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FUJINO OMORI ILLUSTRATION BY KAKAGE



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Astrea Record, Vol. 2 -The Fall of Justice-, 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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ASTREA RECORD vol. 2 -SEIGISHITTSUI-

DUNGEON NI DEAI WO MOTOMERU NO WA MACHIGATTEIRUDAROUKA EIYUTAN

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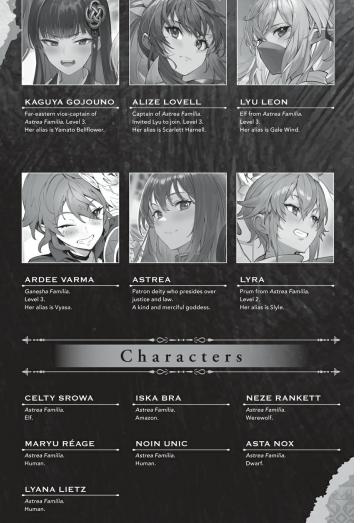
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An evil god who previously went by the name Eren. A force of absolute evil who wishes to destroy Orario.

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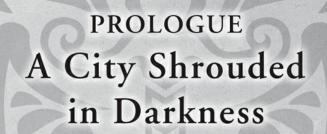
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AFTGRGA RECORD The Fall of Justice

Story by Lujino Omori - Illustration by Kakage Character Design by Hughito Yasuda



PROLOGUE

A City Shrouded in Darkness

Somebody said, "Remember the stars. They have not forgotten how to shine."

Somebody cried. "How can we see the stars when dark clouds gather and hide them from us?"

Somebody sneered, "Just like how evil swallowed the justice everyone took for granted."

It was raining. Water fell like tears from the clouds above. The color of the sky didn't seem real. An all-encompassing gray, neither light nor dark, like a rotting lichen spread out across the heavens, trapping those who still walked the earth in the crevice between night and day.

It could have been mistaken for limbo, teetering on the precipice between this world and the next, if not for the presence of graves—countless graves that lay unmoving beneath the pounding rain. No, this was very much the world of the living. And this was a garden of the dead, a bleak cemetery located within the walls of the Labyrinth City.

"…"

A handful of gods stood together, vastly outnumbered by the graves. Even calling them graves was a stretch, for many were little more than holes in the ground, covered with dirt and simply marked with broken weapons or wooden sticks. No coffins, no headstones. Nothing but the cold earth to entomb the soulless bodies of their fallen children.

All of them lost their lives in a single night. The night that evil was born in Orario.

"This tragedy has claimed the lives of many adventurers and innocent townsfolk..."

Her walnut hair glistened with tears. Astrea, goddess of justice, addressed her fellow deities with a profound sadness in her eyes, which were the same color as the sea of stars. She stood, as they all did, exposed to the pouring rain while staring across the field of death that stretched far into the distance.

"Even now, their numbers grow," she added.

The never-ending burials. Ceaseless blood and tears. Even the First Cemetery, where adventurers were usually buried, was not enough to house them. Instead, the congregation stood in a hastily constructed extension.

The atmosphere was beyond dismal. Astrea stared down at her feet, while the god beside her let out a wail.

"Oh, my children, my children, I have failed you! No words can possibly

express how sorry I am!"

It was Ganesha. His loud, booming voice was almost enough to dispel the gloom, and his tears nearly outpaced the rain. They poured from under his elephant mask, staining his clothes.

"It is pathetic! Pathetic! That I, the god of the masses, can do nothing but scream and holler!!"

Today, no one begrudged him his tears. No one told him to shut up or be quiet. In fact, they envied him for his ability to grieve so openly. They all wished they could do the same.

A little off to the side, Hermes spoke to the graves of his fallen followers, so numerous he didn't have the luxury of visiting them one by one. "The souls of our children are long departed," he said cynically. "There is no one beneath the earth to hear our pleas or ease our regrets."

The ways of an eternal god could seem callous to mortals, yet as he thought of those he'd lost, Hermes pulled the brim of his hat down over his eyes.

"This is just a mortal custom," he told himself. "A meaningless gesture, and yet..."

"And yet, if we do not pray for them, who will?"

Astrea finished his words with a firm nod, her sad indigo eyes now set on the uncertain sky.

"Our other children fight on, even now. Evil denies them their moment of grief."

ASTREA PECORD

-->-THE FALL

OF JUSTICE -

Soon, the rain dried, as though the sky had run out of tears with which to cry. But there was no one left to enjoy the improved weather. The streets were either burning or broken, a grim reminder of what had transpired overnight.

Today was the second of the Seven Days of Death, and all of Orario was consumed by fear.

Over at the city's west entrance, a crowd had gathered.

"Open the gate! Why the hell are you trapping all of us in here?!"

"Let us out! Let us out of this place!"

"The Evils could return at any time!"

A huge number of people were clamoring, their clothes covered in soot and their faces marred by blood as they screamed at the adventurers manning the barricades that sealed off the city gate.

"The Evils are waiting for you out there!" shouted back an adventurer of Hermes Familia. "They've surrounded the whole city!"

His name was Falgar Batros, a war tiger who stood head and shoulders over his peers. Despite his imposing stature, the terrified citizens seemed almost ready to attack him for standing in the way.

"If you leave the city," he pleaded, "we won't be able to protect you! Please understand!"

But this only seemed to enrage the townsfolk further.

"Who cares?!"

"A fat lot of good your protection did us!"

"Aren't you supposed to be adventurers?!"

"Let us out of here!"

Men bellowed and women shrieked. At their feet, little children trembled, frightened by their screaming parents. This mob was far more terrifying than any monster the adventurers had ever faced.

Asfi watched from a distance, wearing a troubled frown.

"The Guild must be desperate if they're enlisting the help of *Hermes Familia*," she muttered under her breath.

This was unrestrained panic. There was no other word for it. In this state, no instructions from the adventurers or the Guild staff would do any good. Asfi understood why citizens who just wanted to escape Orario and flee to the supposed safety of nearby Port Meren were treating them like the enemy.

And she could hardly fault them. The previous night's events had shaken the whole city to its core.

"We have to do something, Ankusha!" she said, urging the woman standing by her side. "At this rate, we'll have a full-blown riot on our hands!"

Asfi was talking to Shakti Varma, captain of *Ganesha Familia*, a group that acted as the city watch. Shakti's subordinates were stationed not just here, but at all the other gates as well. In fact, it was mainly her familia's members keeping the city's residents at bay.

Shakti's expression was grave as she answered Asfi's call.

"This must have been their plan all along," she said, referring to the Evils, who had all strangely withdrawn from the city after the battle the previous night. "They've trapped us inside these walls, certain we'd eventually turn on each other."

"...!"

"And if we take even one step outside, we'll be walking right into their trap. Not that we could attempt to break out, even if we wanted to."

Everything was going according to plan for the Evils. There was no need for them to take risks and endanger their winning position. They could bring the city to its knees without lifting so much as a single finger.

The proof was right in front of them. Shakti clenched her fists in anger and turned her gaze to the city walls... That's when she saw it—red stones falling from the skies. Inferno stones.

"Run!!" she yelled, jumping clear even as she raised the alarm. As soon as the stones hit the ground, fire bloomed. Then the screams began.

"Aaaaaaaagh!!"

"The Evils! They're dropping bombs from the city walls!"

"Gaaaaaaaaaagh!"

Laughter echoed as the bombs fell, and panicking townsfolk ran for their lives. Those unfortunate enough to be at the back toppled over and the crowd trampled them as people fled with wild abandon. In a matter of seconds, there was a fresh wave of wounded for the harried adventurers to deal with.

Falgar leaped into action, carrying townsfolk away from the flames. Asfi protected the Guild employees, sweat coating her brow from exertion, while Shakti met the explosions with her greatshield in an attempt to keep the people around her safe. The bombs kept coming until Shakti commanded her mages to put up a barrier overhead. Shards of broken flagstones were flying in every direction, and the air was thick with smoke. Asfi turned her eyes skyward and was shocked by what she saw.

"The Evils have taken the walls!"

They were dressed head to toe in white robes and face coverings. Asfi could see more than a dozen of them already. She wiped her bloody cheek with the back of her hand. Beside her, Shakti's face looked grim.

"Damn. They've turned Orario into a prison!"

"Ha-ha-ha-ha! Look at them run! They're so predictable!"

Atop the walls, Valletta laughed as the townsfolk below scattered. She was one of the Evils' commanders, and she was delighted to watch her subordinates who were tossing bombs into the crowd below. Hearing the callous laughter of their leader only encouraged them. One ran up to her to deliver a message.

"Lady Valletta. The foolish townsfolk are gathering at the other gates as well. Your orders?"

Valletta was not perturbed, for there were forces stationed on the walls all around the city.

"Same as here," she said. "Chuck shit down at 'em. And if they're stupid enough to step outside the city, kill 'em."

Her lips twisted into a sadistic grin.

"We gotta make sure they give Finn and those other bastards a hard time, yeah?"



"The enemy has encircled Orario."

The meeting room at Guild headquarters had become a war room. Finn glanced across the table with a grim look on his face.

"All supply routes have been cut off, and there is little hope of reinforcements. Even getting refugees to Port Meren is an impossible task."

"So it's a siege, then," said Loki, the only other soul present. "They plannin' to starve us out?"

All the desks had been pushed together in the center of the room to form a table, which was covered in war plans, maps of enemy positions, and various reports. However, due to the urgency of the situation, all the Guild staff, as well as Finn's peers, were otherwise engaged.

"There's a lot of work ahead of us," said Finn gravely. "Tending to the wounded, clearing debris, distributing food. And every day that passes means our stores get a little smaller, our forces a little weaker. To top it all off, we have a ticking time bomb right here in the city. Sooner or later, the people will turn on us, and the Evils are doing all they can to speed that process up."

Enemy forces were operating out of Orario's own walls. They were perfect fortresses to keep everyone trapped inside. The Evils could safely watch from on high as their prey grew weaker and weaker.

Finn analyzed the maps and calmly went over the information in his head. It was clear this was all Valletta's scheme. She clearly had no qualms about exploiting any weakness, no matter how cowardly or cruel. The cold and calculating Finn Deimne understood that better than anyone else. He wanted to believe that he was different, that he possessed qualities of respect and honor that Valletta lacked, but he couldn't deny they were deeply similar. And whenever Finn showed restraint in war, Valletta would find a way to make sure

he regretted it. That was what made her such a despicable yet formidable foe.

While Finn mulled over Valletta's thought process, Loki gave a deep and bitter sigh.

"No attack's scarier than the waiting until something happens, eh? Here we are, tryin' to protect the same people who'll end up stabbin' us in the back."

The resentment in her voice was well warranted, after all her familia had suffered the previous night.

"I figured Njörðr might be able to help us get people to Meren," she went on, "but it seems the Evils got to them as well. 'Bout the one savin' grace is that they're too busy holdin' the walls to stage any more attacks in the city."

To the southwest of Orario lay Port Meren, the metropolis's gateway to the sea. When the attacks first began, Meren had sent up countless emergency flares during the night, but the skies had since fallen silent.

While Loki screwed up her face in displeasure, the door opened, and a single old dwarf stepped inside.

"I'm not cut out for all this scheming," he said. "Give me a good old-fashioned brawl any day of the week."

"Gareth! Are you okay? How are you feeling?"

"I can't be lying around when there's fighting to be done," Gareth insisted. "Whenever I close my eyes, I see that witch's face again. Makes my blood boil, it does."

The dwarf was still covered in bandages. The sheer number of casualties meant that the city's healers had no choice but to triage their patients. With not enough healing magic to go around, naturally robust dwarves such as Gareth were the first to receive plain old treatment instead.

Finn looked at him in shock, but Gareth returned a smile.

"I thought my constitution was all I was good for?" he said with a chuckle. "Don't think I forgot that snide remark of yours all those years ago."

Finn's expression relaxed into a smile. "...Thank you, Gareth."

A warm feeling filled Loki as her two children bantered. They were the founders of her familia, and she had watched over them ever since.

"Whatever you say, you have to be careful in your condition," Finn went on. "If you're out of commission, that puts us at a serious strategic disadvantage."

"Oh, believe me, I know," Gareth replied. "Now tell me, how goes the battle? I've heard scraps here and there, but that witch laid me low, and I'm sad to say I missed a good deal of it."

"Yes, of course. Well, it turns out the enemy are led by an evil god called Erebus. And they have two old members of *Zeus Familia* and *Hera Familia* on their side..."

Finn explained everything that happened after Gareth and Riveria were defeated by Alfia, the Level 7 witch.

"...I see," said Gareth when he was done. "So Zald is here, too. I did not expect the return of two specters in a single night."

"What a nightmare," said Loki. "That dirty old man and that creepy hag gave us lotsa trouble in the past..."

"I don't need reminding," said Gareth. "Last night was enough to for a lifetime."

The familias of Zeus and Hera were the two most powerful forces in Orario's thousand-year history. Even two survivors were enough to chisel a frown into Gareth's stony brow. Both he and Finn were Level 5, and yet there was a vast gulf between their combined might and that of either one of these titans of the past. It almost didn't make sense for them to share the title of first-class adventurer.

"The wall that protected this city for a thousand years now stands against us..."

Eight years ago, before they were shattered by the Black Dragon, Zeus's and Hera's familias were icons of the city. From the moment Finn and the others first stepped into Orario, they were baptized in their glory, and everyone strove to reach their heights. But things were different now. Zald and Alfia were not merely impossible aspirations; they were enemies of the city. Anyone who

knew them from back then realized they were a force to be reckoned with. Their return was a nightmare, just like Loki said.

Gareth's words left a heavy silence lingering in the room.

"...So where has everyone gone?" he asked, hoping to change the mood. "Are they all busy?"

"They're setting up a forward base in Central Park," answered Finn. "Or perhaps it's fair to call that our true headquarters from now on. That'll be our fallback position in case we need to defend the city."

"Hm," pondered Gareth. "I suppose that means you've reasoned our enemy's aim is there. Babel, no doubt."

"Probably," said Loki. "If the Evils occupy Babel, they can release a flood of monsters into the streets. It's what I'd do."

"Yes," agreed Finn. "It would be the fastest way to take over the city. And judging by their behavior last night, I'd say it's very likely they were intending to do just that."

"Hm, yes. Makes sense. But in that case, why didn't they?" Gareth stroked his magnificent beard as he tried to decipher the enemy's intentions. "Zald and Alfia had every opportunity to do so, especially after all those deities were sent back to heaven. Why not finish the job?"

"Consider this," said Finn. "Our enemy is Level Seven, the equal of a boss from the deep levels, only with the speed and maneuverability of an adventurer."

Finn placed his left hand on his hip, and his right on the table, staring at the written summary of Orario's adventurers that populated the papers before him.

"Gareth, even without you and Riveria, most of *Freya Familia* was there at Central Park with me. If all of us worked together to oppose them..."

"Hm, terrible odds, but a sliver of hope is better than nothing," said Gareth, seeing where Finn was going with all of this. "Assuming, of course, we're ready to do whatever it takes."

"Yes. We would have a shot in one big decisive battle, but only by abandoning the townsfolk to their fates," answered Finn, picking up on the profundity of Gareth's words. "Plus, Zald and Alfia are no strangers; we have records of their abilities. And only one of us would need to survive to make things difficult for Valletta and the other villains."

Without Zald and Alfia at the helm, morale among the Evils would plummet, just like it had among the defenders of Orario when Ottar fell. It was only through those two ex-heroes' incalculable might that the Evils could even hope to contest Orario's supremacy at all.

"So the enemy decided to play it safe, then," said Gareth. "And now they're holding the townsfolk over us like a weapon. We can't afford to take any more risks."

With Gareth apparently convinced by this simple explanation, Finn sank into the deep sea of his own thoughts.

That must be what our enemy is planning—I'm sure of it. But why are they being so passive?

He couldn't help feeling there was one piece of the puzzle missing...something that was key to understanding the whole situation. Namely, why did the Evils not simply have Zald and Alfia run wild in the city? Orario's forces already had their hands full managing the citizens and dealing with all the adventurer casualties. Any semblance of defense they could mount would very quickly fold to the might of the king and queen.

Perhaps there's a reason Zald and Alfia can't act...or won't?

Finn narrowed his eyes in thought, scanning the papers laid out before him for clues. Just then, Raul burst into the room.

"C-Captain! Lady Loki! The enemy's attacking!"

"Here we go!" exclaimed Loki. "Must be the harassment Finn predicted. Where are they?"

"I-in the factory district to the northwest!" replied Raul. "An evacuee camp, where we put all the people who couldn't fit in Central Park!"

As soon as he heard this, Gareth donned his helmet.

"I'll take care of this," he said to Finn. "No doubt our other warriors are busy."

"That won't be necessary," said Finn, completely calm. "I already sent Riveria there earlier."

"What?! But she's still injured, and a fragile elf to boot. Isn't that the same as sending her to die?"

A smile appeared on Finn's lips. "Of course not. If anything, I'm sending her to keep an eye on someone."

It was Loki who ultimately divulged the meaning behind Finn's cryptic words. "Yeah. After all, a momma's gotta look after her kid, right?"



A silver gleam sliced through the air.

"Gah..."

A human man slumped to his knees and fell face-first into the rubble before he even had a chance to wind up. His attacker swept back her long hair before dashing off in search of her next target.

This young girl's movements drew not only the ire of her foes but also criticism from her own allies.

"Come back, Aiz! I can't protect you out there!"

Despite her tender years, the girl possessed beautiful golden hair and eyes that would put the most exquisitely crafted porcelain doll to shame. However, her rosy cheeks were now streaked with blood—the blood of her enemies. She was only nine but she carried a silver sword wrapped in her tiny fingers.

Aiz Wallenstein flew across the battlefield, ignoring Riveria's cries.

"It's fine," she said. "I can do it."

She sprinted toward a pack of Evils cultists, the sadistic villains who tormented the innocent people of Orario. The moment they laid eyes on her, fear gripped the thugs and they cried out in horror.

"G-golden hair and golden eyes! It's the Doll Princess! Who else can move

that fast?!"

"It's the War Princess!"

Aiz only muttered under her breath.

"I'll beat them all."

Even the Evils recognized her at a glance. They knew her as nothing but a figurine, crafted to kill. She came to a sharp stop in front of the cultists and channeled all the power within her tiny frame into a diagonal slash, slicing up a brawny beastfolk man. Then, with a perfectly timed follow-up, she rent the flesh and weapon of an Amazon warrior approaching from the side.

"Gahhh!"

One after the other, villains fell to her blade, and in no time at all, the entire unit was reduced to an unmoving heap. The girl's childishly short arms and legs had done nothing to impede the ferocity and precision of her strikes.

She was Level 3. Not even double digits in terms of age yet, and she had already made a name for herself as a second-class adventurer. Judging by the brutal display, it was no fluke. She moved like a tiny golden storm, devastating all in her path.

She wore a set of blue battle clothes called the "Alice Dress of War." This was a specialized set of armor refitted from standard heavy-duty prum gear according to Finn's exact specifications. It was custom-built for use against humanoid opponents, and the prum hero had ordered it specifically for Aiz to wear over the coming days.

In the ruins of a city that had already lost so much, the sword princess delivered her verdict with the impartiality of a judge condemning a criminal.

"They've all been defeated already?!" cried the leader of this band of fanatics, revealing the whites of his eyes. "And...she hasn't killed a single one!"

It was quite a feat to incapacitate such fierce opponents without letting them die. It would have been much easier to just kill them outright. But while Aiz's sword danced among her foes, never once did she succumb to bloodlust. Her purpose was to neutralize the threat and nothing more.

"I said come back, Aiz! I've had it with you ignoring me!"

It was none other than Riveria who came up with this restriction. She shouted as she struggled to keep up with the young girl. She had never wanted Aiz to take part in the battle in the first place. Slaying monsters in the Dungeon was one thing, but she was sure that aiming that blade at people was too much for the young girl to handle.

And yet Riveria couldn't say anything when Finn accused her of hypocrisy, letting boys as young as Raul fight while forbidding Aiz from doing the same. Perhaps she was merely being overprotective.

In the end, Finn had his way. After the crushing defeat they had suffered the previous night, it was no longer an option to leave cards in their hand unplayed. Even Riveria could see the logic in that. But logic and emotion were two very different things.

"You'll pay for this, Finn..."

And so the high elf pressed on in spite of her injuries. She cursed their hardheaded leader under her breath while keeping a watchful eye on the girl who was like a daughter to her.

"Sh-she wiped out all three of Valletta's units?!"

The lone enemy commander wilted as the full scope of the War Princess's devastating power became terribly obvious. Then he stiffened with grim determination. He reached into his robe and drew the Inferno Stone that had been given to him for such an occasion.

"O Lord! I offer up my life in—"

However, any hope he might've had of taking the girl out in a blaze of glory was swiftly dashed, for her blade moved faster than the eye could see.

"Huh?"

A flicker of gold passed him by. A sparkle of silver danced in his eyes. And when the man tried to press the trigger, he found he could not. His hands wouldn't obey him. It took him a moment to realize why.

They were completely missing.

"Finn told me how you guys blow yourselves up," came a monotone voice from behind him. "I won't let that happen."

As he finally realized what must have happened, blood spurted from his stumps.

She cut my hands...without hitting the bomb. I can't reach...

Words flashed through his brain as he struggled to process his thoughts. And when he realized what the girl had accomplished was as impressive as threading a needle blindfolded, his mind froze in fear.

"...Th-that's impossible..."

The last foe fell onto his back, and the sounds of battle ceased. All that remained was silence, like the calm ocean after a shipwreck.

"It's over..."

Aiz flicked the blood from her sword—almost as long as she was tall—and returned it to the scabbard on her back. Then she got thwacked on the head.

"Uggh!"

"That's what you think, you careless child! It's not like the Dungeon out here; there's a war going on! Never let down your guard!"

Riveria spat words like thunder, shooting a look of deepest displeasure at the headstrong girl.

"Owww..."

Aiz, however, remained unrepentant. She rubbed her head and peered up at Riveria with teary eyes. It was only times like these that she acted her age. If Loki had been here, no doubt she would have tried to spirit away the adorable little girl and take her home.

"Don't look at me like that, young lady! Why don't you listen to me when I'm talking to you?!"

Aiz's crocodile tears were, of course, wholly ineffective against the seasoned Riveria. Shaken, the young girl softened her gaze and began to speak.

"Well, they were no match for me..."

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"This is what I'm talking about! You—"

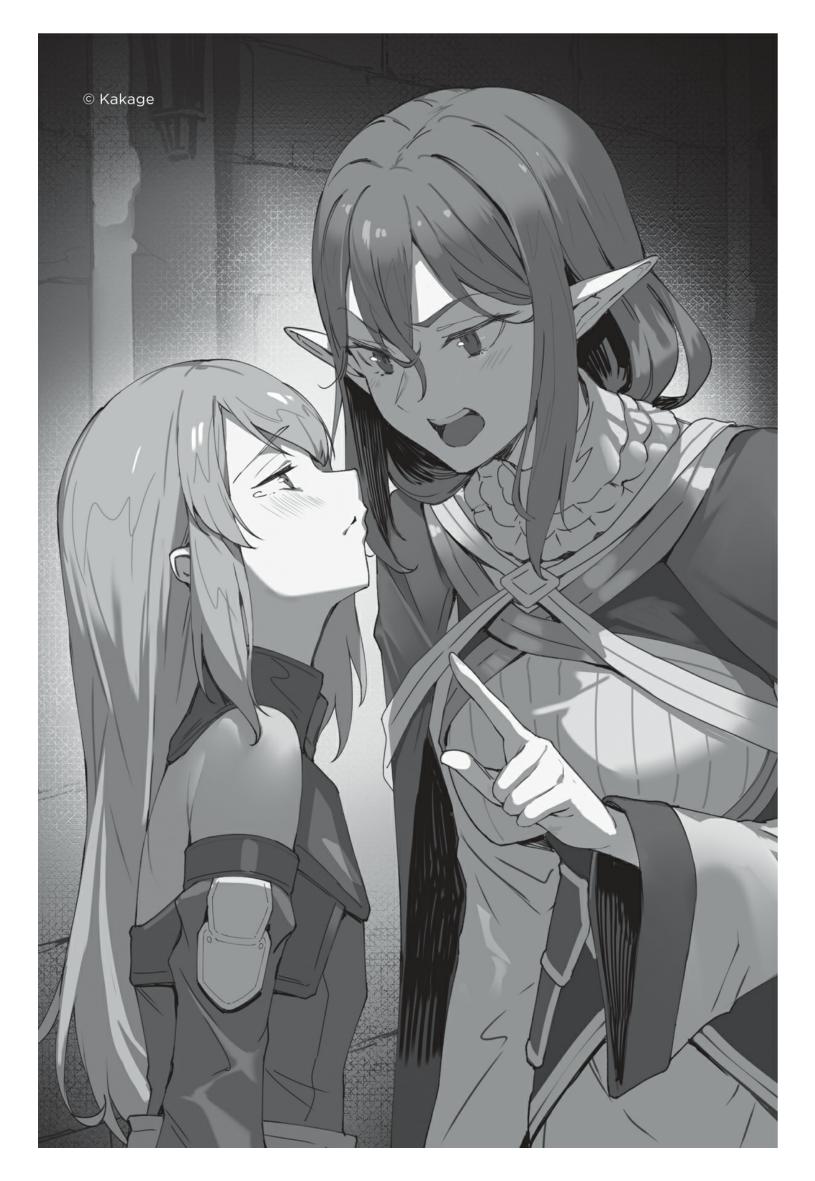
"And besides, you're hurt."

"!!"
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Riveria froze when she heard those words.

Like her dwarven comrade, Riveria still exhibited signs of recent medical care. She was wrapped in bandages, and her clothes—the Master's Elf Montante, a set of black-and-white robes with a jade-green cloak—were still in disrepair after the battle with Alfia.

"So I thought...I have to work harder," said Aiz. "I didn't want to see you hurting, Riveria..."



It was a gesture of love. Innocent, childlike love for the members of her familia. Aiz was young and shy, awkward with words and expressions. She simply stated exactly what she was feeling.

Riveria closed her eyes in thought for a moment, then kneeled on the ground, bringing her jade-green eyes in line with Aiz's golden gaze.

"...I'm happy you care about me, Aiz, I really am," she said, choosing her words carefully. "But do not forget that I feel the same way about you. I worry about your safety, even more than I do mine. I just don't want you to get hurt."

"...Okay."

At last, the young girl nodded. To anyone else, the pair would seem a perfectly ordinary mother and child.

"Now, come," said Riveria. "Let's get that blood cleaned up."

"Mm..."

Sensing she was no longer angry, Aiz trotted over to Riveria. Like a docile kitten, she submitted her face for a cleaning from Riveria's snow-white scarf.

Riveria couldn't help but smile at the girl as she scrubbed Aiz's cheeks clean, but her smile vanished when she looked down at the crimson stains on her neckerchief.

"Aiz...don't ever get used to the smell of blood. To kill another person is something that should be abhorred." She looked down with despondent eyes. "Remember that. Never forget that it's *people* you're fighting, not monsters."

In the tone of her voice was something rarely heard from the mouth of one so wise and noble as she. Aiz didn't answer this earnest plea at first. Perhaps she didn't quite understand. She simply stared back with big, round eyes.

"Riveria..." she said at last. "Why do people kill each other?"

"...!*"*

Riveria's eyes flew wide.

"I know about the Evils," Aiz went on, "but...don't we have other things to fight?"

From the mouths of babes came the pure and ugly truth.

"Shouldn't we be fighting the monsters instead of each other?"

A chill wind blew through the shattered city streets. Only after a long silence did Riveria open her mouth to speak.

"...You're right, Aiz. You're absolutely right."

She looked to the sky, for she could change nothing here on earth.

"What fools we are...to spill the blood of our brethren."



AFTGREA RECORD

Story by Lujino Omori - Illustration by Kakage Character Design by Snouhito Yasuda

CHAPTER 1

The Taste of Stones

The skies above remained cloudy and gray. The flames of war had all but died out, yet what remained were great pillars of smoke that loomed over the smoldering city, connecting the earth to the sky. Not even birds flew in the vast, interminable smog.

"Is that the last of them?" Lyra asked in a hoarse, rasping voice.

It was Kaguya who answered. With no waterskin to offer, she tossed the parched prum girl a magic potion instead.

"It seems so. The only ones trapped beneath the rubble now are corpses."

She watched as the last of her familia returned with tired expressions after delivering the rescued survivors to safety.

"You look dreadful," she said at last to the pink-haired prum.

"Heh. Looked in a mirror lately? You're no better than the rest of us."

Lyra forced a weary smile. She and the rest of *Astrea Familia* had been working through the night to aid the rescue efforts. Every able-bodied person in the city had been doing the same—adventurers, healers, Guild employees. As agents of justice, the girls refused to be outdone.

The strain on the body was great. But the strain on the spirit was greater still. A few days ago, this street had been bustling with life. Now there was nothing but stone and ash. The members of *Astrea Familia* failed to find anything to say in the face of such devastation.

Lyra downed their last magic potion and wiped her mouth. The girls had expended their healing items on the tired and wounded who most needed them, so these were all they had left.

"Neze, what are we doing to combat the spread of disease?" asked Alize. As familia captain, she oversaw this operation. Though she was no doubt more tired than anybody else, her voice was firm, and the fire in her eyes burned as

brightly as ever.

"The members of *Dian Cecht Familia* are distributing medical supplies all over the city, so I don't think we'll have to worry about that," answered Neze. "And we've got a saint watching over us."

"A saint? Oh, you must mean that little doll girl. Okay, well, we've done all we can here. Time to pull out."

Alize called out to the other volunteers, and the group withdrew from the area.

"Man, can't wait to take a shower and get some hot grub," groaned Lyra. "Then I'm goin' straight to bed."

