the drop of a hat, if the situation called for it.

"Running away? You think we'll let you go that easily?"

It was Alize who moved to block her path. Flames of fury burned within her pupils, and she was joined by Lyu and Gareth, wooden sword and battle-ax at the ready.

But Valletta was not perturbed. "Oh, don't worry. You'll have much better things to do than go after a rapscallion like me."

She snapped her fingers, a delighted grin on her face. Her gesture was the signal for the last few remains of Valletta's unit, who had been hiding in the wings all along.

From seemingly everywhere at once came the sound and force of explosions.

"Aaaaaaaaagh!"

The earth shook, debris rained down from above, and everywhere people screamed and ran. Valletta had been keeping one last trick hidden up her sleeve.

"Magic swords?!" gasped Lyu. "They must be using them to blow up the buildings!"

"Oh no! We need to save everybody!" cried Alize.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Better hop to it, then, ladies!" Valletta sneered, finding joy in their plight. "You don't get a move on, and all these poor, innocent people

are gonna be squashed like nasty pancakes!”

“Rgh…! Arachnia…!”

Lyu growled with loathing, but it made no difference. The woman turned and walked away as explosions and clouds of dust quickly obscured her.

“W-we’ve no choice…” stammered one of her subordinates. “Brothers and sisters! Rain down destruction! Take as many of them with you as you can!”

“Scoundrels! Help the people take shelter, lassies. I’ll do something about these fiends!”

Then Gareth let out a battle cry, like a soldier ready to lay down his life, and charged into the crowd of Evils fighters.

“Elgarm…!” said Lyu with reverence. “…I’m sorry!”

“Take care of them for us, old man Gareth!”

The only response from Gareth’s direction was the sound of clashing steel. The two girls turned and ran.

The old dwarf’s battle-ax was nearly as tall as he, yet he twirled it with no more effort than he would a paper fan. As he flung and dashed his foes on the cobblestone, their faces grew fearful, and they turned their spells and magic swords on him. In response, Gareth only redoubled his charge, smiting the Evils soldiers with the long edge of his ax, the pommel, which was as hard as a diamond, or failing all else, his boulder-like fists.

Gareth showed them no mercy. It was all part of his plan to divert the enemy’s attention onto him. If he could spare the buildings and civilians even one more fireball or explosion, then the old dwarf would gladly shoulder any pain without hesitation.

Meanwhile, Alize and Lyu, wise to the old dwarf’s intentions, sought to capitalize on the opportunity as quickly as they could.

“Let’s split up!” suggested Alize. “Link up with our friends and the other adventurers!”

“Understood!”

Alize and Lyu moved swiftly, rescuing civilians from danger and eliminating any stray foes that crossed their paths. The group had contingencies for emergencies like these, and so the two girls tried to guide survivors northward, toward the designated evacuation point—Twilight Manor, home of *Loki Familia*.

Thanks to this plan, the adventurers also had a role to play. They stopped trying to fight off the attackers and instead began escorting civilians off the battlefield. They were the guiding beacons that led the townspeople to safety.

It was a swift and precise strategy, and every second that passed, more lives were saved. However, every moment that Lyu or Alize faltered was a sacrifice of life too heavy to bear. Indecision was not an option.

“Gaaaagh!”

At long last, the final Evils soldier fell to Gareth’s ax, but by now the old dwarf was in no state to savor his victory. Due to the burns he had sustained, smoke rose off his body through the cracks in his armor, and as he rested his battle-ax upon his shoulder, he called out to the others.

“That’s the last of them! Raul, go and summon *Dian Cecht Familia*! Hurry!”

“Y-yes, sir!”

Raul had been hard at work evacuating civilians, and his face paled as he took in the scene before his eyes for the first time. His head jerked up and down like a stiff doll before he ran off to fetch the healers. As soon as the battlefield was deemed safe, the younger members of *Loki Familia*, not yet trained for combat, rushed in to aid the wounded.

But just because the battle was over didn’t mean the streets were silent.

“Aaaaagh!”

“My legs! Somebody, help!”

Some had been shredded by wooden shrapnel from window shutters torn apart in the explosions. Others lay feebly, their limbs crushed beneath fallen stone or blasted off completely. The cries of young and old alike spun together

like thread.

The noxious scent of smoke and scorched blood pervaded the air, and the faces of *Astrea Familia* were harrow.

“Those cowards!” spat Lyra. “Preyin’ on innocent civilians…”

While the prum ran around delivering healing potions, Kaguya was slicing up rubble with her sword. Neither of them had time for their usual jokes.

“Leon!” shouted the far-eastern girl. “Use your magic! You’re supposed to be healing!”

Elsewhere, Lyu could hear Neze and the rest of the group. “The buildings could come down at any moment! Get these people to safety!”

Their voices drifted in the background as Lyu shouted back to Kaguya, “I know! But my spells can’t heal multiple people at once! There’s just too many!”

Lyu’s spells produced a soft green glow, like a sunlit canopy, but she could only treat one patient at a time. Out in the streets, Lyu could see many victims who couldn’t even stand, let alone walk, and there were surely more trapped beneath rubble or inside buildings who were still unaccounted for. It was clear there weren’t enough hands for all the work that needed to be done.

Suddenly, Lyu’s eyes fell upon a young human girl crying out in pain.

“Waaaaah! It hurts! It huuurts!”

Her parents didn’t seem to be nearby. Her arms and legs were covered in scratches, and her knee was still bleeding. She was sitting immobile, overcome by the terror of the situation.

However, Lyu couldn’t leave her patient for even a moment. She just watched, her face screwed up in pity, when all of a sudden, a figure approached the girl and kneeled beside her.

“Oh, you mustn’t cry, my dear,” he said. “When you cry, you make everyone around you sad, too. Here, press this handkerchief to the wound.”

Lyu’s eyes went wide. “It’s you! Eren!”

If the mysterious god noticed Lyu’s presence, he did nothing to acknowledge

it. He continued to talk to the little girl, attempting to cheer her up.

“Stop bleeding…Stop bleeding…” he sang as the handkerchief quickly went from white to red. “There! All gone! Now, if you’re brave enough to handle that, you don’t need to cry, do you?”

“No, mister…*sniff*.”

By the time Eren had completed his first aid procedures, the little girl had stopped crying. He smiled at her and offered his hand to help her up.

“Good girl,” he said. “Now, the evacuation point’s just over there. Do you think you can make it by yourself? I have to help some other poor children who weren’t quite so lucky as you.”

He pointed toward the skyline, and to the tip of the *Loki Familia* headquarters that peeked over the other buildings.

The little girl wiped her teary eyes and returned a smile. “Yes…I can do it… Thank you, mister!”

Then she ran over to join a group of people the Guild were ushering to safety.

Lyu watched the whole thing start to finish. Then, when she was finished healing her patient, she walked over. “…Thank you, Eren,” she said. “We really need any help we can get right now.”

But just as she was about to go on to say how she misjudged him, the god spoke back.

“Oh, no need to worry. I just came over to offer you an apology, that’s all.”

“…Huh?”

“You see, I figured I’d take a leaf out of your book. Do some good for once. And do you know what I found?”

Eren smiled, indifferent to the creeping horror working its way up Lyu’s spine.

“Helping the hurt, the weak. Why, if it doesn’t give you such a rush! The thrill, the satisfaction! Now I see why you do it!”

His joyous smile exuded an almost diabolical innocence.

“Wh-what…do you…?”

“So yes, I’m sorry,” Eren went on. “I’m sorry I ever said your work was selfless. Now I know, there *is* a reward after all!”

Lyu could only regard him in stunned silence as the eccentric god announced his newest theory of good and evil.

“Helping makes you feel strong!” he said. “Being thanked makes you proud! Giving charity makes you feel superior! And it all feels so, so good, doesn’t it?”

His words were nothing but joy. Heartfelt joy at finally understanding the minds of his children. At finally realizing the missing piece of the puzzle. At finally having good cause to look down on justice. All this joy was abundant in his merry voice, enough to make Lyu’s blood boil.

“Oh, I wish you’d just told me this sooner! I was worried about you, you know! I thought you were working yourselves to the bone for no gain!”

Lyu mumbled something in response, but only the last word was audible.

“…back.”

“I guess there are some truths even the gods don’t know!” said Eren, failing to hear her. “Hands-on experience is just the thing for these sorts of conundrums!”

“…that back.”

“Hmm?”

“I said, take that back, right now!!”

Lyu’s fists were shaking. Her anger couldn’t be clearer—but the god only smiled.

“Take what back?” he asked innocently.

“The complete disrespect that just came out of your mouth! You’re saying the only reason we work is to satisfy our own egos!”

“Whaaat? So that’s *not* why you do it? But then, what are you fighting for?”

Lyu’s fury was like raging hellfire, but the god did not back down. In fact, he pressed her with even more questions. He almost seemed to enjoy it. His attitude only fueled Lyu’s burning anger.

“Stop being obtuse! We fight for the good of the people. For the sake of order! So that nothing like what happened here in this street ever has to happen again!!”

“Is that not satisfaction, then?” said the god, in a soft, gelid tone.

“Wha—?”

His voice was like a shadowy serpent, coiling around her legs.

“I mean, nobody pays you, do they?”

“…Stop talking.”

“Nobody gives you bread or buys you soup.”

“…Stop it.”

“It doesn’t earn you any benefit at all.”

“Shut up!”

By now his eyes were a sliver, the mocking grin on his lips so obvious it was a wonder he had ever managed to conceal it.

“If you deny yourself riches, deny yourself fame—deny yourself even a moment of gratitude—why, then it’s not justice you seek, but loneliness!”

“SHUT! UP!”

Lyu’s heart was ready to explode out of her chest. She could take the god’s know-it-all tone no longer. But in response to her air-rending scream, Eren only shrugged.

“I mean you no offense, my little elf child. Think of it as nothing more than the mad insight of a capricious god. Just ask yourself this question, and see what you come up with…”

He smiled a wide grin that didn’t seem to reach his eyes, then spoke, slowly and deliberately.

“What exactly is your justice?”

Lyu could feel the blood rushing through her. Her eyes started to flicker. Seeing her stand there in silence, Eren delivered his final proclamation.

“Because if you can’t answer that,” he said, “then whatever you call justice must be twisted beyond measure. Far more than any evil.”

“How dare you!!”

That utterance was more than Lyu could take. She strode up to the god, grabbing him by the lapels. It didn’t even occur to her that she was disrespecting a divine being. Fury commanded her, and all she wanted to do was glare into the god’s dark eyes.

It was proof that she had no words to refute Eren’s accusation.

Just then, Lyra and Kaguya came over, sensing something was amiss.

“Leon, what are you doing?!” cried Lyra when she saw the situation.

“We have to save these people!” said Kaguya. “Don’t let this meddling god distract you!”

The two of them ran over and took hold of Lyu’s arms. She could only hang her head and swear.

“Grr…Dammit!”

There were still voices in the street, crying out for aid. Lyu knew that, and so, clenching her teeth in anger, she turned away with Lyra and Kaguya, leaving Eren alone. The god simply tidied his lapel and watched as the girls departed.

“…Pride. Ideals. Conviction,” he said aloud, casting a defiant smile around the scarring aftermath of evil deeds. “Certainly, only a righteous soul could keep those lights burning forever. But if starved of reward, of thanks, of validation… how long would they last? I can’t wait to find out…”

Four days until the Great Conflict…

CHAPTER 6
Assemblies of Light and Dark

Story by Fujino Omori · Illustration by Kakage
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CHAPTER 6

Assemblies of Light and Dark

On Northwest Main Street, the road known as Adventurers Way, stood an impressive building. It was a grand construction meant to resemble the Pantheon, and many people considered it one of the city center's primary landmarks.

This was the headquarters of the Labyrinth City's top administrative authority, the Guild. Several of Orario's top adventurers had gathered there, in a room large enough to house hundreds.

Finn, Riveria, and Gareth were present from *Loki Familia*. From *Freya Familia*, Ottar and Allen. Shakti from *Ganesha Familia*, and Alize and Kaguya from *Astrea Familia*. This assembly consisted of familia captains, their seconds, and other top officers. It was a veritable Who's Who of the city.

"Representatives of all familias are here, I see. We are ready to begin our regular meeting to discuss measures in the face of the threat posed by the Evils…"

The man who addressed the congregation was a rather chubby elf by the name of Royman Mardeel. He opened proceedings in a calm, measured tone.

"…But before that"—his eyes flared open—"how do you intend to explain the state of our fair city? I've forgotten the last time we went any amount of time without seeing some kind of attack, not to mention that despicable business on North Main Street just the other day!"

The Evils' activities had really ramped up in recent days. They had started as mere arson attempts on factories, which, while horrible, resulted in little to no civilian casualties. The soup kitchen massacre was different, and the start of a much nastier trend.

As he was one of Orario's highest authorities, these constant attacks caused Royman ample embarrassment. His equally ample flab jiggled from side to side as he gave everyone present a dressing down.

“Well, maybe if you let us go after the bastards instead of orderin’ us on expeditions like it’s a damn picnic, we could do something about it, you fat pig!”

It was Allen, the catman, full of anger, who spoke out against Royman’s words. “You got us tryin’ to balance clearin’ the Dungeon with runnin’ all over town lookin’ for those assholes! Is your head full of swill or somethin’?!”

“B-but you don’t understand!” protested Royman, somehow able to keep his composure under Allen’s furious interrogation. “Without Zeus and Hera, we must make efforts to maintain our legitimacy, or else order could fall and give rise to a second Evils! That’s why it is vital that we break new ground in the Dungeon and demonstrate our strength on the world stage!”

“Just admit that all you care about is keepin’ your greasy little backside glued to that seat,” Allen spat back. As Royman cowered in fear, Finn stepped in.

“Bickering will get us nowhere, my friend,” he said to Allen. “We came here to end fights, not start them.”

“I ain’t your friend, prum. Now take your peacemakin’ bullshit and shove it up your ass.”

The bad blood that had long existed between Orario’s various factions reared its ugly head once more. Riveria was the next to speak up.

“Your obstinate refusal to listen to others reflects poorly on your mistress,” she said, closing her eyes.

“You want me to tear your wings off, pixie?” Allen growled back.

His eyes shone with murderous rage. Sweat began to dribble down Royman’s cheeks. It was not looking like it would be long before the meeting would become a bloodbath.

Only a few members appeared undisturbed by the hubbub. Shakti looked serene, like she’d seen it all before, and Ottar never showed much emotion to begin with.

“I want to go home,” sighed Asfi, watching the farce play out. “We’re about to see first blood, and the meeting hasn’t even started yet.”

It was Asfi’s first time being invited to one of these gatherings, and she didn’t

much like what she was seeing. “*Loki Familia* and *Freya Familia* have always been at each other’s throats,” said Kaguya, sitting nearby with a feigned smile. “Just sit back and let it play out.”

“What, and watch them kill each other?” replied Asfi, a despairing look on her face. “Why did Hermes and Lydis send me here by myself anyway? Those two are going to get a piece of my mind when I return!”

“Ooh!” said Alize, leaning in. “I think I see why you and Leon get on so well now! Both of you are so hardworking, you don’t know how to say no!”

“If you know, then why do you keep doing it?!”

Asfi’s pent-up anger came to a boil, and she exploded in a fit of rage, causing all heads to turn and wonder if they had even been paying attention to the meeting. Gareth, on the other hand, wisely ignored this distraction and attempted to move things along.

“Much as I hate to agree with Royman,” he said, “the blame for that awful attack rests squarely on me. I cannot excuse my failure.”

At the old dwarf’s grave admission, the room suddenly fell solemn, and everyone’s eyes gathered on him.

“This was a brazen and sudden attack on our city,” said Shakti. “There was no way we could have predicted it, and even if we had, there was little we could do to stop it. Especially when we consider the perpetrator was Arachnia herself. Finn and I had been expecting the attack to come in the form of explosives, and so we issued orders to be on the lookout for suspicious packages and the like.”

“Explosives?” said Alize quizzically. “But why?”

It was Gareth who answered her question. “Because of those ignition pieces the curs had been stealing,” he said. “We thought they might use them to build bombs.”

“With those installed,” Riveria explained, “an explosive device could be easily detonated by anyone. It would be as simple as turning on a magic-stone torch. You can imagine the threat that would pose.”

Around the entire table, heads nodded in comprehension. It explained why

the Evils had been attacking and ransacking factories. It also made it easy to see why Shakti had been so concerned; if bombs had been detonated across Adventurers Way that day, the damage would have been incalculable.

“Unlike magic swords and magic items,” said Shakti, “a bomb of this design could be used even by followers of the Evils with no combat ability whatsoever. It all fit together too perfectly, but it seems we missed the mark.”

“Or perhaps they’re still keeping that plan in the back pocket,” suggested Riveria with a sigh.

It was Kaguya, who had been quietly listening all this time, who spoke next. “I see,” she said. “I believe I understand now. However, I would have preferred you shared this with us sooner.”

Her condemning tone was barely hidden. Finn, who had concocted this hypothesis a few days prior, decided to lay all of his cards on the table.

“Half of that is that it was only a hunch,” he said. “The other half is that we didn’t want to make security too tight, or it would tip off the enemy.”

It was common knowledge by now that Valletta’s attack on the soup kitchen had been a mere diversion and that Finn had predicted and forestalled the true attack elsewhere in the city. However, Kaguya’s disdain was palpable, even behind her polite veneer.

“So in your mind,” she said, “this terrible tragedy was all part of the plan? All those women and children nothing more than beads on your abacus to be tallied and weighed?”

“I didn’t predict just how devastating the attack would be,” protested Finn. “… But I suppose we’re well beyond excuses now. Still, we scored a decisive blow against the Evils, make no mistake about that.”

“Man, what would we do without heroes like you?” came Allen’s sarcastic reply.

“You’re right,” said Finn. “Ideally, we wouldn’t have to make these decisions. We need to find an answer that gets us out of this mess, but I can’t.”

He cast his eyes downward in shame. Kaguya, Allen, and the other

adventurers who had doubted his decision found they could say nothing in response to his contemplative silence. Even Royman's constant bluster was nowhere to be heard. A hush fell over the room as everyone considered what a dire predicament they were in.

"All right, all right, enough of this!" came a bright, sunny voice, completely lacking in tact. "All this gloomy talk is making me want to stress-eat!"

It was the captain of *Astrea Familia*, standing out of her seat.

"Why are you always like this, Alize Lovell?" said Asfi with a sigh. "Can't you see we're trying to be serious here?"

"But it's true! Everyone here is doing their best to protect Orario. Why do we have to sit around pointing fingers?"

""""!!""""

Their eyes all shot wide open. Allen, Kaguya, Riveria, and Finn. Even Shakti and the other adventurers watched on with the same look of shock.

"Learn from your mistakes, and give people credit when they get things right! That's how you talk things through! Even kids know that much, right?"

Her proclamation silenced the table. It remained so for several seconds until, at last, a boisterous laugh rang out.

"Ha-ha-ha!" chuckled Gareth. "You certainly aren't afraid to tell us what's on your mind, missy! And yet, you're absolutely right!"

"Tch. Self-righteous brat," Allen muttered.

"If you have an objection, let's hear it," said Riveria with a smile. "That self-righteous brat just offered the most sensible suggestion we've heard all day."

Alize's voice was like a ray of sunlight that breathed new life into the barren discussion.

"Look at that!" she said, puffing out her chest. "My beautiful pearls of wisdom just stunned all these first-tier adventurers into complete silence! He-hem! I'm so great!"

"Please don't push it, Captain," said Kaguya with a despondent frown. "You

were doing so well, too…”

Finn looked across the table at the two girls and cracked a gentle smile.

“Heh. Well, unfortunately, I haven’t any good news to share, but perhaps I can point us in the right direction,” he said. “Let’s start by going over the reports from Shakti’s crackdown on the black market the other day…”

Finn took the lead as each familia reported on what they’d learned about the Evils. The meeting covered information from a wide variety of sources, including Orario itself, the depths of the Dungeon, and even towns and cities farther afield. The participants listened to reports, then discussed and debated the implications. It was meticulous, time-consuming work, but nobody complained because they all realized, at a time like this, knowledge was their most potent weapon. Only by leaving no stone unturned could they protect their own lives, as well as those of their familias. And so, everyone shared their opinions and wanted to hear what the others thought.

“I suppose that covers everything up until today,” said Finn, after the minute hand of the large clock hanging in the hall had undergone three complete revolutions. “Is there anything else anyone wanted to bring up?”

At that point Ottar, who had largely remained silent throughout the entire proceedings, finally opened his mouth.

“The Evils have at least one powerful warrior on their side,” he said. “A true-born fighter, from what I can tell.”

“Ah, the person who tore a hole through that adamantite wall,” said Alize. “Nobody’s run into anyone like that, have they?”

Alize didn’t seem even slightly intimidated by coming face-to-face with the most powerful adventurer in the city. It was Allen, who had also seen the hole himself, who answered her.

“Still, there’s gotta be someone,” he said gruffly. “No one we know coulda done it, not even the Evils’ top brass.”

“Hmm, I know we don’t have a lot to work with,” said Finn, “but Ottar, how would you estimate this individual’s combat ability?”

Ottar dropped his voice even lower than usual and replied, “Level Six. No lower.”

At this, the entire conference room began to buzz.

“What?!” Asfi was unable to conceal her surprise. “That’s the same as the Warlord himself!”

Level 6 was a lofty feat indeed. So lofty, in fact, that Ottar was the only adventurer currently in all of Orario known to have attained it. The idea that the Evils might have a warrior of his caliber on their side was almost too distressing to consider.

“…We also ran into a mysterious foe while securing the black market storehouse,” Shakti added, as if one earth-shattering revelation hadn’t been enough. “A woman of unknown origin. A mage, or perhaps a magic swordswoman. She did not go after us directly, but she was able to defeat a force of around thirty trained warriors, including me.”

“She fought off *Ganesha Familia* by herself?” mused Riveria, furrowing her graceful brow. “I’ve never even heard of a mage that strong…”

“It wouldn’t be the first time a powerful adventurer went unannounced,” said Gareth. “We suspect that years ago, *Osiris Familia* had access to multiple first-tier adventurers they never told anybody about.”

Back when Zeus and Hera were around, there were many other familias who vied with them for supremacy. Among them were those who harbored Level 6, or even Level 7 captains without reporting it to the Guild. All fought to be the best, but in the end, it was Zeus and Hera who came out on top.

The other gods and goddesses, their familias gutted, often had no choice but to leave Orario entirely. However, some stayed behind. *Sebek Familia* was one such example, though by now it was a mere shadow of its former self.

For this reason, it was hard to dismiss the possibility of a secret Level 6.

“…Well, I can’t speak to the allegiances of the mage,” said Finn, “but it seems clear to me that this Level Six is on the Evils’ side. We all ought to stick together for the time being. Nobody wants to run into them alone.”

Everyone's faces to grow grave. The room fell silent. After an adequate pause, Finn continued.

"Now then, on to the last business of the day—and perhaps the most important," he said. What he was about to bring up would make the entire three-hour meeting so far look like a child's tea party. "We've received word from *Hermes Familia*. They've managed to locate several new Evils bases."

""!!""

Alize's and Kaguya's eyes went wide, and so did those of every other adventurer in the room. Asfi stood up and gave her report, collated from information brought back by *Hermes Familia*'s scouting parties over the past few weeks.

"There seem to be three in total," she said. "All previously abandoned facilities, and quite large compared to those we've seen in the past. We don't know anything about what happens inside, but judging by the number of lookouts, it must be something quite important. These could even comprise the Evils' main base of operations."

"Based on these reports," said Finn, taking over from her, "the Guild has also voiced its opinion that these are important Evils facilities. They've recommended we try to strike all three at—"

"*Astrea Familia* will take one!" shouted Alize, leaping to her feet so fast she startled Asfi, sitting beside her.

"I haven't said anything yet," said Finn, wearing a defeated smile.

"You're going to ask for volunteers to carry out the attack, aren't you? Of course you're going to pick the *Freya* and *Loki Familia*s, but you'll need one more! Well, I nominate us! We're the fastest familia around!"

Alize placed one hand on the table and leaned forward, almost as though she wanted to crawl across it and shout her answer in Finn's face. Shakti, meanwhile, looked at this girl, a girl who showed no fear, who knew when bravery crossed into recklessness, and who, more than anyone else, expressed a heartfelt desire to do the right thing. She looked at her and opened her mouth.

"…Finn. I propose the *Ganesha* and *Astrea Familia*s join forces. That should make up the numbers."

"Understood," answered Finn. "Then, as you say, we of *Loki Familia* shall make up the second group, and…Ottar, can we count on you for this?"

"Very well," the boaz man responded with a nod.

Now that it was clear the two main forces of Orario would be taking part in the operation, morale around the table began to rise. It was Kaguya who narrowed her eyes and spoke.

"I'm terribly sorry to interrupt the good cheer, but…are we not considering the possibility this is all a trap?"

Finn's answer was immediate, as though he had factored it in already. "We must take that into consideration and not spread our forces too thinly," he said. "For that, we will need the cooperation of other strong familias: Hephaistos, Ishtar, and Dionysus, to name a few. Royman, can you handle this?"

"Well, if Orario's safety hangs in the balance, I'll bleeding well have to, won't I?"

Finn then turned to Asfi. "Post your scouts all over the city," he said. "If they witness anything out of the ordinary, I would very much like to hear it."

"Yes," the girl replied. "I'll get the whole familia on it."

There was a noise around the table unlike the previous silences. A bristling energy that came with direction and purpose.

"…Now, as I'm sure you've surmised, this will be a search-and-destroy operation," Finn stated. "Now that we know where these bases are, we cannot leave them be. We must take the initiative and wipe them out."

His sea-blue eyes surveyed each of the participants around the table in turn.

"The operation will begin…three days from now."

In their laps, beneath the table, people tightened their fists.

"This operation requires the utmost secrecy," he went on. "We cannot allow our enemy to figure out what we're up to. It could be a matter of life and

death.”

“Just leave it to me! They won’t know what hit ’em!”

It hardly needed saying who that sunny voice belonged to. Several others got caught up in Alize’s infectious enthusiasm, but Finn’s face remained serious.

“In that case, meeting adjourned,” he said.

However, that wasn’t the end of the story.

“…….”

For there was one woman who, unbeknownst to anyone at the meeting, had been listening to their conversation the entire time. In the empty room next door, an upstanding Guild employee pressed an earring-shaped magic listening device to the wall. Once she heard the sounds of adventurers leaving their seats, she put away her tools and casually left the room.

“We have received word from our informant in the Guild.”

All it took was five hours for the information in the meeting to reach the Evils’ ears. Olivas read from the discreet, folded-up notepaper in his hand and smiled.

“The enemy begin their operation…in three days.”

The room was large, but much of it was cloaked in shadow. It was like some chamber secluded deep within a dying ruin, or a cold, dark section of a labyrinth.

There sat several figures, shrouded in darkness. After hearing Olivas’s news, Valletta Grede laughed and slapped her knee.

“Ha-ha! She did it! The bitch did it! Damn, these faithful worshippers are pretty useful!” A smile crept across her face. “Five years ago, we planted her, and we ain’t used her once! All so she could stay hidden until now!”

“Heh-heh. I’m impressed,” said Vito. “I didn’t think you had the patience.”

The man known as Faceless revealed one glimmering scarlet eye on his otherwise unremarkable face.

“Well, what good is a secret weapon if you don’t keep it secret?” replied Valletta, the leader of the bunch. “’Sides, we had to, ’cause of Finn. That little rat’s got more brains than most gods. If he goes sniffin’ around, the cat’s outta the bag. Had to keep it all on the down-low, until now.”

Valletta spoke in a celebratory tone, but Vito wasn’t ready to let down his guard just yet. He returned only a pointed glare.

“Come to think of it, Faceless, where’d your god piss off to? He’s the one who came up with all this, ain’t he?”

The god Valletta referred to was an embodiment of evil. One whose depths of wickedness shocked, frightened, and excited her in equal measure.

But Vito only gave an indifferent shrug.

“Oh, you know how these gods are,” he said. “Probably enjoying a stroll in some little corner of town.”

“Tch, well, his seat’s gettin’ cold. Whatever.”

Valletta would have preferred their leader stay on his throne where he belonged, but his absence didn’t seem to bother her for long. She smiled and shouted back into the darkness.

“You heard us, yeah? Party starts in three days. You gonna be ready? You’re our *real* secret weapons, ain’t ya?”

Two robed figures stepped out into the gloomy light.

One was a giant of a man. So tall that meeting his gaze would require most people to crane their necks.

The other was a woman with long ash-gray hair.

These were the very two mysterious individuals who were the subject of so much debate in Finn’s earlier meeting.

“I have nothing to prepare,” said the first. “When it comes time to fight, summon me. That is my only purpose.”

His deep voice rippled the air. The man almost seemed to exist on another plane. Vito opened one eye and grinned.

“Heh-heh-heh. Why say a hundred words when a single sword will suffice?” he said. “A most terrifying being indeed…”

“We’d really be screwed without these guys,” said Valletta with glee. “Even that boar bastard don’t stand a chance against ’em, let alone the rest of—”

“Silence.”

A single quiet voice cut through Valletta’s words. It was the robed woman.

“…What?” Valletta asked.

“Your voice is not just a nuisance; it is poison,” the woman said. “I feel sick just listening to it. The stench hits me as soon as you open your mouth. Stop talking.”

Her tone, as if she were talking to some pestilent insect, severely aggravated Valletta, whose face turned red with anger.

“What did you just say to me?!”

“We are content to silently follow orders. Would that you do the same.”

The implication in her words was clear: *Everything you do just makes more trouble for us.* Valletta couldn’t much take her haughty attitude, but she knew if she let her anger take control, she would end up torn to pieces before she even drew her sword.

“Let’s not overdo it, shall we?” said Olivas with a smile, attempting to keep the peace. “We are comrades now, for better or worse. Our goals may differ, but at present, we walk the same path. *Apate Familia* and *Alecto Familia* are preparing to fight as we speak. With those mad warriors at our side, nothing can stop us from spreading the fires of calamity.”

Joy crept into the man’s voice as he spoke.

“Soon our master’s desire will be fulfilled…and Orario will fall.”

CHAPTER 7

What She Taught Me: Twilight Words

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A bright red sunset lit up the western sky. Dusk came early in Orario, due to the high walls that bordered the city, and there was a long period of time after its shadows began to creep along the streets before the last vestiges of sunlight died out completely.

In happier times, adults would while away these hours drinking in taverns, while children would play on street corners. Nowadays, however, the specter of the Evils hung over the city, and the long twilight was spent only shivering behind bolted doors and shuttered windows.

Lyu walked these quiet streets without a word on her lips.

"……. "

Even the mask could not fully conceal the fourteen-year-old elf's natural beauty. The setting sun cast a ray across her face but failed to extinguish the shadow of doubt that lurked there. As she watched the sparse crowds, she thought to herself.

What exactly was her justice?

Eren's words rang in her mind. Beneath the mask, she ground her teeth.

"It's obvious…" she said, as though he were still there to hear her. "Our justice…the cause we all carry in our hearts…It's…"

Her words reached no ears but her own. And still she failed to spit out a single answer. With just one question, the god had proved to her just how foolish she really was. A follower of Astrea, the goddess of justice, unable to even define the term. It was shameful. Idiotic.

"Leon! There you are."

That voice was so bright it seemed to light up the darkening avenue. Lyu felt somebody bump her from behind, and a pair of arms wrapped around her.

“A-Ardee?!”

“Yep! Who once told Lord Ganesha that even though I always cling to people like a dog, I actually love cats, and he said, well, elephants are ele-fun? It’s me, Ardee!”

“Why do you always introduce yourself like that?” cried Lyu, still not over the shock of bumping her. “Don’t crash into me, it’s dangerous!”

“I’m sorry, Leon,” said Ardee apologetically. “I just saw you all alone, and I had to.”

Ardee scratched her cheek, still pressing her ample breasts into Lyu’s back. She shared that shapeliness with her sister, it seemed. Lyu’s face grew redder and redder, until Ardee at last had enough and released her.

“So, *are* you by yourself?” she asked.

“Yes,” Lyu replied. “I’m on patrol. We decided we should keep up appearances, so that the Evils don’t suspect anything.”

Ardee fell in line beside her, and the two started walking. Alize and Kaguya had passed on the details of the meeting two days prior, so Lyu knew about Finn’s plan. All the members of *Astrea Familia* were buzzing with energy thanks to this new course of action, but they were trying not to let it show.

“Oh, right,” said Ardee. “Yeah, I just got off work, too, myself! I’ve finally finished taking inventory of everything that we seized at the black market!” Then her eyes lit up. “Listen to this. You’ll never guess what we found! It’s the branches from—”

But just then, Ardee noticed the look on Lyu’s face. It was as if the girl was far away, not even listening to what Ardee had to say.

“…Is something up?” she asked.

“No, I’m just…thinking about things,” said Lyu, but her eyes remained fixed to the ground.

“You don’t have to lie to me, you know,” said Ardee. “Besides, you’re really bad at it!”

“A-Ardee…”

Lyu looked over at Ardee's indefatigable smile. All the warmth of human kindness lay within it.

"Let's worry about it together," she said. "I mean, what else are friends for?"

Lyu and Ardee stopped to rest on a convenient planter by the side of the road, and the elf girl told her story.

"So Eren showed up after the soup kitchen massacre…" Ardee said when she had finished. "I'm sorry; I wish I'd been there for you."

Lyu shook her head. "It's okay," she said. "You and Shakti were with Braver doing what needed to be done. You don't need to apologize."

Ardee thought for a moment, looking up at the darkening sky overhead.

"This Eren's a lot meaner than he seemed at first, don't you think?"

"I hope that's all it is…" mused Lyu. "I know gods can be detached, but this seemed like more than that."

"From what you said," Ardee replied, "I think he sounds like a dumb boy trying to get a girl's attention!"

"How did you reach *that* conclusion?" asked Lyu with a mixture of indignation and embarrassment. Then her voice took on a somber tone. "I don't think that was it. I don't think that was it at all…"

The events of that day replayed in her mind. It was as if the strange god were mocking her, even now.

"If you can't answer that…

"…then whatever you call justice must be twisted beyond measure. Far more than any evil."

His words reverberated in her very soul. Before she knew it, Lyu had turned to Ardee.

"What do you think justice is?" she asked her. "True justice, I mean?"

"Hmm…That's a hard question," Ardee replied. "I think everyone has their own answer to that. I wonder if gods do, too?"

There was little certainty to Ardee's response. She stroked her slender chin

and closed her eyes.

“I’m not as smart as my big sis,” she said, “If we overthink it, we’re just going to go round in circles.”

“…….. ”

Ardee’s answer was insightful, and it might even have convinced Lyu, once. But she couldn’t exactly go back to Eren and say, “I try not to think about it.” She needed a concrete theory, one that would persuade both him and herself.

What made good better than evil? That was the question she needed to answer, and now it looked like she would have to find that answer on her own. It felt somewhat like Ardee had just left her all alone at the center of a great maze, and Lyu cast her eyes to the ground once more.

Then, as she pondered it, Ardee’s face lit up. “How about this?” she asked. “Justice is turning weapons into music.”

“…Wh-what? Weapons into music?”

“Yeah! Like hanging up swords and spears and making them into wind chimes! Or getting two shields and crashing them together as cymbals! Or, or beating on a cannon like a big drum!”

Lyu half suspected the girl had gone mad. She gestured wildly as she talked, and her eyes were as wide as a child’s.

“Making it so weapons don’t hurt people anymore but bring them smiles instead! That’s my justice, and it can be yours as well! Do what I do and just don’t think about it so hard!”

Ardee’s attempts to cheer her up prompted a long silence from Lyu. Then, at the end of it, she said:

“That’s not true, Ardee.”

She looked up into the carefree girl’s eyes.

“You’ve thought about this much longer and much harder than I have. I know because of what you said the other day.”

Lyu thought back to seven days ago, just before the pair encountered Eren for

the first time. It was Lyu who wanted to pursue the law to its fullest extent, and it was Ardee who fought not to.

“That man was right. The only reason we can afford to be worried about justice is because we’re the ones with all the power.”

“I’ve been thinking, Leon. Do you think forgiveness can be a part of justice?”

No words from Eren’s lips ever shook Lyu so deeply as Ardee’s did.

“While I was mindlessly following the word of the law, you had gone beyond that,” Lyu said. “You thought about it until you found a justice you could believe in.”

The two girls sat side by side, dyed in the red glow of evening. Lyu’s words caused Ardee to give up her carefree demeanor.

“You’re right,” she said. “Justice isn’t easy, Leon.”

She smiled, a lonely smile.

“You can’t make others agree with it, but you can’t keep it to yourself, either, or else you’ll never change the world…You know, sometimes I think there’s no such thing as true justice.”

“Ardee…”

In that moment, the girl sounded much older than she appeared. Lyu gave her a supportive look.

“All I want is for everyone to get along, to be happy, and to not have to think so hard about anything,” said Ardee.

It was a child’s wish. Noble, and very simple, but almost impossible to grant.

What would Alize have to say? What about Astrea? And would Lyu agree with them? The gods of heaven came down to live among the people, but they brought no answers. They would only offer guidance, as if saying “This is your story.”

But how long would that story take? And would Lyu ever reach its end and find the answers she was searching for? She asked herself over and over, lost in her thoughts as the red sky darkened. In that schism between night and day,

when everything seemed so fickle and ephemeral, Lyu felt as though she were standing alone in a vast desert, far away.

At that moment, Ardee spoke again.

“But you know,” she said, the smile returning to her lips. “At times like this, I find it’s best to be honest with yourself.”

“Huh?”

“About what it is you really want to do.”

Ardee stood up and turned around.

“And what I want to do is make you happy, Leon!” she said. “I guess that’s my justice now!”

“…!”

Lyu’s sky-blue eyes shot wide open. Ardee smiled and took her hand.

“Let’s dance, Leon! Right here, right now!”

“Wh-what? Ardee? Have you lost your—?!”

Ardee pulled Lyu to her feet. Their fingers entwined, the pair skipped across the cobblestone, with Ardee leading and Lyu trying desperately not to fall over. Before long, the sunny girl broke into a fit of giggles, and people stopped and stared at the curious sight.

“What’s going on?” said a dwarven laborer.

“An elf and a human, dancing?” said another, a weary human man.

“They just started all of a sudden, in the middle of the street!” said a third, a sparkly-eyed catgirl.

Before long, a great crowd gathered, to which Ardee paid no mind whatsoever. Lyu, on the other hand, was blushing so hard you could see it through her mask.

“A-Ardee! Stop it!” she shrieked. “Why are we doing this?”

“It’s what an old hero used to say!” the girl replied, smiling innocently. “I read it in the *Tale of Argonaut*! *‘So dance, fair maiden! Dance to your heart’s delight!*

Show me the smile that graces your lips!”

“Wh-what?”

“It’s my favorite story! I think I know what my justice is! It’s to make everyone happy!”

Ardee recited the line with great familiarity and hastened her footsteps. Now Lyu felt she really would fall if she didn’t keep up and was too busy landing her feet to defy the human girl’s whims. It was like she’d been suddenly pulled up on stage to play the main part in a slapstick comedy.

“What an odd couple,” muttered the dwarf. “Though I must say, it does look quite fun…”

“Yeah, I think I like it!” said the man. “Go, girls, go!”

“You’re so beautiful!” said the girl.

As they watched, the initially miserable grown-ups cast aside their gloom, hooked on Ardee’s smile. Soon, they were hooting and whistling, calling out to the pair. They were accompanied by the whoops of children, jumping up and dancing on the stones. Before long, Ardee and Lyu were completely surrounded by a wall of people.

“See?” sang Ardee. “Everyone’s smiling now! They’re clapping their hands, stamping their feet, and getting all excited!”

“B-but they’re looking at us!” Lyu protested. “Everyone’s watching me trip over my own feet! This isn’t making me happy, it’s just embarrassing! Stop it, Ardee!”

“No! We’re going to keep dancing until you like it!”

“Wh-what…?!”

So long as Ardee refused to listen to her, there wasn’t much Lyu could do that wasn’t clumsily attempting to stay upright. It was then that a familiar face appeared out of the crowd.

“I thought I heard loud voices…” the girl said. “What on earth are you two doing?”

“Ah, Asfi!” said Ardee. “Do you want to join us, too?”

“I’ll pass,” said Asfi, a tired expression on her face. “I took enough dance lessons in the castle where I grew up to last me a lifetime.”

“A-Andromeda! Save me!” came Lyu’s voice, pinning her final hopes of salvation on the blue-haired girl, but Asfi mercilessly shrugged.

“I’m afraid there isn’t anyone who can stop Ardee now. Certainly not me… Besides,” she said, cracking a mischievous grin, “I don’t get to see you like this very often. I think I’ll stay and watch awhile.”

“Andromedaaa!!”

The dance continued. There was no music, no instruments, and yet the joyous cheers of those nearby was all the melody Ardee needed. With her smile, she banished the sadness and pain that lurked within all of their hearts.

“…Leon!” she said suddenly. “Justice will persevere!”

“Huh?!”

By now, Lyu was so embarrassed, she could hardly remember how depressed she’d just been.

“Even if the answer we reach isn’t the right one at first, justice can change and keep going!”

This was the guiding principle behind Ardee’s sense of justice. Even if it wasn’t the answer Lyu wanted to hear, it was what she saw, what she felt. This was what she carried around with her every second of every day.

“Softness can turn to hardness, warmth can turn to cold, but our justice can always change into a new flower! Or maybe not a flower at all, but a star that shines down on everyone!”

Lyu stared back in shock. She suddenly couldn’t remember when she last blinked.

“Someone we save can go on to save someone else! Today’s kindness can become tomorrow’s smiles!”

Perhaps that was just her wish. A worthless, unattainable dream. But to Lyu’s

ears, it was hope. A hope that spread its wings and took flight within her heart.

“Ardee…”

“Smile, Leon. Smile for the sake of your justice, no matter what form it takes!”

Lyu stopped dancing. She reached for her mask and showed the girl the smile she longed to see.

“…I will!” she said.

Ardee couldn’t be happier. The two began dancing again. Soon, instruments joined in and added to the chorus of cheers, and the entire street became a ballroom in the gloam. Smiles returned to people’s faces, and the sounds of good cheer echoed across the town.

“…Justice will persevere, huh?” muttered Asfi as she watched the two girls. Her elegant eyes burned every last detail of the happy scene before her into her brain. “I’ll remember those words in the sunset.”

The girls remained bathed in the song of justice, dancing to its beat, until the dark crept in from the east and night fell at last.

Lyu saw a light in the young girl’s smile. She vowed never to forget what Ardee had told her.

One day until the Great Conflict…

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CHAPTER 8
Sound of Life

CHAPTER 8

Sound of Life

As evening approached, the clouds finally parted, bringing an end to the eternal night. The sky, the streets, the buildings; all were stained in the same crimson light. Lyu sensed a different kind of energy in the air compared to the previous evening when she and Ardee had danced in the twilight.

The backstreets were busy, and adventurers from both *Ganesha Familia* and *Astrea Familia* were hard at work carrying supplies this way and that and taking up positions in the shadows of buildings.

“Here’s the supplies from *Dian Cecht Familia*!”

“All right. How long will it take to divvy them out?”

“Ten minutes, sir!”

“You’ve got five! Hop to it!”

However, for all their speed, everyone was quiet. The two familias had gathered in the northwest of Orario, district six, to enact their part of the operation and neutralize one of the Evils’ suspected bases.

“Everybody is in position, Captain,” said Kaguya, in her usual battle garb, *katana* at her hip.

“Understood,” Alize replied. “Do you think the enemy’s spotted us?”

Kaguya’s eyes narrowed, her gaze keen. “If so, they haven’t shown it,” she answered. “It’s quiet. *Too* quiet. It makes me wonder what we’re about to walk into.”

“We don’t have any choice,” replied Alize. “We have to crush this base one way or another.”

Her firm resolution clear on her face, Alize shifted her gaze to the building before her. It was a large warehouse that had at one point belonged to a wealthy merchant, before it fell into disrepair.

Lyu was standing nearby, listening, when something suddenly occurred to her, and she turned to the human girl at her side, steeling her nerves for battle.

“Ardee…” she said.

“Hmm? What is it?”

“…No, nothing. Good luck.”

Lyu put away her thoughts. This wasn’t the time.

In return, Ardee turned and smiled at her.

“You too,” she said.

Meanwhile, over in district five, a *Freya Familia* underling addressed his superiors.

“Are you sure about this, sirs?” he said. “You don’t want Hegni, Hedin, or the Gullivers going in with you?”

“We don’t need no elves or prum slowin’ us down,” Allen answered. “This pig could take ’em alone with one arm missin’.”

“Hedin is acting commander of the reserves,” said Ottar, the pig in question. “If anything goes wrong, do as he says.”

The two beastly warriors exuded raw power, their equally fierce gazes fixed on the building ahead of them. Their subordinate instinctively jumped to attention.

“Yes, sir! Good hunting to you both!”

He left. All around them, familia members finished preparing their positions. Allen and Ottar were of one mind.

“A few more minutes,” said Allen, “and the Evils are history. Nothin’ they do can stop us now.”

“Yes,” said Ottar. “We will massacre them.”

District nine was where the final strike team lay in wait, made up of the members of *Loki Familia*. They awaited only the word of their leader, Finn. Riveria approached, staff in hand.

“Finn,” she said. “We’re ready to begin the operation…What’s wrong?”

“My thumb. It aches.”

He cast a look down at his gloved hand. Even the others could tell that his digit was twitching.

“That old omen again?” asked Gareth, standing nearby.

“Yes,” Finn replied. “It started eight years ago, when the Age of Darkness began, but now it hurts more than ever.”

“What do we do?” asked Riveria, narrowing her eyes. She and Gareth knew more than anyone else how canny their leader’s intuition could be.

Finn closed his eyes and lifted his chin.

“We see it through,” he answered. “We’ve already done everything in our power to ensure this operation succeeds. Now all we can do is hope it was enough.”

It was quiet enough that Lyra could hear her pocket watch ticking away. Everyone’s thoughts were trained solely on the mission ahead.

Across the city, gods and goddesses watched over their followers. A trickster in her mansion courtyard. An elephant man standing in his palace. A messenger atop the city walls. And a personification of beauty staring down from her tower.

A pair of elves of light and dark. A quartet of prum brothers. The dwarven proprietress of a bar. An eye-patched blacksmith. An unruly female warrior. A young priestess. A werewolf who still didn’t understand the true purpose of his fangs. An untainted white elf. A sword-wielding girl. Other adventurers like Asfi. Blacksmiths and healers. All stood in their designated locations throughout the city, ready to respond at a moment’s notice.

Alize, Kaguya, and Lyra. Shakti and Ardee. Ottar and Allen. Finn, Riveria, and Gareth. Each of them stood before the fortress of evil they had been assigned.

The time for action was drawing near. The goddess of justice closed her eyes

and offered a prayer for her children.

Lyu drew her sword. The timepiece counted down the last few seconds.

“It’s time,” said Riveria, in a smooth, calm voice.

Finn could feel all eyes on him. He carefully gave his order.

“Go.”

The Great Conflict had begun. Somewhere, a mysterious god donned a wicked smile.

“It’s time,” he said.

A blast blew the heavy door clean off its hinges, the magical explosion announcing the battle that was to come.

“W-we’re under attack!!” screamed the Evils followers as adventurers rushed inside. Across the three bases, similar scenes played out.

In the abandoned trading house in district six, the sound of boots thundered on the stone floor.

Shakti yelled, “Chaaarge!” and her warriors advanced with the speed and force of lightning. The unsuspecting Evils didn’t stand a chance. The men of *Ganesha Familia* were joined by the women of *Astrea Familia*, dominating the battlefield like Valkyries.

“Hyah!”

“Gwaaaagh?!”

A flash of Lyu’s wooden sword swiftly eliminated one of the frontline enemies. She was joined by Kaguya, Asta, and Noin, who skillfully defeated their foes as well.

“Seize control of the base!” shouted Alize. “Neze, Maryu! Take the others and split up! We’ll press on!”

“Don’t let a single one escape!” said Shakti, separately giving orders to her

squadron. “Take them all out and capture every last one!”

Neze and an upper-class adventurer from *Ganesha Familia* barked “Understood!” and “Roger!” before splitting off to the east and west with the rest of their squads.

The walls of the hallways had been torn up, and the building material within was blackened with soot. It looked less like a trading house and more like an old, abandoned factory. Certainly a locale worthy of housing the city’s undesirables.

“They’re coming!” yelled Lyra, keeping an eye on the battlefield from her position at the center of the squad. “Back of the hall, and up above!”

From the open second floor, several Evils members leaped down into the hallways.

“Got ’em!” replied Ardee. The girl abhorred violence, but she was a Level 3 adventurer all the same. Her one-handed sword, Sacred Oath, was the judge and executioner of many a monster and villain. She raised it above her head and unleashed a vicious onslaught that flung the soldiers of the Evils to the ground before they even had a chance to attack.

Meanwhile, two other foes kicked down the doors at the far end of the hall and strode in, only to come face-to-face with Kaguya and Lyu.

“You take the one on the right, novice,” said Kaguya. “The other’s mine.”

“Already on it!” Lyu replied.

The two girls danced, swords in hand, outnumbered yet unflinching, a dazzling display of beauty and strength. Kaguya’s sword sliced clean through her enemies’ armor, and her swift follow-up strikes allowed no foe to even land a hit, no matter how determined. Such was the power of her cold and frightening techniques.

One by one, enemies fell to her wall of sharpened steel, while the ones at the back saw what awaited them and grew scared. Kaguya showed no mercy, hacking and slashing until even her own allies in *Ganesha Familia* turned and stared in fear and awe.