"No, you aren't," remarked Kaguya, equally tired. "After we get cleaned up and eat something, we're going out on patrol. Evil could be lurking around any corner."

The streets they walked were in equally bad shape as the ones they had just left. Walls had been torn down and many buildings were in ruins. If someone claimed a giant had just charged through the town, most would probably believe it. Wooden beams and barrels lay strewn across the debris-filled street. It would be almost impossible for a non-adventurer to traverse without breaking a leg. And being as tired as they were, the girls were having plenty of trouble themselves.

Lyra kicked aside a shard of glass from a toppled magic-stone streetlamp as she said, "We may be strong, but we ain't immortal. We haven't had a chance to catch our breath since the sky fell on our heads."

Lyra continued to grumble as per usual, but not even Kaguya held it against her. By now, all of them had realized what an important role the prum girl's chatter served. In the Dungeon, whenever trouble arose, she always had something to say. She wouldn't allow any silence to linger unfilled.

This was her way of soothing the party's troubled minds and souls. Even she, the smallest member of the party, had a crucial role to play. None of them would ever admit it, but the other girls were grateful for her constant chatter. With her usual wisecracking, they managed to smile, just a little, despite the

destruction surrounding them.

"……"

Lyu, however, was trapped in a greater slump. She stared at her feet, a truly despondent look on her face.

"Keep your chin up, Leon," said Alize, walking alongside her. "You've got to say something if you're feeling bad." She gently placed her hand on Lyu's shoulder. "You haven't spoken a word all night. If you keep it bottled up inside, you'll explode!"

"……"

"We're almost at the camp," she said, undeterred by the elf's characteristic reluctance to open up. "Then we can—"

Just then, a group of townsfolk stepped into the road, barring the way.

"What do you want?" asked Lyra, unable to conceal her bewilderment.

The townsfolk, inhabitants of the camp Alize had just mentioned, simply stood there with grim expressions, like a horde of malignant specters. They glared at Lyu and the other girls with simmering resentment.

Then one of the figures spoke. The words were quiet but thick with emotion. "I thought *Astrea Familia* was supposed to be the good guys," she said. "Why didn't you protect us? Why didn't you save us?!"

It was a beastfolk woman, her voice like tearing silk. Her shoulders trembled with anger, and her eyes were filled with tears and pent-up rage.

"You lied to us!" she screamed. "Give him back!"

"""!!!"""

Lyu, Alize, Kaguya, Lyra—all the girls of *Astrea Familia* opened their eyes wide in shock. Then, the floodgates opened and the stones began flying.

"Everyone's dead!"

"And what did you do? Nothing!"

"What good are you?!"

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"You're adventurers! Do something!"

"Why is this happening?!"

"Justice? What a joke!"

"It's all your fault!"
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The crowd may have lobbed rocks at them, but what the members of *Astrea Familia* had to endure most was the stream of abuse that contained all of the townspeople's anger and suffering. Although the girls didn't know it, this was precisely what Finn had predicted, and there was nothing they could do. People had lost their homes, their livelihoods, and their loved ones. It was obvious why they had lost any semblance of composure as their emotions swelled. And it was perfectly understandable why they were turning against those who those who had fought for them—because they were the same people who had failed to protect them.

The girls all threw up their arms to protect their faces. All of them except Lyu.

"...What is the meaning of this?" she whispered. Her entire body trembled from sheer indignation and her voice steadily rose in a crescendo. "What have we done to deserve this? Is this any way to repay us after all we've done for you? All we've given?! All we've lost?!"

All her pent-up rage exploded at once, just like Alize said it would. But all she received from the townsfolk in return was the cold and bitter taste of stones. That and cruel contempt for the failure of justice.

The words of the protectors failed to reach the ears of the protected.

It was so unfair, so unreasonable, that Lyu felt her faith shaken to its very core. And it wasn't only her face that contorted with rage.

"How dare you...!" spat Kaguya. Several of them could endure this no longer, and their hands reached for their weapons. The far-eastern girl was just about to free her sword from its sheath to deflect the hurled stones and send the townsfolk packing when Alize stepped forward and reached out to stop her.

"Captain! Stay back; we don't know what they might do!"

But the red-haired girl ignored her. She stepped out into the hail of stones

without any heed for her own safety. Of course, it wasn't long before one of those stones met its mark.

A thin streak of blood ran down Alize's brow. The beastfolk woman who threw the offending stone stepped back in shock, realizing what she'd done.

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"Ah..."
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But Alize said nothing to her. Instead, she addressed them all.

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"I'm sorry."
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No rhetoric, no cleverly crafted words. Just a simple, purehearted apology. The crowd of demi-humans froze, unsure how to respond.

"We were weak," Alize went on. "And as a result, we let your homes get destroyed. We let your family and loved ones be killed."

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"""...!!"""
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"I'm so, so sorry."

The people were suddenly quiet, like a raging fire doused with water. Some grumbled and frowned, while others looked guilty. Her sincerity had soothed their anger somewhat since it was clear that no one felt more responsible for what happened than she did.

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"Alize..."
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Lyu couldn't find the words for what she was seeing. Kaguya and Lyra were much the same. All of them had seen how Alize gave just as much if not more than anybody else. They knew how many people her tireless efforts had saved. Why did she have to hang her head in shame? Why was it that, after giving her all for the sake of others, the only thing she received in return was condemnation? It just didn't seem right.

"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."

The evil god's words rang in her head, now in the mocking voice of a malicious court jester.

"You're all gung ho about it now, but what happens after you burn out?"

"Would you still say the same?"

His teasing tormented her, and just as Lyu was thinking about how unreasonable it all was, someone stepped out of the crowd. Someone who didn't accept Alize's apology.

"'Sorry' isn't enough..."

A human woman shambled forward, like a zombie.

"My child is dead because of you!!"

Her ash-coated face contorted in rage as she charged Alize and struck her across the cheek.

Alize could do nothing but stare. Lyu gasped in astonishment.

"She was so young, and now she's gone!"

"H-hey, stop that! Those are adventurers!"

A man, presumably her husband, came up from behind the woman and pulled her back.

"They did everything they could... They saved our little Leah once already... They..."

The man tried to reason with his wife, but it wasn't long before he, too, broke down in tears.

"Aaaargh! Why?! Why did this have to happen?!"

All of *Astrea Familia* looked on in shock. It was only Alize and Lyu who saw it. Beyond the weeping couple, poised atop a heap of rubble like a tombstone, was a blood-soaked teddy bear.

"I remember that... It's..."

A scene from the not-too-distant past played out in Lyu's mind. A scene of a twilit street.

"Ah! It's Astrea Familia!"

"Thank you for saving me, nice ladies!"

Didn't the girl who Alize and Lyu saved have a teddy bear just like this one?

"Oh, you don't know how grateful we are to you, Miss Adventurer. How can we ever repay you...?"

How could such a grateful woman have become so consumed by sadness and rage?

And where...where was that innocent young girl now?

All these questions pointed to one terrifying conclusion. Lyu's body turned to ice.

B-but...we saved her. We saved her...

It didn't make sense. It wasn't right. Lyu felt her heart come undone, and the world around her disappeared into an ashen smog. She hated those who had done this, but more than anything else, she hated herself for being powerless to stop it. Powerless to protect the ones she loved...like Ardee. All the regret and remorse bubbled up through her veins like molten magma, searing her insides until...

"Aaaghh... AAAAAAAAAAGHHH!!"

...something snapped. Something that had been given every reason to perish already, and only by some miracle had been keeping Lyu's mind bound together.

She slumped to the floor as the world around her went dark.

"Leon? Leon! ... Shit! C'mon, help me carry her!"

Lyra's voice was faint, as if she were deep underwater. She could hear Alize and the other girls running over, but the sounds were muffled like distant thunder.

Then, as clear as day in her own head, she heard a question she could not answer.

"What exactly is your justice?"



At first, she didn't realize she was dreaming. The glow of the evening was so warm, so bright, that she could almost cry. Golden stalks of wheat swaying in the breeze matched the color of the sky above, and it was impossible to tell where one stopped and the other started. The air was cool and refreshing. The smell was incredibly nostalgic, but it couldn't possibly be real.

Because *she* was standing there. Her back was turned, just like the day she disappeared forever.

Leon...

Her sky-blue hair. A voice that would never be heard again.

Lyu didn't dare reach out. She stood, transfixed by the sight.

Her face was in shadow, but her lips were moving.

Leon. Justice will...

Lyu wasn't ready to hear the rest. Before the next words came, everything receded at the speed of light. The dream ended, ejecting Lyu into harsh reality.

All she could do was scream the girl's name.



"Ardee!!"

She bolted up, throwing her blanket aside. Her hand reached out, but all it caught was empty air, reminding her that what she had just seen existed only inside her own mind.

Her arms fell lifelessly into her lap. She stared at them, silent, before eventually turning her hollow, sky-blue eyes on her surroundings.

"Where am I?"

She recognized the desk and chair. The sofa she was lying on felt familiar as well. Still, she stared wordlessly for a while before the answer came from a person standing next to her.

"You're home."

Lyu raised her eyes to meet the gaze of the kimono-clad woman by her bedside.

"Kaguya..."

Then, her foggy mind began sorting the dream from reality. The townsfolk had been throwing stones, and Lyu had passed out at some point. The other girls must have brought her back here, to the Stardust Garden.

How disgraceful to let them see her like that, Lyu thought. Completely ignoring the guilt Lyu felt, Kaguya gave only a rude snort, as though nothing were owed.

"At least you're finally awake," she said. Then, after confirming Lyu's injuries were mild, she quickly changed tack. "Get up and get ready. The Evils are still attacking. We need to join the others."

She offered nothing but a series of indisputable facts, allowing no emotion to enter her voice. Her expression was uncomfortably calm. Lyu was silent for a moment. Then, just as Kaguya was about to leave the room...

"How?"

A tiny utterance escaped her lips. Kaguya returned a perturbed look.

"How what?" she asked.

"How are you not angry after everything that's happened?"

Once Lyu had started, she couldn't stop herself.

"So many died, even the ones we saved before. And the ones who didn't threw rocks at us!"

All the questions she'd been holding back flooded out in one great deluge. A righteous fury took control of her voice and leveled it at her own ally.

"Ardee's dead!!" she screamed. "How can you be so calm?!"

Her voice echoed off the walls for only a moment, before the air grew silent once more. Kaguya only stared at the elf girl, silent, before releasing a huge sigh.

"You're ridiculous," she said.

"What?!"

"Criticism. Mockery. Slander. Sacrifice. These are all part of the mantle of justice. We can't escape them."

The drawn-out tone of her voice was the same one she adopted whenever she found fault with Lyu's actions. Only now, there was a calmness to her words that Lyu had never heard before.

"This was something we all accepted and were prepared for. All of us...except you."

"Hrk!!"

Kaguya's words were like a knife to her heart.

"We all knew this day would come. But you were the last to join us and the least ready to accept this."

Lyu was speechless. Kaguya mercilessly beat her into submission with the cold, hard truth. And while she scrambled to gather her thoughts, the fareastern girl continued.

"Remember what I said, Lyu Leon. You can't save everyone."

It was nine days ago, after the girls confronted Vito on the eighteenth floor of the Dungeon.

"Know your place, you cocky elf. You think yourself a superhero? Nobody could possibly have saved them all, and you know it."

That cold, calm statement had come after Lyu chastised Kaguya for being so dismissive of the adventurers who had died before *Astrea Familia* arrived on scene. The memory played in her head as Kaguya dropped her gaze to the sword at her hip and ran a slender finger along its sheath.

"You'll get over it. In time," she assured Lyu. "But if you had done what I said and prepared to accept sacrifices, you wouldn't be in this situation now."

Her answer left no room for interpretation. Lyu was still reeling from her words and couldn't formulate a response straightaway, but the anger inside her refused to allow that insult to go unchallenged. Her heart began to pound, sending boiling blood coursing through her veins as her righteous fury

compelled her to speak out.

"What kind of justice is that?!" she roared. "'Get over it'? 'Accept sacrifices'?! That is not what our goddess stands for! That is not the justice I chose to follow!!"

But even this was not enough to make Kaguya recant. The look in her eyes said it all. What good is that conviction when you lack the strength to see it through?

Lyu's idea of justice was nothing but a dream. An unattainable fantasy.

"Don't be ridiculous," Kaguya spat. "We live in the real world. There comes a day when each of us must make a choice. It seems that, for you, that day hasn't come yet."

When Lyu looked at her face, instead of the scorn she had expected, she saw sadness.

"You are as skilled with the sword as any of us, elf, but your heart is the weakest by far. You aren't ready to face the horrors of war."

In the wake of losing a dear friend, Lyu was on the verge of a complete breakdown. That was why she couldn't see what the sadness in Kaguya's eyes meant. The source of that sorrow was a mourning for something she had given up on but Lyu still held on to. At the same time, it was worry. Worry that the elf was not yet strong enough to face the challenges that lay ahead, and that they would leave her broken.

"Kaguyaaa!!"

And because she lacked the composure to recognize any of this, Lyu leaped up from the sofa in anger, grabbing Kaguya by the collar. The far-eastern girl didn't so much as blink, nor did she try to fight back. If it helped soothe Lyu's ire even slightly, then she would endure whatever the elf girl needed to get out.

"Kaguya?! What are you doing?!"

Alize heard the crash as Lyu upended a chair in her rage, and Alize came running into the room. She had come to relieve Kaguya of her duty in watching over the sleeping girl. Seeing the two on the verge of coming to blows, she

stepped between them and pushed the girls apart.

"And you, Leon. You've just woken up, so take it easy!"

Alize went to place a hand reassuringly on the girl's shoulder, but before she even could, Lyu ran at her and hugged her tight.

"Alize," she sobbed. "Tell me the truth. Are you also willing to accept sacrifices?!"

With trembling eyes, she looked up into those of her leader, only a short distance away.

"Are you willing to forget about the death of our friend? To throw up your hands and say there's nothing we can do?!"

Her eyes were the color of new growth in spring.

"Please, Alize, tell me! What is the justice we've been fighting for?!"

It was the plea of a girl who had lost everything. Neither her elven pride nor her adventurer's armor could turn away the world's cruel realities a moment longer. All she could do was scream. She was letting her best friend see her at her weakest moment, but that was okay so long as Alize could answer her question.

The flame-haired girl closed her eyes for a moment. The rhythmic, mechanical sound of the timepiece on the wall ticked away. Then, at last, she spoke.

"I'm sorry, Leon."

She couldn't. That was the plain and simple truth.

"I don't have an answer for you right now. At least not one you'll accept."

Those were the absolute last words Lyu wanted to hear. She couldn't believe her ears. It was the first time she had ever heard the bundle of sunshine that was Alize Lovell sound so forlorn.

"No!"

Screwing up her face like a child, Lyu sprinted out of the room, fighting back her tears.

"Leon!"

Kaguya shouted after her, but Lyu ignored her cry. She dashed out the front doors and into the ruined streets of the city. Shaking her arms and wiping her face, she screamed as she ran.

"I don't want your apology, Alize! I just...!"

Beneath the ashen sky, amid the cold rubble of a town destroyed, she lay her heart bare.

"I just wanted you to say I was wrong! I wanted you to smile, to take me by the hand and tell me where we go from here...like you always do!"

With no destination in mind, she ran, letting her wild emotions guide her. There were no stars in the skies above to show her the way.



"...Couldn't you have at least lied to her, Captain?"

After Lyu had left bawling like a child, a wrinkle of concern crossed Kaguya's brow.

"I may not be suited to weaning ignorant children," she continued, "but I was counting on you to succeed where I had failed."

It was not an attack on either her captain's character or her own but, instead, an admission of their respective roles.

Alize cast her eyes downward. "I know," she said. "I should have done what I always do. I should have laughed and smiled and been myself, but..." She shook her head, whipping her crimson hair about like a flickering candle flame. "I couldn't do it. No, I didn't want to do it. If I lied to Leon, I'd be lying to myself as well."

Kaguya didn't have a response for such a heartfelt confession. The two of them simply stood there in silence until the door creaked and a third girl stepped into the room.

"Let's get some light in this room, seriously. It's a good thing I stayed behind."

[&]quot;Lyra..."

The pink-haired prum girl flashed a casual smile, replacing the one the two girls had lost.

"I'll go after Leon," she said. "And you come, too, Kaguya. Looking for lost children sounds like a job worthy of our patrol."

"In that case, I'll come, too," suggested Alize.

"Not you, Captain. You need to stay here to take charge of the others," said Lyra, flashing a grin. "By the time we come back, you better not be mopin' around. That's not the Alize we want to see, y'know?"

"Agreed," said Kaguya. "There's something wrong about seeing Alize so somber."

Alize stopped in her tracks as she looked at their smiling faces.

"Lyra... Kaguya..."

Both of them had been with Alize and *Astrea Familia* since the very beginning. Alize respected their opinions more than anyone else's.

"You're right!" she said at last, slapping her cheeks one at a time. "Now's not the time to mope around! I gotta hurry and come up with an answer for Leon, so we can laugh in the Evils' faces with the light at our backs!"

"I don't remember sayin' any of that"—Lyra chuckled—"but you do you, girl. We'll handle Leon, so just sit tight."

She looked at Kaguya, and the girls nodded to each other before leaving the room. Alize waved good-bye, and then...

"……"

After they had left, her smile disappeared. She dropped her hand and stared down at her feet with a bleak look on her face. The darkness was so thick, Alize was starting to wonder how they would find the light again.



Lyu sprinted aimlessly through the streets, her feet scattering spray in the

sudden downpour. Though it was far from dusk, the skies above were as dark as night. The streets were empty since most of the residents had fled to seek refuge from the fighting, and Lyu felt more alone than she had in a long, long time.

At last, she realized how long she had been running, and the fatigue hit her all at once. She came to a stop in the southeast part of the city, far from Stardust Garden, gasping for breath.

"Pant... Pant..... I'm a disgrace."

All around her were the inescapable traces of war, filling her with emptiness.

"I said such horrible things to Alize...and then ran away like a petulant child. What was the point?"

No matter how far she ran, she couldn't escape the regret that weighed heavily on her heart. As she was pondering what to do next, she heard a commanding voice take control of the streets.

"Listen up, everyone! Here are your orders!"

Lyu was startled and hid herself away before she even realized what she was doing. She peeked around the corner, looking for the owner of the voice.

"I won't mince words: we're short on people," the leader said. "Nursing the injured, burying our dead, and keeping the townspeople under control—these tasks should be left to the Guild and civilian volunteers!"

It was Shakti, captain of *Ganesha Familia*, barking orders to her subordinates that served as the city watch.

"We must focus on protecting everyone else from the Evils' attacks! We must be a shield for those who cannot defend themselves!"

"""Yes, ma'am!""" roared the crowd of troops.

The sight brought a warmth to Lyu's heart.

"Even after losing her sister, she's still leading with a steady hand..."

Shakti had every reason to be in mourning, even more so than Lyu, but she wasn't stuck in the past. She stayed focused on the here and now. It was

inspiring. Lyu was beginning to think how pathetic she must seem by comparison, but then she heard Shakti's next words.

"And never show mercy to your foes! None of you must make the same idiotic mistake my sister did!"

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"What ...?"
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She didn't believe her ears at first. But Shakti didn't stop there. In fact, it only got worse.

"Ardee *died* because of mercy!" she roared, glaring with fire in her eyes at the crowd. "Because she tried to save her enemies as well as her friends! Her kindness was her own undoing! It was the very definition of folly! Our foe will not hesitate to blow themselves to kingdom come! So don't hesitate to cut them down if capturing them becomes impossible! I won't let a single one of you repeat the same mistake my sister made!"

There was an uncertain pause, then the warriors answered in unison.

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"""Yes, ma'am!"""
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The adventurers of *Ganesha Familia* dispersed into the city. After they were gone, Lyu staggered into the street, unable to process what she just heard.

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"Shakti..."
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"Hm? Leon? What are you doing? It's dangerous to be out by yourself. Head back to your familia and—"

"What did you mean, Ardee died because of mercy?"

"…"

"What did you mean, her actions were the definition of folly?"

"……"

"What did you mean, her death was an idiotic mistake?!"

Lyu was at her breaking point. She walked right up to Shakti and roared in her face.

[&]quot;Very good. Now move out!"

"You're wrong! Ardee was kind! She knew more than anyone what justice meant! All she wanted was to live in a world where everyone was happy!"

"……"

"She...she was trying to save an innocent child! To protect an innocent life!!"

"And she died for it."

When Shakti finally opened her mouth to speak, it was to deliver that devastating blow. Her eyes were cold and cruel.

"What?!"

While Lyu reeled in shock, Shakti's eyebrows arched sharply.

"All she did was get herself killed at a time when we need every able-bodied adventurer we can put in the field. Whether it was to save a child or spare an enemy, her mistake is costing us dearly."

Lyu couldn't believe it. She was hearing a total condemnation of Ardee's actions from the mouth of her own bereaved sister.

"I warned her about it in the past," Shakti went on. "I told her not to show compassion to her foes. We aren't gods."

They were the words of someone who knew it was impossible to save everybody. The words of someone who knew what it took to be a protector.

"I heard about what happened with the pickpocket, Leon. Didn't you take objection to Ardee's idealism then?"

"Well...I..."

"There's no room in Orario for ideals right now. What we need is to keep our people alive, no matter the cost. And that means we all need to see Ardee's mistake as a lesson."

In stark contrast to Lyu's words, Shakti's were as cold and hard as stone. But Lyu's fists shook when she heard that word again. *Mistake*.

"If we want to come through this crisis in one piece, we need to use everything at our disposal...even her memory," said Shakti. "That is my justice."

Lyu heard something snap inside her once again. Translucent glass blood

seeped from the cracks in her heart. It splintered into fragments and disappeared without a trace, as if everything she believed in had never existed at all.

"That's your justice? You call that justice?! I don't believe you...You're lying! That can't be true! It's unacceptable!"

Lyu stepped backward, one foot at a time, shaking her head in a vain attempt to deny what she was hearing.

"Y-you're her sister, you can't just...!"

She wasn't able to complete her sentence. Because when Shakti refused to meet her gaze, Lyu's anger had nowhere to go, and she took off running once more.

"Grh!!"

Again she fled, just like with Alize. Running from so-called justice. Shakti watched her go, a blank look in her eyes. In that moment, the elf girl looked so much like her sister that it was impossible for her to follow.

"Shakti..."

It was only the sound of his footsteps in the puddles that alerted her to the presence of the elephant-masked god who appeared at her side. She didn't know how long he had been standing there, listening.

"Ganesha, do you think...I was wrong?" she asked, but the god didn't immediately answer. "Was Leon right? Was denying everything my sister believed in going too far?"

""

Though Lyu hadn't said it outright, Shakti knew what the elf girl had wanted to say, because she had considered the very same idea herself. There was no trace of the confidence and conviction she had displayed a few moments ago. All that remained was a lost and confused girl, the same as Lyu.

"All it means is you chose a future for these people over honoring the fallen," said Ganesha. There was no fault Shakti could point to in his words, and that was what made them so painful. She clenched her fists tightly.

"You're right," she said. "That is what I chose. I chose to spit on my sister's grave for the sake of the living!"

Her anger, her fear, and her pain—they all surged forth in an unstoppable wave, clouding what was left of her rational mind. Then she peered into her god's eyes.

"Tell me, Ganesha! How many more sacrifices must we suffer?!"

She turned to the skies above, cloud-filled and starless.

"How much more must I lose before I can finally tell her I'm sorry?!"

The god had no answer. He clenched his jaw in frustration, unable to utter a single word.



AHOGRGA RECORD The Fall of Justice

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CHAPTER 2

Wavering Justice

Chaos reigned in Orario, surrounded as it was on all sides by the Evils, who had taken up positions on the city walls. As Loki had put it, the city was under siege. Anyone who so much as approached the borders of the city was subjected to an incessant barrage of bombs. To prevent the townsfolk from being hurt, the adventurers had cordoned off the areas outside Central Park and the rest of the central district. Some refused to have their freedom curtailed so dramatically, but all were dragged kicking and screaming to the safe zone if that was what it took. It was an unpopular choice but necessary to prevent senseless loss of life.

Still, some people could not be convinced that these measures were for their safety and spat insults in the faces of their protectors. Friction was mounting between the city's inhabitants and the adventurers, just as Valletta had predicted.

"Do something! We're dying out here!"

"We've no food, no shelter, no clothes even! And some of us are still wounded!"

"What do you expect us to do, turn on each other?!"

Angry townsfolk closed in on the adventurers and Guild employees manning the cordon. They were cold, hungry, and fearful of an attack that could come at any time. Each voice contributed to the pandemonium, laying the foundation for mass hysteria.

"Stay calm!" shouted the war tiger, Falgar. "Rations are being handed out! Just sit quietly and do not act in haste!"

He and the other upper-class adventurers desperately pleaded with the citizens to keep them under control. Off to the side, Asfi saw all this as she spoke to an employee of the Guild.

"I've evacuated all the townsfolk from the gates," she said. "I'll leave the rest here to you."

It had been half a day since Asfi and Shakti had witnessed the Evils attacking innocent townsfolk at the west gate. After Asfi had spent that whole time guiding people away from the other gates and walls, the exhaustion was beginning to show.

"Thank you," replied the Guild employee. "Erm...do you mind if I ask?" The woman's face was pallid and grim. "We're going to win this...aren't we?"

A pause. Asfi knew what the woman wanted to hear, but she couldn't bring herself to say it.

"We will do everything we can," she said at last. "But we need your help to have a chance."

"R-r-right, yes! Of course, silly me! Good hunting, adventurer!"

Flustered and babbling, the Guild lady ran off. With a look of bitter pain, Asfi watched her go.

"Even the people in the Guild are starting to worry..."

"Yes, and there is little we can do to reassure them," said Falgar, appearing by her side with his greatsword and shield upon his back. "Nor the common folk, for that matter. It just goes to show how deep the wounds of last night run. The Evils wear us down from within, and there is precious little hope to be found. Whoever concocted this scheme of theirs must be truly despicable."

Falgar and Gareth were of one mind regarding the craven techniques their foe employed. Asfi could feel her heart pounding away in her chest.

At this rate we'll lose control of the people...and then it's only a matter of time before the city falls. We need a victory, anything, even a small one, or else...

But as if to deny her even that, Hermes suddenly appeared behind her, like an omen of calamity.

"Asfi," he said.

"Lord Hermes?" She spun around, stunned by the god's apparent disregard for his own safety. "What are you doing here without an escort?!" she shouted

at him. "Are you aware there's a war going on?!"

"Asfi. From now on, you lead the familia."

"Wh-what? What do you...?"

Asfi was lost for words. She couldn't speak. Then it slowly dawned on her that Hermes wasn't joking. There wasn't a shred of levity about him. No trace of a smile on his lips or a bounce in his voice like usual. His gaze was distant, devoid of light and warmth.

She couldn't breathe. There was only one reason Hermes would say what he had said, and Asfi's sharp mind had already deduced what it was. A terrible, sinking feeling gripped the pit of her stomach, eclipsing the beating of her heart.

"Lydis is dead," said Hermes. "You're the captain now."

"What?!"

She almost didn't hear his cold, callous command. Before she even had time to feel shock or despair, the world around her stopped, and all the color drained from Asfi's face.

"Move in! Attack! Bathe these ignorant sinners in blood!"

Both the screams of the bystanders and their assailants' mad yells filled the air. The agents of evil were eager to paint the ground and ruined walls in gore.

The target was a makeshift overflow camp to the north of Central Park, where any excess evacuees were placed. As if that weren't bad enough, the cultists were deliberately targeting those who couldn't fight back.

People sprinted from the battlefield, tugging on the arms of crying children, sometimes leaving the old and infirm behind to save their own skins.

"Th-this way, everyone! Run as fast as you can!"

At the center of the chaos, one young man still stood up for the fleeing townsfolk: Raul of *Loki Familia*. While the upper-class adventurers fought on the front lines, he and his fellow lower-class adventurers were forced to steel their courage and stand on the battlefield. They took up sword and shield and risked their lives battling aggressors often more powerful than themselves.

"Raul's almost ready for a Rank Up."

Those words had come from Loki's mouth ten days prior, before the onset of the Great Conflict. Raul remembered how happy he'd been to hear them at the time, but they were little reassurance now. He'd been in Orario for only a year, and the dangers of the city were already beyond his wildest nightmares.

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"Th-this way! Hurry!"
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"O-oh, thank you, kind adventurer...!"

Deathly pale with fright, his knees shaking, Raul felt like he might wet himself. That didn't stop him from guiding the townsfolk to safety. After entrusting an old lady to his ally, he set out once more across the battlefield, which was riddled with danger. Then, all of a sudden, a member of the Evils appeared from out of nowhere and lunged at him with a knife.

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"Hey, adventurer...! Die!"
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"Eep!"

Raul was nearly run through before he had a chance to cry out in fright. Luckily, an even keener blade came to his defense.

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"Silence, whelp!!"
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"Gagh!"

A single-edged longsword came from behind and cut the Evils footman down.

"N-Noir!"

An old human with a beard had come to Raul's rescue. Despite his appearance, he clearly possessed the speed and strength of a man many decades younger. His body, over 170 celches tall, was like an elegant weeping willow standing firm in the face of adversity. Even without the benefit of his Falna, he was a spry and energetic gentleman and a master of the sword besides. His name was Noir Sachsen, Level 4, and he was still actively adventuring despite being over seventy years of age.

"Get back, Raul," he warned. "You can't swing a blade when your knees rattle like a loose shutter in the wind."

"B-but I gotta stand and fight—!" Raul began before being cut off by the appearance of two more figures. The first was a grizzled dwarf boasting a beard that put even Noir's to shame, while the second was a woman who looked like the epitome of an Amazon.

"You ain't take on anything besides monsters before, young'un," said the former, "Leave this to us old-timers."

"We were Finn's equal during our prime, you know," the second added with a grin that seemed out of place on the battlefield. "Listen to your elders, Raul."

"Dyne... Bahra..."

These three, Noir, Dyne, and Bahra, were *Loki Familia*'s oldest members—in terms of age, at least. They were converts from other familia, but they had been braving the Dungeon long before Finn, Riveria, Gareth, or even Loki first set foot in the city. That alone put them on the same level as any first-class adventurer.

"Stay off the battlefield, Raul. That's where you work best," said Noir as the next wave of Evils cultists closed in. "Go and help the citizens to safety—all their screams are beginning to wear me down. You don't want Anakitty to get mixed up in all this, either, do you?"

"...!*"*

"Raul!"

The one who called his name was a catgirl in the process of helping the fleeing old woman to safety. Her name was Anakitty Autumn, a fourteen-year-old who joined the familia about the same time Raul did. She'd always had her head screwed on properly and was more attuned to the dangers of the battlefield than Raul was. That was why when she looked at him, it was with a face of pure terror and eyes that said, "Come back, you'll die!"

Seeing the young and tender girl on the verge of tears, Raul balled his fists in embarrassment.

"I'm sorry," he said to the veteran trio. "Please, take care of them for me!!"

With those final words, Raul ran back to where Anakitty was. Trying not to listen too closely to the clash of blades behind him, he collected her and the old

woman before fleeing the battlefield.

Still, he couldn't help himself, so he took one quick peek over his shoulder. There he saw Noir, tearing through foes like a god of war.

We can't fight on the front lines, and we can't help the rear guard, either! We wouldn't last five minutes in a fight like that!

Turning his back on the battlefield, Raul opened his mouth and screamed.

"All we can do is run! Is this the age of darkness you warned me about, Captain?!"

"Finn! Where are you going?!"

Royman's quailing voice did not break Finn's stride.

"To Central Park," he answered. "I need to see for myself what's happening out there."

He stepped briskly through the hallways of Guild Headquarters located in southwest Orario, now the second-most important base of operations in the city after Central Park.

"I have to reinspect the board," he said, a bold determination in his voice. "There's always another angle."

Royman struggled to keep up, not only with the prum's quick steps but also with his mind. Finn alone seemed to view this war from a position of logical detachment.

"How?!" yelled Royman in a tremulous voice. "Finn, how can you be so calm at a time like this?! Rarely does your arrogant behavior surprise me these days, but this truly takes the cake! Never have I seen you display such brazen disregard when we are staring down such...such calamity!"

The elf in charge of the Guild could take it no longer. Despair had claimed him, like it had so many others.

"Frankly, Finn, I don't know what to do! Zeus's Glutton and Hera's Silence, fighting a war against us? It's a nightmare! Doomsday!"

Zeus Familia and Hera Familia. The very names struck fear into all. There

wasn't a single person who hadn't heard tales of their legendary might, and nobody understood the threat they posed more than Royman Mardeel. For over a hundred years, he had stood as Orario's guiding presence, so that the city's prosperity would continue into eternity.

"And to top it all off," he cried, "nine of our familias have been decapitated! Even many gods who survived the exodus have no followers left! This is the worst thing that's happened to Orario since...well, since ever!!"

Royman's final words seemed so fragile, they might shatter at the gentlest touch. That finally stopped Finn in his tracks.

"You're right," he said. "The situation is dire. We couldn't have dreamed of a worse enemy, and our city teeters on the brink of extinction."

Finn offered no soothing words. The prum captain admitted that all of Royman's fears were completely warranted.

"However," he said, turning around, "that's precisely why we need to stay strong. Now, perhaps, more than ever."

The short-statured prum stood opposite Royman and looked up boldly into his eyes, wearing an indefatigable smile.

"Chin up, Royman. No more of that wailing. And remember, you've got me on your side. I will do whatever it takes to inspire hope in you all. Call me arrogant for that if you like, but let me ask you: Who else has what it takes to steer us through this storm?"

"...!!"

"Who else can show such courage when all seems lost?"

After an awed silence, Royman balled his right hand into a fist.

"...Only you," he replied, begrudgingly at first, but soon with an intensity that would frighten the gods in heaven. "Only you can bring hope to this miserable city, Braver! Only you and the other first-class adventurers stand a chance at releasing us from the specters of Zeus and Hera!!"

He took a step toward Finn, as if he intended to shake the prum by his shoulders.

"Save us, Finn! You must defeat those who reached greater heights than any other in Orario for a thousand years!"

"We will," came Finn's simple reply. "Our city's future depends on it."

There was no smile on his face now, only grim determination. He turned forward once more and resumed striding down the corridor.

"But to do so," he said, now only to himself, "to seize that faint chance of victory—I'll need *his* help."

Passing through the Guild lobby, Finn emerged onto the streets, setting his sights to the southwest—where Orario's greatest protector fell at the hands of its conqueror.



"Gaaaaaaaaagh?!"

A single crushing swing nearly tore one man's body to shreds. Instead, it sent him flying through the air, spewing blood. The force bent his arms and legs into terribly unnatural shapes before slamming his mangled body into the ground.

The scream that penetrated the air of southwest Orario belonged to one of the attackers encroaching on the city.

"K-kill him!" spat the leader of a group of Evils, as if his trembling voice might be able to strike down their foe when he said it with enough venom. "His fight with Master Zald has left him crippled and weak! Now's our chance to finish him off for good!"

It was hard to blame him for believing that when their opponent trailed torn bandages while blood dripped from every cut. Despite all that, his strength seemed undiminished. His iron will and the fire burning in his eyes were alive and well. The man existed for one purpose and one purpose only: to destroy anyone unfortunate enough to step into his path.

"H-he can't be stopped! Nobody can take on that beast!!"

The Evils foot soldiers failed to find inspiration in their leader's words. Their unstoppable foe showed no mercy as he cut them down left and right.

"Hurgh... Hurgh... ROOOOOOAAAAAAAAGHHH!!"

Then Ottar roared, huffing steam like a mad bull. With greatsword in hand, there was nothing alive he couldn't kill. Nothing standing he couldn't destroy. This battle was meaningless, a futile slaughter with no winner.

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"Pant... Pant..."
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Soon the earth fell silent, save for the sound of Ottar's labored breaths. A single animal person who had been watching the fight dropped from a partially destroyed building onto the rubble-lined street.

"Pickin' on small fry 'cause you got beat? That's embarrassin', man."

"Allen...!"

Ottar wheeled around to see a familiar young catman wielding a silver spear.

"I dunno if you and that armored asshole got history or what," Allen continued, "but you gotta put it aside. You can't just go chargin' off by yourself like a wild animal when we got a war to fight."

Allen spoke reason. Since the moment he awoke following his ill-fated showdown with the Conqueror, Ottar had been trapped in a thorny tangle of rage and grief, committed to hunting down Zald and destroying anyone who got in his way.

"Leave me," he said. "I don't have time for this."

From his voice, it was clear Ottar believed he had nothing to lose. Without another word, he turned and tried to leave Allen behind.

"Where are you goin' now?"

"To find Zald."

"Yeah? So he can finish you off?"

"So I can destroy him!"

Ottar pointedly ignored Allen's pleas. Allen had always known him to be a quiet man who nonetheless held incredible inner strength, but there was no trace of that Warlord now, only a mindless beast.

"Right, got you," he said, staring at the boaz's back, his eyes as narrow as

knife blades. "In that case, time for you to die."

"|"

Allen took up his silver spear and lunged. Ottar spun around and caught it on his blade just in time. A moment later and it would have pierced his heart.

"Allen!" he cried as he parried the blow. "What is the meaning of this?!"

"You ain't kiddin' nobody," said Allen. "You fight Zald now, you're as good as dead; we both know that. Might as well leave your excella to me and save him the trouble."

What Allen was asking, as a Level 5 to a Level 6, was for Ottar to be his doorway to a Rank Up. "Then I'm gonna tear that tin can to shreds," he said, an undeniable fire of determination in his eyes.

"Rrgh! Allen!!"

Meanwhile, the only emotion in the boaz's eyes was fury. He had known his vice-captain for a long, long time, and so he knew the moment he saw that spark, the ensuing fight was inevitable. Allen would not give up until he had taken the very last thing that kept Ottar going.

Their weapons clashed. Allen's spear, swift like the wind, and Ottar's greatsword, as heavy as a mountain. The storm of blows pealed like thunder and buffeted the area with gusts of wind. In this deadly showdown between raw speed and raw strength, the war-torn street had little hope of surviving. Shock waves from their fight were already leveling what remained of the buildings, filling the roads with dust and stone. Sounds of their duel carried several blocks away, and those who heard them turned their heads in confusion, wondering what meeting of armies could possibly create such noise.

The battle raged on. Two warriors who should have been allies looked more like wild beasts competing for the same juicy kill.

"Grh?!"

At long last, after an exchange scoring hit after hit, a decisive blow landed. One of the combatant's weapons wheeled through the air, and its wielder slumped to his knees.

The weapon was a greatsword. The man was Ottar. But it was Allen who screwed up his face in bitterness and disgust. His arms, still locked in place after their final swing, began to tremble.

"...The hell was that?"

Then, he lifted his chin and yelled with all his might.

"What the hell was that?! Since when did you go down so easy? When did you become such a loser?!"

"Grh..."

"The hell's wrong with you, Ottar?! Any fight between us oughta end with me gettin' my ass laid out!"

Ottar bore his junior's criticism with obvious despair. He was devastated in mind and body. Not once had he ever lost a duel with his cat-person associate.

He couldn't even muster up a single word in his defense. The pitiful sight of him only angered Allen more.

"I swore to defeat you and become the greatest chariot I can be! You know how much I sacrificed! I didn't say good-bye to *that idiot* so that you could go and turn out like this!!"

"...!*"*

Ottar froze. As the captain of *Freya Familia*, he understood exactly who Allen was referring to. Once upon a time, there had been another wheel to his chariot. Allen's little sister followed in his tracks wherever he went.

"Allen..."

The catman had never once divulged how he felt about that sacrifice. Seeing him open up now, Ottar was silent. Meanwhile, Allen clicked his tongue, as if he'd accidentally said too much, and his gaze met Ottar's rust-colored eyes once more.

"Stand up," he said. "I ain't after your pity. This time, it's to the death. With all of us."

As Allen spoke those words, a series of fresh faces appeared at the border of

their duel. First were the four prum brothers.

"What a sight, Ottar."

"You look so pathetic, it's not even funny."

"But that's okay, 'cause we're the same."

"We lost our fight, too. So kill us and bring to life a more powerful warrior. One who can strike down *Apate Familia* in our place."

Following them were the white elf and the dark elf mages.

"We must bring ruin to the Evils, those despicable sisters included."

"Ottar...we've always fought to win, but today we must unleash our full power."

They all stood before Ottar, fully armed and armored for battle. It was Hegni the dark elf who stepped forward and spoke on their behalf.

"We all want to fight, Ottar. We need to. It's the only way we can atone for the mistakes of last night."

He spoke proudly and defiantly, without need for the magic that usually shielded him from the looks and words of others.

"Hegni and Hedin...the Gulliver Brothers..."

Ottar could scarcely believe his eyes. All of Freya Familia was out in full force.

"You better believe that prum's got some kinda plan up his ass," said Allen. "Til he finally decides to share it with us, we fight."

"!!"

"Whoever survives gets to take down Zeus and Hera's lapdogs."

By the time Ottar realized *whom* Allen was suggesting they fight, the catman confirmed it with his words.

"This is our Folkvangr now," he said. "This street is where we'll choose our strongest Einherjar—the one who gets to kick those two freaks into the next millennium."

Folkvangr. That was the name of Freya Familia's home. A place where the

city's strongest warriors trained daily to surpass their limits in mortal combat. Here they would hold one final contest, to determine who among them was powerful enough to be the last man standing.

Dusk was approaching. Ashen clouds held back the reddening sky. At long last, Ottar spoke.

"Allen. Did you come here...for me?"

"What a stupid thing to ask. There's only one person I do anything for, and it sure as hell ain't you."

Allen's decision was not his own. He was merely a vessel through which a higher power made her decree.

"Find this age's champion for me."

Ottar's eyes went wide.

"It's long past time I had my revenge on Zeus and Hera."

He curled his boulder-like fists tightly.

"Rrgh!!"

His mistress's divine will flowed into him, becoming his own determination. His goddess was ever noble in defeat, and so Ottar needed to be the same.

"If you're gonna keep on sullyin' our Lady's good name," said Allen, "then you can just die. I'll take out that armor-wearing asshole instead."

Without a trace of warmth or mercy in his voice, Allen lowered the tip of his spear to Ottar's throat.

"...No," came the boaz's cracked voice. Ottar looked up, a blazing fire behind his eyes, and grabbed the spearhead in one hand. "The one who will settle the score with Zeus is me. You don't know how many times I've cried and licked my wounds, waiting for the day to repay the favor!"

Then Ottar rose to his feet. He gripped the spearhead even tighter, letting the blood drip between his fingers. Before his gathered comrades, he raised his voice, letting everyone hear the Warlord's determination.

"I will defeat Zald! I, and no one else!!"

The corners of Allen's lips twisted. It almost looked like he was smiling. He pulled his weapon free of the giant's firm grip and twirled it, before leveling it once more at the blood-soaked boaz.

"Raise your voices!" yelled Allen. "It's time to fight!"

Ottar wrapped his stout fingers around the grip of his greatsword, and in chorus with the other Einherjar, he roared.

"ROOOOOAAAAAAAAAAGHHH!!"

Sword and spear clashed in endless concert, accompanied by the crackle of magic spells both black and white. This prelude was the cry of a Folkvangr reborn. The skies themselves shook with trepidation as a ferocious, neverending battle unfolded in the streets below. These warriors fought tirelessly, thirsting for strength. They fought, because there was no other option available to them.



The sky unleashed a bestial howl, like a cornered wolf. Then the rain began. Great lashings of it, like lances falling from heaven, as the clouds above went from gray to black.

"Pant... Pant... Pant...!"

Lyu ran down empty roads, her face wet with tears and rain.

"Shakti!" she cried. "Why?! Why would you forsake Ardee like that?!"

"Do not show mercy to your foes! None of you must make the same idiotic mistake my sister did!"

"That is my justice."

Though Lyu had run from her, Shakti's words were not so easily escaped. They echoed in her mind, persistent, despite Lyu's furious attempts to deny them.

"That can't be true! Then what was it all for? Her life? Her death? Her justice?! What was any of it for?!"

She screamed into the heavy rain. Anything to drown out the thoughts piecing themselves together in her mind. Anything to stave off that dreadful realization. The realization that her friend's principles hadn't saved her and that she had died in vain.

She sprinted through the streets, a wind without direction. She ran and ran and ran.

At last, she arrived before a building cloaked in gloom. It was rectangular, or at least, it had been once, but like every other structure in the city, it was so full of holes, it was a wonder the place was still standing. It looked like a bomb had gone off, demolishing the walls, and every single window shutter had been blown clean off. Inside, several pillars were missing, and the entire eastern wing of the building slanted ominously, ready to come down at any moment.

Lyu went inside, forcing the bent metal door.

"...Why did I come here?"

Beyond it, dust and rubble covered the floor. The ceiling was gone, offering a view of the murky sky and letting in the incessant rain that fell instead of starlight.

This was district six, in southwest Orario. A place once believed to be an Evils stronghold...and the place Lyu's friend had lost her life.

"Nobody's here... Everything's been destroyed..."

Lyu shambled into the center of the room, even as the rain fell and soaked her golden hair. She almost couldn't recognize the place anymore.

"There's nothing left... Not even her body... And yet..."

Even the wall stained with her blood was gone.

"Ardee..."

Lyu stood still and gazed up into a starless sky, like a condemned prisoner awaiting execution. She stood as ice-cold water beat her mercilessly, hoping against hope it would wash her sins away...but it didn't. The ink-black night closed in around her, ready to carry her off for good, and then...

She heard a noise.

At the opposite end of the room, a metal door squeaked. Lyu quickly replaced her mask as she realized somebody else was entering the building.

"Who's there?!" she yelled, but all she heard were tiny footsteps. A prum? Lyu twitched her long ears and focused her azure eyes on the darkness. Eventually, a figure stepped into view. A small, human girl.

"What are you doing here?" she asked Lyu in a flat voice. "Who are you? Are you alone?"

Lyu was relieved to see it wasn't one of the cultists, but the figure's true identity surprised her even more. She couldn't quite make out her face in the shadow, but her long, radiant hair, like spun gold, left no question as to who she was.

A child, dressed in armor... And that hair. Could it be?

The Sword Princess. Or as she was once known, the Doll Princess. A finely honed killing machine raised to cut down monsters. Despite her young age, she was already Level 3, displaying an astonishing rate of growth that outstripped even Lyu's swift progress. Some called her the miracle child of *Loki Familia*.

Her name was Aiz Wallenstein, and her terrifying strength struck fear into friend and foe alike.

"Are you...with the Evils?" Aiz asked, tilting her head.

"Wha—?!" Her impertinent accusation sent the blood rushing to Lyu's head, expelling any worries she might have had about the girl's safety. "How could I be? How could you even think such a thing?!"

"But you're wearing a mask," the Sword Princess pointed out.

"So what?! Is everyone who wears a mask a member of the Evils now?!"

"Okay, well, what are you doing here, then?"

"W-well..."

The girl's innocent question caused Lyu to trip over her words. She didn't quite know what to say. She'd been running around aimlessly and just kind of...

ended up here, but she couldn't exactly use that as her excuse. As she was struggling to figure out how to answer the completely unintimidating child half her size, Aiz said something else.

"There's no light in your eyes, either."

"!!"

This time, Lyu was left truly speechless. Aiz stared at her with the glassy eyes of a doll, as if she were looking into a mirror.

"They're a bit like mine from before," she said. "But also, not. Scary eyes."

Lyu's sky-blue eyes had lost their luster. They were the eyes of one who knew despair. Aiz saw a person on the brink. An unpredictable element that could go one way or the other.

And then Aiz unwittingly spoke the word with the potential to detonate that volatile mixture of emotion.

"Finn told me about the bombs. Do you have one, too?"

Of all the things she could say, it had to be that. The one word that Lyu in her present state couldn't bear to hear. The word that had taken her precious friend away from her.

"Child, I'm warning you," muttered Lyu, a cold anger seeping through her lips. "Never say that word to me again."

An incandescent fury took hold in her mind, forcing her to relive the scarlet flames and blood of Ardee's death.

"If you won't listen," she went on, seething with rage, "I don't know what I'll do."

The mere thought that she of all people could be wearing one of those despicable devices—one of the inhumane bombs that stole her friend's life—was enough to send the high-minded elf into an outrage. Her entire body shook with the throbbing beat of fury.

It was obvious now, if it wasn't already, that Lyu was a broken being.

"Then you are dangerous."

Aiz remained unperturbed. Infuriatingly so. She reached over her shoulder without letting her doll-like expression waver and drew her sword.

"I have to fight you."

Lyu didn't understand the girl's reasoning—what chain of logic had led her to conclude that battle was the only reasonable option?—but she couldn't bring herself to care any longer. So Lyu drew her wooden sword, gripped it tightly in both hands, and spoke in a dark, stern voice.

"I apologize in advance. This is nothing but the futile tantrum of a lost and foolish elf."

"I don't understand," said Aiz as she also assumed a stance. "Which means...I have to beat you."

"Easier said than done!"

The two immediately readied themselves for battle. Sky-blue and golden eyes locked for only a brief instant, before each combatant launched herself at the other.

""Haargh!!""

Weapons shrieked amid the falling rain. The sword and the gale wind fought. They fought, because there was no other option available to them.



The first clash of swords was all it took for Aiz and Lyu to accurately gauge each other's strength.

Such power!!

In the blink of an eye, the pair exchanged an uncountable flurry of high-speed slices, impossible for mortal eyes to follow, and enough to drown out all other sound. Even in the thick of it, the two girls caught each other's gazes, and it slowly began to dawn on them that they were an even match.



She's so small, Lyu thought, but her strikes are so clean, and she doesn't hesitate for an instant! How many monsters must she have slain to get to this point?

Aiz fought like a mad beast. Lyu could barely keep her eyes trained on her. She was fast. Incredibly fast, and she poured everything she had into manipulating her sword, which seemed much too large for a child her size. When she swung, it was with all the muscles in her upper body. When she spun, it was with all the speed and force of a whirlwind. It seemed at first that Aiz's weapon was the one in control of her, but the more they fought, the more Lyu realized the girl was like bottled lightning—a miraculous condensation of tempestuous violence. If Lyu faltered for an instant, she would be torn to shreds by the relentless onslaught of blows and scattered to the four winds. Meanwhile, Aiz kept coming, never letting up as she shifted, fluid and unrestrained, from one form to the next.

She's so...fast? Aiz thought. No, not as fast as Finn. But my attacks still can't get through.

Lyu fought like a territorial animal. Aiz couldn't afford to take her eyes off her. She was skilled. Incredibly skilled, and she parried every last blow with minimal effort. When she moved, it was with forms she'd studied for countless nights and polished on countless battlefields. It seemed at first that Lyu was fighting a losing battle, but the more they fought, the more Aiz realized that fighting her was like fighting air itself—each time Aiz thought she managed to break her posture, the elf's flowing techniques allowed her to recover without conceding a single opening. If Aiz let up for an instant, their roles would be reversed, and she would find herself on the back foot instead. Meanwhile, Lyu never faltered, constantly modifying the flow of battle with the lightest wave of her wooden sword, as if by magic.

Her style was influenced not only by the elven village where Lyu was born and raised, but also by the techniques from the Far East, the wisdom of the canny prum, and a bold, sunny resolve. All who laid eyes on her would recognize the seeds of justice planted within it, which Astrea continued to water even today.

Discarding their shock and unnerving revelations, both Aiz and Lyu threw themselves into the fight with renewed fervor. Two heads of golden hair weaved and fluttered, following the paths of their strikes. Their disparity in size offered neither side an advantage. While Lyu attempted to use her height and longer limbs to extend the range of her blows, Aiz was able to turn her short stature to her benefit, often dropping low to the ground to slip past the elf's sweeping sword and seize an opening. But no matter how forceful and numerous her strikes, Lyu parried each one with precision and power.

In terms of technique, Lyu held the upper hand. But in terms of adaptability, it was the animalistic instincts of Aiz Wallenstein that won the day. Each combatant had a wealth of her own experience to draw upon, and so the battle waged on with no end in sight.

"I see why they call you the Sword Princess," said Lyu as she directed her wooden sword toward Aiz's head. "You certainly live up to your name!"

Her age belied an almost impossible level of mastery. She wasn't simply a prodigy. It was almost as though the gods themselves had created her for a single purpose—slaying monsters.

"Mask... Wooden sword... Cloak... Fast..."

Aiz muttered to herself as she brought her silver blade up to parry, but she failed to realize her words were tinged with wonder. She could scarcely believe the girl's strength.

"I can't see your face, but your eyes are green...or maybe blue."

It was difficult to pierce the persistent gloom that blanketed the area. Plus, her opponent was wearing a mask. But she grew more and more unruly as the battle raged on, and the rain striking her face made Aiz think of the Wild Hunt, a spirit said to appear during the blackest of storms.

"Who are you?" she asked, but nobody answered. The only conversation here took place through their blades.

The two girls were alike in more ways than they realized. Long golden hair, a combative spirit, and an affinity with the wind. They both turned themselves into storms, dancing to a tumultuous melody.

Then, both of them leaped high into the air. They crossed at high speed, each unleashing her most powerful blow yet with a thunderous crash.

Lyu landed, her cloak tattered and torn, and she turned around, panting heavily through her mask.

"I can't get through!" she lamented. "Is this the power of Loki Familia?"

She saw Aiz land and similarly turn a short distance away. Her entire body rose and fell with each breath, but the drawn-out battle had not affected her resolution in the slightest.

"Pant... Pant... I'm...not done," the little girl said. "I can get...even stronger."

"She's insane!" Lyu said to herself. "Is that why people call her the War Princess?"

She gripped her sword firmly, and so did Aiz. Neither of them felt the falling rain anymore. Lyu steeled her resolve once more.

"So that's how it's going to be?!" she cried. "Very well, then let's—!!"

"Aiz! Where did you go?! Don't run off by yourself!!"

At that very moment, a bellowing voice rang out—like that of a mother who had caught her child playing outside after dark.

"Uh-oh."

A look of worry crossed Aiz's face, just as a furious high elf stepped into the ruined building.

"How many times have do I have to remind you to stick close?!" she shouted. "Are you refusing to listen, or are you just plain stupid?"

"Ow!"

The woman's fist came down hard on Aiz's blond crown, and the little girl groaned in pain. She quickly tossed aside her sword and began rubbing her head, teary-eyed. The image that had terrified Lyu just seconds ago was now nowhere to be seen.

"L-Lady Riveria?!"

Lyu had no time to laugh at the comical display before her. She was horrified

by just who had stepped onto the scene.

I can't let a high elf know I just lost my temper and attacked a child!!

As the name implied, high elves were the most mighty and noble of all the elves. Their people were expected to revere them like gods. Perhaps even more than gods. Simply seeing Riveria brought Lyu to her senses enough to realize what she'd been doing and how bad it looked.

A few moments went by as she wondered how best to rectify the situation, and then...

"I-I'm really sorry but I have to go!"

She bolted. Pulling her mask back over her face, she ran outside into the streets as fast as her legs could carry her.

Riveria raised a single eyebrow at the sight of the fleeing figure.

"Hm? Who was that? It looked like an elf," she said to herself. "Aiz, who were you fighting?"

"Oww..... The Evils?"

"Why is that a question? What was the fight about?"

Aiz lifted her head. "She had scary eyes," she said. "It felt like...I had to fight her."

She turned to look in the direction the elf girl had fled.

"But after a while...she didn't feel so scary anymore."

She recalled the girl's eyes as they were at the height of their duel. They were bright, just like her own. Like nothing outside of the battle mattered.

"I think...I helped her, just a little," she said, and somehow, the tiny girl looked just a little more grown-up as she said so.

However, Riveria was not impressed. "Well, if she's our enemy, then you shouldn't really be helping her, should you?"

"...True!" said Aiz, thumping her fist in her palm.

Riveria sighed and clutched her head like the girl's stupidity was giving her a

migraine. "Where did I go wrong...?" she groaned.



AFTGRGA RECORD The Fall of Justice

Story by Lujino Omori - Illustration by Kakage Character Design by Snouhito Yasuda





CHAPTER 3

A Gray Wildflower

The long night gave way to the third of the Seven Days of Death, yet the clouds above remained as gray as ever. Only the sky's tears had finally abated.

Lyra dropped her gaze to the ruined streets and sighed.

"Where the hell'd Leon go? We'll have searched the whole damn city at this rate..."

Beside her walked a woman with long black hair as smooth as silk—Kaguya. Without breaking stride, she scanned the ruined streets.

"We've been at this all night," she agreed. "We know she talked to Shakti, but where could she have gone after that?"

Lyu had made her dramatic exit from the Starlight Garden almost a full day ago. The girls were asking around about her, taking the opportunity to gather information while out on patrol, and their search had led them here, to district eight in Orario's northern quarter. *Freya Familia* had been in charge of its defense on the night of the Great Conflict, and it was the most heavily damaged portion of the city after the southwest district, where Zald and Alfia had appeared. Fire and magic alike had leveled entire city blocks, leaving nothing standing.

Naturally, the streets were empty, and there was nothing left of the city the girls had sworn to protect, just an eerie silence that pervaded everything. Kaguya and Lyra, however, didn't let that silence bother them. The two were similar in many ways—one of them being their rational and mature response to calamity. Lyra was the one who usually maintained the party morale with her gallows humor, and against Kaguya, she didn't see a need to hold back. Sometimes, to understand people, you had to make them talk, even if they didn't want to. Kaguya knew that as well, and that was why the two made such a good match and why they were well suited to supporting Alize as deputy captain and prum strategist.

They were both pragmatic souls. They'd both seen the worst life had to offer and come through it bent but unbroken. Now, it was Lyu's turn.

"Hey," said Lyra.

"What is it?" said Kaguya.

"First time she's ever done this, ain't it? How long do you think 'til Lyu comes back?"

"She might never come back," offered Kaguya. "She's a delicate girl, even for an elf. And with things like they are, I wouldn't be too surprised if she went and got herself killed."

"Man, that's cold, even for you," smirked Lyra, pretending to be surprised. "You're allowed to be a *little* optimistic, you know. Come to think of it, I've always wanted to ask. What did they do to you in the east that turned you into such a stone-cold bitch?"

"Lyra, in the spirit of our companionship, I'm going to be frank. I've always hated your company. You just have to poke your ratty nose into every last thing."

Unlike her pink-haired partner, everything Kaguya had said was sincere. Only their goddess, Astrea, knew of her painful past, and the girl intended to keep it that way. Besides that, she found the prum's attitude nauseatingly similar to her own. Unsurprisingly, however, her harsh rebuke left no mark on Lyra's pride, and the girl continued grinning, undaunted.

"Damn, so you love Leon so much, you're willin' to put up with me to search for her," she said. "That's touchin'. It really is."

Kaguya scowled at Lyra's quick-witted response. There wasn't much she could say to that, and she felt foolish for entertaining the prum's comments in the first place.

"This is precisely the sort of thing I mean," she muttered, causing Lyra's smirk to widen. The prum girl decided it was prudent to push her compatriot no further and thoughtfully closed her eyes.

The two were both pragmatic souls. That was why Astrea had saved them

both, why Alize confused and fascinated them both, and why both of them saw fit to look out for Lyu, their newest arrival.