Meanwhile, the masked elf ran in the opposite direction, covering Kaguya's back. As she cut down her foes, she chanted a spell.

"…Cross the skies and sprint through the wilderness, swifter than anything. Imbue the light of stardust and strike down my enemy…"

Reluctant though she was to admit it, Lyu was not as proficient in hand-to-hand combat as Kaguya. Still, she had something else up her sleeve. A song of power far beyond those wielded by most frontline troops. It could obliterate a whole slew of enemies with ease.

"Luminous Wind!"

Balls of light appeared, encased in green air, and blasted the enemy foot soldiers packed into the hallways.

"Gwaaaaaaaaaaaaagh?!"

Lyu's unforgiving magical onslaught slammed her foes into the walls, knocking them unconscious. Surveying the damage, Lyu dismissed the last vestiges of her magic and muttered, "I suppose I overdid it again."

"What a show! And she ain't even a mage!" said Lyra. "The rest'll be a piece of cake! …As if."

She narrowed her eyes attentively. Shakti came over, wielding a spear.

"Indeed," she said. "It's all going far too smoothly."

It wasn't like the enemy soldiers weren't putting up a fight, but this was supposed to be their main stronghold, so it was downright disturbing that no adventurer had suffered so much as a scratch yet. Everyone who'd ever been in the Dungeon recognized the feeling they were experiencing. The feeling of walking deeper and deeper into a trap.

"I knew it," said Kaguya. "Something's not right about this at all."

"Still, we continue the operation!" came the determined voice of Alize. "The enemy is losing numbers fast! Now's our chance to strike a decisive blow!"

The adventurers could not possibly retreat at this stage. They were deep behind enemy lines, and turning their backs prematurely would only get them all killed. There was only one way to bring the Age of Darkness to an end, and

that was not dragging the problem out, but to press on.

Lyu and the others nodded. The six girls—Shakti, Ardee, Alize, Kaguya, Lyra, and Lyu—led their complement of upper-class *Ganesha Familia* members through unlit corridors. Every window was boarded and nailed shut, forbidding even a single ray of light from entering the building. The farther they went, the colder the air became, and everyone soon got the distinct impression they were stepping into the underworld.

Suddenly, the long hallway came to an abrupt end, opening up into a vast room.

“Look!” cried Ardee, pointing ahead. “This must be it!”

Maintaining their formation, Alize and the others stepped into the open space.

“Wow…!”

Like the hallways before, the room was dilapidated and dark, but this one had a ceiling ten meders high and was filled with steel cargo containers. It looked like a cross between a warehouse and a shipping harbor. Perhaps it had once been a storeroom, but now the only thing stored there was evil itself.

As the girls cautiously entered, they heard a voice.

“Oh, hey. There you are.”

“Arachnia!” Lyu cried.

The girls all turned around and looked up toward the source of the voice, only to find Valletta Grede sitting atop a stack of containers. Her eyes scanned the group for a moment, and then…

“Tch. Thought Finn was gonna be here,” she muttered, her face turning to a scowl. “Shoulda known better than to trust that worthless woman,” she added under her breath.

Then her lips twisted upward. “You guys sure got here fast. It ain’t a race, y’know.”

“You don’t seem too worried about it,” said Lyra. “Wipe that gross smirk off your face. What are you up to?”

“Who knows? Maybe I’m just figurin’ out how to kill you guys?”

Valletta didn’t seem in the least bit bothered by the prum girl’s murderous glare, or anything about the situation, for that matter. Lyra grew concerned at her mocking grin.

“Valletta Grede!” yelled Shakti, taking a bold step forward. “Lay down your arms and surrender! This base is ours, and your troops are being taken into custody as we speak!”

Valletta stared down the lot of them. Even now she seemed to be enjoying the flow of the conversation.

“Hyah-hah-hah-hah!” she cackled. “Has anyone ever actually done that? How stupid do you think I am? Go on, you lot. Get ’em!”

At her order, a band of Evils soldiers stepped out of the shadows.

“It’s an ambush!” shouted Lyu.

“I didn’t think there were this many of them left!” cried Ardee.

The enemy soldiers readied their weapons. They all wore milky robes and cowls and looked exactly the same, but from their sizes and shapes, they seemed to be mostly dwarves and animal people, and none of them looked like magic users. They outnumbered the adventurers by more than two to one, and they quickly surrounded the group.

“Now, come get me,” said Valletta. “Let’s have some fun!”

Valletta leaped into the fray, her bloodred greatsword atop her shoulder, and the battle began. All the enemy soldiers roared and charged, and soon the air was filled with clashing steel.

“Out of my way!” shouted Kaguya. For each foe she felled, another soon took their place. She clicked her tongue, forced to adopt a more defensive posture. To her side, she watched as Lyu sidestepped a dwarven hammer and went for a counterattack. Before her sword could strike true, however, a second foe came in and beat her back.

“This is chaos!” cried Lyu. “So this is how they fight when their backs are to the wall!”

“Stick together!” Lyra warned. “Don’t underestimate these guys; if we give any ground, they’ll trample us!”

These forces were clearly more formidable than anything the girls had encountered elsewhere in the base. Lyra flitted between her enemies’ greatswords and claws, tossing her boomerang blades at any foe who tried to get the drop on Kaguya and Lyu.

Meanwhile, Valletta stared down Shakti and Alize.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Not bad, Ankusha! You too, Scarlett Harnell!”

She was the sole Level 5 on the battlefield. Her two foes were Levels 4 and 3 respectively. However, Shakti and Alize remained undaunted by Valletta’s superior stats. They relied on tactics, strategy, and superior teamwork to plug the gap.

Watching all this, Lyra narrowed her eyes. She observed first Lyu and Kaguya battling alongside the men and women of *Ganesha Familia*, then shifted her gaze farther down the room, to Alize and Shakti’s fight.

Somethin’ stinks. I’m no Finn, but I know a trap when I see one. Anyone can see that these chumps don’t stand a chance against our girls. It’s only a matter of time before we clean house and gang up on that scum, so why ain’t she scared?

It wasn’t Lyra who received an answer to that question, but Ardee, fighting on the other side of the warehouse. She spun round, deflecting an attack aimed at her back, when to her utter surprise, the assailant let out an oddly high-pitched scream.

Ardee’s eyes went wide when she saw who had just attacked her. It was a little girl, dressed in a milk-white robe like the other Evils. This human girl was so young, in fact, that she only came up to the height of Ardee’s chest.

“A-a child?!”

The little girl clutched the knife in her hands, whimpering as tears formed in her eyes.

“How could they do this?!”

The mild-mannered Ardee was consumed by violent rage. She could scarcely believe the depths to which the Evils would stoop.

“Put down that knife!” she cried, running over to the girl. “You mustn’t fight! Don’t listen to anyone who puts a weapon in your hand!”

Her own justice guided her. Guided her to help the girl before her. The little girl paused, her eyes wide. Then she slowly began to cry.

Ardee smiled. “It’s okay,” she said. “I would never hurt you.” She lowered her sword and reached out her other hand. The girl stared for a moment, then reached out her right hand, her left clasped tightly to her breast.

“Now, come here,” said Ardee. “Let’s get you to safety.”

Catching a glimpse of this across the battlefield, Valletta grinned a twisted grin. The little girl looked up at Ardee with vacant eyes, and in an emotionless voice she said, “O Lord, please…”

It was neither good nor evil that drove her. Just a single wish.

“Please let me see my mother and father again…”

Then she pressed the switch concealed on her body.

“_____”

Time froze.

Ardee couldn’t pull free from the girl’s lonely fingers.

The eternal moment was ended by a terrible blast.

The force. The shock. The heat. It tore everything apart.

Shakti, Alize, Kaguya, Lyra, the soldiers of *Ganesha Familia*, and Lyu all flinched. None of them could muster a single thought in the face of such unimaginable chaos and destruction. The light blinded them. The noise deafened them. The tremors racing through the earth threatened to knock them off their feet and bring the whole building down on their heads. Even some of the steel shipping containers were dented inward or flung clean into the air.

A wall of sound. Like a waterfall or an earthquake. Like a castle collapsing all

around them. The sudden and destructive blast leveled all it touched.

It was Lyu who staggered to her feet first, cloaked in a layer of dust and soot. As the ringing in her ears subsided, and the stars in her eyes went away, she gazed upon what remained.

“Wha…?”

Nothing. Nothing but the sound of crumbling stone and creaking metal. Nothing but a smoldering crater, like a great wyrm had bitten away the earth. Like a god had carved out a void in space itself. No trace remained of the walls, the floor, or the two girls who had been standing there only seconds ago.

Lyu refused to believe it.

“Wh…what?”

Alize froze.

“…No.”

Kaguya looked on in terror.

“…It can’t be.”

It was Lyra who figured it out before anybody else.

“…The kid blew herself up?”

Ardee’s scorched blood had been seared onto the walls like a macabre coat of paint. It was all that remained of her. That, and her sword. It had been thrown gut-wrenchingly far by the blast, smoke still rising from it.

In that moment of despair, a howling laughter echoed off the walls.

“Hyah-hah-hah-hah-hah-hah-hah-hah-hah-hah-hah-hah-hah-hah-hah-hah-hah-hah-hah-hah!!”

Valletta Grede trembled in wild ecstasy and mad joy.

“See that, Thanatos, you son of a bitch?! That kid you tricked just took one of those damned adventurers down with her! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!!”

That was the deal the little girl had struck with Valletta’s dark master, the god

of death. Slay an adventurer and be reunited with her parents in the afterlife. Valletta bore witness to that dark pact coming to fruition with rapturous glee.

As her cackling rang in the background, Shakti stood, rooted to the spot, her voice cracked and shattered.

"…Ar…dee?"

There wasn't anything left of her sister to bury. Shakti staggered, only by some miracle remaining upright.

"…No."

Lyu's lips trembled. The blast had torn off her mask.

"No. This…can't be happening…"

Her trembling lips disgorged a wave of denial. The quivering spread to her entire body.

"Ardee?!" she wailed, running over toward the spot her friend had once stood, but Lyra grabbed her and held her back with all her might.

"Leave it, Leon!" she shouted, struggling to keep the unruly Lyu under control. "Alize, Kaguya! Stay away from the fallen Evils!"

The prum girl could not allow herself to give in to fear and sorrow just yet. Not while she still had a warning to issue to her friends. For she had finally deduced what was so strange about the whole operation.

"They're all rigged to blow!" she screamed.

As if on cue, several of the barely conscious soldiers began to move. They hauled themselves onto their backs, grasping for the switches hidden beneath their clothing.

Kaguya and Alize gasped and leaped away in opposite directions, just as one of them spoke.

"O Lord, I beg you…Carry my soul to my loved ones!!"

Then, that piteous cry was engulfed by another cataclysmic explosion. The blast wave caught up to the girls and sent them crashing into the floor.

But that wasn't the end of this flame-wreathed banquet. The Evils had

converted every last one of their foot soldiers into deadly weapons. One by one, with trembling hands and tear-stained eyes, they carried out their final duties.

“Diiiiiiiiiie!” one of them screeched.

“Wait for me, Anju!” cried another.

“May chaos take the world!!”

“Glory to Lord Thanatos!!”

Those were the last words anyone could hear before an uninterrupted series of explosions drowned it all out. The adventurers were beset on all sides. Many of *Ganesha Familia* disappeared into the clouds of fire and soot, including Shakti and Lyra. Even Lyu found herself knocked from her feet and crawling across the ground.

It was the cruel and fleeting melody of life.

“We attached those ignition pieces to Inferno Stones!” Valletta howled. “Ain’t that a riot?! Now anyone can blow themselves up whenever we want!!”

An evil smile crossed Valletta’s lips as she watched the destruction from atop her mountain of containers, safely out of the range of the blasts.

Lyra summoned up all the rage her small frame could muster. “You’re a rotten, vile monster!” she cursed, wiping the blood and soot from her face. “Those are your friends, your comrades!”

But Valletta returned only the same, mocking smile.

“You finally worked it out?” she said. “Take our bases, capture our soldiers. We don’t care.”

She grinned and gestured around the building—nothing but a carefully crafted decoy, like the two others of its kind.

“These ain’t our soldiers, sunshine. They’re walkin’ fireworks!”

Meanwhile, up on the second floor, the soldiers of *Ganesha Familia* who had split from Shakti earlier were looking at one another in confusion. They had just felt the first explosion rock the building.

“What’s going on?”

“Is the captain okay?”

As they faltered, a half-dead enemy soldier crawled over to his unconscious comrade and fumbled with his robes. One of the adventurers noticed him.

“H-hey! What are you doing over—”

But it was too late. There was a click, followed by a searing light, and the bomb-laden followers of that captured god reduced their foes to ash. One explosion set off another bomb, and the chain reaction swallowed the building, floor after floor.

“May my life finally atone for my sins!!”

One mad zealot cried out, his face awash in blood and tears. Fortunately, Neze possessed keener senses than her companions.

“Noin, Asta!” she cried. “Get away from him!”

She rushed to the back of their group to grab Celty’s arm before leaping through a shuttered window, sending fragments of wood and glass everywhere. The rest of *Astrea Familia* didn’t hesitate to follow her lead.

No sooner had the girls left through the third-story window than a bright red flower of fire engulfed the floor, and the girls were sent crashing into the ground on a wave of hot compressed air.

“It’s started a chain reaction!” cried Kaguya, her clothes tattered and torn, as she applied pressure to her bleeding arm. She looked around as deafening explosions came from the upper floors, reverberating through the building. Dust and rubble fell, and all around her, ominous cracks began to open in the walls and ceiling.

“That was just the signal,” said Valletta, grinning. “You can’t stop what’s been set in motion now. Anyway, see ya…Actually, I guess I won’t!”

She turned and left, disappearing through a door. Then an explosion went off behind her, sealing the exit with rubble.

The building’s not going to last! thought Alize, her mind going into overdrive as it attempted to analyze everything she saw and heard. *It’s going to come*

down at any moment, with us still inside!

Then, with split-second determination, she made a decision.

“Shakti! Lyra! Kaguya! Pull out!!”

Nobody objected to her order, but…

“It’s Leon, she’s not listening!” screamed Lyra. “Hey, stop it! We have to go!”

“Ardee…Ardee…!!” cried Lyu, struggling against the prum girl’s arms. Kaguya came over to restrain her, but the elf girl still fought against them both, desperate to run over to the smoking crater, where not even a single wall of the former hallways still stood.

“Idiot!” Kaguya swore. “Leon, don’t go! You’ll be buried alive!”

“B-but Ardee!! She’s still there, we can’t leave her!”

Lyu was no longer thinking straight. Her emotions ran riot in her mind.

“Alize!” she protested, her sky-blue eyes wet with tears. “Please, we have to help her! Lyra, Kaguya, please! She’s there…She’s right there!”

There was nothing where Lyu pointed, just a crimson stain smeared across the rubble. Alize, Kaguya, and Lyra all bitterly clenched their teeth. Lyu took advantage of their hesitation to pull herself free at last. She picked up the girl’s sword and ran toward the crater.

In front of her stood Shakti. She had just killed an enemy soldier before he could detonate his explosive device. Now she was dazed and unresponsive, and covered head to toe in blood.

“Shakti!” she cried. “It’s Ardee! She’s…She’s…!”

“…….. ”

No answer. But with trembling breath, Shakti caught Lyu as she tried to run past her.

She knew. She knew if she turned around, that would be it. If she saw the spot her sister spent her final moments, she wouldn’t be able to tear herself away.

So as the explosions continued, as the building tore itself apart, as the timer

in her head counted down…

Shakti had a decision to make.

To be a sister, or a warrior?

For love, or for the mission?

What was right?

What was her justice?

The elf before her was a shadow of herself. The tears that streamed down her face were her own tears. Nevertheless, with a strangled voice, she barked an order.

"…Alize, go!! Get out of here!!"

Shakti slipped her arm around Lyu's waist and hoisted the elf onto her shoulder, even as her heart in her chest threatened to tear itself apart.

She chose to be a warrior. She chose the mission. Without looking back, without any parting words, she took Lyu and ran.

The only one looking back was Lyu, on Shakti's shoulder, screaming Ardee's name and reaching, grasping at air. The elf watched as Ardee's grave grew smaller and smaller, until it was nothing more than a speck in the distance. By now her eyes were so clouded, she couldn't even recall the girl's smile.

Alize, Kaguya, and Lyra all clenched their fists and sprinted for the exit. They were followed by the last remaining survivors of *Ganesha Familia*'s attack force. In place of tears, their faces were marred by blood.

One final blast leveled the building. Columns buckled, supports fell, and the roof came down to trap anyone still within. Everyone ran for their lives as the ceiling caved in behind them, leaping for the exit just as the falling rocks threatened to swallow them.

What followed was a cacophony of stone and dust, drowning out all sound save Lyu's voice, calling Ardee's name.

Meanwhile, back at the home, Astrea suddenly interrupted her prayers and rose to her feet.

“Lyu…?” she muttered. “My children…?”

Her meager powers of foresight stabbed her in the breast with foreboding.

But the goddess didn’t have long to be astonished before everything shook.

The ground. The mansion. The city itself.

Her eyelids flared wide, revealing her deep blue eyes, like the dark of the night sky.

“What’s goin’ on, guys? What’s with all that smoke?!”

In the Twilight Mansion, to the north of town, Loki ran outside and perched herself over the railing on the bridge that ran between the towers.

Dusk had well and truly fallen, and in the black of the night, Loki could spy dark plumes of smoke to the south and southwest. As she scrutinized them, trying to make out their details against the moonless sky, Raul ran up to her.

“L-Loki!” he stammered. “There’s been a string of explosions in the city!”

“What?! You mean they tried to blow up my familia?!”

Raul took a deep breath. “…No,” he said.

“Huh?”

All the blood was gone from his face. He was dripping cold sweat. Loki sensed the dread in his voice and waited desperately for his next words.

“Not there…*Everywhere*.”

Meanwhile, in district five to the south, a deafening explosion shook the Evils base. One by one, the members of *Freya Familia* escaped through a hole torn

by their captain's sword.

"Casualties?" asked Ottar, replacing it atop his shoulder as he glanced back at the collapsed building. Already, it was a pile of smoking rubble, unrecognizable as the Evils base they had come to destroy.

All around him, healer girls ran to and fro, struggling to comprehend what they saw. As the tell-tale glow signaled that they were treating countless patients, Allen Fromel landed by his captain's side, bloodstained spear in hand.

"We lost five," he said. "Dammit. Don't they know who they're dealin' with?"

Allen had managed to put down the enemy commander, but that did little to alleviate his unbound rage. The apostles of evil had given their lives to take out some of his team's finest Einherjar.

Meanwhile, Ottar stood as still as a boulder and narrowed his rust-colored eyes. Then both their ears twitched simultaneously as they heard a second explosion.

"…Huh? Wait, how long are these gonna go on for?"

Allen looked around. Ottar's eyes, meanwhile, widened with shock.

"…It can't be," he said.

"Everyone, get inside Riveria's healing circle!" shouted Finn. "Patch up your wounds and regroup, quickly!!"

In a town square, a short distance away from the base they had infiltrated, the captain of *Loki Familia* barked his commands. The plaza was awash with the clatter of footsteps, and amid it all stood Riveria, eyes closed and chanting.

She was casting a group recovery spell. Her magic circle stretched six meders in radius and gave off a jade-green glow. Those who kneeled within it found their wounds instantly healed, a testament to Riveria's reputation as the most powerful mage in the city.

But even she wore a grim frown. Her face was marred with disgust at the Evils' vile deeds. Meanwhile, Gareth handed off his smoldering greatshield to a supporter.

"To think they would stoop to suicide attacks," he said, "It's a good thing you

noticed when you did, Finn.”

Thanks to his quick thinking and Finn’s perceptive eye, the members of *Loki Familia* were relatively safe, and no one had perished. Few had escaped unscathed, but with Riveria’s healing, they would be well again soon enough.

Still, despite being the infiltration party to suffer the fewest losses and regroup the quickest, Finn and his lieutenants were far from calm.

“You hear that, don’t you?” said the old dwarf.

“Yes,” Finn replied. “Something’s not right.”

The sounds of explosions rumbled in the distance—the same ones Ottar and Allen had heard.

Finn’s blue eyes were grim. “What happened to us wasn’t a trap,” he said. “It was a signal!”

He thought of the woman who was surely behind it all, and her venomous smile.

“It was never us they were after. It all makes sense now!”

The city was ablaze, as if the gates of hell had opened to swallow all in flame.

Asfi ran through the streets.

“The enemy’s true target…was the city itself?”

Fire spewed out of buildings, into streets and squares, bringing destruction to every corner of the city. Followers of the Evils had appeared suddenly and without warning. If they ran into any adventurers, they didn’t hesitate to consign their lives to fire and ash and try to take as many as they could with them.

The screams of men, women, and children could be heard from every street.

Orario was awash in flames. From her vantage point atop a grand gambling house in the business district, Asfi surveyed the carnage alongside the war tiger,

Falgar. The two of them shuddered in fright.

“Orario…?!”

The feast of evil had begun.

CHAPTER 9
The Opening Act of Evil

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CHAPTER 9

The Opening Act of Evil

It all began with a scream more ghastly than any that came before.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaagh!!”

The throat-tearing scream of an innocent townswoman. As she and others tried to flee, they were shot with poison-tipped arrows, or burned to ash by fireballs so that not even their tears remained.

The perpetrators of these vile acts were the minions of evil in their uniform robes. They were like cultists enacting a dark ritual. A ritual to call to earth their forbidden god and revel in the destruction it wrought.

“I-it’s the Evils!!”

Screams rang out. Explosions thundered. Lifeless bodies fell to the ground, to be trampled by the blood-soaked boots of their killers. Sparks flew, and dark shadows danced. Evil approached its zenith.

Vito stood in the center of a burning street, flanked by corpses.

“Now come, one and all,” he said. “The stage is set, the curtains flung wide.”

The corpse of an elf, his face still twisted in a mask of terror. The body of a dwarf impaled against the wall, his blood splattered across it. An animal person mother and her daughter, their lifeless hands still intertwined.

Vito surveyed the carnage and smiled. He walked down the street alone, his smart boots clacking against the cobblestones.

“Thus ends the performance of peace…and the start of our own,” he said, gesturing theatrically. “Evil’s opening ceremony, as my god would put it.”

He threw his arms wide, his voice approaching song.

“Now, sing for me! Dance! An opera of death! And enjoy it, for I most certainly shall!!”

He stepped out onto the main street to find it overcome by chaos.

Everywhere he looked, terrified townsfolk ran for their lives.

“A banquet of blood none can possibly resist! Ah-ha-ha…AH-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA!!”

The ringing of his blade preceded a fountain of blood, and the streets were bathed in the vivid colors that Vito admired most.

Meanwhile, on Adventurers Way in the northwest of the city, the lobby of the Guild headquarters was awash with sound as panicked townsfolk swarmed the doors. Overworked receptionists shouted to be heard over the din.

“Reinforcements requested in district six! Evils agents spotted carrying out attacks! Skirmishes ongoing in districts one, two, and four!”

“Reports of casualties keep coming in! We can’t keep up!”

At the center of it all stood Royman, who barely had it in him to utter a word.

“Wh-what’s going on? What’s happening out there?! It’s like a war! Here, in glorious Orario of all places!”

The sweat dribbled from his flabby chin. Suddenly, his face paled, and he shuddered.

“I-it can’t be…”

Atop a burning building, Valletta stood and watched the panic-stricken streets below.

“It’s time for the feast! Let’s hear some dyin’ screams!”

“N-no, stop! Please!!”

An animal man begged for his life. His attacker, another man of the same race, had lost his entire clan and grown resentful and wicked.

“Die, you ignorant sinner! Die, Orario!”

His victim’s screams couldn’t convince him to stay his arm. The knife in his hand kept stabbing until the cries stopped.

Meanwhile, an innocent prum girl was about to discover just where fate could lead.

“Help meee!”

“Let my body become a flame that returns all to ash!!”

His eyes crazed, the elf’s hand didn’t waver for an instant as it reached for the detonation switch. Both he and the prum girl, along with anyone else in the vicinity, were utterly vaporized by the blast.

“I-it’s you—! *Gaaagh!!*”

There was no justice here. Only the strong would survive. Olivas’s merciless fist had crushed an adventurer’s skull like a ripe berry. His comrades-in-arms froze, their courage drained, as the silver-haired man reveled in his own darkness. He licked his bloodstained fists and smiled greedily. Then he descended on the startled lower-class adventurers, snuffing out lives as if in pursuit of some grand philosophy.

“Now, do it,” he said, turning to his followers. “Bring true despair upon Orario.”

“”””Yes, sir!””””

His loyal soldiers fell upon the now defender-less citizens.

The screams and yells were far too numerous to count. Fear mixed with murderous anger. A raging hellfire consumed all, living or not. Bodies lay by the wayside, smoldering. This undignified cremation left nothing behind but ash.