Kaguya wore a stiff expression of frustration, while Lyra crossed her arms contentedly behind her head. Considering the former towered over the latter in terms of size, they made for a very odd couple indeed, but there was no mistaking the connection they shared.

Then Lyra stopped.

"Ah, snap. I remember that place," she said, spying an evacuee camp filled with demi-humans. "Those are the guys that threw all them stones at us."

Some of the faces in the crowd were ones Lyra's keen mind remembered from the previous day. They didn't seem to have noticed the girls yet, but once they did, a response was all but certain.

"Let us not overstay our welcome, then," said Kaguya. "We'll find out if Lyu came this way and then make a swift...hm?"

Just as she was scanning the population, thinking there was no chance in hell Lyu would have come anywhere near this traumatic place, she noticed a sight that made her pause.

Right in the middle of the camp was a lone girl, serving up steaming bowls of soup to a crowd of people.

"Here you go! A nice, hot meal to warm your belly!" she said.

"Give me some, too!!"

"Hey, don't push!"

Grown men and women who had lost their homes fought to be the first to be fed, but despite their unruliness, the girl smiled sweetly.

"Don't worry," she said in a strangely sonorous voice. "There's plenty to go around!"

Her eyes and tied-back hair were both light gray, and she wore a dress and purple cape, like many of the city girls. Anyone who came to her received the same welcoming smile along with their meal.

"She's handing out food..." said Kaguya in disbelief.

"And at a time when everyone's busy lookin' out for themselves," said Lyra. "I don't see the Guild around, either. She doin' all this by her lonesome?"

After running all over the city trying to save people's lives, the two *Astrea Familia* girls were keenly aware of what a pitiful state it was in. Any free adventurers were busy securing the borders or placed on medical duty, and no one was left to hand out food. It was inspiring, then, that there was someone out there willing to devote their own time and resources to making sure everybody was fed. Especially just a regular, run-of-the-mill city girl with no connection to the guild or any familia.

An old man approached the girl and expressed his thanks.

"You don't know how grateful we are... To give out your own food when there's so little to go around."

"We've all got to share the load at times like this," the girl replied. "Besides, don't worry; this all comes courtesy of a tavern called the Benevolent Mistress."

She struck a proud pose with one hand to her chest. Off to the side, not speaking, was an unsociable-looking catgirl who seemed to be the girl's assistant, dressed in a green waitress uniform with a cloak over the top. She stirred the pot grudgingly.

"It seems really scary at first," the first girl went on, "but it's actually the safest place in Orario. If you need help, you should stop by the shop on West Main Street!"

Her bright words were the gods' honest truth, but the people seemed ill inclined to believe her.

"I'm happy you would tell that lie to make us feel better..." said an animal woman.

"...But we all know there ain't nowhere safe in Orario these days," agreed a prum man, the pessimism creeping into his voice.

The people were so mired in their despair, even a goddess would have a hard time teaching them hope.

"Oh...it wasn't meant to be a lie," said the girl to herself, pressing a finger to her cheek, "but as long as everyone gets fed, that's the most important thing."

She smiled. No matter how glum the people around her were, she refused to let it affect her smile.

"And then once your stomachs are warm, it'll spread to your hearts and faces, too! Is there anyone else who hasn't—!"

"Stop! Stop this madness! Why bother handing out soup when we're all gonna die?!"



A ruddy-faced young man came storming out of the camp, screaming and yelling. The smell of alcohol lingered on his breath.

"If we don't starve, the Evils'll get us instead! What's the point?!"

"That's not true," said the girl. "The city's adventurers are working very hard to make sure you—"

"Adventurers? I wouldn't trust 'em to wipe my ass! The Evils made 'em look like a buncha crybabies! Loki, Freya, all of 'em got their asses kicked! What bleedin' good are they gonna do us, eh?!"

The man's ceaseless attack made the fearful townsfolk exchange worried looks. His words were an unwelcome reminder of what all of them—what all of Orario—was at this very moment trying their damnedest not to have to think about. All that remained in the space between his words was a chill air that threatened to snatch away all the warmth their soup had brought them.

"I'm gonna die, we're all gonna die! The adventurers ain't gonna save us! They sure as hell didn't save my little sister...!"

The despair refused to leave his voice as it became more and more fragile. In the end, it felt like he was about to cry.

"...I think I preferred it when they were throwin' rocks at us," said Lyra, watching the commotion from a distance.

The townspeople's weeping voices were more painful than any stones. Kaguya simply stood beside her, saying nothing.

"It's over... It's all over," groaned the man. "Adventurers, this city, everything!"

All around him, people hung their heads. Even the catgirl stirring the pot stopped to look over. The gray-haired girl paused and placed her finger to her cheek once more, trying to come up with something.

"Hmm..."

Then, like a child, her eyes lit up, and she clapped her hands together.

"In that case, should we just all kill ourselves?"

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"What?"
The young man froze.
""What?""
Lyra and Kaguya were aghast.
"""What?"""
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The people couldn't believe their ears.

"Well, if life's so tough and painful and sad all the time, then why not kill yourself? Then you won't have to feel sad. You won't have to feel anything at all!"

The girl continued speaking merrily, heedless of the horrified stares she was receiving. She looked innocent and pure, like a holy priestess conveying the word of her god.

"Perhaps you'll even see your sister again in heaven," she went on. "And if what the gods say is true, you'll be reincarnated someday and get to live again!"

She clenched both her fists and leaned forward in excitement. The young man recoiled from her.

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"Wha... I... But..."
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"Excuse me!" she called out over the crowd. "Is there anyone else who wants to die along with this gentleman here? It'll bring an end to all your hardship and suffering!"

Nobody was quite sure how to react. It was as if a smiling tavern waitress had offered them a flagon of arsenic to wash down their ale.

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Lyra and Kaguya were both slack-jawed. It took a lot to render them *both* speechless, but the girl's bizarre comeback had somehow done it.

""She's a psychopath..."" they both muttered.

Meanwhile, the young man finally opened his mouth and managed to string together a coherent response.

"I...I didn't really mean..."

"Oh, I know," replied the girl, playfully sticking out her tongue. "I was just teasing. But you know who else doesn't want you to die? The adventurers!"

"[]"

The girl's statement shook the man to his core.

"They're out there as we speak, fighting for you, you know? They're trying to make sure nobody else has to get hurt. Of course, they can't always save everyone, but that's not their fault. And nobody blames them more than they blame themselves."

Nobody could speak out against the girl's flowing words. It was the truth that none of them wanted to hear.

"It's not nice being misunderstood, is it? I hope you'll all understand that these brave men and women are doing everything they can for you."

None of them could bring themselves to look at her bright, sunny smile. They stood staring at their feet, their voices caught in their throats. Lyra saw the parents of poor little Leah standing among them.

The young man clenched his fists and choked out one final protest through his streaming tears.

"But...you shouldn't tell us you're gonna protect us if you can't do it! Like *Astrea Familia*! They're nothin' but lyin' hypocrites, makin' promises they can't keep just to make themselves look good! They deserved what we did to 'em!"

He had to say something—anything—to confront the guilt in his mind and justify the stones he'd thrown, but the girl answered him with a calm smile.

"So what?" she asked.

"What?"

"We need people who look out for each other, whatever the reason. Especially at a time like this. It doesn't matter if their goodness is just for show or not."

The young man was speechless. The townspeople stared in shock. Lyra and Kaguya looked on in wonder. What the girl was saying was that there was value in something less than perfect justice. Placing a hand to her breast, she glanced off into the distance with a look of respect and awe.

"In days like these, anyone who makes an effort has the right to be called a hero. They're all fighting out there, so we need to fight, too, against the cruelty and depression that's trying to take over our hearts."

""

"Even if we can't all be heroes, the least we can do is stand by them, and not against them."

Those words struck a bitter blow to the hearts of the drunken young man and all the people in the crowd. They suddenly felt awful for having lashed out against the people fighting on their behalf. Her truths were like knives in their chest, but their verity was unquestionable. Anyone could see that.

"Rgh..."

After a while, the young man hung his head. He could have screamed out, said he and his fellows were powerless and weak and couldn't be expected to do such a thing, but it seemed he finally realized that he possessed neither the right nor the cause to throw stones at the people standing up for him.

One woman in the crowd found that truth particularly difficult to accept.

"I just... I just wanted..."

It was Leah's mother. All she wanted to do was shout—that she had it the worst, that no one else could possibly understand her pain—but she couldn't, because deep down, she was a good person, and she realized how foolish it would be. No matter how much the resentment and the grief warped her, she was still the same person who had thanked the adventurers alongside her beloved daughter.

"Oh, Leah! Leah!!"

It was easy for people to tell themselves they deserved safety—that they were entitled to protection—but it wasn't right. And she knew that if she put

herself in the adventurers' shoes, she wouldn't want to fight for people like that, either. To be so overcome by bitterness that she lost sight of that and attacked the very people who swore to protect her—it was cowardly, base, and evil. Whatever form justice took, this was certainly not it.

The townsfolk were all silent as they thought about what they'd done.

"Everybody's just lost," said the catgirl helper, who had been silent up until this point. She stared at the townsfolk with vacant eyes, seeing in them a reflection of her former self, trapped with no way out.

"…"

Kaguya watched on from a distance, silent, while Lyra scratched her nose, impressed with the young city girl's words and actions.

"Hey, you hear that? We're heroes, apparently."

"Stop that," replied Kaguya. "Just the thought of it makes my skin crawl. I can't think of a word that suits me less."

But Kaguya didn't elaborate on this, because at that very moment, an explosion rocked the camp.

The two girls looked over, just as a scream filled the air.

"It's the Evils!!"

People fled in all directions at the sight of the milk-white robes, now deeply associated with death and destruction. One cultist stood and laughed as smoke rose off his magic sword.

"Looks like this place is totally unguarded, even in the middle of town," he said. "Hah-hah, stupid sheep!"

As evidenced by their treatment of *Astrea Familia*, this camp was a gathering of people who had lost faith in the adventurers' protection. They had ignored orders coming in from Central Park and settled in the northern part of town, unwittingly making themselves an easy target for the Evils.

"Yes, yes, flee in terror! Let the adventurers hear your dying screams, and despair!!"

The apostles of evil licked their lips and descended on the crowd. Only a few didn't immediately turn and run like everybody else.

"Syr!" cried the catgirl standing by the soup stall. A flickering flame suddenly returned to her eyes, as if a completely different person had taken over her body. She snatched up her weapon, which was wrapped in a white cloth and lying nearby, and stood in defense of the gray-haired girl, but the latter refused her protection.

"Anya!" she cried. "Go and help everyone!"

The catgirl scowled in response to this request, but ultimately did as she was asked. Just as an Evils blade was about to reach its mark, she stepped in with feline grace, pulling off the cloth and unveiling her weapon—a gleaming golden spear.

"Waargh!" cried the enemy cultist as the sweeping spear knocked him off his feet.

"O-over there!"

"An adventurer?!"

One corner of the camp descended into melee, sending into the air the sounds of clashing metal. Meanwhile, the city girl stood firm, crying out advice to the fleeing citizens.

"This way, everybody! Head south! Hurry!!"

A cruel Evils cultist kicked over the cauldron of soup, causing the girl to clench her fist in rage. But this didn't stop her from calling out over the chaos. Her clear, loud voice carried far, guiding the people away from the Evils' clutches.

"You should be worrying about yourself, girl, not other people!!"

"Ahh!!"

The man who was the instigator of this attack came up behind her and caught her by surprise. Her escort was engaged with the enemy elsewhere and could not reach her in time. The girl turned, his sword reflected in her pupils, when...

"Not so fast!"

"Wurgh!"

A cross-shaped slash, one part katana and one part boomerang, cut the villain down where he stood.

"You got grit, girl," said Lyra with a roguish smile. "But it ain't gonna do you any good if it gets you killed."

"Adventurers...?" asked the girl in wonder.

"Oh, hardly," said Kaguya with a smile. "We're just regular old hypocrites, I'm afraid."

With that, the two leaped into action. They moved quickly, even through the chaos. Through their day job, the girls were well accustomed to working with crowds, and they swiftly picked out the Evils from the innocent townsfolk.

Kaguya let out an incredibly unladylike war cry, stunning friend and foe alike, and just as attention gathered on her, Lyra's boomerangs flew out from the shadows, disabling the hapless cultists before they even saw what was coming.

Angry and fearful screams filled the streets. Lyra's spinning blades feasted on the enemy cultists, splattering their blood onto the cobbles. They looked around, unsettled, but couldn't spot the prum girl responsible for the onslaught, and while they were busy looking for her, the far-eastern girl made her move.

Kaguya was far more adept at martial arts than any of her peers in *Astrea Familia*. Her attacks were not just graceful—they were divine. While the Evils scrambled around trying to find the lesser of the two threats, Kaguya's blade cut them all down one by one.

Their leader—the one who attacked Syr—had already fallen, so there was no one left to call for a retreat. By now, the raiding party was reduced to a mob of wild animals. Meanwhile, the two girls had already picked out their enemies from the crowd and could be as rough as they liked without worrying about hurting bystanders.

Kaguya made bold, sweeping movements without minding her back, but Lyra was there to keep an eye on her. Similarly, the prum's attacks lacked power, but Kaguya's blade more than made up for it. Even though it wasn't planned, their

respective styles made for a fearsome combination.

"A-Astrea Familia?! Waagh!"

Kaguya cut down the last cultist, completely eradicating the enemy in under two minutes. The catgirl adventurer could only look on in complete and utter shock.

"That's the last of them," said Kaguya, resheathing her sword. "Ganesha Familia should be here soon. We'll let them handle the arrests."

"Yeah," said Lyra. "Looks like Lyu's not here, either. Let's go—"

But just as she was about to turn around, the young man from before and Leah's mother both staggered out of the camp toward them.

"Y-you guys protected us..."

"Even after the way we treated you..."

They both wore stunned looks of surprise, bewilderment, guilt, and pain. They each tried to say something more but couldn't find the words. Lyra stared at them for a while before turning away.

"Let's go, Kaguya."

"Ah, wait..."

The far-eastern girl silently followed her associate, leaving the two townspeople without a single word. With utterly distraught looks, they watched the girls leave.

"Are you sure you didn't want to give them a piece of your mind?" Kaguya asked after the camp was no longer in sight. "You haven't forgotten what they did to us, have you?"

Lyra looked around to make sure no one was watching, then burst into a devilish grin.

"There wasn't nothin' I could say that hurt them more than sayin' nothin'," she answered. "Did you see the guilty looks on their faces? Oh, man, you can't pay for satisfaction like that."

"Oh dear," said Kaguya, lifting her kimono's sleeve over her mouth. "You

really are the most ill-natured prum I've ever had the displeasure of knowing."

However, the two were truly alike, since behind her sleeve, the far-eastern girl wore a smile just like her compatriot's.

"Besides," said Lyra, stopping in her tracks and placing a hand on her hip. "Ain't it way more heroic that way?"

This time, the smile on her face was an altogether more wholesome one.

"True. Not that it suits you," said Kaguya.

The two shared a grin, then set off once more in search of their wayward junior. Their faces were just a little brighter than they had been when they arrived.

Back at the camp, the girl with light gray hair and eyes stood and gazed in the direction the two girls had left.

"...Stay strong, familia of justice," she said with a smile.



AHOGRGA RECORD The Fall of Justice

Story by Lujino Omori - Illustration by Kakage Character Design by Snouhito Yasuda

CHAPTER 4

Those Who Struggle

It happened on a day like any other.

"Asfi, take over as captain after I die, would ya?"

"Huh?"

Asfi had been in her studio, working hard all morning to refine her latest creation in the fight against the Evils, when Lydis stepped in and whisked her away, saying, "Let's go have lunch together!"

Asfi's emphatic protests fell on deaf ears, and so she sighed as she was dragged away to a nearby tavern. The sign out front read, THE BENEVOLENT MISTRESS. It had been in business for two years and was surprisingly profitable, considering the times. According to Lydis, "If you want good food and a relaxing atmosphere, come here! It's like paradise! It's like Valhalla! Only pity is they charge adventurers extra!"

It was after sitting down at the counter and being wowed by a superb vegetable quiche that Asfi heard those unsettling words.

"What are you talking about, Captain?"

"Just something to keep in mind. Man, the food here is great!"

Lydis bit into a piping hot skewer of slow-cooked meat, ignoring Asfi's puzzled look. Lydis was a human, and even Asfi could recognize the woman's stunning beauty. Her long, ash-blond hair ran in a single plaited bunch down her right shoulder, and she wore a white collared blouse and a necktie that was curiously handsome.

She was a striking, unapproachable beauty until the moment she opened her mouth, at which point she sounded like a complete and utter imbecile.

"I know everyone's saying this," Lydis went on, speaking as she stuffed her cheeks yet miraculously without a single drop of fat staining her snow-white blouse, "but in times like these, you never know what'll happen. Just letting you

know my wishes, you know, just in case. I'll tell Hermes as well."

"H-hold on a second! Y-you can't just start talking about your death like that!"

"It's not very a happy conversation, I know. But I don't want it to be sad, either. I just want things to go on as normal even when I'm gone, you know? That's the best thing for the familia and for our god as well."

Ignoring Asfi's horrified look, Lydis reached out for another serving of food. The dwarven proprietress standing behind the bar said nothing.

"We're followers of Hermes," Lydis said. "That means we can't let any holes sink our ship. We have to patch them up and keep on drifting on the winds of discovery. You understand what I mean, right?"

"Not even a little bit," replied Asfi. "Besides, being chosen as *your* successor is one accolade I could do without."

"Aha-ha! That's because you're always so serious, Asfi. I bet Hermes is going to have a grand old time with you. You'll be dead on your feet trying to keep up with him!"

"Hey!"

"But I believe in you, Asfi. Nobody else cares more than you."

Asfi was momentarily surprised by Lydis's sudden transformation from a chuckling child into a sage and mature young woman. However, Lydis soon broke that illusion with an exclamation of "Wow, this meat pie is amazing!" as she resumed unceremoniously stuffing her cheeks.

"You'll be fine, Asfi," she said between mouthfuls. "Whether that day comes or not. You're our almighty hero—our Perseus."

"And on what basis do you say that, I wonder...?"

"Hey, are you doubting me? I'm Lydis! When have I ever been wrong?!"

"Is that supposed to be Hermes? Cut it out!"

"Ha-ha-ha! Now Hermes sad...!"

No matter how grown-up for her age, Asfi was still a child. She didn't—couldn't—appreciate the intent behind Lydis's words. At the time, she

considered it just another one of the captain's tasteless jokes. But in this case, it was the playful Lydis whose mind was far more grounded in reality.

And that was why she died.

On the night of the Great Conflict, Lydis gave her life so that a band of upperclass adventurers could escape with theirs. With a calm and clear mind, she put the needs of the city above her own, and the tasteless joke became the cruel truth.

She always knew it was a possibility, even as she said it with a laugh. In the Age of Darkness, anyone could become a martyr, and anyone could find it was their turn to step up.

For Asfi, that time had come.



Footsteps came running toward her, and the *Hermes Familia* member shouted a report.

"Skirmishes in districts five, six, and eight! We're seeing more movement than ever before! What do we do, Asfi?"

She was in the southern part of town, at about the same time Kaguya and Lyra were investigating the evacuee camp in the north. She was scared. How many times had she felt this way, just today? With no way in or out of the city, supplies were scarce. There wasn't nearly enough to go around. The constant attacks by Evils groups only added to the stress, and many adventurers like her were clinging to their last strands of sanity.

It was all going according to Valletta's scheme. Looking after the people was proving to be a herculean task, and the strain was starting to take its toll.

However, amid all this, Asfi had a different kind of pressure to contend with as well.

"Th-three sites at the same time? How many of them are there?"

"We've spotted at least eight warbands! They outnumber us two to one! What do we do?"

Asfi was struggling to adapt to a new truth. She was the one giving the orders now.

"Lydis is dead."

"You're the captain now."

How many times had she heard Hermes's humorless words in her head? For better or worse, she hadn't even had time to process the death of her friend and captain. She was simply cast adrift in the sea of her new responsibilities without a tether. Asfi felt that if she lost focus for even a moment, the weight of it all would cause her to pass out.

"W-we don't have enough people... I'll go with the Berbera stationed in district three to provide reinforcements!"

Ignoring the urge to run and hide from her familia's expectations, Asfi began coming up with a plan, but at that point, the heretofore silent Falgar spoke up.

"We can't. If we do that, the east part of town will be completely undefended. The enemy have plenty of forces on standby, just waiting for us to lower our guard."

Asfi was lost for words. She felt deeply embarrassed. Falgar was supposed to be operating as her aide, but it felt more like he was pointing out her mistakes.

"B-but then, what are we supposed to—"

Falgar, however, was completely right. The problem was that a young girl like Asfi couldn't possibly figure out where to go from there. She stood, feeling alone in the overcast streets, when a new voice rang out.

"Leave that to me, lassie. Don't change our positions—that's exactly what our enemy is trying to provoke with these slapdash raids."

"E-Elgarm..."

It was Gareth, greatax slung across his shoulder, with a contingent of adventurers in tow. The blood of their last battle still clung to their weapons as he offered Asfi advice as a veteran.

"In return," he went on, "we'd like Hermes Familia to do what it does best and investigate the locations of our greatest foes: Zald, Alfia, and the dark god Erebus. Leave everything else to us and track them down."

"Understood," said Falgar, nodding in place of Asfi, who still stood rooted to the spot.

Gareth had not made an empty request. Up-to-date intelligence on the enemy leader and those two conquerors was crucial. But a part of him also wished to remove *Hermes Familia* from the battlefield. They had just lost their leader, and Asfi was clearly struggling.

"Do not falter, Perseus," he said, looking her straight in the eye. "That is what our enemy wants most of all. They are keeping us on edge, demanding we fight without rest or knowing when the next attack will come, and instilling us with fear."

"B-but..."

"As long as it causes chaos, our enemies don't care if it's a small battle or a big one. But a captain has to always be aware of what's happening on the entire battlefield."

"Rgh...!"

Gareth's words shook Asfi to her core. After he had left, she hung her head in shame. Then, after a long while, she managed to open her mouth to speak.

"Falgar," she said in a quiet voice, "I can't do this. You've got to take over for me! I can't be the captain we need right now!"

"Asfi..."

She hadn't even raised her head. She simply screamed her desperate plea toward the ground. Falgar found it hard to watch.

"I just keep giving orders that don't make any sense! I can't think straight, and my voice just keeps shaking! It's still shaking now!"

Ever since taking over the captain's duties, Asfi found herself stumbling at every turn. It was only through Falgar's constant advice that she managed to avoid getting everyone killed. Perhaps if Hermes were here to support her, it might not be so bad, but he wasn't. Like many other gods, he was busy elsewhere and lacked the time to fuss over each and every member of his

familia.

"All I'm doing is dragging everybody down! I'll get you all killed! Just like Lydis!"

She buried her sweat-drenched face in her hands. Her captain's death had triggered a visceral change. It drove home that lives hung in the balance every time she gave orders, and people could die, just as easily as Lydis had. Often Asfi had been forced to assume her captain's duties, usually at the whim of her patron god, but never had the lives of her friends depended on their successful completion. In the Age of Darkness, the captain's cup was a poisoned chalice.

There were very few Finns in the world, and Asfi was not one of them. The weight of her new position was unbearable.

Lydis...! What am I meant to do? Why did you pick me as your successor? What does it matter that I care more than anyone else? How is that supposed to help me support the familia now that you're gone?!

Asfi felt her past coming back to haunt her. It was a part of her she had tried to leave behind when she left her hometown—when she abandoned the title of Princess Andromeda. She wanted to cry so badly, but she couldn't. If she did, she would turn back into the scared, sheltered little girl she had worked so hard to grow up from.

But through her tear-streaked eyes, she could almost see the face of her captain again. She wanted nothing more than to run to her side. Asfi was not strong. She was just a fifteen-year-old girl, the same as Lyu, with no set sense of justice, drowning in a responsibility she didn't ask for.

"I can't... I can't..."

She looked like she was about to hyperventilate. Her subordinates all stood around her, looking at one another in discomfort. Falgar, meanwhile, regarded her with a concerned frown.

There was an awkward silence as the remnants of a headless familia wallowed in despair. However, the silence lasted only a moment. Soon, Falgar made up his mind and strode over to Asfi. He took both of her shoulders in his massive grip and forced her to meet his gaze.

"Listen to me, Asfi," he said. "Like Hermes, I thought you were the best one for this job. I still do. Because you care more than anyone else here!"

"What...? What does that mean...?!"

"You worry yourself sick because you know what needs to be done! Your sharp eyes cut through the mist and seize the present moment!"

"||"

That moment is now.

Asfi heard a whisper of someone else's voice. She saw, standing behind Falgar, a woman of stunning beauty.

Lydis...

She was waving, smiling her usual carefree smile. As if saying that her part in this was done. As if saying that Falgar's thoughts mirrored her own.

"Be confident in yourself! Be proud of yourself! Because your ability to analyze a situation is no less than Braver's!"

"||"

Falgar Batros was a powerful war tiger. He had joined *Hermes Familia* around the same time Asfi did, and both of them had seen their fair share of joys and woes. Asfi had made a name for herself as a prodigal item maker, but if there was one thing she lacked, it was physical strength. That was where Falgar came in. With her brain and his brawn, they made for a fearsome combination.

If there was one person besides Hermes and Lydis who knew Asfi well, it was Falgar. If there was anyone to whom Lydis could entrust the execution of her last request, it was him. He had watched Asfi struggle, seen her highest and her lowest points, and his words were much stronger than the voices in Asfi's head telling her she wasn't good enough. She was good enough. She was Perseus, the almighty hero, and she was smart enough to give Finn a run for his money.

"Think back to all those times Hermes strung you along!" he said. "This is nothing compared to that! You could handle this with one arm tied behind your back!"

"Falgar..."

"This job was made for you. It's something I could never do! So Asfi...please!!"

This was Falgar's plea, his request to the girl who possessed what he lacked, and the fulfillment of his promise to Lydis to watch over and support the new captain.

Asfi felt a tremor in her breast. She closed her eyes, as if dropping a curtain on all that had been said and done. In the darkness, she saw the playful smile of a man who had always watched over her, and the woman who ran his familia like a ship in the wind.

There are many things I cannot do, Asfi realized. But there are also things that only I can do. And I...I know what must be done!

The girl reached out into the blustering wind and seized her unwavering determination. The one thing she was afraid of more than anything else was becoming an impotent figurehead and failing to fulfill her captain's dying wish.

She opened her eyes. The curtain rose to reveal a new world. Lydis was gone. There was only Asfi, here to carry on her legacy.

"We'll fulfill the request to locate the leaders of the Evils," she said. "At the same time, try to scavenge supplies from the ruined buildings. Food, equipment, anything you can find."

An awe-inspiring look of determination suddenly appeared on Asfi's face. Falgar breathed a huge sigh of relief.

"...! Asfi!"

"The enemy has vacated the shopping district south of Central Park in order to occupy the walls. We'll need supplies to continue the war. We have to secure whatever's left for later."

Finn would surely come up with a plan to turn the tide of the war. But supplies would be necessary to execute it. Weapons and armor were always indispensable, but the war effort required food and clothing as well. Like Gareth said, Asfi could see the battlefield clearly in her mind, and she was already thinking several moves ahead. She saw what measures needed to be taken to combat the encroaching despair.

If Finn were here, he would surely say, "That's right."

If Lydis were here, she would surely say, "Well done."

"Stick together," said Asfi, in a voice more powerful than before. "Split up into teams of four and comb the district!"

"Understood! I'll go tell the others!"

With obvious relief, Asfi's subordinates ran off to relay her commands. After they were gone, Asfi turned back to Falgar.

"Thank you for your encouragement," she said. "If it'll help us win this war, then I'm more than happy to do enough worrying for all of us!"

"Thank you, Captain! We're counting on you to lead us to victory!"

No one worked themselves to the bone more than Asfi. Even Lydis knew that.

In response to Falgar's smile, Asfi displayed one of her own—one that hadn't been seen in quite some time.

"Still," she said, "I know you said all that only because you don't want to be captain yourself."

"Heh, you got me there."

The two shared a smile, then they quickly donned their serious faces once more.

"I'm going to use my magic items to scout ahead on my own," said Asfi. "You take Thane and lead our people."

"You got it!"

Asfi watched as Falgar departed, then she set off in the other direction.

"I know what needs to be done," she muttered to herself. "And I know what I can do!"



The path was set. All that remained was to walk it.

"Aaagh!!"

"What?! Is there somebody there?!"

"A blast wave just came out of thin air and—gugh!!"

Fels unleashed Magic Eater, devastating the wandering group of Evils cultists. All that remained after the dust settled was an eerie silence. Nothing to show for all the losses.

They dropped the hood of their cloak, the Reverse Veil, rendering them visible once more, though there was little point in doing so now there was nobody left to see them.

"How goes the search, Fels?" came an old man's voice. It was Ouranos, the founding god of Orario, speaking through a magic item known as an oculus.

"Just encountered another group," replied Fels. "They've all been dealt with. Coming up on the entrance to the sewers now."

Ouranos was the patron god of the Guild, and Fels was essentially his right hand. Ever since the Great Conflict began, Fels had been out in the field, assisting the adventurers from the shadows under cover of darkness. Those activities didn't stop once dawn broke, either. They worked day and night, with no need for rest.

Four times now, they had put a stop to brewing insurrection by sending riotous groups of people to sleep with judicious use of magic items. Anyone they came across, they healed, be they adventurers or civilians. With their owl familiar, Gafiel, they scouted the city walls and relayed enemy positions via the Guild to Finn and his associates.

Now, reports had come in of suspicious activity taking place in the waterways beneath the city, so on Ouranos's orders, they were heading to investigate.