Then, even those ashes were caught up in the chaos, scattered to the four winds. The roars and wails of the city were like the howls of a living beast, one that permitted no memento of the fallen to persist.

“Ahhh, music to my ears!” sang Valletta, in merry contemplation. “I’ve been dreaming about this day for so, so long!”

There was no madder scene than this. People dying in the streets. An unending anthem of death. The march of chaos, freed from the shackles of law. The Evils followers reveled in violence, unhindered by morality.

However, they never doubted for a second the justness of their cause. They

had all lost things, precious things, to the illogic of this cruel world. To them, they were simply victims, empowered to commit the most heinous acts imaginable in the name of their justice.

“How beautiful! How humorous! How hideous these people truly are!”

These were the words of evil gods, who pointed and laughed as Orario burned. They saw now the true face of humanity, of the mortal world. These foolish, imperfect children knew full well that murder was a sin but were content to repeat the same mistakes forever.

“They cannot escape it!” they cried. “These are the bounds of right and wrong! For what are good and evil but two sides of the same coin?”

They chuckled and clapped their hands, conveniently forgetting they were the ones who created this chaos to begin with.

“Either come down and join us or shut the hell up!” Valletta sneered. “I ain’t got time for your oh-so-clever pronouncements! I got a slaughterhouse to run!!”

The woman shared in their joy, if none of their philosophy. She couldn’t care less for the lives and fates of mortals, except when their blood fed her blade.

Nothing made her heart race like breaking the most ancient of taboos. Nothing could be more depraved. Purpose and ideology were meaningless, fit only as kindling for the bloodlust that flared in her eyes.

A horrifying and fiendish smile crawled across her lips.

“I won’t let a single one of you escape! Townspeople, adventurers, gods—I’ll kill you all!!”

She addressed her pronouncement to the paling Royman. To the innocents who ran in terror. To the heroes who scrambled to defend them. And to the various gods who watched on with concern.

“This is a showdown,” she said. “Between you…and us!”

Now it was evil’s turn to thrive. It was time for killing, looting, and pillaging.

The screams didn't stop and neither did the explosions. The townsfolk were too consumed by sheer terror to even grieve as one fell after the other.

"Ah…ahhh…"

Lyu stood alone, unable to process what was happening. Her sense of righteous anger drew her to this place, but now that she was here, she wasn't capable of anything more than a weak and broken moan.

"Waaaaagh!"

"Not that way! Quick, come over—"

To her right, a panicked human man ran, only to meet his end on an assassin's blade before Noin's frantic voice could lead him to safety.

Behind her, she heard a female voice, calling for aid.

"Help me! Oh gods, please help me!"

Lyra's voice urged the woman to follow her.

"This way, hurry! Get to the center of the city and you'll be al—"

Then an explosion engulfed the poor grief-stricken woman.

"Dammit. Dammiiiit!!"

Lyra cursed the heavens. And the rest of *Astrea Familia* fared no better. No matter how fiercely and bravely they fought to protect the townsfolk, their lives spilled through their fingers like grains of sand.

A little girl stood in the street, crying over the loss of her parents.

A merchant trapped under rubble screamed for help, before going silent.

Order was falling apart and chaos quickly filled the gaps. The peace Lyu had fought so hard to uphold was coming undone so quickly. The city was bathed in red, but by now it was impossible to distinguish what was blood and what was fire.

Every turn of her head revealed more horrors. The hellish scene took over her mind. Lyu was overcome by despair, and she wailed. It was then that someone grabbed her by the collar, and an open palm struck her across the cheek.

“Don’t just stand there, you incompetent fool!”

“K-Kaguya…?”

The human woman arched her well-trimmed eyebrows and roared in Lyu’s face. “Draw your sword and fight! We cannot be indecisive now!”

Lyu recovered a trace of sanity, but it was still fear and confusion that commanded her.

“B-but…Th-this…I-it can’t be happening! I’ve never witnessed such cruelty!”

It had all gone too far. The innocent young elf could scarce believe what she was seeing. Never had she faltered in her quest for justice before seeing the tragic acts of evil on this wretched day.

“Well, get used to it, fool! You can’t let despair control you!!”

Kaguya had no time for Lyu’s complaints. She pulled, squeezing Lyu’s collar tighter and bringing their heads close enough to touch, before bellowing into those wide, sky-blue eyes.

“Don’t think! Just move! Fight! Saving even one life is worth it!” Then, fighting to control her tears, she added…“Or else…it’ll be just like Ardee all over again!!”

That name, and the feelings behind it, caused Lyu’s eyes to flare wide. Emotions roiled out of her chest, washing away the darkness.

“Rgh…!! Raaaaaaaaaaaaaagh!!”

Her grip tightened around her wooden sword, and she flung herself at the attacking Evils. Lyu gave herself over to her emotions, slashing wildly alongside Kaguya’s blade.

The roaring fires knew no peace. The embers of war filled Orario, and the metallic rhythm of clashing swords rang out in every direction. Adventurers fought bravely against the Evils followers, who had become warriors of death.

“There’s too many of them!” shouted one. “Where are they coming from?”

“The chain of command is down!” barked another. “What do we do? Protect

the citizens or advance on the enemy?!”

“I don’t know! I don’t fucking know! What are we supposed to do?!”

It was all they could do just to survive. Many of them were completely bewildered. No matter how many of the Evils they defeated, more kept coming. They crawled out from every crevice, waiting to ambush an adventurer and go out in a blaze of glory. The forces of good had no room to breathe, let alone work out what was going on, and the chaos and panic gripping the townsfolk was no help.

They had no idea where to focus their efforts. No means of communicating with others in the field. They weren’t even members of the same familia. These were just soldiers separated from their comrades and linked together by a common fate. All they could do was swear at each other.

A human archer who managed to keep the mad bombers at bay with his arrows. A half-elven swordswoman who mixed magic with keen slashes, and a stalwart beastman sentinel.

It was amid their warring words that a calm, clear voice rang out, cutting through the fire and chaos.

“Stay calm, children,” it said. “Lest your fear spread to those you seek to protect.”

“I-it’s you!”

“The goddess of *Astrea Familia*…!”

She appeared before the adventurers, her long walnut hair flowing behind her. A goddess had set foot on the battlefield, her unspoiled beauty captivating men and women alike. She examined the adventurers with her deep blue eyes before offering guidance.

“Bring the people to the city center,” she said. “There will be people there with the wisdom and foresight to understand the situation.”

Her slender finger pointed to Central Park. Everybody in the vicinity froze and listened to her. Astrea spoke her divine will, loud enough that all could hear.

“You must be as a shield for the weak. Do not falter! And may the stars watch

over you.”

“““Y-yes, my Lady!!”””

Like explorers beholding the guiding light of the pole star, the adventurers nodded. The lamp of hope had been lit once more. Encouraged, the adventurers began shouting to one another and swiftly divided themselves into two groups—one to escort the townspeople to the city center and another to stay behind and hold the line.

Astrea had managed to tip the scales slightly in justice’s favor once more. She smiled, and just then the footsteps of a second god came up behind her.

“You watch yourself, Astrea,” he said. “No god should be walking around a place like this without protection.”

It was Hermes, holding on to his hat to keep the fiery draft from blowing it away.

“And here I thought you liked to watch events from on high,” replied Astrea. “If it’s so dangerous for me to be here, then what are you doing here?”

She cast him the coy look of a playful big sister. Hermes shrugged and sighed.

“…Guess I’m the protection,” he admitted. “Besides, even Zeus would call me a failure if the world lost a beautiful goddess like you.”

He smirked but then soon cast aside his playful smile and turned serious.

“Besides,” he said, “this time I figured I’d take a leaf out of Ganesha’s book.”

All along the street, buildings were ablaze. The city was falling, and the screams were unending. It wasn’t hard to guess what Hermes was alluding to. His Arcanum sealed, and with nothing but his own two hands, he had been leading people to safety and gathering intel.

He was fighting alone, just like her. Astrea looked at him and nodded.

“Then we’re the same,” she said. “We wish to help our children and save as many lives as we can. Would you escort me?”

“…You must be kidding. I’ve often dreamed of a romantic walk with you, but never pictured it quite like this.”

His words were a joke, but his eyes were quite grave.

“Sorry, but all my children are busy. Us two could go missing in the fires of war and nobody would even notice.”

It was safe to say that right now there wasn’t a single familia in all of Orario with forces to spare. All adventurers had been sent to combat the Evils, and even noncombatants were working with the Guild, evacuating residents.

Even the other gods were providing aid from Ganesha, who stood at the forefront of battle, inspiring the people, to Miach and Dian Cecht, who opened the doors of their medical stores for anyone who needed it.

Hermes had abandoned his preferred method of sneaking away to conduct his investigations, but Astrea had made an even bigger break with habit, heading straight for the center of conflict instead of away from it.

Even for a capricious god, she was acting unusually. It was like she’d taken leave of her senses—or discarded them outright. It was only by chance that Hermes had spotted her, but now that he had, he couldn’t let her go.

But his words did nothing to break the goddess’s gentle smile. “Perhaps you’re right,” she said. “But here’s what I think. We may not be able to help our children directly, but we can at least show them the path.”

She closed her eyes and placed a hand to her breast. “Is that not one of the ways we can help our children grow?” she asked. “That’s why I have to go.”

Then she walked off, still smiling, as graceful as a tender lily, yet firm as she approached the next battleground.

“Really now,” Hermes sighed. “You and Artemis are birds of a feather. You never do what other people say.”

He watched the virgin goddess depart, a bitter smile on his lips. Then, before she was out of sight, he hurried after her.

The wailing, flame-wreathed pandemonium could not be contained on the ground. It rose, into the starless sky, to the very peak of Babel, the tower of the

gods where Freya lived.

"…First, they ushered our greatest heroes into three separate locations. Then, once our forces were split, they sprang the jaws of their trap across the entire city, leaving us flat-footed and unable to respond."

Unusually for her, she was out of her seat, standing by the large window pane set into the outer wall. Her silver eyes fell on the city below, and as she watched her beloved children fall in the streets, her ever-perfect brow displayed a sliver of worry.

From atop Orario, she surveyed the game board, and a rage brewed in her heart.

"We goddesses of beauty could intervene and end this war in an instant," she muttered. "We could charm and neutralize the Evils' children. But it seems our foe is determined to prevent that."

Freya cast her eyes to a hill near Central Park. There, she spied a group of armed Evils soldiers, keeping a watchful eye on the gates of Babel.

They were there for her, Freya surmised. If she set one foot outside the building, she was as good as dead—or sent back to heaven anyway. She would be shot, or bombed, or whatever else it took. And even if the mortals got cold feet, the evil gods would do it personally. Freya spotted one of them, standing among the group: a goddess in heavy makeup. She noticed Freya's gaze and grinned, sticking up her middle finger. Freya only returned a cold glare before turning her attention elsewhere.

In addition to the first squad, Freya spotted three others positioned on rooftops and more in the buildings and trees. Orario's protectors were busy fighting in the streets and had neither the time nor manpower to spare in eliminating them.

It seemed the enemy had deduced the threat the goddesses of beauty posed and planned to deal with them accordingly.

Meanwhile, to the southwest of the tower, at the heart of the pleasure quarter, sat the brothel house Belit Babili, home to Ishtar, another goddess of beauty. She, too, had noticed the Evils surveilling her position.

“I suppose Freya also has no choice but to hide inside her shell,” she mused.

From her position in the home’s main hall, she could see the fires that ravaged the red-light district of Orario. No doubt Evils soldiers were already holed up in the nearby buildings, waiting to ambush her the moment she stepped outside.

She gave an annoyed frown and screwed up her face, before taking a puff from her long pipe.

“I hate to let those flies keep me locked up,” she growled, “but as it stands, there’s no reason for me to take risks. All I have to do is wait for Freya to lose her patience, then watch and laugh as she gets sent back to heaven in shame!”

Ishtar bore a burning hatred for Freya, considered by all to be the fairest in Orario instead of her. Her lips twisted into a smile as she imagined the goddess’s downfall. Then she turned and headed back into her home.

“Tammuz,” she said to the young human man at her side. “See to it that the area around our headquarters is thoroughly guarded. Tell the Berbera to keep any rats from sniffing around our borders. I don’t care what happens beyond them.”

“B-but, Lady Ishtar! If we do nothing, then Orario will…!”

“We don’t have time to care about anyone but our own,” Ishtar commanded. “Now, hurry up and recall our whores before the enemy make them their playthings. I will protect my own children, and no one else’s.”

“U-understood, my Lady!”

His attempt at advising his mistress callously demolished, Tammuz quickly carried out her demands. As cruel as they were, it was with careful consideration of the war and its direction that Ishtar came to her decision.

“We must not mistake foolishness for magnanimity,” she said. “I am no goddess of justice.”

To a god, returning to heaven effectively spelled the end of their familia. It wasn’t worth disrupting the delicate stalemate between Orario and its enemies. So while Ishtar knew it was precisely what the latter wanted, she ordered her

followers to focus their efforts solely on self-defense.

“So Ishtar has holed up, too…I suppose it’s only natural.”

Freya looked down at the pleasure district, where Ishtar’s followers were shoring up the perimeter, and her eyes narrowed. It was clear that Ishtar wanted nothing more than for Freya herself to make the first move and, in doing so, invite her own destruction.

“The pieces on this board,” she said, “are quite ill-spirited…and unscrupulous.”

There was more than one battle taking place in Orario today. While their children fought for their lives in the streets, the gods were engaged in another game. Layers upon layers of strategy, so intricate that a single wrong move could spell a player’s end. The gods were forced to think long and hard about where to deploy their forces.

All of them, it seemed, except Astrea.

While everyone else guarded their pieces jealously, Astrea struck out fearlessly into the center of town, saving the lives of adventurers and townspeople in the process. Freya smiled as she watched her move through the streets, with Hermes following a short distance behind.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen you so determined…” she whispered. Such words of respect very rarely passed Freya’s lips.

Suddenly, the door burst open, and a member of *Freya Familia* walked in.

“I apologize for disturbing you!” he said. “Please forgive me!”

The man kneeled before her. He was covered in blood, though whether it belonged to his friends or his enemies, none could say.

“We cannot prevent the Evils from self-destructing!” he said. “Their chaos is unstoppable! Please, give us your commands!”

Freya didn’t even look back at the man. Her eyes were fixed on the soldiers gathering at the tower’s base. “Recall your troops to…Hmm, no. Send them to Central Park,” she said. “Set up a formation. Loki’s children will be there, too.”

“Loki, we can’t keep taking losses like this! Every time we finish one off, they take us out in the explosion!”

Loki frowned as she heard her follower’s report.

“Dammit, they’re like livin’ bombs,” she grumbled. “It’s insane! Even I’d never stoop that low!”

Loki had relocated the remaining members of her familia from the Twilight Manor to Central Park. Her careful scrutiny of the battlefield had led her to surmise it was the clearest course of action, but even now there was little relief in her perpetual frown.

“I dunno how things can possibly get any worse,” she muttered, as the screams of townsfolk rang in her ears from all directions, “but I still got a bad feelin’ about this. Like everythin’ so far’s just been the openin’ act.”

The heat coming off the burning buildings caused Loki to sweat. It was at that time that a certain group of adventurers returned to Central Park, to scattered cheers.

“Loki!” one of them cried.

“Finn!” Loki replied. “You made it!”

She was overjoyed to see the safe return of her familia’s strongest members, but such joy lasted only a moment before she got straight to business.

“Where’s Riveria and Gareth?” she asked.

“I left half the force in their care and sent them south to strike back at the enemy,” Finn explained. “How goes the evacuation?”

“I called everyone I could here to Central Park,” said Loki. “Raul and the others came straight from the manor, and Freya’s kids are here as well.”

“Thank you.”

Finn looked around and saw that many of the townspeople from Babel’s first floor and its surroundings were gathered here, huddled together like refugees. There were far more than he had been expecting, thanks primarily to the level-

headed actions of Loki, as well as Astrea and *Ganesha Familia*.

It was all but certain that some of these refugees were emissaries of evil—perhaps even evil gods looking to get close enough to one of their bitter foes to make an attempt on their life.

However, there was little Finn could do about that. He would leave the spy hunting to Loki herself—who was even now scanning the crowd with one eye open—and Freya. If there was a time the two could put their differences aside and work together, it was now.

“Let’s erect a perimeter around Central Park,” he said. “We’ll make our last stands here and at Guild HQ. I’ll take command of our forces!”

Finn was a truly brave hero. Though he knew the enemy was likely behind his lines already, he didn’t show a shred of weakness. His voice carried across the battlefield, making even the battered townspeople look to him as a beacon of hope.

He ordered his troops to take their positions. As for the lower-class adventurers, too weak to fight the enemy, he had them construct barricades around the border of Central Park, gathering broken planks of wood and empty ale casks to serve as fortifications. It was nothing pretty, but it would hold.

Just then, a subordinate came running up.

“Captain!” she said. “Explosions are getting louder in all directions! The enemy is closing in!”

“Hold fast! Don’t forget that training and experience is on our side! Allow the evacuees through the checkpoint while eliminating the suicide bombers! Hit them with fire magic or a magical sword, and their bombs will go off prematurely! Blow them up from a distance before they get too close!”

“R-roger!”

“If you don’t have a means of engaging at range, aim for their feet! Throw your weapons or whatever you can find! Go!”

When the lieutenants heard Finn’s words, it was like they suddenly had purpose and direction again. They ran off in all directions to relay his words to

the soldiers on the perimeter.

“This park is our last line of defense!” he shouted. “Stand fast and protect the weak!”

“““Hurraaaaaaaaaah!!”””

The adventurers all cheered Finn’s decisive words. His commands were swift and precise. It was everything the troops looked for at a time like this.

A good commander could make his army fight even harder. Finn’s guidance breathed new life into their flagging morale, preparing them to strike back against the Evils. The veteran adventurers, just barely managing to hold the line, found their energy restored. Turning their focus from defense to offense, they began to repel the invaders gathering on the border.

One group of adventurers on the front line was made up of the dwarf Dyne, the human Noir, and the Amazon Bahra.

“Now that Finn’s here, our formation is unbreakable!” shouted Dyne. “Look around; this place was like a wake a moment ago. Now everyone’s raring to go!”

“Yeah,” said Noir. “Honestly, the new generation is so capable, it makes me mad. He’ll always be a cocky little brat to us!”

“Ha-ha-ha!” Bahra laughed. “Well, they’re all cocky little brats; that’s what we love about them!”

These seasoned veterans were determined not to be outdone by Finn and the other rising stars and took out enemy soldiers one after the other. From the center of the park, Finn smiled. He could rest easy and leave the front lines under their careful watch.

“The first-tier adventurers and reserves from *Freya Familia* have been deployed to the northern part of the city,” he explained. “They have been tasked with defending Guild headquarters, along with the industrial district!”

Before arriving at Central Park, Finn had, at Loki’s suggestion, tasked Raul and the other lower-class adventurers with running messages between here and the Guild. Thanks to that, he had a good grasp as to the general state of the

battlefield. He knew that members of *Freya Familia* had already set up fortifications, not only at Guild HQ but also to the northwest, in Hulrand's Cathedral and other historical buildings nearby. That was where they were housing evacuees in those parts of the city.

Freya Familia had similarly entrusted the defense of Central Park to Finn and his associates. To put it one way, it was a sign of mutual faith between the two titans of Orario. To put it another way, it was an excuse for them to ignore each other entirely.

"They will not be sending reinforcements!" Finn continued. "If we are broken here, look for Hildsleif! He has command in the north!"

"Captain!" said a messenger. "W-we've received word from Hildsleif as if he knew you were going to say that! He says, 'How dare you force all the responsibility onto me, you shameless prum! Go die!' He sounds furious, sir!"

"I see! Well, I'll certainly give my life if that's what it takes! Tell him I pray for his success!"

"Maybe I've died already and gone to hell…" the envoy muttered, as he turned to run back the way he came.

The scale of this crisis had already grown to the point where Finn needed every spare brain cell to consider his options. To that end, he needed to delegate. And delegate he would.

This was no adventurer's fight. Nor was it the cause of any individual god or goddess. This fight was for all of Orario.

"*That's* Finn's response? *'I pray for your success'*? After everything I said? Is this a joke?! Did you even deliver the message properly, you useless piece of excrement, or are you looking to meet a swift end at my hand?! Well, that can be arranged!"

"Eeeeeeeeek!! Don't kill meeee!!"

In the northwest of the city, Finn's messenger once again reported to Hildsleif, an elf with long golden hair whose real name was Hedin Selland. The elf was furious at Finn's uncooperative response and was currently spouting all manner of abuse at the poor, helpless messenger.

"Do you know how many riffraff are stuck here that I'm now responsible for?! Perhaps this is difficult for you imbeciles at *Loki Familia* to understand, but all we have at *Freya Familia* are reckless, obnoxious dullards like our boar-headed captain! How in the hell does Finn expect me to hold a line when all of my sentries are incorrigible warriors with death wishes?! You know who's going to have to clean up their messes, don't you? It's me! Me, you idiot, me!!"

Is he angry at us or at them?!

At rest, Hedin was so fair, casual observers might mistake him for a beautiful maiden. However, his face was so contorted by rage at the moment that not even the most myopic fool would make that error. The envoy was ready to wet himself in fear, but the petty tyrant's constant bemoaning of his incompetent allies almost convinced the messenger to pity him. Almost.

Hedin was the main brain behind *Freya Familia*—perhaps the only one, for that matter—and so while the messenger, an animal man named Olba, sympathized with his plight, it was essential that he hear what Finn had to say.

"A-also," he stammered, "Finn says to engage the suicide bombers only at long ran—"

"Struggle for eternity, indestructible soldiers of lightning."

"…Uh?"

Olba had a confused look on face as the elf strategist finished his chant.

"Caurus Hildr."

A blinding flash of lightning nearly seared the poor messenger's retinas. He and Hedin were standing atop a steeple of Hulrand's Cathedral, about a hundred meders off the ground. Hedin's magic set a barrage of lightning hurtling toward the city below.

"Wh-wh-wh-what are you doing?!" he asked.

“Engaging at long range, you fool,” replied Hedin without looking at him.

“…Huh?”

“Once I surmised the enemy were all suicide bombers, I switched our tactics. I’ve been standing up here, and anytime the enemy gets close to this cathedral or any of the other churches housing evacuees, I let them eat lightning.”

Olba heard the distant screams of the Evils soldiers as Hedin’s electrical assault rained down on them. Hedin’s eyes were sharper than those of any forest ranger, thanks to his many Rank Ups, and even in the gloom of night, not a single foe escaped him. His lightning blasts ignited the bombs, taking out not only the suicide bombers themselves but any others in the vicinity by inducing chains of explosions that rolled the earth in thunderous hellfire.

This was certainly what Finn had asked for, but Olba could scarcely believe that Hedin was able to handle it all by himself. This was the sheer strength of a Level 5 adventurer.

“You’re always so painfully slow,” Hedin remarked. “Do try to keep up.”

Come to think of it, I did see strange flashes of light coming from the steeple… Olba idly thought while he wept at Hedin’s sour words.

The elf’s long-distance lightning strikes seemed more like a carpet of bombs, and Olba paled as he watched the destruction being wrought below.

“You might be able to fight them off,” he said, “but there’s going to be no city left if you keep this up!”

“The enemy outnumbers us,” came Hedin’s calm response. “We don’t have the luxury of choice.”

“Wh-what if there are people still trying to get away?”

“You want me to sacrifice the many we’ve saved for the sake of a few stragglers? Then you can be the first to die.”

Hedin dismissed Olba’s appeals. His unceasing bombardment was a merciless yet decisive way of keeping the enemy out.

“Besides, I’m still holding back,” he said.

In what way?! Thought Olba, right before a backward kick to the gut caused him to crumple.

“If it were up to me,” Hedin explained without looking back, “I would burn this whole city to the ground and make sure those blasted Evils have nowhere to hide.”

Hedin tutted and continued blasting his magic as the beastman messenger writhed on the floor behind him.

It was true that Hedin was not going all out. With his peerless control and accuracy, Hedin was making sure that collateral damage was kept to a minimum. But so long as he didn’t spot any of the evacuees Olba had mentioned, he would not hesitate because of the scale of destruction his attacks would bring. After all, if any survivors had the poor sense to flee directly into an area infested with enemies, they were as good as dead already. Hedin had decided to save those he could, while refusing to devote resources to those who were lost causes.

Finn surely knew this and had no intent to meddle. He and Hedin were two birds of a feather, pragmatic and calculating souls with no room for sentimentality. That was what made them both so adept at reading each other’s minds.

Suddenly, Hedin shouted down the spire.

“Van! Go and reinforce Hegni’s unit to the south! I can’t get a clean shot with all the spires and steeples in that area! Go on foot and eliminate the enemy!”

“Y-yes, sir!”

Van, the half-prum adventurer waiting below, reacted quickly and followed his new orders.

Hedin and the rest of *Freya Familia* were charged with protecting not only St. Hulrand Cathedral but also three other churches in the vicinity. All four of them were currently sheltering the terrified townsfolk, huddled in fear as more explosions ripped apart everything outside.

As ruthless as he was, Hedin was also proud, and he was determined to protect these four shelters to the death. So it came as some surprise to the still-

reeling Olba when Hedin immediately began casting lightning at whatever he could see.

“Wh-what?! Isn’t that where you just told your allies to deploy?! Why are you aiming right there?!”

Olba had never seen anything like it in all his years with *Loki Familia*. Hedin, meanwhile, wondered if he ought to choke the life out of the beastman envoy and put a stop to his nagging once and for all.

“This isn’t enough to kill those idiots,” he said, almost annoyed at the fact.

“Gaaaaaaaagh?!”

Jet-black steel severed the soldier’s neck before he could set off his explosive vest. As his arms fell limply by his sides, a barrage of lightning came out of the sky and consumed him. Hedin’s spell caused a fresh chain of explosions, but the dark elf quickly and deftly wove through them.

“Man, this sucks. This really sucks. This is even worse than the battle of Heodenings. I never thought a war like this would come to Orario. Ugh, I hate war.”

He danced across the battlefield, not letting himself be caught in either the self-destructive blasts of his foes or the reckless onslaught of his allies.

His name was Hegni Ragnar. A Level 5 adventurer, same as Hedin, and his title was Dáinsleif. None in *Freya Familia* could defy the danger of Hedin’s spells as easily he did. Hegni fought ahead of them all, blending into shadows that even the flames of the burning city could not dispel. Any foes who evaded Hedin’s aim soon met their end on Hegni’s blade instead.

“I-it’s Dáinsleif!!”

“Gaaaaaagh!”

None were safe from his jet-black sword. Orario was nothing now but a battleground for wild beasts drunk on blood. These beasts were neither good nor evil; they were mindless, and so while Hegni was usually timid and reactive, today he felt no guilt in cutting them down. Trying not to look at the innocent corpses lining the streets, Hegni focused solely on hunting his prey.

“Is it only the north that’s like this?” he muttered to himself. “I wonder how things look in the south, where Ottar and Allen are. I don’t really care about them, but I hope Lady Freya’s all right. Oh, I just can’t stop worrying about her! It’s so scary!”

The cloak of night shielded Hegni from judgmental gazes, encouraging him to voice his thoughts out loud. It was then that a pair of high-pitched voices pierced the darkness.

“It’s okay, Hegni!”

“Give up your life, and you won’t have to think such worrying thoughts anymore!”

“Oh, here we go…”

He couldn’t bear their girly, squealing tones. He pulled up his collar, shielding himself from this filthy pair’s sight; they shouldn’t get to see the face that his beloved goddess had once called beautiful.

“Let’s turn his lifeless husk into a pretty little doll, Dina!” said one. “We can sit him next to my darling Hedin, too!”

“What a wonderful idea, Vena! I’m sure Hegni loves it, too! Oh, I love him so much, I just want to strangle him!”

“Careful, sister! You accidentally said how you really feel!”

“Oh, did I? Whoopsie! Aha-ha-ha!”

These sickly, singsong voices belonged to a pair of sisters whose hearts were black as tar. They both wore scanty robes like exotic dancers, and they each purposefully looked like the mirror opposite of the other.

One tied her hair in a single side bunch, the other two. One had fair skin, as pure and white as a newborn babe, while the other’s was dark and alluring like a forbidden fruit. However, no adventurer was fooled by their childlike appearance. All knew them to be a pair of carnivorous flowers who killed those unfortunate enough to attract their lustful gaze.

The elder of the two was Dina Dis, a white elf with golden hair, and the younger was Vena Dis, a dark elf with silver hair. Each bore a tear-shaped tattoo

beneath opposite eyes. They clasped hands and laughed sweetly and innocently.

But their depravity was so base that Hegni refused to even consider them members of the same race.

“You’ve come…like I knew you would, Dis sisters.”

“Of course!” said Dina. “How could we turn down a magnificent party such as this?”

“We can’t be late!” added Vena. “We have to hurry and kill the two of you, or else the lives our god granted us would go to waste!”

The two sisters chuckled gleefully to each other. A wicked, unceasing laughter that chilled Hegni to his very core.

There were two groups considered extreme even by the Evils’ standards. One of them was *Alecto Familia*, of which Dina and Vena Dis were captain and vice-captain, respectively.

Broken was the only word that could accurately describe them. They were twisted pleasure-seekers, finding joy only in the pain and suffering they inflicted on their victims. They were up there with Valletta in terms of how many adventurers and innocent townsfolk they had sent to an early grave.

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“Please stop following me around,” said Hegni. “Go bother Hedin; I don’t care. Just leave me alone.”

“We can’t!”

“That’s right, we can’t!”

““Because we love you two to death, more than anything else in the world!””

As much as Hegni hated to admit it, these two were his and Hedin’s archenemies. The sisters had been obsessed with them ever since the four clashed by chance and suffered a painful draw.

Hedin loathed the girls for the dishonor they brought his people, while Hegni was simply baffled by their bizarre words and actions.

For instance, they once told him:

“Hegni, we’re the real edgelords!”

“Yeah, our god told us so! That means you’re just a fake!”

““What a poser!””

Hegni hadn’t the slightest clue what they meant by that, but for some reason, their words made his blood boil, and Hegni found himself overcome with murderous rage.

He had lost track of the number of times he and Hedin had tried and failed to kill these two. Their strange personalities aside, Dina and Vena were both Level 5, among the strongest of any Evils fighter. In terms of height, they both measured somewhere in the region of 150 celches and resembled human girls of about fourteen or fifteen. Though, of course, they were elves, and in fact were older than Hedin and Hegni, who were both about seventy. Despite their cute and innocent act and appearance, Hegni knew the pair were more cunning and blackhearted than any he had ever faced.

“Hey, look, Vena! Hegni’s not such an edgelord today!”

“You’re right, Dina! How strange! That must be a good omen! It must mean this paradise is going to go on forever!”

I should have just used my magic, thought Hegni to himself as he pulled up his

collar once more. He had hoped that fighting in the darkness would mean that he didn't have to endure people's gazes, or that these two sisters would find something else to obsess over in this large, city-scale war. No such luck on either count, it seemed.

I don't suppose they're going to give me time to don the Warlord's Mask now.

Then again, perhaps it wouldn't matter for these two. Hegni found that, despite his usual crippling shyness, he had no qualms speaking plainly with these two girls. Not because he was especially close to them, but because he didn't care one bit what they thought of him.

"Fine, let's do this," he said. "I kill you, and I never have to see either of your faces ever again, filthy sirens."

In Hegni's eyes, the two of them didn't qualify as elves. They were something else—something monstrous.

As soon as he said it, the two sisters dropped their smiles, and their eyes opened sickeningly wide, boring holes into Hegni's soul.

""Don't call us that word,"" they said in unison.

"We are elves, whether you like it or not," said Dina.

"What's the difference between us and the others, huh?" asked Vena. "You're just a meanie! A big, mean meanie!"

Very rarely, as if in bitter spite of the nobility of the elven race, a twisted individual of unmatched darkness would be born. The Dis sisters were two such examples: a cruel trick that nature chose to perpetrate against their kin. They were therefore a pair of living contradictions, beings obsessed with the purity of their race yet unable to meet the standards of it.

Hegni didn't know what the two girls had been through in the past as a result of this. Persecution? Oppression? Ostracization? Were these two young girls desperately trying to suppress their true natures, lest they break down completely?

Hegni didn't know. But nor did he care. He had no pity for their lot.

Because it didn't matter what they were before. It didn't matter their tragic

past or noble motive. These sirens were responsible for untold death and destruction. That was all that mattered.

““Die for us, Hegni! Along with Hedin over there!””

Hegni had but one wish: that tonight would be the night he finally severed his bond with these two sisters. With that wish in mind, he unleashed his magic and sent his sword hurtling toward them.

“Not them again.”

“The *psycho sisters*, Freya calls them.”

“They’re not even that edgy.”

“I really feel sorry for Hegni and Hedin having to deal with them all the time.”

Standing in a line a short distance away were the four prum quadruplets, the Gulliver brothers. While the rest of the squadron gasped and looked over in awe at the battle unfolding between Hegni and the Dis sisters, the four who comprised Bringar only muttered in silent pity.

The location, toward the south end of district seven, was at a crossroads surrounded by many historical buildings. Here Alfrik, Berling, Dvalinn, and Grer had just finished eliminating the enemy rank-and-file. This was a spot that Hedin couldn’t see from his vantage point, and thus the ground squad had needed to engage the enemy on foot. However, the main skirmish was now over, as evidenced by the bodies lying at their feet.

Hegni had encountered the sisters at the end of one of the four streets leading off from the intersection. The four brothers glanced in that direction, then turned around.

“““““So, who are you lot supposed to be?””””” they all asked at once.

Their four sets of eyes were directed toward what looked like about a dozen adventurers. There were humans, animal people, and dwarves, all of whom looked fairly robust. Many of them were tanned, but otherwise they were a rather diverse group, both in terms of race and in terms of weaponry. There was one point, however, that they all had in common.

They were all wide-eyed and fitted with some kind of gag, literally champing

at the bit and frothing. It was clear to see that not one among them was sane.

“Hurgh…Huuurgh…!!”

“What’s up with these guys?”

“Gross.”

“They’re out of their minds.”

The beastly groans that their mouths emitted caused the four brothers to take a step back in fright. All except Alfrik, that is.

“Looks like the Evils are back to their old tricks—pumping adventurers with drugs and cursed items and using them as their expendable pawns.”

“Expendable?” came a voice. “Perish the thought! These are our finest warriors.”

The voice came from a sturdily built animal person standing at the rear of the pack. He was past middle-aged, with a long beard, and wearing a priest’s habit in black and purple. An unsettling, gleeful look dominated his eyes, and in his hand he held a blood-soaked cane.

Despite his priestly appearance, however, the old man was far from benevolent.

“It’s you. Apate’s lapdog.”

“Basram.”

Apate Familia boasted the strongest forces in the Evils, on par with *Alecto Familia*. The four Gulliver brothers glared at the head priest with all the hate they could muster.

The cruelty of their order hardly bore mentioning. In fact, *Freya Familia* had already killed the captain, vice-captain, and all notable lieutenants in previous battles. Now Basram was forced to stand on the front lines. It just went to show how far the group had fallen.

However, judging by the old priest’s words, the faction wasn’t ready to throw in the towel just yet.

“What do you mean, finest warriors? Explain yourself, Basram, or die where

you stand.”

But the old man just chuckled. “Ha-ha-ha. I fear you will kill me either way. But don’t worry, you shall see what I mean soon enough.”

He smiled, and the horde of fighters took up battle stances, eager to draw blood.

“You sniveling worm.”

“This mad rabble won’t stop us from crushing you.”

“This day will mark the end of *Apate Familia*.”

The three younger Gulliver brothers all spat insults and drew their weapons. Great hammer, greatax, and greatsword were all ready to go. Only Alfrik, spear in hand, seemed reluctant to engage.

If these are really his finest warriors, he thought, *then why haven’t we seen them before? Why didn’t they show up when we took down the captain? And something else is bothering me. I feel like I recognize their faces…*

His watchful eyes scanned the enemy lines. “Don’t let your guard down,” he said to his overeager brothers.

Off to the northwest, another battle raged. Streaks of lightning lit up the bloodred sky, and the air was filled with thunderous booms, not from the suicide bombers but from magic. If one strained their ears, one could almost make out the sounds of clashing steel. It was a battleground no less fierce than the one taking place in the center of the city.

Several people watched from afar. One of them, an Amazon, hoisted up the greatsword she had just used to cut down a foe and saddled it on her shoulder.

“Wow, things are really heating up. Say what you want about Orario; at least it never gets boring.”

She possessed radiant good looks and an enviable figure, with long black hair tied back in a ponytail. All of which did nothing to detract from the fearsome image given off by her supple yet toned arms and fiendishly heavy weapon—almost as tall as herself.

On what little fabric comprised her outfit was emblazoned the crest of her

faction—*Ishtar Familia*.

She was surrounded by other Amazons, all of whom looked to her for guidance.

“What now, Aisha?” an ashen-haired one asked.

The Amazon—Aisha Belka—sniffed derisively at the question.

“That’s obvious,” she said. “We leave the pleasure quarter in search of our next battle.”

“But Ishtar wants us to head back and protect our home.”

“Yeah, and? We’ve only just joined. She can’t expect to order us around like that.”

Aisha and the rest of her band were somewhat lowly fighters, even within their own familia. Of all the Berbera, they numbered among the weakest. There were plenty of stronger warriors, like the toadess Phryne, so it wouldn’t matter much if Aisha’s group went off to play on their own for a while.

At least, that was the childish excuse Aisha told herself so that she could continue indulging herself.

“You made sure all the wounded returned to base, right?” Aisha asked.

“Of course. The brothels are safe, too.”

“Then let’s go, Samira! Let’s have some fun! Even in the deserts of Kaios, I never found enemies as crazy as these!”

The Berbera under her command all let out a roar of approval and rushed into an unsuspecting gang of Evils soldiers.

Elsewhere in town, a forge’s high smith came running over to the commander in charge of defending the area.

“Captain Tsubaki!” he cried. “The adventurers are demanding more magic swords!”

“Then let ’em have ’em!” the commander replied. “Swords are meant to be used, aren’t they?”

She then swung her own magic sword at a wave of charging suicide bombers,

engulfing the entire front rank in flames.

“I know they’re effective against the bombers,” the smith shot back, “but we can’t be sure that everyone who comes to our forge is an ally! We can check familia crests, but the enemy could always show us counterfeits!”

“Then just look at ’em! If they look all evil-like, don’t give ’em anything!”

“You can’t be serious!”

Tsubaki made for a capable smith, but her skills as a commander were sadly lacking. As she argued, she pulled a magic sword out of the earth that she had stuck there previously and used it to launch a fireball at the second wave of foes.

“Besides,” the high smith continued. “Even if we only give out swords to those we trust, we’re going to run out fast! There’s too many enemies!”

“Aaargh, shut up! Who cares?! You’re not the only one short-staffed tonight, you know! Let us handle the battlefield and leave the supply chain to Lady Hephaistos!”

At that very moment, the goddess in question was in her home, the Vulca Workshop.

“Our stores are now open!” she declared. “Bring out all our inventory!”

“L-Lady Hephaistos, are you sure about this? That’s our entire fortune!”

“Well, it’s not going to do us much good if the entire city is destroyed! I’ll start handing them out to adventurers. That way, if I see they’re not who they claim to be, I can give you a signal, and you get out there and capture them!”

Deities could see though any lie perpetrated by mortals. The young worker was taken aback by this clever plan and only started moving when Hephaistos told him to snap to it.

After he hurriedly left the room, the goddess turned to the little old god next to her.

“Now, what about you, Goibniu?”

“Doubt I’ll make it back to my own forge now. Hope you’ll let me stay here

awhile.”

The other smithing god, usually situated at his home in the northwest of town, had happened to be visiting Hephaistos’s forge in order to discuss logistics, when the outbreak of war cut their meeting short.

“Light the forge,” he said. “Might as well put my skills to good use while you’re out there dealing with the customers.”

The old god flashed a faint smile, something rarely seen on one so brusque as he. Hephaistos returned it.

“That would be much appreciated,” she said. “Thank you.”

It didn’t take long for them to analyze the situation and come to a snap decision. No matter which way the war went, there would surely be a need for weapons and equipment. Therefore, it was time to start hammering out some divine works for Orario’s protectors to use in the battles to come.

“I’m sending some of my best blacksmiths. Fire up every furnace!”

“Leave it to me.”

On that day, the fires of Hephaistos’s forges reached unprecedented capacity.

“Burques! I managed to get Hephaistos to give me some magic swords!”

“Nice work, Lofina!”

A young elf girl ran over to where the rest of her party hid, carrying in her arms a large sack with a bunch of weapons poking out of it.

She and the fellow members of her familia were all covered in soot and dust, and they crouched behind rubble like they were cowering in the trenches. The captain, Burques, began dividing up the weapons, ready to launch an assault on the Evils soldiers who lurked at the opposite end of the bridge.

“Not you, Filvis,” he said when a sweat-drenched young girl approached. “You need to rest and shake off that Mind Down.”

“N-no! I can still fight! Let me fight!”

The girl was only twelve years old. For an elf, that was so young that even other races considered her a child. The look in her eyes, however, was prouder

than any of her adult peers. With jet-black hair and eyes like rubies, there was no doubt she would one day grow up into one of the greatest beauties to ever walk the earth.

She was dressed in long white battle clothes like a priestess, and carried a short wand made of wood from her hometown's sacred tree.

"The very fate of Orario hangs in the balance!" she protested. "I cannot just sit around doing nothing! I am prepared to do whatever it takes to soothe Lord Dionysus's fears! Ferry supplies, maintain barriers, anything!"

She was Filvis Challia, and they were *Dionysus Familia*. All were proud to fight for Orario's safety in the name of their lord.

"…Fine. Come with me, Filvis."

"Lofina!" the girl replied, overjoyed.

"You really do spoil that girl sometimes," said Burques with a sigh. "Fine. You make sure not to distract your big sister, okay, Filvis?"

"I won't!"

Her face turned into a smile. A smile of admiration for her elder sibling who served as vice-captain. Then they all turned and followed their captain into the heat of battle. The little girl summoned a shield of white lightning that would keep her loved ones safe.

"Healing droplets, tears of light, eternal sanctuary. Compose a medicinal hymn—three hundred, sixty, and five."

The girl recited her chant as if reading from holy scripture, unleashing her magic on the wounded adventurers before her.

"In the name of all that is holy—I heal you. Dia Frater!"

An *exceptionally* large magic circle encompassed the area, abating the suffering of those within.

"Whoa?! That massive wound just closed up before my very eyes!"

"You're a saint! A true saint! You've earned our worship from now on!"

Cheers erupted from the crowd of newly healed adventurers. The location

was Northwest Main Street. If the magic-stone factories in the northeast of town were Orario's lifeblood, then the Guild Headquarters on this street was its brain. It was here, on one of the many battlefields, where the girl stood.

Her faction's emblem was a ball of light, flanked by herbs. It belonged to *Dian Cecht Familia*, one of the best, if not *the* best, medicinal suppliers in Orario. And she was its prodigal child, its secret weapon, Amid Teasanare.

"Cheers, kid. You patched me up real good."

"I am not a kid."

"I'll be countin' on you next time, squirt!"

"I am not a squirt!"

Amid pouted as the ruffians all took their leave. With her snow-white robe, long silver hair, and mysterious violet eyes, she looked like a doll, and all agreed her beauty would only grow in the coming years.

Right now, however, she was a little under 120 celches, often mistaken for a child or even a prum. She insisted on using a rod too large for her, and no matter how sternly she attempted to glare, she always looked painfully adorable.

Yet as far as Amid was concerned, she was a full-fledged lady, with a respectable twelve (!) years under her belt. Give it another seven, and she would be walking as tall and proud as the rest of them. Of course she would. Surely.

Amid looked at the revitalized adventurers with a mixture of annoyance and worry. Then, suddenly, a bout of dizziness overcame her.

"Urgh…"

She had been healing nonstop for hours. They just kept bringing in more wounded. Adventurers, of course, but injured civilians, too. For a small girl like her, healing them was just as exhausting as fighting on the front lines, if not more so.

Luckily, a hand caught her scruff before she planted her face in the ground. Her collar tightened around her neck before rubber-banding her back up.

“Gyugh!” she squealed.

“Take a rest before you pass out,” her rescuer said. “Here, have a potion.” Then she poured the magical concoction over Amid’s hair. The sweet-smelling liquid streamed down her face and into her eyes.

“Blugh!”

“Now, go sit in the corner and look pretty.”

Amid shook herself like a wet dog, drying her long silver hair, before glaring daggers at the girl beside her.

“What are you doing here, Ersuisu?”

“Telling you to sit this one out. You have any idea how mad the old man will be if I let you push yourself too far?”

It was a chienthrope from *Miach Familia* called Nahza Ersuisu. She was noticeably taller than Amid, despite being a year her junior.

“I’m heading onto the battlefield to serve as Miach’s escort,” she said. “Scaredy-cats like you should stay put.”

She waved her hand as if to shoo Amid away. In her other, she held her weapon, a bow. As she turned to leave, Amid puffed up her cheeks, threw aside her staff, grabbed hold of the girl’s canine tail, and pulled with all her might.

“Eeep?!”

“Look at how your tail is shaking!” she said. “I might be a scaredy-cat, but you’re just a scaredy-dog!”

“Sh-shut up! I’ll have Lord Miach to protect me out there! He’ll save me from all the bad guys, and then love will bloom on the battlefield…”

“L-love?!”

“It doesn’t matter how grown-up you act; Lord Miach will never love you!”

“Y-yes, he will!”

“And besides, I’ve seen you making eyes at him. Stick to your own familia, you floozy!”

“Sh-shut up!”

“Girls! This is hardly the time or the place!”

““L-Lord Miach!””

There to break up the catfighting was the very god they were discussing. At his rebuke, the girls turned red-faced.

Ignoring them, Miach turned and shouted. “Dian! We’re heading over to Central Park! I’ll leave things here in your capable hands!”

“What, and let you steal all the glory?” snapped the white-haired old man. “If you’re going, then so are we!”

“Please, must we always quarrel like this?” Miach sighed. The rivalry between their two factions was no less strong between the two gods than it was between their respective disciples.

“One of us must stay back to provide healing on the northwestern front! You must understand, Dian, this is no time for petty squabbles!”

“Nrgh! You have a point…Very well, but you better pull your weight over there, you hear?”

“Right back at you, my fellow. Come, Slane, my captain. Let’s go.”

“Yes, Lord Miach!”

Miach departed southward alongside an armed escort, leaving the two quarreling girls to hang their heads in shame.

The fires of war were burning in all quarters of the city. Only the gods in heaven and the birds above could see the true scale of the invasion. Crimson streaks erupted in the streets, igniting the buildings. It was like a fiery cauldron, enclosed on all sides by steep walls of stone, ready to drag all within it down to the deepest pits of hell.

Meanwhile, atop a tall belfry, a catgirl assassin surveyed the inferno. Her feline tail swayed softly from side to side, before suddenly pricking up.

“…Orario is freakin’ wild, meow.”

Meanwhile, on a rooftop, a human girl bounty hunter peeked at the inferno

while fending off her Evils attackers. She restlessly clenched and unclenched her bloodstained fists.

"…Man, Orario is crazy."

These two girls had coincidentally and independently arrived in the same city at the same time, on the same terrible day. Each of them cursed their own rotten luck.

""I guess I'll stay out of the war business for a while.""

Each of them came to the same conclusion. To look out for number one.

Amid all the buildings of the city was one that stood undamaged despite the lack of adventurers guarding it. It was a tavern called The Benevolent Mistress over on East Main Street.

"Unruly customers, get lost!!"

"Guoooogh?!"

The proprietress, a stockily built dwarf woman named Mia Grand, flattened the intruders with a single punch.

"Harrumph!" she snorted. "What a feckless lot, running about like they own the place."

She looked around. The streets outside her bar were ablaze and littered with piles of rubble and upturned carts. Behind her, the tavern was conspicuously untouched, and Mia's animal person staff hurried to and fro, trying to keep the flames from spreading to it.

"…We can't hold out forever," she grumbled. "Guess it's time to cut our losses and head on over to Central Park."

The bar was sheltering a few dozen people who hadn't been able to make it to the evacuation points in time. They were all exhausted, and covered in soot, and relied on Mia's strong arm to see them through the crisis. Mia was happy to help, but she had been an adventurer once upon a time, and her old instincts told her there wasn't much sense in prolonging the siege any further.

"We're sitting ducks out here," she muttered to herself. "And I got a feeling something nasty's about to happen."

Mia took one last look at the bar.

If any of them mess this place up, I'll make them wish their mothers never squeezed them out.

Then she quickly set about leading the civilians to safety.

The heaviest Evils losses in the battle so far had been suffered by those who had foolishly attempted to attack this place unprepared.

Maybe I just have rotten luck, the girl thought.

It always seemed to go this way. She had no parents, no friends, no guardians. The only person looking out for her was herself, and everywhere she went, people tried to take advantage of her.

And now it was starker than ever, the difference between her and those upon whom fortune smiled. They would stumble across powerful adventurers or find somebody foolish enough to stand up for the weak in a time of war. That was all it took in these times for a nobody to change their fate.

Evil had taken over the minds of the people. How else could you explain all the fire and death? They let darkness into their hearts and preyed on the weak. Evil gods whispered into their ears, telling them it was the only way to make the old order fall.

"Diiiiiiiie!"

"Ah…"

So when the young prum stared up from the gutter, seconds from meeting her end at the tip of a blood-soaked blade, she realized she was just unlucky.

Or perhaps not.

"Get the hell away from her!!"

"Gaaaaagh?!"