"Be ever vigilant, Fels."

"……"

"If our enemy really is located underground as we've surmised, there will be dozens of lookouts."

"……"

[&]quot;Remember that veil only cloaks you from sight and covers your scent. It does

not render you undetect—Fels?"

Fels had been working tirelessly behind the scenes, unknown to all but Ouranos himself. Fels, however, didn't mind that. So long as their efforts could help the city of heroes weather this war, Fels was content. They may have been a fool, lacking flesh and skin, held together only by bones and regret, but this was something they could do. Something only one who felt no hunger, thirst, or weariness could do.

And so, the path was set. It had been decided a long time ago, and it stretched far off into the future as well. Fels had long been prepared to walk it, but at this moment...they were not moving.

"Ouranos," they said. "The bodies never stop."

".....

"I am no stranger to death, but the sheer scale of it..."

Fels had lived for eight hundred years. They had seen much in that time, and any unnecessary sentiment had been shed along with their flesh. They lived detached from the rest of the world, and that had left them with a cold, mechanical way of seeing things...or so they thought.

"Death, loss, loneliness, longing... It's all staring me in the face."

None could be exposed to such senseless slaughter and come out of it unshaken. Not unless they were counted among the gods themselves. Fels was beginning to realize there were emotions that not even eight hundred years of servitude to pragmatism could erode, and from which they might never be free unless they abandoned their mortal soul entirely.

Before their eyes was a mountain of corpses. One of them, a young elf boy, gazed lifelessly in Fels's direction, arm outstretched as if seeking salvation, even in death.

For what reason had Fels sought immortality? For what reason did they dream of resurrection? They remembered their old self, mired in hubris and pain, long prior to donning the mantle of fool, and felt a quiver in a heart that should have long since rotted away to nothing.

Fels saw before them a mirror image of everything they had lost, and so like an angel of death, they extended a single bony finger toward the young boy's.

"If my foolish magicks were good for anything...could they imbue but one of these corpses with a second life?"

But just before their digits touched, Fels heard a voice in their ear.

"You cannot."

"……"

"I will not abide resurrection. Any life you could bring back, I would simply take away once more."

The old god extinguished the thought. With cold, cruel yet merciful words, he took Fels's powerlessness unto himself.

"By my divine will, you are to stand by while others perish. Remember this, Fels. To a god, your mortal sentiment is naught but petty vanity."

"……"

"You must forsake it if you are to execute my will and build Orario ever higher. Forget everything you are and offer me only your undying service."

"...Yes. You're right, Ouranos."

I'm sorry.

Thank you.

These were the things Fels wanted to say, but they remained swaddled in darkness as Fels retracted their hand. Though they could not cry for the god who shouldered their failures, they could show their appreciation in other ways.

"I'm all right now... I'm all right."

Muttering this underneath their breath, Fels cast aside their worries and once more donned the mask of a fool who went on living without purpose.

The depths of their devotion ran deeper still. They lifted their head.

"It's time to go," they said.

"Blurgh! Bleaghhh!"

Raul was heaving.

He was determined not to be outdone by the inspiring bravery of his seniors, and though, by comparison to a certain foolish immortal, the things he could accomplish were rather scant, Raul had nonetheless lied to himself and run all over the city attempting to be of use to his beloved leaders.

Though he could not fight, he contented himself to relay messages to and fro across the battlefield. However, wherever he went, the unmistakable stench of death persisted, clinging to the air. The endless devastation chipped away at his resistance bit by bit, until eventually, there was nothing left, and he collapsed to his hands and knees, emptying his guts.

"Raul?!"

"Blurgh! Cough!"

The contents of his stomach stank worse than the blood. Anakitty came running over to him, though Raul wanted nothing more than for her to stay far away.

"Raul, you have to rest!" she cried, placing her hands on his back and shoulder. "You haven't slept at all!"

"C-can't stop now..." Raul protested. "I gotta keep moving. All the captains are counting on me..."

He could tell his dogged persistence was worrying his fellow messenger. Tears welled in his eyes as he thought about how much this bothered her.

I'm not even fighting on the front! Others have it way worse than me; why am I so weak?!

It was no surprise Raul was finding it hard to handle. He may have been stronger than others, but he had an ordinary person's heart, just as susceptible as anyone else to the horrors found throughout the city.

"What's wrong with me?!"

But Raul didn't want to face that simple truth. To him, it was shameful. Embarrassing. However, he was forced to admit one thing: his heart couldn't take it any longer.

No matter how hard his idols worked, Raul couldn't stop the denial building up inside him. It felt like evil itself were watching his pitiful state and laughing, and when Raul thought about what terrible things still lay in wait, he couldn't even bring himself to lift his head.

"Raul..."

Anakitty whispered his name, sharing in his loneliness and despair. It was then, when Raul was on all fours, elbows and knees quivering, that the pair heard a noise.

Clang. Clang.

"What's that?"

Anakitty's cat ears perked up as she searched for the sound's source. Raul, too, lifted his head. The pair were currently in the western part of the city, where canals crisscrossed like woven fabric, layered in a faint mist because of the unusually chilly season.

"It sounds like...a hammer?"

Raul stood up and wiped his mouth dry. Together with Anakitty, he walked as if entranced toward the source of the sound. It didn't seem like an Evils' trap—the sound was far too clear and peaceful for that.

The mists parted, leading the two adventurers to a large stone bridge, over sixty meders long and ten meders wide. Along the left and right edges, evenly spaced along the parapet, were statues of legendary warriors, dozens of them.

"The Bridge of Heroes?" said Raul quizzically, recognizing the location. The statues depicted those who had fought to seal off the Dungeon back in ancient times. They were responsible for one of Orario's greatest achievements—perhaps its greatest achievement—and so were immortalized in stone.

It was a place Raul and Anakitty had both visited when they first arrived in town. They went to pay their respects to their predecessors, and they took with them the childish hope that they might one day accomplish something of equal importance.

It was a foolish dream that could not survive even the slightest contact with

the harsh truth. Seeing tragedy unfold everywhere they looked, Raul and Anakitty were forced to admit that they could never be heroes. Not if this was what they had to endure.

However, upon that bridge, smith's hammer in hand, sat a single god.

"Goibniu?"

All alone and surrounded by his tools, he was fixing the bridge. It had failed to come through the Great Conflict unscathed. Parts of it were blown away, and a huge crack ran through one of the supports. But what had been damaged most were the statues atop it. Arms and heads had been blasted off, and what remained leaned this way and that.

Stunned, Raul and Anakitty stepped onto the bridge and walked on over to its caretaker.

"Lord Goibniu?" asked Raul. "Wh-what are you doing here?"

"Not much room for me back at the forge," replied the god, without looking up from his work. "My children are doing all they can."

Raul felt that Goibniu's response didn't really answer the question, so he asked again.

"Why are you fixing the bridge? Aren't there more important structures to —?"

"No."

"Huh?"

Goibniu answered before Raul had even finished speaking. Baffled, the young boy stopped in his tracks.

"We need this bridge," explained Goibniu, "If it falls, we all fall."

"…"

Raul and Anakitty were both speechless. Time seemed to grind to a halt.

The Bridge of Heroes had existed since before the age of the gods began. It had survived monster attacks, earthquakes, floods, and even war. Of course, it had been repaired and restored many times over the centuries, but that made

it a priceless treasure, maintained and preserved through countless generations by the inhabitants of Orario.

To Goibniu, it was a symbol of civic pride, one they couldn't afford to lose.

"This bridge is our history," he said. "Our history must never end."

The old god very rarely spoke his mind like this. Raul looked down at Goibniu's hands, to see that they were blistered beyond belief. How long had he been working on the bridge already? He may have been a god of craftsmanship, but such a feat was unimaginable alone.

Raul watched as the statue he was currently working on regained its former shape. It depicted a masked prum holding a long spear, accompanied by a gallant-looking horse. It was said that this hero once blazed a trail to this land in times long forgotten.

He didn't know why, but Raul began to cry, and so did Anakitty. It was strange—he'd seen the statues before, but something about the way these thirty-one heroes stood bravely even now spoke to him. They were all damaged, slanting, and some were even burned. Raul wiped his eyes, and before he knew it, he was squeezing Anakitty's hand tightly. She squeezed his back.

The two were of one mind. Raul steeled his nerves and rose unsteadily yet bravely to his feet.

It was then he heard a voice.

"Look over there! Adventurers!"

"!!"

It was the sneering voice of evil, locating its prey. A total of six cultists appeared at the far end of the bridge and began to approach. Though they all wore face coverings, the mad glint in their eyes betrayed the sadistic smiles beneath.

"Now, what are you all doing out here by yourselves? Waiting for us to come kill you?"

"They're fixing this dumb old bridge! What's the point?! Aha-ha-ha-ha!"

With riotous laughter and gleeful looks, the six cultists set their murderous

eyes on Raul and the others. After killing him and Anakitty, no doubt they intended to destroy the bridge, just to watch the old god suffer.

"Lord Goibniu!"

"I will stay and fix the bridge," the old god replied. "Take care of these interlopers."

"Yes, sir!"

Raul drew his sword without fear or hesitation. Anakitty did the same. The two stood shoulder-to-shoulder, ready to fight off the city's invaders.

None of the enemy were high-level. Supposedly. Surely. But even if they were, it wouldn't make a difference. Raul and Anakitty would defeat them. This bridge was the one place in all of Orario where no adventurer could possibly lose.

"Let's go, Aki!"

"Uh-huh!"

Even if they weren't heroes themselves, they could be brave and fight to the last like their heroes had done. Even if they could no longer fight, they could keep on running forward. They could inherit their forebears' courage, their will, their determination, and carry that into the future with them, like a flaming torch.

"Rrraaaaaaaaahhh!!"

The pair let out a fierce yell and were repaid in courage. Everything after that was set in stone. Under the eternal gaze of heroes past, Raul and Anakitty earned their promotion to Level 2.



The voices were inescapable. Groaning, moaning, wailing. Sprawled out on the ground, with only a scant cloth between them and the hard cobbles, were the countless wounded of the Great Conflict. Many of them had still not been seen to by a healer or received more than basic first aid. The only ones who watched over them were Guild employees, lacking in medical training, as well

as the goddess Astrea.

"We need to stop the bleeding!" she cried, a far cry from her usual calm self, "Gather any clean cloth you can find. Even clothing will do!"

For one with no magic or tools, she was doing an impressive job.

"Here's everything we could find, Lady Astrea!"

"Thank you, Karen," Astrea replied. "Now, go and help Huey treat the patients. Clean their wounds and brace their fractures. Do you know how?"

"Yes, ma'am! C'mon, Huey, you heard her!"

"Right!"

All were astonished by the depths of the goddess's devotion to her children. Along with every able-bodied citizen in the vicinity, she was making herself busy. After the two townspeople had left, she returned her attention to the injured animal woman in her lap.

"Lady Astrea..." the woman groaned, "Please, don't sully your clothes with my common blood..."

She was so injured, it seemed difficult for her to breathe, but Astrea simply replied with a benevolent smile.

"It makes no difference whether my clothes wipe your blood or my own sweat and tears," she said.

"Ahh... You are too kind..."

A single tear rolled down the woman's cheek. Astrea held her hand in hers, then, having completed her treatment, stood up. As much as she wanted to stay and watch over her recovery, there were others in need of care. She wiped her sweat and moved on to the next patient.

They were currently in an evacuee camp not far from Central Park, one of the many places where the overflow from the city center gathered. Many two-and even three-story buildings were relatively undamaged here and had been repurposed into hospitals to house the many wounded. Yet even so, these makeshift hospitals were already full, and excess patients were forced to lie on the streets outside.

Just as Astrea was wandering from person to person, a woman from the Guild and a civilian townsman came running up to her.

"Lady Astrea!"

"What did you get?" she asked them. "Were there any items or healers to spare?"

"We managed to bring back bandages, ointment, and antiseptic," the woman replied, displaying the contents of the sack she was carrying, "but potions and other items are being handed out to adventurers first. Plus, there aren't any healers to spare..." she added in a despondent tone.

"We called on Lord Dian Cecht and Lord Miach for assistance, but there are many other camps in need just like this one," said the human man standing beside her. He was neither an adventurer nor a healer, merely a volunteer drawn from the ordinary residents of the city. Astrea's selfless actions had inspired him to lend a hand, but the sheer helplessness of the situation made him gnash his teeth in frustration.

"I see," said Astrea. "As much as I hate to admit it, there isn't much we can do about that."

She cast her eyes downward for a moment, then just as she seemed to be lost in thought, she spoke with grim determination.

"In that case, there's only one thing we can do," she said. "Give me the cleanest knife or sword you have. Three of these patients need amputations."

"Wha-?!"

The two helpers were shocked by the goddess's macabre request.

"They are all showing signs of metal poisoning, caused by shrapnel from the bombs," Astrea explained. "If we wait for the healers to arrive, it will be too late."

"Th-that's terrible!" muttered the Guild woman.

"You can't do that!" cried the townsman. "How could a goddess be forced to perform such a cruel act?!"

"Whether I am a goddess or not is irrelevant," said Astrea. "If there is some

way I can help, then I will see it done."

She held out her hand. Staring at her porcelain palm, the townsman gulped. After a few seconds that felt like an eternity, he reached for his belt, unhooked his sword, and handed it to her. Astrea instructed them to fetch fire and alcohol for disinfecting the blade, and after they brought them, she walked over to one patient in the sea of wounded.

He was in critical condition. A horrible burn covered most of his upper torso, and his right leg was riddled with shrapnel, causing the skin to turn a deeply unnatural shade. He had just been brought over from another camp, which had recently suffered an attack by the Evils.

"Hold him down," Astrea said to her helpers as she kneeled at the patient's side. "Bunch this cloth in his mouth so that he doesn't bite his tongue off."

The Guild woman stood and watched in horror as the townsman volunteer steeled his nerves and prepared for the operation. The man on the ground, meanwhile, looked up at Astrea with dread.

"Please...don't do this," he groaned. "I don't want to lose my leg..."

"I'm sorry," came the goddess's reply, "but this is better than letting you die."

It was hard to hear the compassion in her determined voice. Swiftly but carefully, she ran a flaming torch across the length of the sword's edge. The man watched all this with chattering teeth and tears in his eyes.

"If you are truly a goddess, then why can't you save me?" he cried. "Save all of us and put a stop to this terrible war!"

Surely it was within the power of the very gods. With a wave of their fingers, they could put Orario back to the way it was.

But Astrea only hung her head in shame.

"If I unseal my arcanum and restore this land, all it will take is one evil god to come along to undo it all."

"...!"

"And once that happens," she went on, "there is no going back. This realm will be a battleground of warring gods for all eternity. This is meant to be *your*

story, my children."

The Guild woman gasped at Astrea's ominous prediction. Astrea lowered her words to a mutter, so that nobody else could hear her.

"And most importantly, if we break the seal before the promised time, then the Dungeon will..."

The volunteer noticed her speaking to herself as he held the makeshift gag in the patient's mouth. "Lady Astrea...?" he ventured. But Astrea only shook her head and set her sights on the task at hand.

"Be strong, my child," she said to the patient. "I will never forget the blood that has been taken from you."

The sky changed as time drew on, the eternal blanket of gray acquiring a smattering of evening's orange glow. The camp, once filled with the inescapable screams of the dying, had now fallen silent.

Astrea lay her bloodstained sword atop a table without a single word. She handed three cloth-wrapped packages, like swaddled babes, to the solemn volunteer. He took them silently, and he carefully carried them outside.

Astrea watched him go, her hands, face, and pure-white dress all speckled with crimson.

"Lady Astrea, here," said the Guild woman, her face pale, handing Astrea a clean rag.

"Thank you," the goddess replied. "And how are you?"

"M-my worries are nothing compared to yours, my lady," said the Guild woman, nervously staring down at the floor. "I could never be a kind and noble goddess such as yourself..."



To these lowly mortals, Astrea was blinding. So much so, they could hardly look at her. Here was a goddess who dirtied her own hands to save lives, who shouldered all their anger and sadness while spreading only kindness and warmth.

Astrea smiled. "This might sound a little unorthodox," she said, "but you mustn't put us gods on a pedestal."

"What?" said the Guild woman, lifting her head.

"Justice, at a time like this, means fighting to help those who suffer. It makes no difference whether you're a deity or not."

A true angel, a true goddess—true justice—was not someone who skipped and threw daisies, but someone who fought on for the sake of the suffering. That was what Astrea believed. The Guild woman's eyes widened at this revelation.

"No matter how painful it gets, no matter how much shame you feel, there is always something righteous you can do," said Astrea. "Remember that."

At this, the Guild woman's eyes filled with tears. She pressed a hand to her chest and gave a firm nod.

"You're right, Lady Astrea!"

Astrea smiled at the look of renewed determination on the woman's face.

Sex, race—even mortality. Such things were not relevant. Even deities were powerless in some respects, and what did you do when you knew there was nothing you could do? Think. Choose. Have the will to go on. These things were more important than any single capability. Astrea had faith the woman would carry her confidence like a beacon, lighting the lamps of others still doubting and in need of guidance.

Then a voice called out.

"Lady Astrea! Is your familia around?!"

"Asfi?"

The girl known as Perseus, the almighty hero, raced into the camp, her cloak

fluttering behind her.

"If you're looking for the girls, they're all over the city at the moment. What's the matter?"

"I need to locate the enemy leader, and I was hoping they could help. Do you know where Leon is? I work best with her!"

Astrea was heartened by the resolute tone of Asfi's voice, but at the mention of Lyu's name, she grew crestfallen.

"Nobody's seen her in quite some time," she admitted. "She's been through so much...losing her friend...and she's been hurting..."

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"Rgh... Ardee..."
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Asfi scowled, remembering the tragedy that had befallen the poor girl. She, too, had been proud to call Ardee a friend. She was always happy to lend a helping hand, and Asfi had been deeply indebted to her. As the emotions swirled in her mind, it was Astrea who lifted her head and spoke.

"Asfi... Can I ask you to look for her? Kaguya and Lyra are already searching. I must go assist Alize and the others."

"Understood," said Asfi. "Thank you."

Then she turned and took off running. Astrea watched her sadly for a moment, and then...

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"...Hm?"
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She heard a sound behind her, but when she turned, there was nobody there. For an instant, however, she thought she glimpsed the silhouette of a man as he rounded a corner and disappeared.

"Did I hear that right...?"

In a vacant alleyway, the man who had been eavesdropping pressed his back to the wall. His breathing was ragged, although he was not particularly tired. He was a man who had run into Lyu and Alize once before, when he tried to pickpocket a god.

"Ardee... Wasn't that her name?"

A man who had been spared punishment at the hands of a bright-hearted young girl.

"That kid... She...died?"

The equipment he was wearing—the armor he had stolen—rattled as he shook. The man who had fled from those girls behind such a torrent of insults—in this moment, he knew what it was to feel loss.

"Rgh!"

He ran, for no other reason than he couldn't stand there thinking about it for even a moment longer. Like so many others in the city, he was directionless and lacking in purpose.

"These dark days go on and on."

Astrea looked up into the ashen clouds, attuning her mind to the troubles of the townsfolk. If only there were stars in the sky to guide them, she thought.

"But at the end of it all, surely, there is light..."

She spoke these words softly, as if not to extinguish hope.



"...I hear a sound."

Surrendering himself to the darkness, the evil one spoke these words.

"A sound?" asked Vito, standing beside him. "Whatever could you be referring to, my lord and master?"

The apostles of darkness gathered in a vast underground cave, through which ran a drainage canal supported by stone pillars.

The dark god stood.

"The sound of struggle," he said, and his lips curled into a twisted grin. "The sound of justice. The last dying gasps of a wriggling cockroach before it gets stepped on."



AFTGREA RECORD

Story by Lujino Omori - Illustration by Kakage Character Design by Snouhito Yasuda





CHAPTER 5

Banquet of Evil

The darkness hummed. Squeezed into tunnels like ants in a colony were the mad followers of evil. Those who hated the world and had lost faith in their fellow man. Those whose loved ones were stolen by death, and those led only by a sadistic pleasure. Whatever their motive, all of them were gathered here, on the fourth of the Seven Days of Death.

They could barely contain their excitement. Their victories over Orario on the night of the Great Conflict still burned fresh in their minds, and now they were gazing upon the face of their leader at last—the evil that had guided them here. He stood above them, on an upper part of the underground waterways that jutted out like a balcony.

"That's right," he said. "This is the sound of those who fight against evil. Dying yet unbroken. The Promised Land. You can always trust Orario to stretch out a few more seconds of tortuous existence."

He didn't seem angered by the city's tenacity. If anything, he looked amused.

"That's rich comin' from you," said Valletta with a wide grin. "Like you ain't the one with a way to finish 'em off for good."

Erebus had planned out the entire war, from the beginning of the Great Conflict to the mass exodus of so many gods. Yet there was more to his divine plan that had not been executed. Valletta licked her lips in anticipation.

"Valletta Grede. Or should I call you Arachnia," said Erebus, calmly noting her presence. "Oh, I know. But credit where credit is due. This city's greatest protectors have turned against them, and still the adventurers do not lay down their swords. Even without stars to guide them, they fight, as do the gods of light who watch over them. Why, is this not truly the City of Heroes, as they say?"

But Valletta only grew spiteful at the dark god's reverent, even evangelical words.

"Who cares?" she spat. "All the heroes in the world couldn't a hold a candle to your darkness! Finn, Ottar, the lot of 'em!"

That was not just a compliment paid by Valletta to her dark master; it was the undeniable truth. She shivered with joy as she spoke.

"We can't get enough of your wicked schemes!" she cried. "Can we?!"

She turned to the dark host huddled in the chamber below, spreading her arms in reverence.

"Erebus! May his reign be eternal!"

"Glory to the Evils!"

"Lord Erebus!"

"Destroy Orario!"

"Grant us our wish!"

"Deliver us the grace of darkness!!"

The cavern air trembled with their praise. They cried out with mad, unending zeal, beseeching their sinister god.

"Thank you, my friends. Though your praise pales in comparison to the sounds of the heroes, nevertheless, I have heard it."

Even when he spoke dismissively of the devotion of his followers, Erebus's divine charisma could not be stopped. The enchanting tones of his voice, like the apple that tempted mankind, seized their hearts and refused to let go.

"Then let it be so," he said. "Let the fire in your hearts ignite new kindling: the very foundations of this city. Let us not be hasteful or rash, but slow and deliberate, as we construct the walls of hell around Orario."

The joyous voices erupted into cheers. At the unveiling of their dark master's plan, the fanatical followers of evil trembled with delight, and some even cried. The darkness had reached its zenith at last.

However, one voice among them lashed out in anger.

"What is the meaning of this?!"

It was Olivas, another of the Evils' commanders. He strode over to Erebus, fists clenched.

"Slow and deliberate? Orario is weak! We must strike fast, before they can finish licking their wounds! Is that not so, Erebus?!"

It was Valletta who responded to that on the dark god's behalf.

"Didn't Erebus already get it through your thick skull, Olivas? The longer we wait, the longer the wretched townsfolk drain the city's resources. Plus, phase two of the plan is almost ready. Keep it in your pants until then, eh?"

"Grr! Need I remind you," replied Olivas, his face twisted with rage, "that Orario is not our only foe?! The world expects this city to slay the Black Dragon. They will not stand idly by and watch its demise!"

Orario was known as the center of the world for a reason. It was the seal that kept monsters trapped within the Dungeon. Very few outside the Evils themselves wished to see it destroyed.

"And even though the merchants were sympathetic to our aims, not all of them could be convinced! If neighboring countries send reinforcements, our siege will surely be broken!"

"Well, why do you think we spent all that time acquiring believers in foreign lands?" said Vito, adding his voice to the debate. "How will the other cities have resources to spare when they're dealing with an outbreak of unprecedented riots all at the same time? My, what a coincidence."

The faintest trace of a grin flashed across his otherwise unremarkable face.

"That should buy us some time," he said. "More than enough time to bring about Orario's downfall in as slow and agonizing a manner as we like."

This war was the culmination of years of hard work. Much of that was the recruitment of fanatical followers—the Faithful—from the lands around Orario. Some were lured with false promises by Thanatos, the god of death, while others were coerced through the taking of hostages, or else promoted from small-time villain into the big leagues.

On the night of the Great Conflict and thereafter, these Faithful were inspired

to commit local acts of mass terrorism, even in far-off regions like the Empire. Though they boasted little combat ability, they were all bestowed bombs just like those used in Orario, and were told to wreak destruction all across the land.

While the attacks were unlikely to topple any of these cities, none boasted a mighty force of adventurers like Orario did to help in restoring public order, and so it would be a long time before any of them could even think about sending reinforcements.

"Everyone's gotta help themselves before they can help others," said Valletta, picking up the rest of Vito's argument. "Even if one or two of 'em manage to put down the riots and send someone over, they'll only be Level Two at best. Nothin' to piss our pants over."

There wasn't a single trace of worry in her sneering voice.

"That academic district could be a pain in the ass," she went on, "but it's far off in the east. Couple of cities nearby go up in flames, and that should keep those good-natured schoolchildren busy."

She smiled a venomous smile, like a spider grinning at its helpless, webtangled prey.

"Besides, we can't flatten Orario alone. We need those two monsters to help us."

The monsters Valletta was referring to were none other than Orario's twin conquerors, the children of Zeus and Hera. Despite her side's overwhelming superiority, Valletta remained humble. She knew that Orario still possessed the advantage when it came to combined military might and that she needed to wait until it was the perfect moment to strike.

She knew when to play her cards and when to keep them close to her chest. That was why even Finn respected her cunning mind.

"We're all just ants standing on the shoulders of them two giants. Except you, of course. You're a fly buzzin' round their heads, pissin' everyone off."

"Valletta! I'll tear that insolent tongue from your throat!"

Finally, Olivas could take the woman's mocking no longer. Red-faced with

rage, he stormed over to her, fists raised. However, at that moment, their god broke his protracted silence to interject.

"Tell me, Olivas," he said. "What do you think evil is?"

"Wh-what?" Olivas stuttered, bewildered by the sudden question.

Erebus faced away, toward his followers, staring into the darkness.

"Is it injustice? Is it savagery?"

"Wh...?"

"I don't think so," said Erebus. "These are simply paths to evil, not its essence."

Erebus, the primordial darkness, expounded on the nature of evil. It was not his domain, but he had his own little theories on its nature, as if he were a traveler from another world. A wandering philosopher. Or a god, cruel yet free of sin, like an amoral child.

"To me," he said with a grin, "to be evil is to be hated."

"To be hated?"

Olivas found himself caked in a cold sweat. Even Valletta and Vito didn't dare interrupt their god when he was speaking. The flock below awaited Erebus's next words with bated breath.

Finally, he turned to face his lieutenants.

"And absolute evil," he said, "is to return all to nothing."

"Rghh!"

Under the scrutiny of his master's eyes, Olivas forgot how to breathe.

"Lives, cities, empires. Even time itself. True evil is to undo all this universe has created. Extinction. Extermination. To smash the very scales which hold life and death in their precious equilibrium. *That* is absolute evil."

Erebus continued preaching to his little lost lamb as the eyes and ears of his followers remained glued to his every word and action.

"So do not concern yourself with the accumulation of petty evils, but with

evil's grandest execution. That is what I, your dark god, have proclaimed."

Before he knew it, the god was walking toward him, and soon Erebus's divine features lay just inches from Olivas's face. His master's eyes gazed deeply into his own, and Olivas saw in them an interminable abyss into which he might topple and never return.

"Ugh... Ah..."

"And for that," said Erebus, "the time is not yet right."

With that, the dark god finally drew away. He returned to his balcony, addressing his followers.

"My wise friends," he said. "I ask for your patience."

The crowd was silent as he spoke, all chilled into submission by his divine presence. The only ones who could even muster a smile through their nervous trembling were Vito and Valletta.

"Now come, Vito," said Erebus. "Join me for a walk, will you?"

"You do ask the strangest things, my lord. It really is taxing, serving as your follower."

Vito sighed. The whims of a god were about as predictable as those of a cat. As he and Erebus turned to leave, it was Valletta, leaning against the wall, who called out to her master.

"Not so fast, Erebus," she said. "All you gotta do is sit on your throne and look pretty, puttin' the fear of god into those suckers down there. Where the hell do you think you're goin'?"

Even before the Great Conflict began, Erebus had a habit of running off by himself, much to the chagrin of his followers, who concerned themselves with his safety. And at a time like this, when it was all but certain that agents of Orario would be trying to track down their location, the risk was even greater.

But Erebus showed little appreciation for Valletta's prudence. "The little boys' room," he replied. "No girls allowed. Run along now."

He made a shooing gesture without turning back, then spoke to Vito.

"Now come, friend. Let us go drain the snakes, as they say."

With that, the dark god and his chosen lieutenant vanished into the darkness.

"Tch... That bastard's too damn sharp..." Valletta said, a frustrated grin spread across her face. Then she, too, departed, leaving only Olivas.

"Grh...!"

He scowled, irritated, while his fists shook like powder kegs on the verge of violent explosion.



"I tell you, it's a lot of hard work being the emperor with no clothes, Vito."

The gray clouds were beginning to thin. Erebus gazed absentmindedly up as he walked through ruined streets alongside his lieutenant and filled his lungs with the fresh, morning air.

"Now, what could that possibly mean, my lord?" asked Vito, offering a theatrical shrug. Opening his eye a hair's breadth, he peered back at his master. "You have this city under your thumb, and still you fancy yourself the foolish emperor? What a troublesome tyrant you are."

"A tyrant? How flattering," Erebus chuckled. "I should use that one on the ladies. A tyrant in the bedsheets...now that's a real emperor with no clothes! Ha-ha-ha!"

Vito could only stare, a silent smile plastered on his face.