A figure appeared, but it was all so fast that the prum girl had trouble figuring out what had just happened. All she heard at first was the werewolf's furious voice. And then, slowly, she realized that the Evils soldier before her had just been mercilessly slaughtered.

“Pick on someone your own size, you assholes. When are you gonna stop pissin’ me off?”

“Calm down, Bete!” came a second voice. “We’ve just received more orders from Braver! He says we need to make sure the citizens get away safely!”

“I know!”

The girl’s eardrums had been numbed by the explosions, and she could barely make out a word. But she could see his face, and the blue, fang-shaped tattoo that ran down his cheek.

“Selenia! Take this prum and get her to Central Park!”

He turned and issued some kind of order to his vice-captain, before running off with the rest of his squad. The brown-haired human girl stopped and offered her hand.

“Are you okay? Can you stand?”

The prum nodded, more or less understanding the question without hearing it.

“What’s your name?” the girl asked. “You look like a supporter…Are you with a familia?”

The prum nodded again. The girl’s warm and comforting smile seemed genuine.

“Lilly…” she said. *“Soma Familia…”*

She took the girl’s hand and stood up but soon fell right over again. The girl giggled and lifted her up.

She had terrible luck. But even a losing streak couldn’t last forever.

So, drowsy from the effects of the divine wine and unable to separate dream from reality, Lilliluka Erde fell asleep in her savior’s arms.

“Wait! I’m not an enemy, I’m with *Vidar Familia*! My name’s Selenia, and I’m bringing these civilians to safety!”

Selenia marched through the barricades, another rescued group of townsfolk in tow. By now, the area around Babel was teeming with people, and one Evils

spy chuckled to himself at the sight.

He had disguised himself as one of the citizens and made his way inside the barricades at Central Park, just as Freya and Finn had suggested might happen. And he wasn't the only one.

Their primary objective was to assassinate Freya. Their secondary objective was to strike a devastating blow to the enemy camp.

Of course, without the help of their god, they stood little chance of harming their divine foe, but the inferno stones concealed within their pockets would give them the edge over any adventurer who might get in their way.

The man had sworn an oath to evil, and soon, the time to fulfill that oath would arrive.

"Excuse me. Do you mind if I stand here?"

"O-of course not! Go right ahead."

A new batch of rescuers had just arrived, it seemed. The man, dressed to appear as bedraggled as the rest of them, shuffled over to make some room.

The newcomer appeared to be a young woman. Even the hood couldn't hide what a beauty she was. She smelled nice, nicer than anyone on the battlefield ought to smell.

Her pale gray eyes, the same color as her hair, turned on the man standing beside her.

"So," she said. *"Where might your friends be hiding?"*

As soon as the man caught sight of that silver glimmer, his heart was hers. With hollow eyes, he began speaking, answering the woman's question as though it had far higher priority than his initial orders.

"…There are three on the eastern side," he said. "Five to the north. Our god is waiting in the west…"

"Quiet," the girl said. "Do not look this way. Let no one hear of what we speak."

"I understand…"

The man continued so softly that their conversation disappeared beneath the clamor of the crowd. The young woman was silent as the man divulged his secrets to her. Eventually, once she heard all she needed to know, she left without another word, leaving the man by himself.

She walked back over to a group of men and women standing nearby—adventurers and healers disguised as commonfolk.

“You’ve become quite adept at using your charms to command others, Lady Syr,” said one, a young girl with pink hair tied up in bunches.

“Thank you, Heith. However, he wasn’t an easy man to find. It was only by borrowing our Lady’s insight that I was able to track him down.”

The girl named Syr turned and looked toward the uppermost floor of Babel, far out of sight, almost as though sharing a telepathic moment with the goddess standing by its window.

A second later, she felt the hard strike of a cane on her back.

“Ouch! What was that for?!”

“…Pray, share with us the information you gleaned, Lady Syr.”

Syr looked back and met Heith’s jealous eye. Her tone was calm, but it wasn’t hard to discern the envy she felt toward the girl’s special connection. Syr glared daggers back, then quickly adopted a more diplomatic expression.

“I have written it all down here,” she said, producing a scrap of paper.

“Excellent,” replied Heith, taking the note and handing it to the other adventurers. “Now we shall be able to stop those would-be killers before they can get their grubby paws on our Lady Freya.”

Those of *Freya Familia* were not just followers of their goddess; they worshipped her with heart and soul. The only oath they swore was to protect their lady at all costs, and no hell was too hot for those foolish enough to threaten her. Now these assassins’ fates were sealed, and soon they would all be buried in unmarked graves.

“I’d like to capture them alive if at all possible…” said Heith. “Do you think you could charm the other spies, as well?”

“The followers, I can. But not the god,” replied Syr. “A mere vessel like me cannot hope to command such power.”

“Figures,” sighed Heith. “We’ll have to leave them to *Loki Familia*, then. At least we can handle the rest for them.”

She glanced over her shoulder. “After all, it sounds like they’ve got a lot more on their plate than we do.”

Finn was burdened with an almost unmanageable torrent of reports, not only from dedicated messengers but also from adventurers escaping the scenes of carnage happening all over the city. However, with his keen mind, he took it all in stride, analyzing the information and delivering his orders.

“Major enemy movement to the south! Send the Berbera and Captain Tsubaki to reinforce! Focus all efforts on the southern and southwestern districts! Tell *Vidar Familia* to help make up the numbers!”

From time to time, Loki would chime in with some welcome piece of news that even Finn had missed.

“Gettin’ reports that *Vidar Familia*’s werewolf is kickin’ ass out there! I think we can let ’em keep skirmishing to disorientate the enemy!”

Reminding himself how grateful he was to have her help at a time like this, Finn focused on the battle map in his mind.

To the north were situated the forces of *Freya Familia*, and the workshops and forges of *Hephaistos Familia*. Between them, other powerful familias filled in the gaps, sometimes taking orders and sometimes acting on their own initiative. The many factions of Orario were working to put aside their differences and come together, repelling the invaders in order to bring peace to their city.

Finn bit his thumb. He could already see the war was reaching a stalemate.

We’ve taken great losses, he thought, *but we can still recuperate, if we focus on deploying our first-tier adventurers in critical locations.*

This was Finn’s strategy. It stemmed from neither an overestimation of his side’s abilities, nor an underestimation of his foes. He knew exactly how

formidable the familias of Orario could be if they worked together for once.

This is Orario. If everyone gets pulled into the war on the same side, there's no force in this world that can stand against them. Surely the Evils are aware of that.

Their motives were inscrutable. Finn could understand their aims in the beginning. The suicide bombings had been unconscionable, but at least they'd ground the city to a halt. What reason did the Evils have to stay on the streets, massacring the townsfolk out in the open? Surely, they must have known that the longer they stayed, the more the tide would turn against them. Finn and some of his fellow commanders had even worked out reliable countermeasures against the bombs already.

Adventurers would always adapt. Finn knew Valletta was aware of that, and he also knew that she never played a game intending to lose.

They had something up their sleeve. It was all but certain.

That feeling in my thumb keeps getting stronger. What are they planning? What do they have?!

Finn looked to the south, just as Raul ran breathlessly over, bearing a message.

"C-Captain! It's the adventurers in the southwest! They've all been wiped out!"

Everyone in earshot turned and gasped.

"Valletta…" growled Finn.

Raul's whole face trembled. It took Finn a moment to realize he was shaking his head.

"No, sir…"

Twitching with fear, the boy relayed what he had seen and heard—the message his fellow adventurers had given their lives for.

"It was just two people…A man armed with a greatsword…and a female magic user!"

Finn’s thumb was screaming at him. His sky-blue eyes flared wide. For several seconds, he didn’t so much as breathe.

CHAPTER 10
Conquerors

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Conquerors

What path is there for the man with no equal? The man who, with a single step, crushes all? With a single blow, smites all? And with a single cut, severs all?

There is only one path: the path of conquest. The one truth no man can deny, and the one law that endures after every last civilization has returned to dust.

A jet-black sword roared in the burning town.

“Gaaaaaaaaagh!”

“My legs…My leeegs! *Grugh!*”

All who stood against it were doomed. None could lay a single scratch on its wielder. The first swing tore them to pieces, then the second obliterated what remained. Lifeless corpses and pieces of gore lined the streets, marking the conqueror’s triumphant return.

The sword was vast, as though carved from the flesh of hell’s plumpest demon. It was so large that all who saw it doubted their eyes.

Its bearer stood over two meders tall. Black steel plate covered him completely save the mouth, chin, and neck. Its weight would crush an ordinary man, but the warrior walked unimpeded as though his armor were no heavier than cotton.

Though his muscles were hidden, the man’s monstrous strength was evident from the way rocks shattered beneath his feet and the earth shook as he walked—and the way dozens fell to a single swing of his jet-black sword.

With each step, the flames quivered.

With each swing, the number of corpses grew.

The conqueror walked unhindered along the path of utter destruction.

“Weak. Far too weak. When did adventurers become as soft as rotten fruit?”

Amid the dancing embers, the man’s crimson cloak billowed like a serpent’s tongue. His deep voice shook those who heard it to their core.

“I barely grazed you. Do you really mean to disappoint me this way, Orario?”

Nobody answered. Instead, a silver spear shot out of the sky like a meteorite, precisely aimed toward the seam in his armor at the rear of the shoulder.

The man didn’t even go for his sword. He turned and raised his gauntlet, brushing the spear aside with a mere flick of his wrist.

Allen was astounded. By his reckoning, he had taken the swordsman by surprise and from behind. Yet his foe had not only seen the attack coming, he had parried it with almost no effort.

“Better,” came the man’s voice. “You are fast, like the wind.”

Allen caught a glimpse of the warrior’s lead-colored eyes through the cracks in his lowered visor. He felt his hair and fur bristle.

“But, like the wind,” the man continued, “you are also weak.”

Suddenly, his hand moved, faster than Allen could follow. His heightened beast senses screamed at him to hold up his spear, and he obeyed, mere instants before an unimaginable force launched him back.

The sheer impact of blocking the blow nearly broke his arm. He slid across the stone, plunging his spear into the ground in order to come to a halt, but only after traveling more than ten whole meders.

Allen felt his blood race. Sweat dripped across his face. “What the hell did you just do?!” he yelled.

He hadn’t seen it coming. No—there had been nothing to see. One minute the man had been standing there, stock-still like a cardboard cutout, and the next, his weapon was thrust in Allen’s face.

“I simply scratched you,” the man answered. “Nothing to be surprised by.”

The mysterious warrior was as solid and unmoving as a cliff wall. Allen took another look, and it was then he realized the man spoke the truth. He had done nothing more than take a swing with the greatsword in his hand.

“An adventurer must be quick to make the unknown known,” he continued. “Before I take your head and devour you.”

“…!!”

Few doubted Allen Fromel to be among the strongest in the land. He never bowed down to others, remaining as aloof as a stray cat. His sharp claws and powerful teeth could fell a tiger, and he could sprint across the plains with a chariot in tow. It was this that earned him the title of Vana Freya, along with the respect and admiration of his peers.

So that was why, when face-to-face with a foe even he did not comprehend, Allen shuddered.

Just then, a third voice entered the fray. A second respondent to reports of an unstoppable one-man army. His blade ran red with the blood of all whom he had felled, but when he saw who he faced, his eyes went wide and time seemed to halt.

“It’s you…” Ottar muttered.

“Ah. Finally, a face I recognize,” said the man. “So this cat must be your apprentice?”

When he heard the man’s voice, he was freed of all doubt. Ottar’s face cracked into a scowl, like an iceberg shattering. Bullets of sweat clustered on his brow.

No one in Orario would believe it, even if they saw the sight with their very own eyes. Warlord was afraid. The city’s strongest boaz was even more shocked than Allen was.

When he spoke at last, it was like the rumbling cry of a wounded beast.

“…Allen, go back to Lady Freya. Protect her.”

“Are you insane?! I’m about to tear this guy a hole he’ll be able to shit out of! Don’t get in my way!”

Allen's response was so furious it almost concealed how hard he was shaking. But…

"Listen to me!!"

Ottar's bellowing voice caused Allen to freeze. He had never seen the boaz man so alarmed before. He was like a boulder, never so much as batting an eye, but now those eyes were creased, his teeth bared.

"If you have even the tiniest bit of respect for me as your captain, then go," he said again. "Do it. If not for me…then for our Lady."

Ottar had never pleaded with Allen in his life. It was enough to quell the rising flames of hate in his heart. He looked into his captain's eyes, the eyes of the man he had sworn to defeat, and saw a love for their goddess that far outstripped any other.

And so, after a while…

"…Tch."

…He turned and ran.

Allen put aside his own feelings, squashed his own pride, all to fulfill Ottar's request and get to Freya as fast as possible to warn her what had happened.

Ottar watched him disappear toward the center of the city and breathed a sigh of relief before turning back to the black-clad man.

"You haven't changed," the invader said. "You're still a child who has yet to be weaned from his mother's teat."

Ottar's foe slowly advanced. There was an inescapable pressure in his voice. Ottar only falteringly managed to put together his words and speak the conqueror's name.

"Why are you here, Zald? How can it be you?!"

The explosions were unceasing, sending a hot draft down every street. Fearful voices called it the Devil's Wind. It cast flames and embers into the air in a phantasmagorical display of cruel indifference.

Immolated adventurers staggered out of the blaze, making it only a few steps

before collapsing onto the ground. A boy kneeled over his big brother, shaking the unmoving body and weeping. Off in a pile of rubble, a discarded teddy bear gazed up at the burning buildings with cold, unfeeling eyes.

The air was filled with the sounds of bombs, blades, and screams. It never ended.

“…….”

One woman stood amid it all. Silent and detached, as if cut from the page with scissors.

A hooded robe covered her face, but her eyes were shut, in deep contemplation of the sounds. She didn’t seem at all afraid of the death happening around her. In fact, she didn’t even move. She stood at the center of the whirling eddy of mayhem, like the eye of a storm.

“What are you doing?” came a voice, along with the sound of footsteps on rubble. It was Riveria the high elf, with long jade-green hair and an unbroken posture.

“This detestable noise shall never be repeated,” the woman replied. Given all that was happening, her voice was unnervingly calm. “As my way of paying my respects, I am listening to it,” she said. “For if not now, then when?”

Her words were like a still pool of water the raging fires could never reach.

“As painful as it is to listen, far more painful would it be to ignore them and regret it when they are gone. Is that not what it means to be alive?”

The woman turned around to face her, but Riveria was already furious.

“You have no right to speak of life, witch. Not when those people lie at your feet.”

Her eyes flashed with rage. The woman peered down at the bodies of the adventurers she had slain.

“They are detritus,” she said. “Nothing more.”

Riveria could take her callous disregard no longer. “Very well,” she said. “Then I shall eradicate you. Perhaps your life will atone for your sins!”

The indignant elf brandished her staff and began muttering a spell. Immediately, a glittering magic circle spread out beneath her, along with a wave of magical energy.

“Blow with the power of the third harsh winter, advent of the end—my name is Alf!”

The woman, meanwhile, appeared utterly unconcerned.

“Wynn Fimbulvetr!!”

Three bursts of arctic wind expanded as they rushed toward the woman. In response, all she did was raise one arm and speak a single word.

“Ataraxia.”

That one word annihilated the fatal blizzard winds.

“Wha—?!”

Riveria couldn’t believe her eyes. An overwhelming wall of sound filled the street, pushing everything else away and extinguishing Riveria’s magic, carving it out of reality as though it was never there to begin with.

At the same time, Riveria had the strangest feeling she’d seen it all before.

“She canceled it out—nullified it completely!”

Just then, Gareth dropped from a rooftop onto the figure’s head, having felt the magical disturbance and come running over.

“Roooaaaaaah!”

He swung his greatax, with all the force of gravity behind it, but once again the woman spoke only a single word.

“Gospel.”

There was a dull rumble, one that echoed in the very pit of one’s stomach, and Gareth was flung backward with the force of a dam breaking.

“Graaaaaagh?!”

“Gareth!”

The dwarf flew like a cannonball, straight past Riveria and into a nearby

building, demolishing the wall. After being pelted with fallen rubble, Gareth struggled to his feet, using his ax as a crutch. All this while, the woman only stared at them without moving a muscle.

“You people are so noisy,” she said. “Even after eight years, it’s all the same.”

Something about her words, her presence, her power, was all too familiar. Gareth and Riveria felt their apprehension slowly turn to dread.

Now the woman’s hood fell back, as though succumbing to the surges of magical energy she radiated.

“I’ve seen this power before…” growled Gareth.

“Yes—only once,” said Riveria.

Beneath her cowl, the woman’s eyes were still closed. When Gareth and Riveria saw her fair and beautiful face, they recognized her at once.

““Alfia, the Silence!””

The woman listened in silent assent.

“Ever since the Age of Gods began, no one has ever received so great a blessing as you!” said Gareth. “They called you the Monstrously Gifted!”

“A member of *Hera Familia*…I didn’t think any of you were still alive!”

That legendary name echoed in the burning streets of Orario, like a prayer…or a curse.

The Silent Witch had returned to Orario, in wisps of light and flame.

“Why am I here, you ask?”

Zald reached up and removed his helmet. When Ottar saw his face, he couldn’t speak.

Across both his eyes were enormous scars, as if ravaged by the claws of some mad beast. His hair was dark red, the color of blood and flesh.

He looked exactly as Ottar remembered him. His master, the ex-soldier, who taught him how to wield absurd strength…had returned to Orario.

“Zeus is no more,” he said, “so I have come seeking worthy foes. Is that not

reason enough?”

Ottar could almost hear the waves of inner conflict resounding in his mind. All he was able to ask was one thing.

“I thought you retired after we fought the Behemoth—some said you died. Where have you been?!”

Ottar still remembered the last time he had seen Zald on that calamitous sea of black sand. Like a great hero, he felled the King of Beasts, then collapsed, his power exhausted, just as the sun rose.

Ottar couldn’t forget the image of Zald’s greatsword, stuck into the earth as if marking the man’s grave.

“Do I look like some wandering specter to you? Are you hoping I come to devour your nightmares, perhaps?”

Unfortunately, Zald’s return was all too real. As if to drive that point home, he drew his greatsword and pointed it at Ottar.

“Take up your weapon,” he said. “I do not intend to make a quick meal of you. I will take my time, make your blood and bones a part of mine.”

“…I don’t understand.” Ottar scowled.

“What is there to understand?”

“I am not a learned man, I know. But you were once a man of Zeus, who protected the city. I don’t understand how you could defile it in evil’s name.”

Zeus and Hera had reigned over Orario, watching over its prosperity for a thousand years—all until eight years ago, when Loki and Freya took up their shared mantle.

Zald had been this city’s protector. Now he was its invader. Ottar could not even begin to reconcile this paradox.

“What is the meaning of this?!” he roared.

But Zald only narrowed his eyes with disinterest.

“I have drawn my sword,” he said. “Will you do the same, or will you die attempting to comprehend my motive?”

There was a truth to Zald's words that Ottar couldn't deny. The man was a warrior through and through. He spoke again, this time in words Ottar recognized. Words the man had told him once before. Zald spat them like a curse.

"You are weak," he said. "Fragile and soft."

Hearing that, Ottar's heart began to race.

© Kakage

“Although you were not part of my familia, I once thought I saw promise in you. I see now I was mistaken.”

“Grh…!”

In Zald’s eyes, Ottar saw what he thought was a flash of despair. It was all he could do just to glare back in defiance. After what felt like an age, Zald lowered his sword.

“But very well. I shall tell you.”

Like a dragon indulging a whim, he chose to answer the boaz man’s question. To explain the source of his abrupt change in behavior.

“It is because I am disappointed. Disappointed in this city. Disappointed in you.”

“Disappointed?! That’s why you attacked Orario?”

In another part of the city, the Silent Witch had just given the exact same reason to Riveria and Gareth.

“That’s right,” she said. “It is disappointment that brings us back to this city. It is disappointment that calls us to war.”

Her ash-gray hair fluttered. She cast off her now-useless robe and tossed it aside. Beneath it, she wore a long black dress.

While it seemed unsuited to battle at first glance, any mage could see that this dress boasted exceedingly strong magical wards. However, these wards were not designed to protect against outside attacks. They were there to prevent the uncontainable magic of the wearer from tearing the clothes to shreds.

“What are you talking about?!” shouted Gareth. “What is it that disappoints you?”

“Everything,” replied Alfia without a moment’s delay. “Orario is just one part of that.”

The elf and dwarf both felt themselves losing their cool.

“Do not insult us,” spat Riveria with disgust. “No matter how lofty you are,

one disappointment is hardly enough reason to destroy an entire city!”

“Be silent, elf. This world is brimming with noise. It has to be blocked out.”

Alfia’s refusal to listen was beginning to annoy the pair of adventurers. Her voice carried no remorse or emotion whatsoever. Only a single regret.

Back on the other side of town, the man in black spoke to Ottar, as if finishing her words.

“We allowed Zeus and Hera to grow arrogant, while gorging ourselves on their fantasies,” he said. “We permitted their spires to rise, and so we alone bear the responsibility of bringing them down.”

Now it was the woman again, speaking to Riveria and Gareth.

“The Age of Gods shall soon end,” she said, “and we shall be the ones to end it.”

Then the two conquerors spoke, in unison, across the vast distance.

““So perish, adventurers.””

“““…!!”””

The determination and malice in that one utterance was enough to plunge Ottar, Riveria, and Gareth into an ocean of fear.

“I shall return everything to silence. So vanish.”

Alfia spoke, and her magic quivered. She outstretched her right arm, and her spell howled. The earth shook, as if a giant had struck the bell of heaven, and all was engulfed in a blinding rumble.

“Grh?!”

Ottar heard and felt a loud outburst of magic from the southwest. As he cast his gaze in that direction, Zald calmly replaced his helmet.

“Alfia has begun,” he said. “We should, too. No woman shall lead me.”

“Alfia…So *Hera Familia* is here, too…!”

Ottar grew agitated at the mention of the woman’s name. Anyone who had spent any time at all in Orario knew the names Hera and Zeus and understood

the heights of their power.

“You must be cursed, child of Freya. Cursed to fall to my blade yet again.”

Ottar was one person who knew the might of those two gods on a personal level. For many times had he fought the men who were Zeus’s champions. Many times had he tangled with Hera’s brave warrior women.

Many times had he faced the black-clad man who stood before him now. The devouring storm. And each time he tasted only defeat.

“Rgh…!!”

Ottar clenched his rock-like fists. Memories of his past failures played behind the windows of his rust-colored eyes. He gazed as if upon the apex of a mountain he had never once reached, and his heart trembled.

“Face me,” said Zald. “Hold nothing back. Not unless you wish me to devour you.”

All the man wanted was to sate his voracious appetite for battle. He readied his jet-black sword. Ottar clenched his jaw so hard, his teeth nearly cracked. He took up his own weapon and roared, as if to banish his own fear.

“Roaaaaaaaaaaaaaaagh!!”

In a mad charge, Ottar raised his greatsword above his head and ran toward his foe. It was the charge of the Warlord, a man who destroyed all who stood in his path.

All—except this man.

“Pitiful,” he said.

One slash. That was all it took.

“…….. ”

All the speed and force—all of his body weight that Ottar put into his attack—all of it was deflected with a single flick of the armored man’s sword.

Unrivaled technique. Unbeatable strength. The might of Zald’s parry not only stopped Ottar in his tracks—it tore his weapon from his grip and sent him reeling.

The last thing he saw, as time ground to a halt, and Zald advanced, sword raised, to finish him off, were the man's eyes. Through the visor of his helm, they said only one thing.

"You are weak."

"…Rgh?!"

Before all the emotions swirling in his mind could cause Ottar to ignite with rage, the black slab of metal in his enemy's hands brought a swift end to the battle.

Just then, the earth howled.

""""Rgh?!""""

An enormous tremor shook the entire city. In the midst of battle, Lyu, Kaguya, and Shakti all stopped fighting. They were lost for words.

"An earthquake?!" cried Lyana as the tremor nearly threw her to the ground.

"No!" shouted Lyra. "That ain't no quake!"

It was Alize who spoke next. "It was an attack!" she said. "A stupidly powerful one!"

She gazed off, wide-eyed, in the direction of the earth-shaking sound. The conqueror's blow had carved a void in the smoke-choked skies of Orario.

All across the city, people turned and gazed in shock. Asfi and Falgar, tasked with lending aid to those who needed it. The Berbera, engaged in heavy battle with the Evils suicide bombers. The one-eyed smith, holding an armful of magic swords. An elf casting white lightning. A werewolf leading his familia. A prum girl, only now regaining her senses. Finn and all of *Loki Familia*, gathered at the center of Orario, and Freya, atop its highest point.

From the top floor of Babel, she waited for the long, drawn-out rumble to finally subside, then muttered a word that no one else could hear.

"…Ottar?"

The goddess gazed down at a spot in the city where all the flames of war had been blown away. Only one black-clad man stood at the center of it all.

“…Grh.”

Ottar let out a dying groan. His vision darkened and blurred. He had been blasted through so many walls he had lost count and broken every bone in his body along the way. As he lay, sprawled out, on the verge of collapse, the giant boaz mustered up what little strength he could command and turned his fading eyes in the direction of his attacker.

Zald wore only a look of deepest disappointment. Ottar the Warlord had been beaten.

“…Ottar?”

Allen froze on his way back to the city center. His keen ears picked up only a devastating silence. He turned and looked across the rooftops, at the distant spot he had only recently left. It had been a battleground for only a short few moments. Now it was about to be a boaz man’s grave.

“…Get up, you asshole. This ain’t no time to be takin’ a nap.”

As he took in the unbelievable sight, he grew more and more agitated, becoming a raging storm of emotion. Clutching his silver spear in his grip, he shouted at the top of his lungs.

“Ottar!! The hell are you doin’?! Get off your ass and fiiight!!”

Acting solely on impulse, Allen defied his captain’s last command and turned back, running as fast as he could to where the boaz man lay.

“Heh-heh-heh. Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Yes…At last, Warlord is dead!!”

Olivas erupted into laughter. From his vantage point, he had watched the whole fight from start to finish.

“The old follower of Zeus is now one of us! Zald has defeated Orario’s strongest warrior! Rejoice, my friends! Let us prepare to drag Orario into the mud!!”

The Evils soldiers with him let out great cheers.

“““Roaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!”””

“““Zald!! Zald!! Zald!! Zald!!”””

The crazed zealots looked up at their leader. Some pumped their fists in the air, others raised their weapons or cried out in mad song. Their voices, their violent screams, all overlapped, calling out their conqueror’s name.

To the stunned adventurers, it was a mocking chant of victory. A battle whose outcome sent ripples throughout the city. The defeat of their greatest icon.

Of all those who learned of his defeat, it was the Einherjar who took it the hardest.

“Ottar…lost…? Impossible.”

There was a quiver in Hegni’s voice.

“I refuse to believe it! The only one he can lose to is me! Us!!”

“Hegni, get down!”

“Rgh?!”

Hedin’s frantic warning came too late to stop the mad sisters’ hands.

““You mustn’t look away, Hegni!”” they both said.

“Gaaagh?!”

““See? Now you’re all full of holes!!””

Even the four prum brothers were on the back foot.

“You can’t beat that boar in a fight!!”

“He wouldn’t stay dead if you tore out his heart!!”

“It’s impossible!!”

“Berling! Dvalinn! Grer! Stay calm!!” screamed Alfrik, his armor beaten and battered. “These are all Level Fives!”

The mindless warriors they fought all cried out, as if celebrating Warlord’s defeat. All across the city, people gasped.

“Ottar has fallen? That can’t be!”

“But he’s a first-tier adventurer!”

“…Wh-what are we to do now?”

Adventurers froze in shock and horror. Weapons slipped from their hands as their resolve began to fail. The news was like a wild storm that swept up what little morale they had and dashed it against the rocks.

Lyu and Kaguya were no exception. It was all they could do not to lose themselves to despair amid the quaking ruins of their city.

“Warlord…was beaten…?”

“That’s impossible! And you mean to say it was a member of *Zeus Familia* who did it?!”

The scales had been tipped. And they weren’t done yet. There was a second large explosion.

“”?!””

Lyu and Kaguya turned in the direction of the sound. The source was a magical blast, several districts away.

There, buildings on either side of the street collapsed, as an elf and a dwarf crumpled to the ground.

“Grh…”

Riveria was the first to fall, her barrier exhausted. Then it was Gareth, dropping his shield. Both of them fell forward onto the cracked stones.

“Ridiculous…” said Alfia, unimpressed and aloof.

Then Asfi appeared, first to arrive on the scene.

“Impossible!” she gasped. “Both Nine Hell and Elgarm?!”

She had been powerless to do anything but watch as Orario’s greatest champions fell one after the other. There was no small amount of despair in her voice.

Meanwhile, amid her compatriots’ cheers, a mad smile appeared on Valletta’s lips.

“That’s curtains for the first-tier adventurers! The greatest protectors this city has to offer! I can’t believe it’s over so quickly!!”

She doubled over laughing, then threw her head back and chuckled to the stars.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! What have you got left to fight with now, Finn?! You’re finished!”

The biggest obstacle to taking on Orario had been those pesky first-tier adventurers. Now, with a king and queen who could thwart any opposition, the whole game swung heavily in favor of the Evils.

It was all going as Valletta had foreseen. Everything was as *he* had planned it.

“Now it’s time for the real show to begin!” she declared.

Elsewhere, a single man walked the flame-licked streets.

“Yes. Witness evil’s rise.”

The dark god flashed a devious smile.

CHAPTER 11
Absolute Evil

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Absolute Evil

A pair of thick sabatons stepped through the ruined street. One could almost hear the earth tremble as Zald walked over to the boaz man, lying flat on the ground.

He looked down his nose at Ottar. “Is that all?” he asked. “I expected more from you.”

His words sounded distant and muffled to Ottar’s ears, like they were coming through deep water.

Ottar couldn’t move. Struggle as he might on the border of consciousness and oblivion, his body refused to obey. He couldn’t even muster up the strength to scowl. All he could move were the tips of his fingers, which trembled slightly.

Zald looked down at him without compassion or mercy. Only disappointment. He raised his greatsword above his head to finish Ottar off.

“If you can no longer stand,” he said, “then this is the end.”

The black slab of metal came down like a guillotine, ready to cut off Ottar’s head.

“Tch!!”

Just then, a man leaped from the shadows. He was so quick that even Zald’s brow raised softly in surprise. Faster than the eye could follow, he cast aside his signature silver spear for maximum speed, then scooped up Ottar’s body and carried it away mere instants before the sword came down.

“Shit!”

But Allen did not escape unharmed. He paid the price for Ottar’s life. His left arm hung limply, dripping blood, but that didn’t stop him from running like the wind, fleeing the street, still roiling with anger over Ottar’s state and his own powerlessness.

When he was gone, Zald scanned the empty street. He didn't give pursuit, despite how easy it would have been to catch up to Allen and skewer him.

"Running away, are we?" he said. "Very well. Wallow in your defeat, powerless child."

His crimson cape fluttered in the wind.

"Krh…!!"

During the same moment that Allen was saving Ottar's life on the other side of town, Asfi also had a part to play.

Her winged sandals were not yet complete. Rather than confer flight, they could only provide acceleration while in midair. Still, by scattering bombs, she put up a wall of explosions before snatching Riveria and Gareth and carrying them to safety.

But Alfia was unperturbed. "I care little," she said without a single change in expression. "There is no escape, after all."

As she watched Asfi disappear into the sky, she eventually lost interest and walked off in a different direction. To where it would all begin.

"For all will go as *he* demands."

In Central Park, now home to wailing evacuees and wounded adventurers alike, a *Loki Familia* follower ran up to his captain.

"S-sir! We're getting reports that our allies in the southwest have been wiped out!"

"Wiped out?!" spat Finn with surprise. "All of them?!"

"Y-yes, sir! Some managed to escape, but the enemy has completely crushed our front lines!"

Then, as if that wasn't enough, a second messenger came over, out of breath.

"Loki! Captain! It's Riveria and Gareth…they've been defeated!"

“What?!” yelped Loki. “Are they both okay?!”

“It seems that Perseus managed to rescue them, Lady Loki. But they are both badly wounded and have yet to wake up!”

The paling messenger’s fear spread not only to Loki but to the young familia members who were standing in earshot.

“No way,” whispered Raul, unable to believe his ears. “Riveria and Gareth… lost?”

The most powerful mage in Orario and a man who could weather any attack. To receive news of their defeat, so soon after hearing about Ottar’s, was enough to crush what little morale they had left. Their drive, their spirit, it all began to crumble, like dunes of sand.

But one man refused to let that happen—Finn.

“What do we know about the enemy?” he shouted. His voice caused the other members to jump, and they felt their fears dispelled. His voice, like a blast wave, lasted only a moment, but when it was over, all of his comrades forgot their despair.

“Sh-she’s a young witch with gray hair!” the messenger replied, standing to attention. “She uses ultra-short chants, and she seems to be immune to even the most powerful forms of magical and nonmagical attack!”

Finn was not ready to give up yet. Seeing his resolve, the younger members steadied their quaking boots and set about doing their part for the war effort, guiding evacuees and reinforcing the barricades.

Meanwhile, Finn turned his thoughts inward.

An ashen-haired witch, able to nullify magic. It must be Alfia! So now we have not just Zeus’s follower to contend with but Hera’s, too!

Careful not to let his own fears show, Finn put his mind into overdrive.

Even if their stats haven’t changed in eight years, they’re still Level 7! We could throw every first-tier adventurer in the city at them and it still might not be enough!!

Correlating and cross-referencing all the data he had access to, Finn could

only conclude they were all in big trouble. Two of history's greatest titans—an unassailable, indomitable pair—had returned to Orario…on the side of evil.

"With those two in the palm of their hand, they can dominate the war! … Valletta! They were your secret weapons all along!"

With their appearance, everything Finn had worked so hard to establish was on the verge of collapsing. The fall of those first-tier adventurers would no doubt have knock-on effects on other parts of the board, in terms of both allied setbacks and enemy gains.

Just then, another messenger arrived.

"Sir! Morale is plummeting as a result of Warlord's defeat! The enemy is advancing in the south! There's nobody to stop them!"

"C-Captain!" said Raul. "We have to send reinforcements! Riveria and Gareth are still out there!" The young boy had not even been in Orario for a full year yet, and he hadn't found the courage to immediately set to work like the rest of his comrades.

"No," replied Finn. "We must stay here in Central Park and protect Babel with our lives!"

As much as he worried for his two friends, Finn knew this to be the right decision.

"There's no doubt what the enemy is after…"

Finn's foresight bordered on divine. And so he severed all doubt and gave his command.

"Fall back! Abandon the districts south of our defensive line, and focus all remaining troops here, in the center of the city! Send a message north and tell *Freya Familia* to do the same! Quickly!"

""Y-yes, sir!""

Raul and the other messengers hurried off to carry out Finn's order.

But Finn couldn't stop there. He was the Braver, a symbol of courage for all adventurers. Even with his back to the wall, he had to push on.

He looked down at his right hand.

Even now, my thumb aches. Could this all still just be the beginning of something more?

Finn's sixth sense was setting off alarm bells in his head.

"What's coming?" He grimaced. "What's out there?"

The sparks of war showed no signs of dying. Finn looked out across the vermilion cityscape and spoke to the empty skies.

"Someone's behind all this…"

"…But who?"

Hermes stopped in the street and looked around at the destruction.

"Who wrote the tune we're all dancing to?"

He was certain some god still lurked in the wings, awaiting their cue.

"You expect me to believe this is all the Evils' lovingly crafted plan? Don't make me laugh. It's all going too well."

There was no doubt in his words. Only revulsion, disgust, and dread. An appropriate reaction for the one who had to be responsible.

"The timing is just too perfect," he said. "No mortal could have ordained this. It can only be the work of a god."

"Indeed," said Astrea, standing by his side. "And wherever they are, this god is mocking us. Waiting to draw us into ever-greater depths of despair."

Her hand went to her breast as she pondered what was to come.

"Something more yet awaits us…horrendous nascent evil!"

The smoke clouds in the sky almost seemed to tremble, resonating with a demonic laughter.

"…!!"

Alize looked up.

“What is it?” shouted Lyra while fighting off increasing waves of Evils soldiers.

“…It’s Lady Astrea,” Alize replied. “She’s in trouble!”

“Trouble? What kind of trouble?”

“I don’t know, but something’s coming for her, I can sense it! We have to find her, now!”

Lyra wasn’t sure if those were the senses of an adventurer or some kind of trained animal. She just looked at Alize, dumbfounded.

“Wait, you want us to go find her?!” cried Neze, wiping the blood from her face between battles. “We can’t even get away from here!”

“Yeah!” came the voice of the Amazon, Iska. “We may have gotten all the civilians out, but the enemy is really comin’ down on us now! Ilta has her hands full as well!”

The girls of *Astrea Familia* were currently in the south of the city, where fighting was the fiercest. They fought on, in defiance of Finn’s order to abandon the southern front, because the road they were on led directly to Central Park. If they left now, that would only mean more enemy soldiers for the defenders of *Loki Familia* to deal with.

Nearby, the red-haired Amazon Ilta Faana bathed in the blood of her foes, leading a unit of *Ganesha Familia* adventurers. And although Alize couldn’t see them from here, Lyu and Kaguya were a block away, on South Main Street, holding the line alongside Shakti.

The two familias were barely holding back the waves of enemies. They had no one to spare.

“…No, it’s okay. Neze, Iska, go with her.”

“Lyra?!” exclaimed Neze, but the prum girl only looked over in the direction of Central Park.

“If our captain has a hunch, then we oughtta act on it. She’s just like that hero, Finn. And we can’t let anything happen to Lady Astrea.”

If a familia's god was sent back to heaven, those of the familia would have their stats frozen and therefore be unable to fight. If that happened, the defensive line was as good as lost anyway.

So Lyra placed her stock in Alize's uncanny hunch.

"We'll work with *Ganesha Familia* to keep them off you," she said.

"I'm sorry, Lyra! Thank you!"

"If I die 'cause of this, I'm gonna spit on you from heaven!"

Lyra forced a smile. Alize's smile, on the other hand, was so bright, she didn't seem to belong on this earth.

"No! No dying!" she said. "Don't even get hurt, or you'll be sorry! Captain's orders! We're all going home together, you hear?"

The girls all looked at her in shock. Lyra smirked, narrowing her eyes like she was staring directly into the sun.

"…Just get goin' already, you big dummy."

Then she plunged into battle once more. Alize nodded, then ran off.

"Lady Astrea's come to the front lines!" she explained to her two escorts. "Talk to anyone you can and find out if they've seen her!"

"Got it!"

She ran, her heart sick with worry. As she did, the name of her beloved goddess formed on her lips.

"Lady Astrea…!"

Thick clouds of smoke obscured the sky, extinguishing the starlight that illuminated and guided the city's inhabitants, and leaving them lost.

Hedin was no exception.

"……. "

From his vantage point atop the church belfry, he cast his eyes northwest, surveying the battle that consumed the streets of district seven.

“Where are you going, Hegni, all full of holes?”

“Come play with us! If you’re going to die anyway, do it where we can see you!”

“Gh…hah…?!”

Down on the ground, the Dis sisters had taken Hegni by surprise, and now the dark elf was bleeding profusely. Try as he might, he’d lost too much blood to shake them off, and the younger sister, Vena, was keeping his fellow Einherjar at bay with her magic sword. Meanwhile, the elder, Dina, aimed to put him out of his misery with the twin stiletto daggers that had inflicted Hegni’s mortal wounds.

This combination of short-range blade mastery with long-range magic was what made the Dis sisters so fearsome and earned them their spot as leaders of *Alecto Familia*.

However, Hegni wasn’t the one in real danger.

“Gaaaaagh?!”

“Grer?!”

No, that was the Gulliver Brothers, surrounded as they were by a total of *twelve* Level 5s.

“Uooooooogh!”

“K-kiiiill…Kiiiiill!!”

The four prum were at the mercy of these so-called adventurers, summoned and commanded by the remnant of *Apate Familia*, Basram.

Peering through the flames of war, Hedin realized their true nature.

“Those shackled outlaws…They’re *Osiris Familia*!” he said.

Each of them wore a mask-like restraint that obscured their mouths, but there could be no mistake. In preparation for hostilities with the Evils, Hedin and Alfrik had visited the Guild library, poring over chronicles of old battles. It

was there they had come across the likenesses of *Osiris Familia*, recorded twelve years ago when they fought the *Zeus* and *Hera Familia*s and lost.

The familia had been home to several Level 6s and even one Level 7: the captain, Melty Zara. However, they had kept them secret in advance of their assault on *Zeus Familia*.

“Unfortunately, I can’t introduce you to their captain,” jeered Basram. “All their first-tier adventurers either died or broke contact. But their second-tier people were all just dying for a shot at revenge!”

The *Apate Familia* priest smiled as his army tangled with the four Gulliver brothers. It was clear whose side had the upper hand.

“After Orario threw them out, they came to us, and we were only too eager to convert them,” he explained. “They trained, waiting, dreaming of the day they could exact retribution on Zeus and Hera…but of course, that day never came.”

Their shot at revenge died the day Orario’s most powerful gods failed in their battle against the Black Dragon. After that, the revenants who used to be members of *Osiris Familia* had no reason to stay with *Apate Familia*. But Basram couldn’t let such powerful warriors go to waste.

If reason could not make them stay, then why let them reason at all? So, following the teachings of his goddess, Basram turned them into mindless beasts.

“A few drugs here, a handful of curses there, and we created ourselves an army. Then they were ready for the next test: spirit infusion.”

Basram chuckled and gestured to his warriors. Where their shackles met the back of their neck, there was a dagger stuck into each of them.

“Spirit infusion?” questioned Alfrik, his helmet battered and blood dripping from his brow. “No more riddles; what do you mean?”

“Surely, you’ve heard the stories?” Basram replied. “Long ago, before the gods descended to this world, heroes would obtain the blessings of spirits to ensure victory in their trials. We were trying to reproduce that phenomenon.”

Those daggers protruding from their necks were all that remained of the

spirits that Basram and his cohort had captured. *Apate Familia* had used them on the former members of *Osiris Familia*, turning them into powerful "spirit warriors" against their will. This was undoubtably an act of blasphemy. By restraining the rebellious test subjects and ignoring the spirits' wails, Basram had succeeded in creating fighters of unholy strength.

"I am still far from re-creating the heroes of old," said Basram, "but these subjects have displayed incredible abilities, such as the power to heal their own wounds. It's just a shame I had no Great Spirits on hand, and so I had to make do with lesser offerings. Still, even without them…well, see for yourself."

"Grh?!"

"Away from the prying eyes of the Guild, I've been training them in the Dungeon, and they recently reached Level Five. Just in time for the Great Conflict to start. It wasn't easy, you know?" he added with a smile.

Indeed, it wasn't. Basram had needed to shepherd a small army of mindless warriors through the Dungeon. Failed infusions and losses to monsters meant that an original supply of forty-two spirits and thirty-four warriors resulted in a harvest of only twelve spirit warriors. It was an experiment sorely lacking in respect for the dignity of life and death.

This all stemmed from the will of Basram's goddess, Apate. Her domain was injustice. A living mockery of all that Orario's protectors stood for.

His dull red eyes opened wide. He thumped his staff against the ground as a manic grin crossed his face.

"Yes, we are Apate's disciples!" he cried. "Exactors of her will! We are the ones who will reshape this world according to the whims of chaos!"

The tip of his staff glowed with an ominous light, and all the spirit warriors groaned in response to it. Fireballs and bursts of lightning appeared in their hands without requiring a chant, burning their own skin as they used them to attack Alfrik and his brothers.

The four prums' teamwork wasn't enough. Their foes' unrestrained violence dashed them against the walls and into piles of rubble.

"Twelve first-tier adventurers…?!" gasped Hedin, watching as the Gulliver

Brothers were tossed about. He felt the unseemly sensation of his heart racing in his chest.

Of course, including the Dis sisters, there were fourteen in all. Fourteen Level 5s, against two in Hedin and Hegni. The Gulliver brothers were only Level 4, and nobody else in *Freya Familia* was even close.

The Einherjar were mighty heroes with no fear of death, but even they were no match for the evils of *Apate Familia*.

“Now, my loyal spirit warriors! You who have received the teachings of Apate! Free your souls!”

There was no more time for Hedin to be indecisive.

“Struggle for eternity, indestructible soldiers of lightning!”

He leaped from the belfry, leaving the startled Olba behind. From high up in the air, he secured a line of sight to the battlefield.

“Caurus Hildr!”

A magic circle surrounded him, and he unleashed a barrage of lightning. Basram, as well as the Dis sisters, instantly reacted to the onslaught. Dina disengaged with Hegni and leaped back, while Vena stopped attacking. Basram was already at a safe distance, but his twelve spirit soldiers weren’t. However, they used their beast-like agility to dodge the lightning.

Hedin kept up his assault, even as gravity claimed him and brought him on a downward arc.

“Van! Noga!” he shouted down, the sound almost drowned out by his own magical blasts.

“Get Hegni and the others out of there!!”

““Y-yes, sir!”” replied the members of *Freya Familia* before jumping to action. Hedin kept the enemy busy while they hurried over to the familia’s strongest warriors and helped them to withdraw.

Hedin watched it all from the corner of his eye, then fell more than 100 meders, landing right in the middle of the crossroads and immediately unleashing another spell.

“Strike forever, indestructible lord of lightning! Valiant Hildr!!”

While *Caurus Hildr* was a barrage of smaller blasts, this spell bundled it all into one massive lightning cannon that filled the entire street. Faced with an attack of this scale, the Dis sisters and Basram’s spirit warriors had no choice but to withdraw. It didn’t need saying what became of those Evils soldiers who were too slow to escape.

“Tch!”

Hedin had successfully forced the enemy back, but he didn’t seem too pleased about it. That was because in turn, the enemy had forced him to leave his post. Until he returned to the cathedral, the chain of command would be broken, and the Evils would have the perfect opportunity to stage an attack on the evacuation shelters.

Of course, Hedin had decided to enter the fray with all of this in mind, abandoning his allies to chaos and exposing his charges to danger. This was not out of misplaced priorities, but the understanding that Hegni and the Gullivers were his most potent game pieces. If Hedin was ever to make gains in this war, he needed them alive.

The fact he could make this decision so quickly, despite his duty to those in his care, was not a sign of a poor commander; it was a sign of an excellent one. But the two devious elves didn’t see it that way.

“You abandoned your people to save Hegni!”

“So mean! But that’s why I love you!!”

The Dis sisters grinned and jeered as the crossroads still sparked in the aftermath of Hedin’s spell. He didn’t waste breath telling them to shut up. As coolheaded as ever, he first made sure that Hegni and the others had made a clean getaway, then turned tail and fled. The faster he could get back to the cathedral, the safer everyone would be.

Or so he had hoped. But the Dis sisters had other ideas.

“You can’t go, Hedin.”

“You made your choice.”

They shared a wide grin, their eyes as thin as knife blades.

“”Now you have to face the consequences,”” they both declared.

Then Hedin felt an enormous wave of magical energy emanating from the dark elf, Vena. Time slowed to a crawl, and four vast magic circles appeared directly above the cathedral and the other churches—where the survivors Hedin had momentarily abandoned were huddled.

“Open, the fifth garden! Resound, the ninth song!”

With that, Vena’s chant was complete. It was not an ultra-short cast, or any kind of special fast-chant ability. She had set up the spell ahead of time. Ever since Hegni ran into her, she had been holding it, ready to activate at a moment’s notice. That was why she had only been using a magic sword in the fight so far.

Dina stood by her, her fingers intertwined with her sister’s, channeling her energy into her as Vena spoke the name of her spell.

“Dialv Dis!”

All at once, the magic circles unleashed four columns of hellfire upon the churches below. Hedin reflexively held out his arm and chanted, “*Valiant Hildr!*”

The roaring thunder collided with the falling fire. The two forces opposed each other for a moment, shedding sparks, before canceling each other out entirely. The cathedral where Olba and the others were stationed was safe.

But he could only save one. The other churches were not so lucky. Each was engulfed in a cascading torrent of flame.

Hedin looked on, aghast, as the churches were bathed in fire. He heard the screams of those trapped within. The innocent civilians who had looked to him to keep them safe—their voices rang in his ears as they burned to death.

Hedin stood, frozen, in the middle of the street, staring at the destruction as the air grew hot with sparks and wisps of flame. It was then that he heard the voices of the Dis sisters from behind.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha!! Isn’t it beautiful, Hedin? So beautiful!”

“Listen to that! The screams of the people you chose to die!”

The solitary ruler stood as their maddening, loving giggles continued behind his back.

“You know what I heard?” said Vena. “I heard you used to be a king! And Hegni, too!”

“Oh, how scary, sister! Hedin’s a mean old king who lets his subjects burn!”

Hedin knew full well what he had done. He had known the moment he made his decision that there were only ever two options. Either he left Hegni and the Gulliver brothers to die, or let the people in his care be slaughtered. Therefore, it wasn’t the actions of these vile, despicable, heartless pig sisters responsible for their deaths; it was his own.

Hedin had done everything in his power to ensure this did not come to pass. He had acted swiftly, with zero hesitation, but it was all for naught. These laughing sirens had made sure of that.

“Did you like our present, Hedin? We sure did!”

“Aww, I’ve never seen you look so alone! I just want to cheer you up with a big hug!”

““But we’re afraid there’s no time for that!””

The two girls embraced each other with glee, then sprang into the air.

“Our dark god told us we can’t end it yet! We’ll finish this some other time!”

“But don’t worry, we’ll kill you next time! Both of you, look forward to it!”

Then the two sirens disappeared, leaving only their wicked, innocent laughter.

There was no need to be greedy. The Evils had dealt a grave blow to *Freya Familia*, and now they left district seven before facing the dragon’s wrath.