"...Tough crowd. Oh, lighten up, my dear Vito," said Erebus with an exaggerated shrug. "Your indifference wounds me most deeply."

The atmosphere was strange. Despite his role as their dark lord, leading Orario to destruction, Erebus was friendly, jovial, and easy to get along with. Of course, Vito understood that this was simply one aspect of the god's personality, one he adopted when conversing with mortals. Similarly, there was another facet that was impossibly cold and brutal. Primordial darkness. It was no less true a part of Erebus than the one Vito spoke with now. Before the Great Conflict, he called himself Eren. Was that a mask or a whole other facet of

his being? It was ridiculous to even ask. A god had hundreds upon hundreds of faces, inconsistent and contradictory. To inquire which were real and which were fake was a foolish and impossible question.

"I shall try," Vito replied. "By the way, not to be an annoying fly, but what happened to our friends Glutton and Silence?"

The two had not been seen since the night of the Great Conflict.

"Who knows?" replied Erebus, completely unconcerned. "Probably off gallivanting somewhere. You know what Zeus and Hera were like."

"You're the one who invited them, my lord... Sigh. You gods are simply too carefree for my liking."

Just then, a party of adventurers on patrol spotted the pair.

"Over there! The Evils? And it's...their god?! C-call for reinforcements! Let Finn know we've spotted the enemy leader!"

But Erebus was calm—disconcertingly so—as the adventurers all drew their weapons and took up formation.

"Whoopsie-daisy, here they come," he said. "Take care of them, would you, Vito? I'd like to enjoy my walk a little longer."

"Yes, yes," replied Vito with another sigh. "I've long grown used to your demanding nature by now."

Vito stepped forward to uphold the trust his master placed in him.

"Rest assured, my lord, that not a single whisper of our presence shall find its way to our enemy strategist's ears. All shall be swallowed in darkness—just the way you like it."

The ensuing fight was no battle at all. It was a slaughter.

"Aaagh!!"

"Huh? Gurk!!"

"Aaaaaaargh!!"

Vito slashed throats, skewered hearts, and impaled his opponents in the face. In just a few short seconds, the adventurers were transformed into blood fountains. Vito tore through them armed with only a single knife.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha!" Vito laughed. "Weak! So weak! Level Two adventurers come apart so easily!"

He hacked off limbs, filling the air with crimson blood.

"If only you could live to see me! See the contradiction I am! A man who despises oppression, but adores the sound of screams!"

His eyes were clearer than those of a serial killer. They were more like a child's, innocent and pure.

"Looks like you enjoyed that, Vito," said Erebus when it was all over. Bloodstains splattered the rubble, and five corpses littered the ground. The dark god was viscerally reminded of his follower's ill nature as he glanced over the scene.

"Oh, I do apologize for my unseemly behavior," said Vito. He covered his mouth with his hand for a moment, and when he took it away, his cold smile had returned.

However, Erebus seemed not disturbed but delighted. "It bothers me not, my friend. I find it curious how your eyes sparkle even while slitting the throats of your fellow man."

At this, Vito began to chuckle.

"Heh-heh. Heh-heh-heh! Well, you gods certainly bother me! For it was you who made this world with all its delicious defects!"

"……"

"Yes, defects like me. You gaze down from your world of perfection and marvel at my inconsistencies!"

When he looked at Erebus, it was with such noble reverence that words like "love" and "hate" didn't seem to cut it.

"But you..." he said, pointing at his dark master. "You, I accept. You, I love! For you alone promise to return this broken world to oblivion, where it belongs!"

However, Erebus smoothly deflected his follower's twisted affections.

"I'm afraid only women get me going."

He began walking once more, strolling aimlessly through the floor of bodies. Vito said nothing more, either, and followed.

"And if I'm to love, it needs to be a proud, strong woman with an unbreakable heart."

His bangs danced around his eyes. Erebus smiled.

"There's nothing—nothing—I love more than to see a grown woman weeping, her face twisted in despair."

A sadistic grin crept across his lips.

"Now, where are you, Leon?"



There was a flash of steel.

"Gagh!!"

A short cry, and the last cultist fell.

In district seven, the city's northwest, quite far from the center, Lyu had just finished off the last of a cultist warband that had been dominating the area. She cast her eyes downward. Her wooden sword seemed like it would slip from her grasp at any moment.

I still haven't been back to see Alize... she thought to herself. I've been running all over the city, cutting down Evils like it's my life's mission...

Her face paled with exhaustion. Even her mask couldn't hide it.

How many enemies were left in the city? And what was she even doing? Lyu addressed those questions to the innermost depths of her heart, but there was no reply. The state of Lyu's mind was perfectly reflected in the wreckage-strewn streets around her.

"Stay with me, my love! Stay with me!"

"Urgh..."

A voice drew Lyu's attention to a pair of humans. A woman and her husband. The husband was lying on the ground, clutching his severed arm stump still pouring out blood. These were the two people that Lyu had been fighting to protect a few moments prior.

"Are you okay?" asked Lyu.

"Of course he's not okay!" the woman shouted. "Are you blind?! Why didn't you get here faster?! What's the point of having adventurers if you can't do your damn jobs?!"

Tears filled the woman's eyes as she screamed. Lyu couldn't find it in her to say a word.

Anger and condemnation. It was something Lyu had seen and heard almost constantly these past few days. Whatever she gave of herself, it was never enough to escape their furious eyes. To silence their resentful voices. Voices tinged with sorrow. Eyes laced with tears.

Steeped in her own powerlessness, Lyu took a flask from her pocket and handed it to the couple.

"Here, a potion," she said. "Use this."

Then she turned and walked away without another word. The camp was not far from here, and adventurers would surely be here before long. Thus, Lyu departed, like a ghost, down ruined streets.

"Never a word of thanks—only criticism," she said to herself, her voice passing through cracked lips. "Even after I told myself I didn't need a reward..."

The people's complaints no longer bothered her. In fact, she found herself agreeing with them. The proud young elf was now a master of emotional mutilation, and without a vision of justice she could cling to, it was easier than ever to fall into a dark spiral of abuse and self-pity.

"I still find myself hoping, only for that hope to be betrayed. I never knew it could feel so...empty."

As she spoke those words, a voice flashed through her mind, as if the darkness itself were laughing at her.

"Don't you mean, when your sense of justice withers?"

"...!!"

It was the voice of a man—a god—who had once gone by the name of Eren.

"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."

It wasn't only one line that shot through Lyu's mind but a whole slew of them, echoing and laughing at her as if from on high.

"You're all gung ho about it now, but what happens after you burn out?"

"Would you still say the same?"

"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!"

His words whirled around her mind, as if asking her, How does it feel? How does it feel now that your thanks and reward are truly gone?

"Shut up... Shut up! Go away!"

Lyu shook her head fiercely, desperate to rid herself of this nightmare, screaming at nothing yet unable to answer the question. When she stopped, all that remained were her own ragged breaths and a pounding in her head that wouldn't go away.

His words...they're like poison. I can't get them out of my head!

Inside her mind, a swollen evil gorged itself on a hollow justice. Lyu fought to stop it. She reminded herself of what she swore by the wings and scales upon her very back. But a bitter disappointment caused her to screw up her face.

I can't keep doing it... I can't go on fighting it...

She hung her head like a broken puppet. Before she knew it, she had stopped walking and begun sinking into a bottomless void.

"Leon!"

Like an arm reaching to pull her free, a voice rang out. Lyu lifted her head to see a girl running toward her. Another young woman wearing a white cloak.

"Andromeda?"

"I finally found you, Leon! I need your help!"

Asfi quickly explained the situation to Lyu.

"We need to track down Erebus and the other enemy leaders! Evils forces are stationed all along the walls, mocking us and trapping us in the city, but I think their leaders have to be somewhere underground! They're probably using the waterways to—"

Knowing at last what it was she had to do, Asfi looked like she was sparkling. Lyu, meanwhile, couldn't find the words to respond.

"Andromeda," she said at last. "Forget me. Find someone else to help."

"Wh-what?"

"I can't do it. Not now. I'll only slow you down."

Lyu didn't even lift her head to meet Asfi's gaze. The blue-haired girl wasn't sure what to say.

"I'm too weak to protect anyone," Lyu went on. "All I can do is watch people die...like Ardee."

"|"

Asfi gasped.

"Leon," she said in terror. "What's happened to your eyes?"

The elf girl's sky-blue eyes emitted a sinister gloom. It looked like she was about to join the march of the dead. Asfi grabbed her by the shoulders and twisted Lyu to face herself.

"You can't give up, Leon. You can't rot away. Look at me!" she yelled. "We need you. We need all of you! If *Astrea Familia* falls to despair, then what's left?! We need your justice to hold out, or there'll be no hope for any of us!"

Asfi laid her worries bare, pleading with Lyu, hoping against hope that she'd listen. The only thing holding Orario together was the belief that good would eventually triumph over evil. If even Lyu stopped believing that, it would all fall apart.

Lyu, however, seemed deaf to her pleas.

"...Shut up. What do you know?!" yelled Lyu, sweeping her arm. "That's easy for you to say!"

"Leon...!"

Asfi's face grew grim, but she couldn't give up. She reached out a hand to the lost elf girl, but at that moment there was a devastating explosion.

""!!""

Lyu and Asfi both managed to leap aside in time, and they turned to see a group of Evils cultists.

"The Gale Wind, and Perseus, both in the same place!"

"Off with the heads of those damned upper-class adventurers! Charge!"

The Evils let out a battle cry and came storming down a hill of rubble. Lyu shot a wicked glare their way.

"Leave me alone," she spat at Asfi. "All I can do now...is fight!"

And with that, she rushed the enemy, wooden sword in hand.

"All I can do," she cried, "is take out as many of these villains as possible!"

On making contact, she immediately flattened the cultist in front, carving a channel through the sea of foes.

"Leon!" Asfi called out after her. "Wait! Come back! Leon!!"

She drew her sword and charged after her, but Lyu was like a berserker with no sense of self-preservation, and it was impossible to keep up with her frightening agility. All Asfi could do was watch from behind as Lyu cut down one foe after another.

And staring down at them from above was an ashen sky that concealed the heavens. The girls cried, for they could not see the stars.



[&]quot;Are these all the supplies we have?"

Neze looked surprised at the dismal quantity of resources handed to her. Despite her best efforts, a trace of disappointment slipped into her voice.

"I'm deeply sorry. We'll have the blacksmiths repair your weapons. Try to make it last, please."

The man, a human adventurer with a large frame, hung his head in apology.

Astrea Familia had come to an evacuee camp just northeast of the city center. It was one of the many designated resupply points where the girls could reequip themselves with items and equipment for the battles ahead.

"Make it last?! These won't last us more than a couple fights!"

The pouch Neze had been given contained only three health potions and one magic potion, the latter of which was only half-full. If this was only for Neze, that would be one thing, but she was expected to share this with the others in her familia—a total of eight people. It wasn't nearly enough. Her fellow party members voiced their objections as well.

"There's no way we can keep fighting on the front lines if this is all we have," said the human girl, Noin.

"What d'ya think we are, slaves you can just use and throw away?" added the Amazon, Iska.

The girls had been pushing themselves for several days straight now. Even if the blacksmiths could repair their equipment immediately, the toll on their minds and bodies was still a major problem. There was only so much they could do to keep spirits high, too.

This wasn't a new problem. The girls had known for some time that supplies were running out, but this felt like being asked to do the impossible, and all they wanted to do was scream.

However, at that moment, a voice seemingly blissfully numb to the bleakness of the circumstances took them all by surprise.

"We mustn't be greedy, girls!"

"""Gweh?"""

"Noble poverty is the foundation of justice! Just think back to our group's

early days, when we had to scrimp and save for everything!"

It was Alize, puffing out her modest chest as her crimson ponytail flared out behind her. For some reason, she wore the proudest-looking grin in the entire world.

"I mean, this is nothing compared to that time we lost all our money on a Dungeon run, and for seven days and seven nights, all we could feed Lady Astrea was bland soup made from a few wild herbs and some salt, and she ate it every day with a smile and told us it was totally fine and not to look so sad and—"

"Please, stop!!"

"What are you doing, digging up our painful past, Captain?!"

Critical hit! Neze covered her blushing face with her hands and fainted in agony. The other girls did likewise and rolled around groaning on the floor while the towering adventurer who had brought them their resupply looked on awkwardly.

After a short period of groans and moans, the girls began to laugh.

"Tee-hee." Marieux, the big sister of the party, chuckled. "You're right. If we compare what we have now to what we had then, it doesn't seem so bad."

"If it comes to it, we can always chew on herbs again!" added the elven spellcaster, Celty, with joy in her voice. In no time at all, the gloomy atmosphere had been completely dispelled, and all the smiles returned to the girls' faces.

"Grr, goddammit!" said Neze, disheveling her hair. "All right, fine! We'll do it! Happy now, Captain?"

"Absolutely! We'll make it work with wisdom and determination!"

Having restored her familia's morale, Alize smiled from ear to ear. The towering adventurer, impressed by this display of courage, said, "Thank you! I'm sorry. We'll do everything we can to support you."

"All right, everyone!" declared Alize. "Go get ready, and we'll meet up back here when it's time to move out!"

At her words, Neze and the other girls left to get their equipment in order and

catch up on what little sleep they could.

"……"

As soon as they were gone, Alize dropped her smile and stared despondently into space. As a familia captain, and a second-class adventurer, she couldn't let anyone see the struggles she was enduring. She gazed up at the clouded-over sky.

According to the Guild, the official number of dead and wounded is over thirty thousand. And that's only the ones we know about.

Alize slipped away into a back alley, where no one could see her as the sadness overcame her heart.

They say even the healers have begun collapsing from exhaustion. Things are getting really bad.

At Finn's orders, the outer reaches of the city had been ceded to the invaders, and all their energy was being concentrated in the center. However, some evacuation camps refused to migrate inward. A heavy cloud was beginning to cloak the entire city in despair, and Alize could only close her eyes as she thought about it.

We can't keep this up. We need to inspire hope. We need to stay determined and blast away the fear.

She clenched one fist tightly.

But people are losing the power to speak up. Even me...

Her hand fell weakly by her side.

"Leon..." she said aloud in an empty street, staring at the ground. Suddenly, a pair of boots came into view.

"Are you okay?" came a voice. Alize looked up, surprised. Standing before her was a girl with light gray hair. "You seem tired," she said. "Would you like some soup?"

The girl held out a small bowl of steaming soup and peered into Alize's eyes. Alize, meanwhile, was stunned that anyone could approach without her noticing them, even if she was tired. She hurried to fix her shattered smile.

"O-oh, thank you. Yes, I'd like that very much," she said.

Then, as she reached out to take the offering, she stopped. The moment she got a good look at the girl's face, a strange feeling overcame her, like a bolt of lightning racing through her body.

"Hm?" said the girl with a puzzled look. "Is something the matter?"

But Alize barely heard her. For when she stared into those deep, gray eyes, the same color as the girl's hair, she found she couldn't breathe.

"Are you...human?"

Even Alize could not explain why she said that. But the words crossed her mind and demanded to be spoken.

u "

There was a long pause wherein the girl didn't answer. It seemed it was her turn to be stunned into silence. The two of them stared, motionless, as if one reflected the other. Then, at last, the mysterious girl burst into a chuckle.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha! Nobody's ever asked me that before!"

She clutched her sides, crying laughing, as if she'd never heard anything funnier in all her life. It was all she could do not to spill the soup she was holding.

"Do I look like a monster to you?" she said, and Alize immediately felt embarrassed. She was *supposed* to be a champion of justice. What was she doing cornering some hardworking, upstanding city girl in an alley and asking, "Are you human?"

"Er...I'm sorry, I don't know what got into me. It just kinda popped into my head. My bad."

Perhaps she'd been even more tired than she thought. Alize smiled awkwardly as she tried to dismiss the strange feeling she'd had.

"My name's Alize," she said in an attempt to patch things over. "What's yours?"

"I'm Syr," the girl replied with a smile. Her eyes seemed so pure, it was like

they were boring a hole right through to Alize's soul.

"Alize," said the girl. "Something seems to be troubling you. If it's not too rude of me to ask, would you like to talk about it?"

About ten minutes later...

"That's another thing that sucks about being the captain! And there's so much going on I have to think about! It's all too much!"

Alize had been talking pretty much nonstop ever since Syr first asked her to open up, and the weariness was beginning to show on the gray-haired girl's face.

"There's still more...? I'm beginning to wish I hadn't asked..."

Her eyes were vacant, while in her hands was the empty soup bowl Alize had drained. The two of them had moved from the alleyways to a nearby water fountain, and were both seated upon its rim. The fountain itself had been damaged beyond repair, and the area was deserted. A chill, wintry wind blew between ruined buildings.

"Well, what better way to make a first impression?" Alize beamed. "Besides, not many people get to hear me complain like this!"

Alize seemed almost proud of that, for some reason. Syr laughed awkwardly and placed a finger on her cheek.

"So, in summary," she said, "you want to know what kind of justice you can present to your friend?"

Alize's voice grew subdued in response, and she adopted a serious look. "Yes," she said. "But it's not just for Lyu."

"Hm?"

"Everyone—the whole city, the whole world. Everyone wants to know what justice is. Even our enemies."

Alize stared straight up at the sky as Syr watched curiously from beside her.

"My answer could change it all; I'm sure of it. It could decide whether our despair stays as it is...or turns into hope."

Hope was what Orario needed right now. Hope and a powerful determination. It was the light that could banish the pall that hung over the city. It wasn't just a common goal, a just cause, and it wasn't so simple as good versus evil, either.

It was the question of what did the city use to have that it lost to evil? What was it that Alize could hold up and inspire all those brokenhearted people to fight again?

"At least...that's what I think."

"Alize..."

Alize was searching for a form of justice that could turn everything around, but the skies were too dark to find it. Not even a smattering of starlight pierced those weighty clouds. And in the absence of that light, evil was flourishing, telling everyone that their justice never really existed at all.

Alize stared at the claustrophobic skies, her eyes contorted in pain. It was then that the girl seated beside her finally opened her mouth to speak.

"I don't know much about justice," she said, "so I'm not sure I can resolve your troubles, but this is what I think. I think there is a justice, and you simply lack the means to see it."

"Lack the means to see it?"

"Yes. Evil has hidden it from you, just like those clouds hide the stars from us."
"I"

This time, it was Alize's turn to exclaim in surprise.

"But those stars go on shining, even now," Syr went on. "Just because we can't see them doesn't mean they're not there."

Standing in the ruins of her city, surrounded on all sides by death and destruction, Alize could have easily dismissed the girl's words as nothing but hollow platitudes. But she didn't.

Erebus was frighteningly powerful. Alize didn't know what she could possibly do in the face of absolute evil. And now she realized that it had caused her to lose sight of something important. Not of the stars, but of herself.

As she looked up at the dark skies now, they appeared different. Beyond their midnight veil, the stars lay waiting. Alize felt she could almost make them out—a realm of starlight hiding just out of view.

Without thinking, she opened her mouth to speak.

"...You're right," she said. "I'm sure of it. And if Lady Astrea were here, I bet she'd say the same thing."

What a strange person, thought Alize as she examined the gray-haired girl before her. Where could an ordinary city girl find the power to lift the dark clouds hanging over her own heart? She was almost like a ghost from an old tale, appearing in the hero's hour of need. Or an oracle, revealing the path set down by the gods above.

Alize let out a deep breath, as if a huge weight had been lifted from her shoulders. "I have to find Leon and tell her all about this," she said.

Syr tittered. "Hee-hee. You really love this Leon girl, don't you, Alize?"

"Yeah," said Alize, nodding. "She's a wonderful friend. And she's much more serious, much more noble, and shines so much brighter than I do."

Alize's eyes shone with trust and respect.

"I don't even care what happens to me...so long as Leon doesn't lose her hope."

That was Alize's sincere wish. And it would always be her wish, tomorrow and ever after.



However, a dark figure threatened that wish with his appearance.

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"Sup, Leon?"
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""!!""

Two figures wheeled around to see his ominous smile. A human and a prum girl.

"Whoops, I guess she's not with you," said the figure. "My mistake. Oh, well."

Black clothes and black hair. His indifferent shrug made it clear he wasn't intimidated. Lyra and Kaguya stared at him for a few moments in shock as disparate thoughts cycled through their heads.

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"It's you...!"
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"Erebus!"

In an instant, all their ire and murderous rage was concentrated on him, but Erebus didn't seem to care. Instead, he calmly asked the girls a question.

"My little lost followers of justice. You wouldn't happen to know where I can find Leon, would you?"



AFTGRGA RECORD The Fall of Justice

Story by Lujino Omori - Illustration by Kakage Character Design by Snouhito Yasuda

CHAPTER 6

Melody of Silence

An unsettling hush came over northwestern Orario.

Kaguya and Lyra were there, surrounded on all sides by half-ruined buildings on the verge of collapse. Opposite them stood Erebus and his follower, Vito.

Neither pair took their eyes off the other for a moment. Kaguya and Lyra carefully scanned the surroundings for any other cultists waiting in the wings, but there was no sign of them. Erebus and his lackey were alone.

"Leon?" said Lyra. "No idea. In fact, if you see her, let us know, yeah?"

"Besides, even if we did know," added Kaguya, "we wouldn't tell the likes of you. How dare you show your face after tricking us like that, *Eren*."

The venom in their words was palpable. Especially Kaguya's. She hadn't forgotten how the god had toyed with them under the guise of his assumed name.

"Oh, I don't consider it a trick," said Erebus. "Just the same sort of thing that Hermes always does. But in the end, I grew tired of it."

Erebus smiled, as if the ice-cold malice issuing from his lips were nothing more than a refreshing spring breeze.

"I couldn't go on hiding my true self from my first and only friend, could I? Or are you saying you preferred Eren to the way I am now?"

In the next instant, his tone of voice and mannerisms completely changed.

"Good day to you, my fair and sharp-tongued maidens! Oh, please don't wear such troubled frowns! What would the righteous and beautiful Astrea say if she could see you now?"

""Grrh!""

His words were the words of the mild-mannered Eren, but the smile on his face was of the purest evil. The girls were only more convinced that he was

toying with them. The veins in Kaguya's forehead looked ready to burst, and Lyra sensed that they risked changing the tone of the conversation if she didn't change the subject.

"So what do you want with Leon anyway?" she asked. "You've been followin' our girl for a while now."

"A stalker god?" added Kaguya, providing verbal backup to her partner, loaded with all the venom she could muster. "Oh, how repulsive. Your foul-hearted perversions make me sick."

Erebus, however, was unperturbed. "Keep playing the innocent sweetie with me and you'll get me in a rutting mood, human. Men are all animals, and you'd better learn that before one of them takes away your precious virginity."

"...!! You filthy...!"

Erebus said this as though it were nothing more or less than the self-evident truth. Kaguya scowled, barely concealing her disdain for his brazen words, but the god simply turned his attention to Lyra instead.

"And you, prum. Why Leon, you ask? Isn't it obvious? Because she's the most innocent and naive of you all! She's an egg containing the pure-white yolk of justice inside her unbroken shell."

""Wha-?!""

"And so I have to know, don't I? What will she do when presented with absolute evil?"

Lyra and Kaguya remained speechless. Meanwhile, the god of primordial darkness waxed philosophical regarding the nature of that ever-elusive justice.

"Think of it as a kind of fortune-telling," he said. "Whichever way she goes, all of Orario will go. You girls like astrology, don't you?"

The god was laughing. At the same time, on a whim, he was testing them. He wanted to see the true worth of Astrea's star-maidens.

At that moment, Erebus's companion, Vito, let out a chuckle.

"Oh, my master, you truly are wicked, to force a naive young elf to speak on behalf of an entire city."

Hearing this, Erebus placed a finger on the side of his head.

"Tell you what," he said. "If you girls can answer my question, I'll leave Leon alone. How about that?"

Steeped in bitter resentment, it was Kaguya who answered.

"Your question? What question?"

The god smiled.

"What is justice?"

"What?"

Lyra raised a dubious eyebrow.

"Didn't you hear me? Tell me what your justice is."

No hints. Erebus wanted the girls to lay their hearts bare. After a protracted silence, Kaguya spoke.

"A trivial question," she spat. "Justice is a weapon. A weapon that makes our every aim a noble one. A blank flag to justify all manner of atrocities."

It was a rather cynical answer, in keeping with her nature. One could only guess what circumstances in life had led her to it.

"And to follow justice is to erode yourself in pursuit of an unattainable ideal," she concluded.

Erebus barely paused before answering her.

"Not good enough," he said, his expression unchanging.

"What?!"

"It's cute, the way you lie to yourself like that. Not cute enough for me, though, I'm afraid."

While Kaguya stood in stunned silence, Erebus voiced her true answer, the one she couldn't bear to speak aloud.

"Your so-called justice," he said, "is nothing but regret. An illusion you cling to with the childish conviction that the world has betrayed you."

Kaguya couldn't speak. She couldn't even muster up one of her trademark insults. Erebus's words had cut straight to her core. Seemingly losing interest in her, the dark god shifted his gaze over to Lyra.

"And you. You still haven't given me an answer," he said. "Hoping that if you draw the conversation out, I'll slip up and say something I shouldn't?"

"...!!"

"Your justice is wisdom masquerading as poison. The last resort of a powerless rat who makes trickery their domain."

Erebus commanded the dominating voice of a soothsayer. Lyra's shoulders quivered in indignation. He had seen through her completely, and he spoke in calm, almost pitying tones.

"Or perhaps your justice is a cloak of invisibility, to hide that ugly inferiority complex of yours."

"Up yours! This is why I hate gods! All-seeing, all-knowing bastards!"

Lyra exploded in fury. It was the only way to stop herself from shaking. Erebus had touched on their deepest vulnerabilities and left them both flustered and angry.

"Don't get so mad, girls," he said. "You've both got what it takes to go far; I'll tell you that."

Lyra ground her teeth in frustration, but the dark god only smiled from the bottom of his black heart.

"But I'm afraid you've lost this one. I've utterly dismantled you both. Your imperfections are so very mortal, but in the end you're nothing but a pair of lost lambs."

""Rrgh...!!""

"And since neither of your answers satisfied me, I'm off to go scramble an egg."

The two girls balled their fists. Erebus had violated their innermost thoughts. And he didn't stop there.

"Now, I think I'll let you go. Run along and tell Astrea that this big, bad, handsome man made you cry."

"Handsome? You wish," spat Lyra.

"But it's true, isn't it? I know you want me."

"I'd rather sleep with a maggot," said Kaguya, capitalizing on what little payback she could seize. Erebus only chuckled.

"Nothing can shut you two up, can it? But I'm afraid you no longer interest me. Time to get a move on."

The dark god made to leave, only to find a sword and a pair of boomerangs barring his path.

"Not so fast," said Lyra. "I know it ain't classy, but the big bad shows his stupid face right in front of us, we'd have to be idiots not to take that chance."

"Killing a god might be out of the question, but we can still put you in chains," added Kaguya. "Astrea will be *very* happy to see you, and an end to this war as well."

Yet even with these two warmaidens breathing down his neck and raring for a fight, Erebus's smile never wavered.

"So you're not going to accept my mercy, then?" he said. "Guess that's just the way good and evil have to be."

Then he looked around—as if searching for something, perhaps?—but after a short moment, he called out to Vito.

"Very well. My faithful follower. You shall ensure my safety for the time being."

"Ahhh, how did I know you were going to say that? You know, these days I feel less your loyal servant and more your human shield."

In some respects, the god and the follower were awfully alike. Both possessed a rather theatrical disposition. Vito feigned offense as he spoke, an affectation immediately exposed by his gleeful smile.

"It's been a while, ladies," he said, prying open a single eye. "Since the

eighteenth floor, if I remember correctly. As two parties both aggrieved by the same god, shall we dance?"

"Silence!" Kaguya roared. "This time, we'll finish you off for good!"

And so the rematch began. Lyra, Kaguya, and Vito all drew their weapons and flew into battle. Kaguya's swift katana strike met and repelled Vito's dagger, but the minion of evil utilized that momentum to effortlessly deflect Lyra's boomerang attack. Even outnumbered two-to-one, Vito didn't give up the advantage. With polished skills and a keen mind, he made sure his two opponents never landed a single blow. In fact, with a second knife pulled from his pocket, he managed to come concerningly close to the girls' slender necks. Lyra was forced to close the distance to cover Kaguya.

The two girls scowled. Clearly, for Vito, the battle on the eighteenth floor had just been a warm-up.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha! Is that all you've got?! Only one person down compared to last time, and this is all you can—"

"Idiot."

As Vito stepped in to finish things quickly, he heard Kaguya's mocking tone. By the time he realized his mistake, it was too late. The pair had simply been feigning weakness.

"What you just saw was teamwork," said Lyra, jumping back to optimal range. "Perfect for getting the drop on overconfident asshats like you."

"?!"

When she moved away, Vito saw what she had been concealing from him: Kaguya had resheathed her sword. She crouched slightly and prepared to demonstrate her lightning draw.

"lai Strike: Gleaming Blade!"

There was a blinding flash of light as Kaguya unleashed her sword. Vito could barely track its movement. All he could do was raise his dagger, which upon impact flew from his grip and into the air.

"lai?!" exclaimed Vito, reeling from the force of the blow. "A technique from

the Far East?!"

"How astute," said Kaguya as she stepped in to capitalize on the opening. "An art passed down through my accursed bloodline. I must commend you on blocking it, but now...it's over!"

Kaguya swiveled her blade, bringing it down on a return trajectory that would undoubtedly cleave Vito's body in two. Mere moments from his inevitable death, Vito's eyes went wide. Then he smiled.

"I'm impressed," he said. "However..."

Before Kaguya had time to wonder what made Vito so confident, a figure stepped in, as silent as the night, between the far-eastern girl and her ill-fated foe.

""?[""

Kaguya's sword halted mid-swing, caught between the intruder's fingers. Both Kaguya and Lyra went wide-eyed with shock when they saw who it was.

"My order was to ensure my lord and master remained safe *for the time being*," said Vito. "Thus my continued participation in this battle is, I'm afraid, utterly unnecessary."

As Lyra leaped back with caution, Vito casually slipped away after Erebus. It was clear he had known all along that the mysterious assailant would step in at some point.

Flowing ashen hair. Eyes eternally closed. Deathly pale skin and a jet-black dress. A witch, arriving to a fanfare of silence.

"You are noise," she said in an irritated tone. "An unending, ear-grating noise."



Just two fingers. That was all it took for the witch to intercept Kaguya's killing blow—just the index and thumb of the woman's right hand.

Kaguya was stunned. "I-impossible! How could she...?"

Whichever way she pulled, she couldn't wrest her sword free of the woman's unbreakable grip.

"It's you!" yelled Lyra. "From *Hera Familia!*" But the witch—Alfia—did not even open her eyes to speak.

"Do not shout in my ear. It's actually quite irritating."

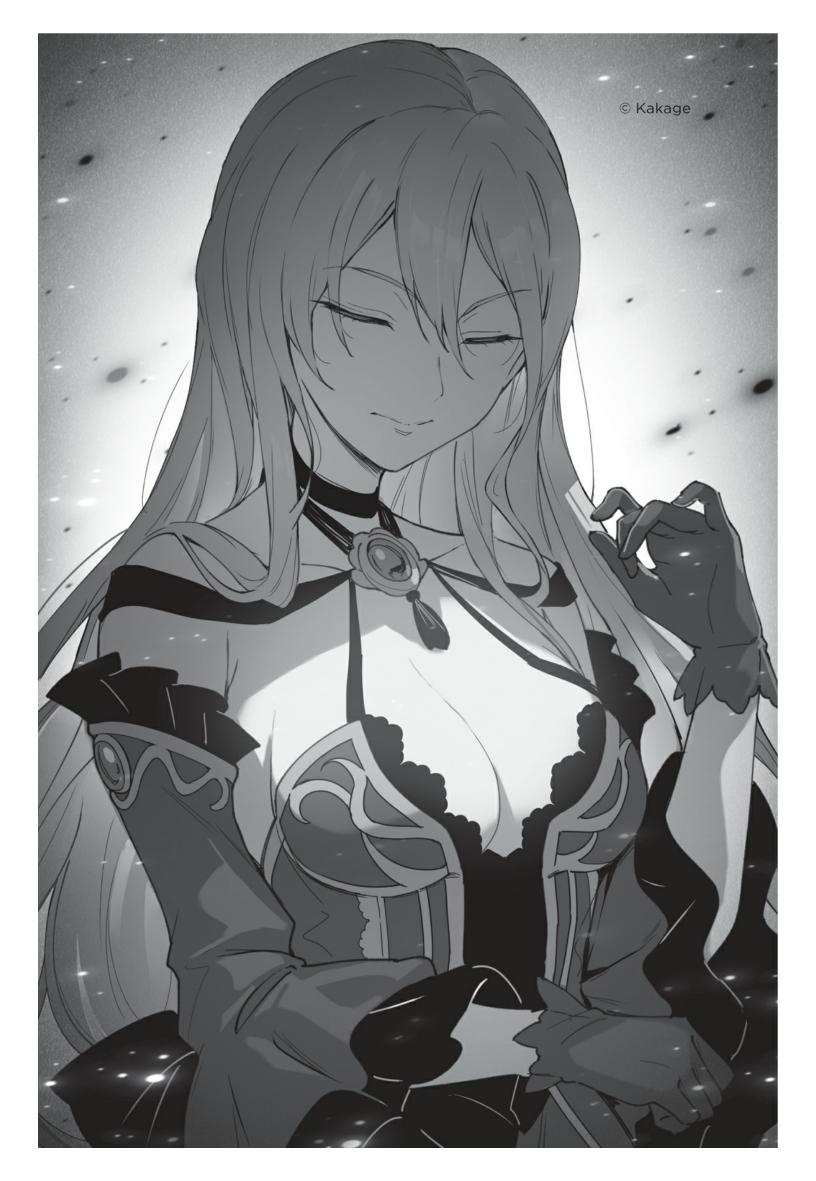
Then she swept her arm.

""Wha-?!""

With that single gesture, it was as if the whole world suddenly shook, and Kaguya was flung clean off her feet. The blast wave caught Lyra, too, and knocked her backward.

"There you are, my sworn friend and ally," said Erebus, suddenly appearing on the street once more. "Have you rested enough for your liking?"

"A fine thing to say after rudely rousing me from slumber with this infernal cacophony," replied Alfia. "You were perfectly aware the church I was using was nearby, right?"



It was now clear why Erebus had looked around before the battle began. He had been searching for the witch's resting place.

"I was," he said, completely unapologetic. "Though I promise me being in this neighborhood was entirely incidental. Still, while you're here, a little bit of exercise ought to wake you up, right?"

Then, he turned his attention to the two girls standing across the battlefield from him.

"Show our little followers of justice the true meaning of despair."

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""Ngh...?!""
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Erebus directed a sadistic smile toward Kaguya and Lyra as they scrambled to their feet. Alfia's expression shifted to one of concern.

"You would have *me* waste my efforts on something this trivial? Or are you and your followers simply too incompetent to see it done?"

"Hurtful," said Vito, "but inarguable. Yet you, my lady, are quite impressive. Why, I can barely sense you. If I couldn't see you standing right there, I'd have no cause to suspect your presence at all."

Vito opened his eye a crack and continued.

"I hear the reason they call you the Silence is that your sound quells all others. I would very much like to see that in action."

"I see," said Alfia. "So you truly are powerless. Then it will indeed be quicker for me to end this personally."

She silently took a step forward. Immediately, Lyra and Kaguya felt an immense pressure bearing down on them. All was silent, save for the alarm bells ringing inside their minds. They had never felt so threatened in all their lives.

"We've got to get out of here, Kaguya! We can't fight a monster like this!"

"We can't. If we run, we die. If we so much as take our eyes off her, we die. She's that strong."

Kaguya was the first to realize just how dire the situation was. She gripped her

sword tightly and steeled herself for the inevitable.

"I see there are those who still show their opponents the proper respect," said the witch. "However, my disappointment in this city is not so easily abated."

While she spoke and moved almost silently, the power building up inside her body was of a terrifying magnitude. She stopped suddenly, at some distance from the two girls, causing their pulses to race.

"Unfortunately, I lack the score for a funeral dirge; only a trumpet sound that will grind your bodies to dust. But please, do not cry."

Alfia sounded almost saddened as the death sentence passed her lips.

"There is nothing more irritating than the screams of a dying young woman."

The air itself seemed to creak, groaning in advance of the unfathomable magical power this Level 7 was poised to unleash. Staring at her was like staring into the open maw of a fire-breathing dragon.

"Fuck this!" cried Lyra. "I'm out! You can stay here and die if you want, Kaguya, but I'm hoofin' it! I'll take my chances!!"

"No, we have to stay and keep our eyes peeled for any opening! I can't survive this without your help, Lyra!"

With inhuman courage, Kaguya steadied her trembling arms and dashed toward Alfia.

However...

"Begone, noise."

Their entire argument was a wasted effort. For the melody of silence began and ended with a single word.

"Gospel."

"Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaghhh?!"

Like a giant's fist, the colossal force came out of nowhere, slamming Kaguya in the stomach and shoulder and making her spew blood. She was sent flying into the nearby ruins with the force of a surging river. Lyra, on the other hand, managed to leap aside before the invisible attack was unleashed. Her survival instincts served her well, allowing her to escape the initial blast, but nonetheless a shock wave knocked her off her feet.

The devastating blow threw rocks and boulders into the air and cracked the ground. Even Kaguya's sword exploded into a million tiny pieces.

A single chime, like a church bell, was all that heralded the destructive blast, although its tone was anything but jubilant. After the dust settled, all that remained was a cold, dead silence. Alfia was the only one standing.

"D-devastating!"

When Vito laid eyes on the aftermath, his mask fell from his face. He trembled in fright while a deafening silence rang in his ears.

"Glad she's on our side," said Erebus, eyes similarly wide. "That's why you don't piss off Hera's girls."

A faint smile on his face was all that indicated the depths of the dark god's excitement and admiration.

Meanwhile, Lyra struggled to her feet, shaking the dust and debris off herself. Then she saw it.

"Grh ... Huh?!"

Blood. Dozens of little droplets, falling off her face and speckling the ground. But that wasn't all. Slowly, her sight started to turn crimson as blood seeped from her eyes, her ears, and her mouth.

"You're kiddin' me. I didn't even get hit directly!"

My ears are ringin', my head's poundin', and I can't even stand up straight! Urgh...feels like I'm gonna be sick!

The ground beneath her trembling hands roiled like swirling paints. Fighting back the urge to vomit, Lyra lifted her head and glared at Alfia.

"That wasn't like any magic I've ever seen. It wasn't wind or light. It was sound!!"

The woman's devastating spell broke both her body and her mind, but that

wasn't enough to stop Lyra from analyzing the situation. Alfia bore the prum's fearful look with total calm as her long, ashen hair flowed behind her.

"Did your allies not warn you? Loki's and Freya's children? Yes, my magic is sound. That and nothing more. I cannot burn you to cinders nor encase you in ice, only batter you about until all that remains is a mangled lump of flesh."

Invisible but utterly destructive. Alfia's magic released a wall of sound so powerful, it could flatten even those not caught in the line of fire. And the scariest part was, she could do it with only a single word.

An ultra-short chant that hits fast with an insane range! Even gettin' grazed would flatten an upper-class adventurer! In a straight-up spell-slingin' contest, she's a monster!

It was despair-inducing. The raw power behind Alfia's spells was so great, it easily outclassed the city's top mage, Riveria Ljos Alf. Lyra scowled, struggling to keep her eyes focused on her foe, the Level 7 witch known by some as the Monstrously Gifted.

"And on top of all that, she ain't even weak in a melee? That just ain't fair!"

The prum girl shook with fright as she remembered what had become of Kaguya's sword. Then at last, her trembling arms gave out, and she planted her face on the ground.

"Words fail me," said Erebus with a malicious smile. "I told you to teach them the true meaning of despair, but it was over so fast, I don't think they had the chance to feel it."

Even a god recognized the vast gulf in ability that separated the two sides of this battle—if what had just happened could even be called that. Alfia, meanwhile, stood unruffled and didn't even glance at Erebus as she replied.

"If a lesson is what you seek, then bring a more fitting opponent. Besides, this fight is not over just yet."

Still without opening her eyes, Alfia turned her attention to someone else.

"A convincing act, prum," she cried out over the battlefield. "Did you learn it from your fellow gutter rats, perhaps?"

"Grr...!"

Lyra's outstretched fingers twitched, and she cursed under her breath. She hadn't even been breathing, yet the horrid woman had seen through her facade with minimal effort.

"You must be Level Two or thereabouts," said Alfia, slowly walking over to her. "I was holding back, but nevertheless, you do well to still breathe. You are cowardly and sly—the polar opposite of that other prum, with his delusions of heroism."

With silent footsteps, Alfia approached the fallen Lyra. Her shadow fell over the prum girl's bloodied face.

"Zald has a fondness for your ilk," she said. "But I find you irritating. Now, sleep."

The woman began building up a spell in one hand. A blunt and brutal means of cutting short Lyra's final moments. But before she could unleash it, Lyra's lips parted, almost imperceptibly, and she spoke.

"I'm small..." she said, "and weak... So I gotta pull my weight..."

"What?"

"I gotta play dead...make bombs...anythin' so I don't drag the other girls down... It's hard as shit, I tell ya..."

Alfia arched a slender eyebrow. She could have sworn she heard the prum girl chuckle.

"Sometimes I gotta be the bait, too... You know how crappy that is? But somebody's gotta do it...'cause..."

"…"

Alfia's face was as hard and featureless as a slab of granite. Her, a Level 7, being lectured to by a measly Level 2.

Lyra raised her voice and shouted as loud as she could.

"I ain't the only one who knows how to play dead!!"

Alfia's reaction was almost immediate.

But "almost" wasn't good enough.

Aided by Lyra's excellent powers of distraction, Alfia's *other* foe reached her back the very instant before she could put up her guard.

"lai Strike: Futaba!"

Kaguya appeared like a vengeful demon, bloodred from head to toe. In her hands were the short swords that bore her technique's name. She unleashed a terrifying flurry of strikes, but Alfia took one step to the side and moved out of range.

"I'm surprised you have weapons remaining," she said. "Or bones, for that matter."

"Haah...haah... You monster! How dare you dodge that so easily!"

Blood spilled from her lips as she spoke. Kaguya had staked her entire life on that backstab, and it hadn't been enough to kill her.

"But..."

A crimson smile crossed her blood-caked lips.

"You're bleeding, Level Seven!"

Slowly, Alfia raised and examined her left arm. Sure enough, the sleeve of her dress was torn, and a single bloody line grazed her otherwise flawless skin.

"It may just be a scratch," said Kaguya, "but that is still a wound! My sword shed your blood!"

Kaguya rallied with triumph as though that flesh wound was enough to win her the battle. Alfia only continued staring at it, saying nothing.

"Your strength may be beyond our reckoning, monster, but you're not invincible!"

"…"

"Even a powerless child can make you bleed! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Pathetic!"

Kaguya kept on laughing and laughing. It was all she could do, yet all the same, it was a route that led to a chance of victory, however small. The enemy was not immortal. If she could bleed, she could be killed.

Even so, Alfia's expression had not changed at all.

"Are you finished making noise? Then it's time for you to disappear," she said, raising her arm toward Kaguya, who by now was barely standing.

"Not on my watch! Try these on for size!"

That voice came from Lyra, who had maneuvered into Alfia's blind spot, tossing dozens of small, spherical objects in the witch's direction. These bomblets exploded, scattering dirt and soot in the air. When the dust had finally settled, the two of them were nowhere to be seen.

"A magic item?" mused Vito with mild surprise. "No, it must be improvised explosives."

"One played the decoy, while the other bought time," said Erebus. "Not bad. They sure gave us the runaround."

Neither Kaguya and Lyra had planned to run into Silence, but their improvised teamwork was enough to distract even a Level 7, at least long enough for the two of them to get away.

"Still, they won't get far in that state," said Vito, stepping over to where the girls had been standing and spotting the trail of blood on the ground. "Shall I hunt them down for you?"

"No. Let them go," said Alfia, still staring with closed eyes at the wound on her arm.

"Are you sure?" inquired Vito with the devious smile of a wicked court vizier. "I thought you didn't like to leave noise unsilenced."

"I had forgotten the sight of my own wounded skin," Alfia replied. "I grew lax, arrogant...like Hera was."

Even now, the woman was silent. Her heart was calm and at peace. The price of this lesson was the few drops of blood dripping down her arm.

"Consider this your reward for reminding me of the folly of complacency, girls."

[&]quot;Ly...ra..."

A faint voice on the verge of disappearing completely reached Lyra's ear. It was Kaguya's, and it burned with indignation.

"I swear... I'm going to kill that woman!"

"I'm out... That's a Level Seven you're talkin' about," replied Lyra, helping her to walk. Despite the thrashing she'd received, Kaguya was seething with anger, and her face remained fixed in a permanent scowl. Lyra answered her between gasping breaths.

"How come I gotta hold you up anyway? You're twice my size!"

As a prum, Lyra was the height of other races' children, and the sight of her supporting her injured comrade would have been comical if it weren't so tragic. She had to practically drag the girl along, scraping Kaguya's knees across the ground behind her. Blood and sweat dripped down her face as she leveraged the full power of her stats.

"Besides," she said, "how are we meant to beat her?"

"We'll get the whole team together and gang up on her!" Kaguya replied, her face brimming with malice.

"Ain't that exactly the kind of unfair bullshit you hate bad guys for?" retorted Lyra.

"Then..." Kaguya clenched her hanging fist. "You think of something... Some clever trick to turn the tables. You're good at that!"

Feeling the far-eastern girl's fingers dig into her side, Lyra gave up trying to persuade her. Kaguya's mind was made up, and there wasn't anything Lyra could do to change it. Besides, it was the cold, hard truth, whether she liked it or not. Something had to be done about that troublesome Level 7.

"We need that idiotic elf, as well...! And the captain, and...everyone! Or else we don't stand a chance..."

"Listen, I get what you're sayin', but you heard that psycho. He's after Leon, too. We gotta get back and have the whole gang find her before it's too late...!"

Lyra struggled like she was climbing a mountain, barely keeping her breathing in check as she gritted her teeth and hauled Kaguya on. Seeing as nobody had

come after them, she guessed—correctly—that the enemy had chosen to let them go, but this only deepened her disgrace and resentment. She couldn't even spare a hand to wipe her face as the sweat dribbled down her chin and fell to the ground.

"You better not hear this and come runnin', Leon...! Just this once, learn to look the other way...!"



Lyra's pleas, however, did not reach their recipient. By sheer coincidence, Lyu happened to be nearby, in the northwest streets of the city.

"What was that noise?"

She turned to see a plume of smoke rising over the ruined buildings. Then, slowly, as if guided by fate, she began walking toward it.



AHOGRGA RECORD The Fall of Justice

Story by Lujino Omori · Illustration by Kakage Character Design by Hughito Yasuda

CHAPTER 7

Dialogues on Justice

The clouds were thinning, the westerly winds scattering them like torn cotton across the sky. Everything was gray, but for the first time, that gray was mixed with the purple glow of twilight, allowing a precious glimpse into the world's transient beauty.

Leon considered this briefly before dropping her eyes to the rubble-lined streets and casting a look around.

"This is where the explosion came from, but there's nobody here..."

She was in district seven and quite close to the city walls. Wherever she looked, ruined buildings were on the verge of collapse. But there weren't any signs of people, dead or alive. In fact, at first glance, it wasn't clear whether anything had actually happened here at all. Then Lyu pulled down her mask and sniffed the air.

"Gunpowder," she said, recognizing the scent. "Was it Lyra? I should look around."

Lyra was characteristically frugal when it came to using her crafted items. Relatively weak compared to the other girls, she tended to scheme and come up with contingency plans for every possible situation. That she had been forced to rely on her bombs could only mean she had run into something—or *someone*—that couldn't be dealt with, and the only sensible option was retreat.

Lyu narrowed her eyes and scanned her surroundings. If there was any chance her friends were in danger, she needed to investigate.

Alongside the smell of gunpowder, she sensed something else—lingering traces of magic. However, the wind had dissipated most of it, and it was difficult to ascertain its source.

"There was definitely a fight here," she said to herself, "but what exactly happened?"

Lyu began moving with utmost caution, and then she saw it.

"What's that?"

One building was miraculously intact. Lyu checked its scarred walls and damaged roof before making her way over to it. The double doors were old and made of wood, which gave a loud, low creak as Lyu pushed them open.

"A church...?" she said. "How has it survived?"

Lyu stepped inside to find stone walls and a wooden floor. The interior was curiously laid out with stairs that led down to some sort of central chamber, which reminded Lyu of a small theater. Standing at the top, she was eye level with a damaged stained-glass window. A chill breeze filtered through the cracks, and Lyu could see the twilight outside. Around her, wooden pews lay splintered and broken, while statues of a goddess, carved onto stone pillars, judged her from every angle.

Even in its current state, the solemn atmosphere here gave Lyu the chills. Then she heard a voice.

"To meet again in a place of worship. Why, this must really be fate."

Lyu's breath caught in her throat. She wheeled around, though she already knew who it was before he stepped out of the dark-cloaked church aisles like a shadow.

"Erebus! Why are you here?!"

"I'm looking for you, of course, Leon. My little egg of justice."

The god was irritatingly calm. Leon felt she was about to burst.

"Enough jokes! You lied to me! You said your name was Eren!"

"I've already had this conversation with your two friends," said Erebus with a dismissive gesture. "Can we skip it this time?"

"M-my friends?" stammered Lyu. "You mean, Kaguya and Lyra?! You madman! What have you done to them!"

"I had my fun. But don't worry—they're safe. I let them get away. Don't you think about trying anything like they did, though... Not unless you want to meet

the same fate."

As if on cue, a second figure stepped out of the shadows.

"Y-you...! From Hera Familia!"

Long, flowing, ashen hair. The indomitable Level 7. Alfia the Silence stood next to Erebus without a single word. Sandwiched between these two unstoppable forces, Lyu thought she could feel the grim reaper's scythe closing in. A single bead of sweat raced along one of her long ears and down the side of her neck.

"I didn't come here to fight," Erebus said. "Just indulge me again, like you did before."

"...What do you want?" asked Lyu. Erebus gave a faint smile.

"I've come to see if you have a different answer to my question this time."

Lyu felt her heart pound out of her chest. Its last beat reverberated throughout her entire body. Her head spun, her ears rang, and her throat felt as dry as desert sand. Before she realized it, she had stepped backward in fear.

"Leon," said the dark god. "What is your justice?"

A nightmare reborn. A conflict rekindled. This was everything Lyu didn't want to face. She had lost her friend to evil. Her faith in her guiding principles was shaken. Right now, this was the very last question she wanted to hear, more terrifying than anything the Dungeon could throw at her.

"Why...are you asking...me...?"

"Because I fell in love with you, Leon. The moment I met you."

"Why...does evil care about justice?!"

"Consider it a divination ceremony. A debate, if you like. This will show me the ultimate fate of this world."

In stark contrast to Lyu's stuttering, Erebus sounded as if his replies had been written long in advance. There was divine intent behind his each and every word.

"Right now, Orario is a microcosm of the entire realm," he explained. "The

entire mortal realm has been left in chaos after Zeus and Hera lost to the Black Dragon. Whether out of desperation or to fulfill their darkest desires, people are out there right now, killing, stealing, despoiling."

The mortal realm had become the battleground of a war between order and chaos while the world waited for a hero. The scales of good and evil teetered back and forth. This was what the dark god claimed.

"The world has a choice: to accept the darkness or to step into the light."

"...!"

"And while I place myself firmly in the darkness camp, I am still curious about the part justice will play in the events to come."

Erebus steepled his fingers and smiled at Lyu. His dark, fascinating eyes stared straight into her soul.

"I want to know if justice has what it takes to overturn this age of darkness and bring about a new era."

When he had finished speaking, the whole church fell silent. For a moment, Lyu forgot that Alfia was even there. Lyu hoped the silence would continue forever, because her whole body was screaming at her. She instinctively knew that when this dark dialogue reached its conclusion, it would destroy her.

But the god wearing a wicked grin did not hear her plea.

"Leon," he said. "I believe that good and evil are both perfectly valid on their own."

All of a sudden, Erebus sounded gentle, like a priest.

"But they shine so much brighter when they are set against each other."

Lyu felt a set of invisible fingers tighten around her neck.

"Wh-what are you saying?"

"Conflict breeds growth. You understand this, too, don't you? After both forces have perfected their nature, they shall birth this era's true ideals. One of ultimate good and one of ultimate evil."

He spoke as if reciting from scripture. It was a dark tome that spat on the

teachings of any established religion and tore Lyu's fledgling wings from her back.

"Then, and only then, can the final showdown commence. The winner shall inherit the world...or destroy it."

The evil god gave a wicked smile.

"Rather straightforward, don't you think? Exactly the sort of thing you elves like to put in your holy books."

Lyu shivered as a chill ran down her spine. She clenched her tiny fists with what little determination she could muster.

"...Rgh! In that case, what is your evil?! What is it that gives you cause to mock me and to look down on justice?!"

With a tiny spark of rebellion in her heart, she flipped Erebus's question back on him.

However, the god effortlessly answered it, as if toying with a small child.

"Satisfaction," he said.

"Wha-?!"

"The pursuits of evil are quite simple. All we do, we do in the name of satisfaction."

He grinned as justice faltered.

"Satisfaction is selfish. It doesn't care about others, and thus, it is hated by them. And extreme selfishness can result in truly unpardonable behavior. That is what we refer to as evil. Or more precisely, that is what you people like to call evil."

Justice and evil were almost always diametrically opposed. While justice adhered to law and order, evil was free from both. It was the ultimate expression of freedom, which in turn was the ultimate expression of self-satisfaction.

There were no rules. No order. How could there be? These were the trappings of justice, something evil mocked and reviled with all its heart.

One could argue that an ill-defined justice condemned everything as evil. But a self-proclaimed evil would never claim the crown of justice. Evil openly mocked that honor and trampled it underfoot.

"Meanwhile, the truly inexcusable and the abhorrent become absolute evil. Like me."

A flutter of ashen hair drew Lyu's attention to Alfia once more. She seemed bored, as though she had no objections to what was said. The god's candid claim had acquired a sheen of truth, which he demonstrated with glee.

But Lyu refused to accept it. Hoping to stave off death just a little longer, she shouted back at him.

"In that case...why?! For what reason do you seek absolute evil? Why do you want to destroy Orario?!"

"My domain is primordial darkness. In other words, the underworld. To destroy Orario is to make this land my realm."

When Erebus spoke, he offered nothing but the pure, honest truth.

"What I do is perfectly natural. For you, what I seek may be destruction...but for me, it is paradise."

"Wha-?!"

"My aims are far too abstract for mere mortals to grasp. Just like any god's."

"How could anybody understand that?! You're insane!" yelled Lyu, shaking her head in denial. But the god didn't so much as flinch.

"Alas, being misunderstood is part and parcel of evil's fate," he said. "But in any case, I have answered your question. Now will you answer mine?"

Lyu's breath caught in her throat. She was out of time. There was nowhere left to run.

"I asked you this question once before, and rest assured I took your answers to heart. Virtuous deeds done without promise of a reward. Upholding that value at all times. And striking down evil wherever it rears its ugly head."

"...Stop it."

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"Is that still your answer now? Or has it changed?"
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"Stop it."

"Have you been thanked yet? Have you been rewarded for upholding those values in the face of great evil?"

The god's words, and all the nasty truths therein, left Lyu utterly trapped. Her face grew haunted and pale.

"Can you look me in the eye and say it hasn't affected you? That your justice still stands strong? That you haven't once stumbled under the weight of all the loneliness and pain?"

"Stop it!!" she screamed. But it was not a determined scream. Her voice cracked, her hands covered her ears, and she squeezed her eyelids tight. There was no trace now of that proud elf warrior—only a scared young girl battered by harsh reality.

"Listen to me, elf. I know you want to see me as the bad guy in all this, but I'm giving you a chance to make the right choice."

The dark god would not let her escape that easily. He stood before Lyu, the point of his metaphorical knife poised over her ribs.

"So I'll ask again. What exactly is your justice?"

He plunged the proverbial knife. Lyu raised her head and attempted to respond, but no words came. Her quivering tongue could produce nothing in the way of justice.

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"I... I..."

"What's wrong? Say it."

"...Gh."

"You can't answer?"

"......"
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Lyu hung her head limply, wishing she could turn back time. After such a brutal execution, no light remained in her eyes.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Behold, justice! Nothing to say for itself before

it plummets into despair!"

Erebus burst out laughing. He swept back his hair, laughing like a madman.

"You've disappointed me, followers of Astrea! But I'm glad! If none of you can believe in justice, then the people of this city don't stand a chance! No longer will your lies cloud their minds! All shall return to chaos!!"

Erebus flung his arms wide, basking in his proclamation. The balance was broken, and the scales of good and evil irreversibly tipped.

"I have only one thing to say to you now," said Erebus in a compassionate voice, after his laughter had died down at last. "Something I've told you before."

"Weakness, thy name is justice."

Lyu felt her heart momentarily give out.

"And foolishness, thy name is also justice."

There was a yawning chasm in her chest. What was the "right choice" Erebus had been talking about? Crushed by evil, Lyu couldn't even see where justice was. Her righteous heart began falling apart.

"…"

Lyu slumped to her knees like a broken doll. Erebus didn't need to say anything more. Mired in despair, the girl was perfectly capable of destroying herself from here.

"Oh, my little egg of justice. You couldn't answer even one lone question. How disappointing."

However, Erebus didn't look disappointed at all. He turned and gazed through the broken stained-glass window. Outside, the ashen clouds were breaking, allowing the reddening sky to bleed through.

"Now you've got me thinking," he said as a malicious grin spread across his face. "What about that other girl? Alize? I wonder if she has an answer for me?"



"Alize! We can finally take a break!"

Alize turned at the sound of Neze's voice.

"They're changing the guard! Ganesha Familia's taking over, so they said we can all go home and take a short rest! Lady Astrea's on her way over here as well!"

"All right!" replied Alize, smiling brightly. "Then it's time for some well-deserved rest! A warrior's repose!"

She sheathed her sword, and the entire group heaved a collective sigh of relief. After fighting countless cultists in Northeast Orario, this was their first true respite.

"Anyone who's not currently doing anything, feel free to head back now!" Alize called out to the other members of her familia.

The girls shared a glance.

"No, you go back first, Alize," said Neze with an embarrassed smile. "Let us finish things up around here."

"I agree," said Marieux, placing a hand to her cheek. "You've already done so much."

"You must be craving a bit of shut-eye after how hard you've been working," added Iska, waving her hand as if to shoo Alize away. "Go on, off you get, now."

The rest of the girls all reacted similarly, reassuring her that just because she was the captain didn't mean she had to stand around on formality.

"You mean it?" asked Alize. "Well, if you say so! See you back at home, everyone!"

She was stunned by her guildmates' kindness but accepted it gratefully. Leaving them to handle things, she turned and walked off down the street, silently but with a big smile on her face.

Finn's defensive line had held fast, and the Stardust Garden remained undamaged. Sensing no danger, Alize unlocked the front door with her personal key and waltzed straight in. After it had closed behind her, Alize was alone in the empty halls of her home. With no one to see her, she exhaled a deep sigh.