Hegni lay on the ground nearby as the healers saw to his wounds. His fists shaking with anger, he hid his eyes with one arm, but the tears flowed down his cheeks regardless.

Meanwhile, Hedin raised a trembling hand to his glasses. He tried to take them off, but then the anger subsumed him, and he broke them in his fist.

“……I’ll kill you,” he said.

It was only through his iron will that Hedin didn't scream with anguish. Instead, he channeled his hate into a vengeful vow.

"Both of you…shall die by my hand."

The flames of the burning chapels seared a smoldering madness into his mind.

And on that day, *Freya Familia* suffered a second loss equal to Warlord's defeat.

The stars were gone now, and the adventurers were lost. Only a red sky watched over them, lighting a passage into hell.

The very first sign of danger was the warning from Hermes's lips.

"…Astrea, hold."

His eyes pierced the gloomy corners of the backstreet, displaced from all the fighting. And then, it came. From out of the darkness, the sound of footsteps.

Astrea gasped and strained her eyes.

"Something's coming," said Hermes. And then, the darkness writhed. That ineffable, endless shade that gathered in the cracks of the city and even the fire that scorched and tortured its inhabitants could not dispel.

Twisting, changing, mutating. Emitting a sound like straining rope, or scornful laughter, the darkness stared back. Astrea and Hermes caught a glimpse of a mad glint, and something came, like a dagger in the night, drawing closer and closer until…

"Lady Astrea!"

"Eep! …A-Alize?"

A voice behind her made her jump, and she turned to see her flame-haired familia captain emerge from the burning city.

At the same time, the footsteps halted.

"I'm so glad you're safe!" said Alize. "I just felt so cold…I knew I had to find

you!”

Then Neze and Iska caught up to her, out of breath. The three of them had raced through the battlefield, cutting down all who stood in their path, and the feat had taken its toll. Their armor and battle clothes were ragged and torn.

Astrea looked at them, shocked…and then, she heard a noise. Astrea, Hermes, Alize, Neze, and Iska all turned and stared into the darkness…from where issued an ominous, slow clapping.

“Always looking after others, and never yourself. That’s why you took so long to find.”

The darkness adopted a god’s voice and spoke.

“I wanted to bury you first, you know. Extinguish justice from this world and leave its inhabitants to chaos.”

Despite his words, the voice sounded pleased, almost gleeful.

“Congratulations, Astrea. You’re still alive. You have you and yours to thank for that.”

The clapping resumed. The startled gods and their followers found themselves showered with unexpected, yet unbridled praise.

“Now, let us see what kind of future your persistence has bought.”

The darkness flickered. Sparks of war flew overhead, dispelling the veil of shadow.

“You chose justice. Now witness its rewards.”

A man’s silhouette separated itself from the gloom. His eyes shone like deep, dark pits into hell itself.

“It’s you…!” Astrea gasped.

Hermes couldn’t believe it. “It can’t be…”

It was the dark god who had masterminded this whole affair. As if appearing only to see their reactions, he gave a twisted smile and vanished into the shadows.

“W-was that…”

“…a god?!”

Though Neze and Astrea had not been able to see the man’s face, they felt his awesome presence nonetheless. Astrea was still frozen with shock.

“…Hermes!” she said at last. “We must follow him at once! I must be sure of what I saw!”

“Astrea, no!”

Hermes grabbed her arm, preventing the goddess from pursuing the nightmarish villain. The next moment, the burning buildings let loose an avalanche of fiery rubble, blocking the road.

“Leave him for now!” Hermes said. “We have to get out of here, quickly!”

His suspicions regarding the enemy leader’s true identity led him to conclude an unimaginable danger was imminent.

“Now!!” he roared. But it was too late.

The entire city shook.

“…Huh?”

A bright light enveloped everything.

The sky cried out as if in pain. The earth roiled as if alive. As above, so below.

“What’s that…?” whispered Alize, looking over the buildings, to the east, where a pillar of light penetrated the clouds.

The light was bright enough to momentarily blind all who saw it. The noise was loud enough to deafen all who heard it. A divine scream.

All over the city, time seemed to come to a halt. Adventurers, Evils, and gods alike all turned to face the pillar, and froze.

True evil was beginning. It laughed, a merciless, pitiless, unjust laugh.

“One.”

The ground jolted beneath their feet. They could do nothing but stare at the

pillar of divine light, in wonder and fear.

“No way…”

In Central Park, Loki’s mind stopped working as she stared at the heavenly pillar. Beside her, Raul stood silent, quivering with dread like the other civilians in the area.

“Th-that’s…” he began.

“…the Pillar of Light,” finished Finn, his thumb wailing as its whispered prophecy came to pass. “The sign of a god returning to heaven!!”

No one said a word. Only the laughter of an evil god filled the silence.

“Two.”

A second count; a second pillar. A second rumbling of the earth.

“What was that?! Another one?!”

“Impossible…!!”

In the north of the city, Kaguya and Shakti shivered with fear as they saw it.

“Rgh…?!”

Lyu stood speechless, watching the intense rays of light flow upward into the sky.

“Three.”

The victims kept coming. Over to the west, another pillar burst forth and pierced the clouds.

“No…”

“…You ain’t tellin’ me that…”

Asfi and Lyra—the former exhausted from carrying Riveria and Gareth back to Central Park, the latter weary from battle—stood chained in fear. Both of these sharp-witted girls had already guessed what was about to happen next, and their faces went pale.

“Four.”

Chaos turned to panic as adventurers across the city realized what was

happening…and what it meant.

“Gods are bein’ defeated?”

“But without our blessings…Oh gods, no!”

“…Somebody, heeeeeelp!!”

They paled. They screamed. They pleaded for their lives. But the forces of evil cut them down without mercy. They were slashed, stabbed, and torn apart. Orario’s brave protectors simply joined the many corpses already littering the streets. Their blood painted the walls. Their flesh roasted in the fires. And the departed gods were quickly followed by the souls of their children.

The disciples of evil grew drunk on the sight. With bloodshot eyes and slavering mouths, they ravaged the powerless adventurers like rabid wolves. The peals of their laughter filled the streets as they gorged themselves on blood.

“Five.”

More divine pillars appeared. The black knives of evil gods feasted on their helpless victims one after the other.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Haaah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!!”

Valletta laughed out loud as she watched the columns of light filling the sky. It was a divine exodus unlike any before.

“The adventurers are droppin’ like flies!” she chuckled.

“Gyaaaaaaagh?!”

And as she chuckled, she killed. Slaughtered the powerless guardians of Orario—maggots who had only ever tried to get in her way.

With each swing of her sword, heads rolled, limbs flew, and voices cried out in despair.

It was exquisite. This was all she had ever wanted.

It was a massacre. A massacre that Arachnia had been waiting her whole life to unleash.

“This is amazin’! O my god, you’re the absolute worst!”

Valletta's heart was full of praise for her dark lord, who had orchestrated all this. Savoring the thrill, she shouted into the heavens.

"Now it's time for the real show to start, Orario!!"

"Six."

Order was falling apart, and through the cracks came chaos, worming its way into reality. The people lost all hope, and many were certain they were witnessing the end of the world.

"Lord Belenus of *Belenus Familia* has been sent back to heaven!"

"*Zelus Familia* have been completely wiped out!"

At Guild HQ, the receptionists screamed their reports as more waves of information came rushing in. It was the only way to stay sane given their shocking contents.

Royman stood at the center of it all, as if frozen in time.

"Sent back…? Wiped out…? So without the gods' blessings, the Evils are targeting the weakened adventurers…"

His perceptive mind quickly pieced together the consequences of what he was hearing. But knowing the buildup didn't make the climax any more avoidable. He was a spectator to tragedy, forced to sit in his seat and watch until the bitter end.

The gates of hell had already closed behind him, and no matter how much he wailed, they would never reopen.

Suddenly, one of the receptionists cried out in despair. "It's a massacre!" she yelled. "A massacre! Make it stop!"

She began to hyperventilate, just as another bright light appeared in the distance, visible through the window.

Somebody fell to their knees, scattering documents all over the floor. A tremor rocked the building, and a thundering roar blocked out all other sound.

All that lingered in the back of their minds was an evil laughter.

"…It can't be."

Royman let out a groan of despair.

“It can’t beeeeee!!”

“Seven.”

Despair spread throughout the city, as the unstoppable march of evil racked up sin after sin.

“Gh…hah…?!”

Vito’s cruel blade stole the life of another brave adventurer, whose body crumpled to the ground.

“Destruction! Chaos! Slaughter! Oh, it’s all so good!”

The wicked man trembled in mad delight. His blade plunged all his victims into a sea of blood, regardless of whether they resisted, or even had the means to resist.

“What a bright and colorful feast! It’s like I’m a child again!”

His eyes sparkled like a kid in a candy store, though his cheeks were stained with gore. With a fixed smile, he slowly approached a cowering adventurer, whose god had been returned to heaven and now lacked the power to fight back.

“I surrender!” he cried, his weapon slipping from his trembling hands. “Please don’t kill me!!”

But Vito ignored the man’s pleas. His only response came from the knife in his hands. The adventurer’s severed head hit the ground with a thud before rolling into the flames and catching fire, while a fountain of blood gushed from the lifeless body’s neck stump.

Vito’s heart trembled. He could scarcely imagine a more beautiful sight than the one that lay before him.

“We’re just getting started!” he cried. “After all, there are no heroes here! Nobody has the power to stop us!”

He spread his arms wide, looked up into the darkness, and revealed his truth to all of Orario.

“Your great heroes are already ours to command!”

Up on the roof of a partially ruined temple, those selfsame heroes looked down at the burning city without emotion.

“Sublime, is it not?” noted Zald.

“Yes,” replied Alfia. “The sight is, at least.”

Her ashen hair fluttered in the wind.

“But if I close my eyes…I can still hear their noise.”

Another pillar appeared, accompanied by another blinding light.

“Eight.”

It was the end of days. A time when evil finally got its revenge on all those who pursued justice.

“Hee-hee. Hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee-hee!”

Olivas laughed alongside his soldiers. He knew the fulfillment of his dark god’s wish was soon at hand, and he practically drooled with anticipation.

“It begins! The fall of Orario! Khah-hah-hah! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!!”

Clashing weapons. The wretched screams of justice. The song of life was fading. Dark clouds filled the skies, blotting out the stars. Order gave way to chaos, and a nascent evil gave its first newborn cry.

“Nine.”

Nine pillars of light. Nine gods returned to the heavens. Never before had an exodus like this ever been seen. But while the city reeled, the servants of evil breathed a collective sigh of relief.

“*Now, it is ready*,” said he.

There was nobody left to see the strings with which he tugged at the city’s fate. He gave a sweep of his arm, like a conductor ending a musical performance.

“We’ve collected all the sacrifices. Now, let’s go.”

At last, the tremors stopped, and the dazzling pillars faded into twinkling motes of light. As silence fell once more over the city, Astrea, Hermes, and Alize all stood perfectly still, unable to mutter a word. In their place, the animal girl fell to her knees.

"…It's over," she said.

"Neze…"

"It's all over. Orario's finished."

Alize could only call the girl's name, but it did nothing to abate the despair creeping onto the girl's face. Such was the calamity they had all witnessed.

It was Astrea who spoke next.

"Nine gods…all returned to heaven at once…" she whispered.

"So the attacks so far…they were meant to ascertain where the gods would hide in an emergency," reasoned Hermes, displaying his divine wisdom. The factory raids, the soup kitchen massacre…they were all just stepping-stones in the buildup to the Great Conflict. "We thought they were random, but all this time, we were revealing to our enemy precisely where to strike!"

It was the only explanation that accounted for as many as nine slain gods. The Evils' gods must have spread out through the city, preparing to carry out their planned assassinations. They were ruthless. Meticulous. All in pursuit of the tragedy their leader had written.

"There's only one god who could have done this…!" said Astrea.

But just then, a voice rumbled in the moonless, starless sky.

"Hark, Orario."

It was the voice of that evil god.

"Hark, Ouranos. I am the darkness which gives this age its name, and I have come to extinguish mortal hope."

Astrea and Hermes stood in stunned silence as his voice echoed down every

street and back alley.

Even Ouranos, on his throne beneath the earth, heard the evil god's proclamation. His sky-blue eyes peered deep into the oculus granted to him by his assistant mage.

"The time for covenants is over. I will tear man and god apart and bring an end to the Age of Gods."

The contemptuous voice carried its master's dark will to every corner of the city. His words settled in like a thick, dark fog, choking the life out of all who heard it: the breathless gods of order, Orario's beaten protectors, and the helpless, huddling townsfolk, who no longer had anyone left to pray to.

"I will bring us all back to true darkness—a swirling maelstrom of chaos even the gods cannot fully comprehend."

All across Orario, the sounds of fighting stopped, leaving only roaring flames, as even the emissaries of evil stopped to hear the words of their dark master, their eyes glittering with delight.

"You may despise me for this. You may think me a brute. Go ahead. Weep, howl, then accept my calamity. For I am evil incarnate, and what greater joy is there for evil than to be hated and reviled?"

There was a clatter as the wooden sword fell from the elf girl's hands. The voice scratching in her mind, issuing scornful laughter—it was a voice she knew well. Her pulse raced, her heart pounding impossibly loud in her chest.

"My name is Erebus—"

In the northwest of the city, atop a storied temple, the voice's bearer cast off the shadows and stepped out for all to see. His two conquerors stood faithfully by his side.

"—primordial darkness, and god of the underworld!"

There was a roar from the city, as the dark host cried out in support of their lord and master.

The people of Orario, meanwhile, were afraid. They were afraid of the dark god's majesty, equaled only by the most powerful divine beings in the city.

“E-Eren? …E-Erebus? What?”

Lyu muttered toward her feet. Her eyes rapidly focused and unfocused. His eyes, the color of the first twilight. His hair, like darkness itself, streaked with ashen gray. Something about the way he carried himself was different, but Lyu was sure it was the same god she knew. The selfsame god who had appeared before her so many times in the recent past, asking her mocking questions about justice.

But that wasn’t the end of Erebus’s declaration.

“Orario’s protectors have fallen! Lain low by a power far greater than their own!”

Zald’s black sword glinted in the night. He stood at the god’s right hand, basking in the bloodred glow of the fires below.

“Orario’s gods have departed! Reduced to a bothersome noise!”

Alfia’s ashen hair fluttered. She stood at the god’s left hand, wreathed in frozen silence.

“Listen well, all you who fight chaos in the name of good! For we are those who fight order in the name of evil!”

There was no missing the cynicism in the dark god’s words. He was denouncing everything Orario stood for—everything that good and righteousness had ever built—using the very same words that Lyu had bounced around in her head ever since she first heard them.

“Listen well, for I have something you all need very much to hear.”

His lips curled into a twisted grin as he silently raised a single arm before him.

“Weakness, thy name is justice.”

Those were his heartfelt words, aimed at the foolish love on which Orario was founded.

Kaguya, Shakti, Lyra, Asfi, Allen, Raul, Alize, Neze, and all the other girls frowned, their faces cloaked in rage and fear.

Astrea, Hermes, Loki, Freya, Ganesha, Hephaistos, and the prum hailed as the

people’s hero, all scowled at the dark god.

And finally, Lyu. Unable to withstand the despair bearing down on her any longer, she fell to her knees.

“Perish, Orario. For we are absolute evil!!”

The proclamation rang throughout the streets. The laughing voice of order’s demise.

On that day, the city of heroes fell.

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EPILOGUE

Dawn of Defeat: Next Prologue

ASTERIA RECORD
The Rise of Evil
Story by Fujino Omori · Illustration by Kakage
Character Design by Suzuhito Yasuda

EPILOGUE

Dawn of Defeat: Next Prologue

On that day, Orario faced its longest night. The city burned, the gutters swelled with blood, and many stars were snuffed out.

Though it was impossible to know at the time, all this destruction and despair was only the beginning—the beginning of a nightmare that would later be termed the *Seven Days of Death*.

After plunging Orario into chaos, Erebus and his two companions turned and left, smiling as if playing a game as they planned the next stage in the city's demise.

On that day, Orario faced its longest night…and its darkest dawn.

A slanted stone arm poked out of the rubble, all that remained of a ruined statue. It reached up toward the heavens, as if seeking rescue through the cloud-blocked sky.

No sunbreak announced the dawn. Dark clouds rose off the city like a funeral pyre, gathering overhead and blocking out the light.

But all who were left behind knew that this was no funeral. There was no time for peace or acceptance. They had lost family, friends, companions, husbands, and wives. Their loved ones, nothing more now than clouds of ash obscuring the sky.

Weary people sat on the ground, unable to lift their necks, wallowing in despair as night slowly turned to day.

"Hurry!" came a voice. "There are still survivors in there!!"

It was Shakti, leading the wounded members of *Ganesha Familia* in the rescue efforts. Many of the buildings were still burning, and as Asfi beat a path through

the flames with her firefighting magic item, she was shocked by the sheer number of bodies she saw on the other side.

“We need a mage!” she screamed. “Can anyone help?!”

There were not nearly enough magic users available to deal with all the fires and wounded. The voice of Perseus sounded like the weeping of a helpless young girl—which, being only fifteen years of age, she was.

“Somebody give me a hand! There are people trapped under the rubble!”

“I’m surrounded by idiots! Someone get me a healer!”

“Anyone will do! Dian Cecht, Miach, it doesn’t matter! Just bring someone, quick!!”

Alize, Lyra, and Kaguya all cried out in petition, rage, and unmitigated desperation. The soot-covered girls of *Astrea Familia* were working restlessly to rescue whoever still needed rescuing.

“Anyone who needs healing, come this way!”

“Bring the medicine over here!”

They had erected a tent to serve as an emergency field hospital. Inside, Maryu, Noin, and the other group members were doing all they could to process the interminable line of wounded.

“Ugggh…Agh…”

“Hang in there! Stay with me!”

The animal girl, Neze, kneeled beside an injured young man, trying to stem his bleeding.

“Please…don’t die on me!”

Her words went unheard. Seconds later, the light left the boy’s eyes for good.

Neze broke down into tears. There was no time to mourn the lost, but still she mourned. For every life their justice saved, countless more slipped through their fingers.

Lyu walked alone, stupefied, taking in the anguished wails of her compatriots.

“……. ”

The city was a smoldering ruin, cloaked in hollow silence. Lyu stepped through the rubble, gazing over the sea of lifeless strangers.

“…How many did we lose?”

The signs of death were everywhere she looked. The cruel scene scorched itself into her sky-blue eyes.

“…How many did they kill?!” she screamed.

She felt an agony like never before. An anger at her own powerlessness that slowly poisoned her heart.

“Lyu…” said Astrea, stepping forward to save the girl from herself.

“Lady Astrea…” Lyu replied. She thought for a moment, then asked the question that dominated her mind. “…What is justice?”

Her voice trembled. Her eyes moistened with tears. She looked to her goddess, hoping she could give an answer that would make all the uncertainty go away.

“Everything our justice bought…All the order we worked so hard to build… What good was it when it folds so easily to evil?”

“……. ”

Astrea did not answer. She cast her eyes downward, as if there was nothing she could point at to argue otherwise.

“What was it all for…? We couldn’t protect them…! We couldn’t save them…!”

Lyu wasn’t angry at her, or disappointed. She was seeing for the first time just how fragile and powerless her own justice had always been.

“Ardee…Ardee!!”

Before her goddess, she kneeled and cried out a name—the name of the friend whose smile she would never see again.

Her sobs echoed in the sea of rubble. A song of defeat, mixed with grief. A song of loss.

“Finn, wait!” cried Riveria, clutching her wound.

Displaced citizens flooded Central Park. Despite all the resources diverted there, there still wasn’t enough to keep up with the wounded and dying.

The prum answered without turning around.

“Go back and rest, Riveria. You’re still wounded. Healing the townsfolk is our top priority. We need you well.”

“It’s you I’m worried about!!” she said, running around to cut him off. “I know what you’re thinking. You mustn’t be hasty!”

Her face was covered in gauze, and her arm wrapped in a sling, but none of that stopped her.

“It’s too early to strike back; we know nothing! I understand time is of the essence, but you mustn’t let your feelings cloud your judgment!”

It was a desperate appeal. She was telling him—no, *pleading* with him—to change his decision.

“Which of us is letting our feelings cloud our judgment, Riveria? You know as well as I do that we haven’t the liberty to hesitate.”

The high elf clenched her fists. She wanted to answer—to say it wasn’t so—but she couldn’t. Finn was right, just like he always was.

“Right now we need to play all the cards we have,” he said. “Do you disagree?”

“Grh…!”

“It’s time for you to stop playing that girl’s mother.”

At those words, Riviera screwed her face up even more.

“But…she’s only a child!”

“A child who has more than proved her worth, against monster or man. She doesn’t need you to look after her.”

Then Finn started walking again, circling Riveria and continuing on. She no longer had any way to stop him.

“If the enemy keeps up their attacks like I’ve predicted,” he said, “we’ll need all the allies we can get—even her. You can hate me for it later.”

His words were cruel, cold, and calculating. The words of a tyrant, but also a master strategist. Finn pushed on toward the gates of Babel, to add a new piece to the board.

He found the girl he was looking for sitting on a step. Raul and the others were with her, keeping her occupied as though soothing a ferocious beast. Her fingers eagerly played with the hilt of the sheathed sword in her lap, as if waiting for a chance to unsheathe it.

“Are you ready, Aiz?” asked Finn.

The girl opened her eyes.

“…Yes.”

She stood, a fierce warrior in a young girl’s body, and took up her weapon.

“I will fight. Show me where to go.”

She spoke with nothing but a fierce determination.

And the clouds in the sky trembled and parted. A single golden shaft of light poured down from the heavens.

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LYU LEON

BELONGS TO	*Astrea Familia*	RACE	Elf
JOB	Adventurer	DUNGEON RANGE	Thirty-third floor
WEAPONS	Wooden Sword	CURRENT FUNDS	3,011,750 valis

STATUS

Lv. 3

STRENGTH	D504	DEFENSE	F373	DEXTERITY	S902	AGILITY	S904
MAGIC	A800	HUNTER	H	IMMUNITY	I		

MAGIC

LUMINOUS WIND	• Wide-Range Attack Spell. • Wind and Light Element.
NOA HEAL	• Recovery Spell. • Affects all targets in an area. Power increased in forested areas.

SKILL

FAIRY SERENADE	• Enhances spell effects. • Enhancement increases at night.
MIND LOAD	• Can spend Mind while attacking to boost strength. • Active Skill. Mind spent is decided by the user.

EQUIPMENT

UNFINISHED FAIRY SWORD	• A weapon that can be used as a sword in close combat, or a staff that amplifies magical effects. • Made from a branch taken from one of the holy trees found in the Wishe Forest which is relatively open to outsiders. Lyu hated her own village, and so she requested wood from elsewhere to be used. Bears no inscription. • Since it is not made from the wood of Lyumilua Forest, Lyu's magical affinity with it is somewhat lower.
FAIRY WIND GARB	• Lyu's battle gear, complete with mask. • Prioritizes mobility.

Afterword

This work is a novelization of a scenario featured in Wright Flyer Studio's mobile game *Danmachi: Memoria Freese.* There have been revisions and amendments in order to make it suitable for publication. I hope this makes it enjoyable for those who have previously played the game, as well as those who have not.

One day in 2020, I was taken to a room and sat down in front of the GA Bunko editorial department's latest assassin, Mr. Usami, for a nice, quiet Talk regarding a new project in the works.

"Mr. Omori," he started out. "How would you like to novelize Astrea Record?"

"No, thanks," I quickly replied. Then, after a moment's thought, I added, "I can't."

The idea of picking up my pen and returning to a project advertised as being equivalent to one-and-a-half cours of anime made my head hurt. I also didn't understand the point of rewriting a script I had already nearly died finishing for the game.

"But you can't not *release a book."*

"It's an important part of the setting."

"The fans will riot."

"You will do it, won't you?"

"Won't you?"

Before I knew it, I was locked in a room as dark as the Orario of seven years past, forced to revisit that harrowing tale of good and evil.

So if you read this book and enjoyed it, you have only one person to thank.

Once per day, you must clap your hands and shout at the top of your lungs, "*Thank you, Usami!!*"

Astrea Record. A tale I have steeled myself to tell once more. There will be three parts. If you have made it this far, then I know my efforts were not for naught.

Now for the acknowledgments. To my lord and master Usami. Though I may have sullied your name in the preceding paragraphs, this work would truly not have been possible without you. Thank you for all your help and support. To my illustrator, Kakage. Thank you for gracing this volume with your beautiful and adorable designs! The first time I saw your depictions of Alize and the girls, my heart leaped out of my chest. I very much look forward to working with you again in the future. And finally, I express my deepest thanks to Wright Flyer Studios and everyone else who assisted in the adaption of this story.

Stay tuned for Volume 2, *Fall of Justice*.

I hope you will follow these girls' struggles to their bitter end.

—Fujino Omori

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