"……"

She was not smiling now. Dropping her mask, she allowed the weariness she felt in her bones to show. She wiped her cheek, only to find her hand now covered with sweat and blood—blood that may or may not have been hers. Like a wandering ghost, she made her way to the parlor and just stood there, as if she'd forgotten how to sit.

"I guess I am a little bit tired..."

That was an understatement—she was exhausted. Her body and soul had taken a dire beating.

How many times had she talked about justice to her friends, even after Lyu ran away? How long was she going to rally everyone under its banner when even she didn't know what its true nature was?

That was the hardest truth to swallow. The thought racked her with guilt.

"I think there is a justice, and you simply lack the means to see it."

"Evil has hidden it from you, just like those clouds hide the stars from us."

She thought back on Syr's words. At the time, they had sounded so convincing, but now Alize wondered if she even deserved the stars' guidance.

"Alize."

She heard the door open behind her, and she turned to see her goddess standing in the doorway.

"Lady Astrea..."

There was no need to hide her own sorry state from the goddess. Alize looked back at the floor. She was stripped bare of the armor that shielded the other girls from her vulnerable, pathetic sight.

"Neze told me you would be here," the goddess said.

"……"

"Is there...anything I can do?"

"I just need a bosom to cry on, if you don't mind."

"Of course. Come here."

Astrea smiled and held out her hand, guiding Alize into her soft embrace. The flame-haired captain buried her face in Astrea's plump chest, wrapping her arms around the goddess's hips like a child. And like that child's mother, Astrea cradled Alize's head in her hands.

Alize felt her fingers on her back, warm and soothing. Tickled, she squirmed in Astrea's arms, but gradually, her tight muscles relaxed, and she allowed the goddess's warmth to envelop her.

After a while, Astrea sat down on the sofa, lowering Alize onto her side, the girl's face still firmly planted between the goddess's breasts.

"Lady Astrea... Am I wrong?"

"About what, Alize?"

"Everything."

As the two sat, eyes closed, like mother and child, the red-haired girl decided to tell her goddess the tale of Alize Lovell.

"I always thought I had to smile for Leon and the other girls, whether I felt happy or not," she said. "I thought I needed to banish their doubt at all costs."

"…"

"But to do that, I needed to never doubt myself. I always said what I thought and acted how I felt without second-guessing it."

Astrea's welcoming lap was like a cradle of stars. There was no need to pretend innocence or purity here. Alize set down her burdens, like a weary traveler, and revealed the discord and anguish brewing in her heart.

"But when I'm alone," she said, "that's when the serious me comes out."

Alize's fingers tightened around the hem of Astrea's robe. The goddess answered her in a voice as soft as silk.

"I think both Alizes are very strong," she said. "The one who speaks her mind and the one who cares for her juniors."

"……"

"Your light, Alize, is not just starlight. It's *sunlight*. That much is clear from the smiles you spread to everyone you meet."

Astrea ran her fingers through Alize's crimson hair. When they reached her hairclip, she undid it, allowing the girl's fiery ponytail to fall across her lap and mix the strands with her own walnut locks.

"But..." started Alize, either unwilling or afraid to allow the goddess's soothing words to lull her into comfort, "The serious me still doesn't know what justice is. Even though I'm supposed to be your follower..."

For a while, the only sound that filled the hall was the ticking of the grandfather clock. The empty space between each tick seemed to mock Alize for her indecisiveness. Then, at last, after precisely eleven of those harrowing marks, Astrea spoke.

"Alize," she said, opening her eyes at last. "Do you know what the happiest times of my life were? It was the day Kaguya joined us. It was the day Lyra took my hand. The day Neze, Marieux, and Iska all believed in me. The day Lyana, Noin, Asta, and Celty all came together. And finally, the day that Lyu found us."

Her clear, gentle voice retraced the threads that were now so tightly intertwined.

"And how could I forget, before any of that, the day you and I decided to start a family?"

"……"

Astrea, her goddess, laid her heart bare. Alize felt the tears welling up in her eyes.

"It's okay," Astrea said. "You are not wrong. And even if you were, you're allowed to be. There's nothing wrong with being wrong."

The goddess's reassurance was as clear and serene as the interminable sea of stars.

"Keep moving forward, Alize. Whether it's right or not. You just have to believe."

"And remember, even when skies are gray...

Even when you can't see them...

The stars are always watching over you."

Those words touched Alize's heart. And even though her eyes were closed, she could've sworn she saw the light of a shooting star.

"I cannot clear away your doubts, Alize," said Astrea, stroking her head once more. "I am only one star out of many set in the infinite night sky. You must be brave. Your justice is something only you can find."

Again, a silence fell over the room. Only, this time, the clock's ticking no longer seemed malevolent.

Slowly, Alize pulled her face from her goddess's breast. The specter that had been haunting her had vanished, and her lips showed the faintest trace of a smile.

"Thank you, Lady Astrea," she said. "I have a lot to think about. I want to come up with my own answer, so that when I see Leon again, I can tell her what it is that drives me."

Astrea smiled, her job complete. The traveler, once lost beneath a starless sky, resumed her tireless journey. It was not for this goddess to say what story those girls would go on to write or what their answer would be. That was up to them.

"I hope you do," she said. "I'll always be watching over you, Alize."



In Northwest Orario, in a ruined yet still-standing church, the dark god Erebus stood across from where Lyu had fallen to the ground.

"Astrea is too soft on you," he declared. "Or maybe she's even crueler than I am. Why doesn't she just tell you the answer? If she's really the goddess of justice, then she must know what it is. Instead, she hides it from you, concealing the truth behind fanciful words and cute metaphors."

A chuckle betrayed the pleasure Erebus took in his condemnation. Lyu could take his insults no longer and weakly raised her head.

"You're wrong! Lady Astrea's not like that! She's..."

But before she could manage a pathetic rebuttal, one that even she knew wouldn't hold any weight, the dark god strode right up to her and gazed deep into her wide, azure eyes. Taking advantage of the girl's fragile heart, he whispered into her long, pointed ear.

"Are you sure about that? Is it not because of her negligence that you're suffering so much inner turmoil? Could it not be that this is all just some sick, twisted game to her?"

"Grrh!"

"Is it justice to feel pain? Is it justice that brought you here to me, just to be laughed at?"

He was nothing less than the devil himself, whispering his diabolical theories. His divine voice all but shattered Lyu's faith in an instant. Suddenly, she couldn't remember the face of the goddess she had devoted her life to, and everything Astrea had ever taught her faded away into distant mists. This dialogue on justice had left Lyu truly lost, and she didn't know where she could turn.

"N-no... That's not..."

She wanted to scream back at him, but no words came. Erebus couldn't help but laugh, seeing the elf's fair face warped by despair.

"Heh-heh-heh. Ha-ha-ha! ...You are so fun to tease, Leon."

His eyes made it seem like he was smiling warmly, but what he truly wore was a sadistic grin. The dark god righted himself, swept back his hair, and laughed to the heavens.

Lyu felt truly violated. Her lips, her shoulders, and her heart all began to tremble.

And then, the whole building shook as well.

""!""

The noise came from outside the church. Lyu reeled in shock, while Erebus peered outside to see what had happened. Only Alfia remained unperturbed, not even bothering to glance over.

"That sounded like...an explosion!" cried Lyu. She peered through the stainedglass window and spotted a plume of smoke rising into the sky outside.



"Leon! Oh, where did you go?"

Asfi had lost track of Lyu after she went charging head-first into a pack of Evils. The last glimpse she caught of the elf's distraught face burned fresh in her mind, and it scared her.

While she hadn't been as close to Lyu as Ardee was, she still considered the girl a friend. And never had she seen the noble elf make a face like that.

So while she searched for traces of her passage or anyone who had seen her, Asfi also felt hounded by the sneaking suspicion that she had to find Lyu, and fast.

I can't let her slip into despair, she thought. I have to let her know!

Inside her heart, like a torch, burned the light of duty.

"I know what I have to do!" she said. "I have to—"

But Asfi was not allowed to finish that thought. All of a sudden, the entire city shook. It was the same explosion that had caught the attention of Lyu and Erebus not too far away.

"What ...?!"

The sound was deafening. Then she heard the screams and saw the sparks rising off the street. Her face paled with fright.

A man with flowing white hair stepped out of the chaos.

"Why are we pussyfooting around a wounded foe?" he asked aloud.

It was Olivas with a warband of cultists in tow, defying his master's orders and bringing carnage to the streets.

"I, for one, will not miss my chance. I will break you, Orario, in body and spirit! Prepare to be *crushed*!"



AFTGRGA RECORD The Fall of Justice

Story by Lujino Omori · Illustration by Kakage Character Design by Hughito Yasuda

CHAPTER 8

A Tragic Performance

A voice echoed down the empty hallways of the Guild Headquarters.

"Gimme a break! Why's a god like me gotta do all this work? I ain't even an adventurer, dammit!"

Loki complained loudly, her vermilion hair bouncing as she tiredly wobbled left and right with a stack of papers in her arms.

"This is exhausting... I just wanna go home and take a bath...in a bathtub full of booze..."

The discontent deity stopped before one of the doors, opened it using her foot, and stepped in. Inside, maps of the city covered every table and spare bit of wall.

"Finn! Sounds like those fortifications you ordered are ready!" she yelled, plonking the papers down on a nearby desk and rotating her aching shoulders. "Once we get the civilians inside 'em, the rest'll be...Finn?"

The ominous look on her captain's face gave her pause. The blond prum gripped a sheet of parchment, eyes fixed on its contents.

"What's up, Finn?" she asked. "Somethin' wrong?"

"Take a look at this," Finn replied, throwing the parchment onto the desk in front of him. "Hermes just brought this over from the Guild. It's a report on the nine gods that were sent back to heaven on the day of the Great Conflict."

"Aww geez, that mess," replied Loki, scratching her head. "I still ain't got a clue how the Evils managed to pull that one off."

Loki took the list and ran her eyes over it. It named Belenus, Zelus, and other gods and deities who had been fighting on the front lines that day.

Then she stopped.

"Hold on," she said. "You sure this is right?"

"Yes," replied Finn. "We all know that *nine* gods returned to the heavens that day. However, this report names only *six* of our allied familias. Which means there are still three missing gods unaccounted for."

This was hardly the most devastating blow the allied coalition had suffered. The number of familias critically weakened or wiped out completely on the first night of the Great Conflict was too large to count. However, those familia who had their gods returned and lost their Falna as a result only numbered six. Even this many was a great blow to Orario, of course, but one whose true extent still lay shrouded in mystery. There could be no miscalculation—Finn had taken stock of the survivors personally after the first terrible night in order to plan their response. So where had these missing gods gone? Or more to the point, where had they come from?

"What's goin' on, Finn? You don't suppose the Guild or that hat-wearin' dandy miscounted, do ya?"

"What if..." said Finn, "the extra gods are from the Evils' side?"

"What?!" shrieked Loki, outraged by this suggestion. "You mean, some of our people took their attackers down with 'em?! Or you think the bad guys have it out for each other?"

"I couldn't say, I'm afraid."

Finn sharpened his gaze, biting his thumb.

"If we assume this wasn't a slipup on the part of our foe, then that leads us to only one conclusion. The aim of this planned exodus wasn't only to break our morale; it was to hide something,"

A hush fell over the room as Loki considered his words. The wings of imagination transformed into the key of illumination that opened a gateway into hell. And after she had eliminated every other possibility in her head, she stood.

"Finn, you don't mean..."

She and Finn extended the arms of their minds, hands grasping for the truth that lay just within their reach.

"Those shitheads! This whole time, there true goal wasn't up here, it was down in the—!"

"A-a message, Lady Loki!"

The door slammed open, and in ran Raul.

"A great gathering of Evils has been spotted in the northwest!"

Finn and Loki stared at him in shock.



"Destroy it all! Lay waste to Orario! Advance on Guild Headquarters and slaughter anyone foolish enough to stand in our way!"

After Olivas gave his order, his cultists unleashed their spells and magic swords. A flicker of explosions lit up the sky, bathing the streets in fire.

"M-Master Olivas, are you sure this is the right move?" asked a fearful commander. "Lord Erebus and Mistress Valletta advised us not to act until the time was—"

"I care not for their cowardice!" roared Olivas, his will to fight unbreakable. "Why delay what's inevitable?!"

Then, with flames in his eyes, he turned to address his army of darkness.

"Orario stands at the gates of hell! It is up to us to push them through! We need not stand idle when our foe is weak and vulnerable! Finish them off tonight and bring a swift end to this war! Unleash your evil, my brethren!"

"WAAAAAAAAAAAGHHH!"

His followers roared like wild beasts released from their cages. They descended on the streets, attacking unprotected camps and following their leader's order to the letter. The unarmed civilians were powerless to resist and ran for their lives while begging for mercy that was nowhere to be found.

"An attack?! A-and so many!"

Lyu watched in horror through the stained-glass window as an army of Evils, larger than any they'd seen yet, marched through the city.

Erebus didn't even blink at the sight. "Oh, dear," he said. "That Olivas, at it again. I thought I told him to rein it in. And right before my very eyes, to boot."

Olivas was most likely unaware that his master was watching him. Erebus, on the other hand, smiled broadly and turned to Lyu.

"At the same time, he just gave me an idea. Alfia, make sure nobody interferes with them. Get Zald over here as well."

"You wish me to help make *more* noise?" Alfia asked with open disinterest. "I do not recall joining the ranks of your fawning sycophants."

Her words were enough to make even the hardiest adventurer shiver in fright, but Erebus bore it all with a smile.

"Oh, don't be such a spoilsport," he said. "Tell you what: Do this one thing for me, and I swear I won't ask you for anything silly ever again."

""

"I'll get straight on with the plan to execute absolute evil, just like you want."

Alfia paused, as though trying to discern the true motive that lay behind the god's smug grin.

"Oh, are you worried about leaving me alone, perchance? Don't be. Anything happens, I'm sure my man Vito will come running to the rescue. Between him and my hordes of loyal followers out there, I think we can handle one little elf, don't you?"

"I don't have time for these games," said Alfia. "Very well. Let us see if you will hold up your end of the bargain."

With a flutter of her long, ashen hair, Alfia turned and left the building. After she'd vanished, the oppressive silence that had filled the church seemed to disappear instantly, causing Lyu to pop out of her stupor.

"The people...!" she muttered, climbing to her feet. "I have to go save them!"

She could hear their screams coming from the streets outside. Without waiting a moment longer, she ran for the door.

"In the name of primordial darkness, I command you to stay, Leon."

Lyu froze.

"If you don't, I'll call Alfia back, and we'll have ourselves a real slaughter."

"Rgh?!"

Never had the god's threats sounded so real. It felt as if she were suddenly bound by thick iron chains, with no hope of escape. It was clear the god meant what he said. His words were solemn...and gleeful.

"We're going to stay right here," he said, "and watch."



"Th-the Evils are attacking again!"

"Aaaaaaaagh!!"

"Somebody, help us!"

Screams filled the air. Whatever few structures made up the nearby camps were swiftly flattened, and bystanders ran in every direction to escape the encroaching flames.

The Evils arrived in the northwest, in district seven under the shadow of the city walls, and advanced eastward toward Guild HQ. Everything in their path, they torched, leaving a trail of destruction as they moved.

"They're attacking us now?! Why?" cried Asfi. The coalition's commander Finn had told her that the enemy would content itself with raids and not conduct any large-scale attacks for the foreseeable future. Did this mean Braver was wrong?

"No," she said, "I see now. Some of them must have gone rogue!"

The enemy's movements showed no indication of serving some greater strategy. It was clear this was not part of the Evils' true plan, whatever it was.

"Asfi!" came a voice.

"Falgar! You're here, too? And you brought everyone else!"

She was joined by the loyal war tiger who served as her deputy as well as the

other members of Hermes Familia.

"We're here to help," returned Falgar. "I don't know if it is good fortune or not that brings us together on the battlefield like this, but we will need all the aid we can muster. There aren't enough adventurers stationed in this district to repel this attack without reinforcements."

As Falgar stood beside her, Asfi could see he wore a deeply troubled frown.

"It's not just the enemy that outnumbers us, but the townspeople as well! Too many of them ignored the Braver's orders and remained here, on the outer edges of the city!"

"Grr! Reinforcements are on the way! We just have to hold off the enemy until they arrive!"

Asfi's grief lasted but a moment before she steeled her nerve and drew her sword. At last, she looked how a captain ought. Her words were no empty reassurances, either. Finn would quickly learn about such a brazen incursion.

"Follow me!" she yelled, her white cloak flapping as she charged the enemy. It wasn't long before her party made contact. Before the flustered cultists could work out what was happening, Asfi's quick steel and Falgar's mad rush eliminated two of their foes.

"Aaaaghhh!"

"Guh!!"

With their flank under threat, the evil march was thrown into chaos. A melee quickly broke out.

Asfi put her bombs to good use, sowing fear and confusion among the cultist ranks and allowing the mighty Falgar to bring his full strength to bear. A swing of his greatsword flattened several disoriented cultists, gouging their lines and creating openings for Asfi to slip in and take out the troublesome mages in the rear. It was a feat made possible only by the bonds of teamwork the pair had forged in the fires of many a battle. The other members of *Hermes Familia* acted on their own initiative, disrupting the enemy forces and drawing their attention upon themselves instead of the helpless townsfolk.

Before long, small groups of reinforcements began trickling in. Nearby adventurers who had heard the sounds of battle had come running. However...

"Dammit. there's no end to them!"

Sweat glittered on Falgar's brow, but his curses were lost to the waves of evil descending on him from all directions. No matter how many he cut down, there always seemed to be more, fighting tenaciously with no concern for their lives.

"Dieee!" screamed a cultist as he lunged at a bystander and stabbed them repeatedly with a knife.

"Aaagh!"

"You cur! Try this on for size!"

A dwarf adventurer, noticing the heinous act, struck the cultist down in anger, but then a second foe leaped at him and latched on to his back before detonating her bomb. The resulting explosion vaporized everyone in the immediate vicinity. Asfi stared, astonished, as the blast winds ruffled her skyblue hair.

"They're targeting the civilians!" she yelled, a disgusted scowl on her face. "It's to tie us up and lure us in! Despicable!"

Lacking a Falna, the Evils cultists—the so-called Faithful—knew they couldn't beat an adventurer in a fair fight. Instead, they were determined to take their enemies down with them in a blaze of self-destruction. By attacking civilians, they could corral the adventurers and then rush in close while their backs were turned.

Asfi watched as the same series of events played out again and again. Even when the adventurers knew what the Evils were doing, they couldn't simply abandon the townsfolk. Slowly, but surely, their numbers were dwindling.

She saw an animal man, covered in blood. One human screamed, desperately rolling on the ground to extinguish his burning clothes. More visceral scenes seared themselves into her mind.

"At this rate, they'll overwhelm us! Where are our reinforcements?"

There was no way Finn and the other adventurers at Central Park didn't know

about the situation by now. And yet, still nothing. Asfi only grew more and more worried as time went by.

What if they...ran into trouble?! she wondered. But at that moment, a dark, deep, male voice intruded on her thoughts.

"Now isn't the time to be daydreaming, Perseus."

Asfi wheeled around to see Olivas, a grin on his face and longsword in hand.

"This place shall be your grave," he said.

"Hrgh?!"

With incredible speed, the two of them threw themselves at each other. Asfi couched her short sword and nimbly deflected the villain's steel. There was a flash of sparks, an intense tremor, and the young girl staggered backward. One clash was all it took to reveal the difference in their power. Asfi could do nothing to stop the monstrous man from bearing down on her.

"Grrh! I can't die... Not here... Not now!"

She kept up her defense as best as her slender arms and legs could manage, but Olivas flashed a malicious and leering smile.

"I'm afraid this is the end, little girl."

It was the grin of a viper that had finally driven its prey into a corner.

Just then, however, Asfi heard Falgar's voice in her ears, shouting, "Asfi! Look out!" and time ground to a halt.

She suddenly became aware of a second foe, who had approached silently from behind, dagger in hand. The assailant realized they had been spotted and gave a mighty yell before sprinting at her to finish the job. Asfi brought her blade around and, thanks to a combination of quick wits and luck, made short work of him. Falgar's warning had saved her life.

However, nothing was safe in war. As if waiting for the moment Asfi would inevitably drop her guard, Olivas closed in.

"You know what Zald told me, little girl?" he said. "He called me a maggot. A maggot fit only for crushing other maggots like you!!"

He swung his sword and sliced her back open, spilling beautiful droplets of fresh blood like so many flower petals.

"Gaagh!"

The young girl staggered forward, very nearly falling to the ground. Olivas merely laughed at her. He pulled a second blade from his belt and leveled it at Asfi.

"Allow me to finish you off with this magic sword," he said, and the air grew blisteringly hot. Asfi spun round to see Olivas's sadistic smile, framed against a backdrop of burning crimson. The next moment, a raging hellfire descended on her.

Falgar screamed, "Asfiiiiii!!" but the roar of the flames blocked him out. A braying tempest of fire drowned out every color except fiery red. The townspeople screamed, the adventurers went pale, and the cultists cried out in glee.

The earth groaned. Smoke and wisps of flame filled the air. Asfi shot across the sea of broken rubble.

The sky was red. At some point, the clouds had broken, offering a clear view of the setting sun that dipped below Orario's seventh district. Olivas saw the madder-stained skies as a blessing on his wicked task, and he smiled.

"Gah! Kagh...! Ugh, ahhh...!!"

Meanwhile, Asfi staggered to her feet, coughing up blood. It was no miracle that she had survived that explosion. It was thanks to her snow-white cloak—an ingenious magic item of her own creation. Just before the fires engulfed her, she had wrapped it around herself, boosting her physical and magical defense.

Unfortunately, it couldn't protect her completely due to the sheer power of Olivas's sword. Scorch marks lined her face, and her arms and legs had suffered intense burns and couldn't stop shaking. Her back stung where she had been slashed, and Asfi scowled in discomfort.

Olivas laughed, grinning with glee at the blood-soaked girl's pitiful state.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Even now, you vainly cling to life! Give it up, Perseus.

My next attack will end this."

With that, Olivas pointed his magic sword at her once more. The blade glowed red-hot before launching a massive fireball in Asfi's direction. The girl screamed as it exploded.

"Aaaaagh!!"

"Asfiiii!" screamed Falgar. "Dammit, get out of my way!"

But no matter how many times he swung his greatsword, the war tiger failed to carve a path through the countless number of cultists. There were simply too many of them. A wall of evil that offered no way through.

Olivas's magic sword released projectile after projectile. Asfi tried to run, clutching her scorched arm, but eventually one of them hit its mark. Even if she used her cloak to protect herself, it wasn't enough to protect her from that merciless barrage. In a burst of fire, she was thrown to the ground, her clothes tattered and burned.

The townspeople nearby covered their mouths in shock as they were assailed by the deafening, incessant roar of flame.

"That's horrible..." said a woman.

"I-is that because we didn't evacuate in time?" asked a man.

These people had disobeyed the adventurers and refused to move closer to Central Park. Some of them had even been in the crowd that threw stones at *Astrea Familia*.

"Oh, yes," answered Olivas, his lips twisted in a grin. "That poor adventurer is going to die, and you're all to blame! Or should I say, to thank?"

He chuckled and threw his arms wide.

"The brave always die so young! You know why? Because the cowardly use them as shields!"

It was a fact oft repeated, a history eternally retold. A crushing truth that even the most heroic of tales was obliged to include.

"The powerless! The ignorant! The feeble-minded! They cannot swing a blade

or master a staff! They can only be as chains for those who fight on their behalf, cursed to guide the enemy's blade directly into their backs!"

Those content to stay at a distance, offering words but no actions.

Those who put their own safety before everyone else's.

Those who spoke highly of rights without ever getting involved.

There was nothing wrong with people like that. In fact, it was beyond ordinary. Not everyone had the strength to be a fairy-tale hero. And it was these masses who decided whether a cause was righteous or not; every would-be follower of justice needed to obtain their approval.

"At last, bear witness to the moment justice falls! Never have I felt so alive!"

Olivas spoke with open contempt for the twisted form justice took. His repulsive laughter filled the air. But the people could say nothing. Never before had the consequences of their actions been laid out in such stark relief before their very eyes. The knowledge that each and every of them was party to this tragedy was too much guilt to bear.

The looks on their faces drove Olivas to even greater heights.

"Ha-ha-ha! Yes, yeesss!" he gloated as a sadistic shiver ran down his spine. "Such despair! *This* is what my lord and master wishes to see! The beginnings of a chain reaction that will grind Orario into dust!"

The setting sun dyed his smile the color of blood.

"Change of plan," he said. "We'll still slaughter all these foolish townspeople and proceed on to Guild Headquarters, but before that..."

"Rgh...!"

"Perseus! I'll stick your head on a pike and parade it through the streets!"

Olivas set his wide, mad eyes on Asfi with disturbing clarity of purpose, as if his god had just granted him a vision. Asfi desperately tried to crawl to her feet but was in no state to stand. Olivas looked upon her, covered in blood and unable to manage anything besides a feeble twitch, and his darkness grew deeper. He licked his lips, spread his arms, and prepared to steep himself in the simplest evil of them all—violence.

"You shall become a symbol," he said. "A symbol of this city's despair!"

With that, he launched another fireball. It hit Asfi head-on, and the crimson blast flung her away. Like a broken rag doll, she skimmed the ground before finally coming to rest in a crumpled heap.

Olivas could barely contain his glee. He had defeated Asfi in the most brutal manner imaginable, and now the people cowered in fear of what he might do to them next. A deep, dark vibration originated in his stomach before working its way out of his throat.

"Heh-heh-heh. Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-la"



"Andromeda?!"

Within the church, Lyu screamed. The Evils were committing their atrocities right before her eyes.

"Oh, Olivas," said Erebus. "You really don't hold back, do you? But at least you're out there, making a difference."

His detached admiration made it sound as though he were watching characters in a play. People were dying outside, and while Lyu gasped and cried out, Erebus simply smiled and laughed. The stained-glass window might as well have been a portal to another world, or a theater screen, and Lyu an unwilling spectator to this tragedy.

But the screams ringing in her ears were real, and so were the blasts that shook every bone in her body. This wasn't a play or a bad dream she could wake up from; it was the real world.

Then, all of a sudden, Erebus turned his attention from the screen back to Lyu.

"Let's play a game, Leon," he said. "Have you heard of the Trolley Problem?"

"The what?"

Erebus smiled and launched into a courteous explanation.

"Imagine, if you will, a rail cart that suddenly loses control while in motion. Ahead of it are five men at a worksite, all of whom will surely die if the cart continues along its path. Luckily, there is a switch. One that can divert the cart onto a different path. But if you do, the cart will hit someone else. Hmm, let's say...a woman."

Erebus chuckled and glanced out the window.

"Yes, there's a single woman working on the other track. Now, what is the correct course of action in this scenario? Do you pull the switch, condemning the woman to death, or do nothing and let all five men meet their end?"

"Huh?"

"It's a little thought experiment, Leon. Honestly, you mortals come up with the most interesting diversions."

Lyu didn't understand where Erebus was going with this, but she got a terrible feeling in the pit of her stomach. His unending smile made him seem like a hunter eyeing his prey, and his thought process was entirely beyond her comprehension.

It was here that Erebus chose to make his point crystal clear.

"It's a simple conundrum, but no example more perfectly encapsulates the situation I place you in now," he said. "So choose. Will you let the men die, or allow the woman to take their place, knowing her blood will be on your hands?"

The world flickered before her very eyes. A fire raged in the back of her mind. Lyu felt her heartbeat reverberate throughout her entire body.

"...You don't...mean..."

"Oh, but I do. Now, make a choice."

All the color drained from Lyu's face, while Erebus's lit up in a broad smile.

"One woman's life in exchange for all those people," he said. "What will it to be, Leon?"

An unbearable fear came over Lyu and caused her to shudder. At that moment, she knew—there could be no clearer embodiment of evil than the one who stood before her.

"You can leave this building right now and run to save your dying friend. But if you do, it will be the end for all those innocent people."

His words were the words of a god: unbreakable and absolute.

"You have my word," he said. "Whatever it takes, I will not rest until each and every one of them is dead."

A sadistic, predatory smile traced his lips.

"Or," he said, "stay here. Let that woman die as if you had killed her with your own hands...and in return, all those poor, innocent people will be free to go."

All of a sudden, his voice took on a more merciful, benevolent tone. But what the dark god suggested was anything but.

"No lies, no tricks. I promise. I swear on my soul they will not come to harm."

A holy, yet incalculably dark pact.

"Let her die, and I will order my followers to stand down. They won't so much as touch those bystanders."

Concealed by his deceptive words, the evil god had made one subtle but considerable misdirection. The original trolley problem asked whether it was better to let the many die through inaction, or to take matter into one's own hands and kill the few. But what Erebus was proposing was the precise opposite. The tracks were switched; Lyu could do nothing and let Asfi die, allowing the citizens to go free, or condemn them to save her. There was no moral conundrum in this case. The utilitarian answer was quite clear.

The crux of Erebus's new problem, therefore, was not about cause and consequence, but about duty. About whose lives Lyu valued more. There was no doubt what the correct choice should be, but was Lyu strong enough to pursue it? Or would she instead act contrary to what her principles demanded to rescue her friend? It was the ultimate test of Lyu's commitment to upholding justice, and one she couldn't run away from.

His words still hanging in the air, Erebus silently awaited Lyu's decision. To Lyu, the momentary silence felt like an eternity, but to a god's infinite being, it was nothing.

At last, the final vestiges of justice within Lyu wrenched her reluctant lips apart. But all she could do was unleash her emotions in a vain attempt to make it all go away.

"...You're mad... You're insane!" she screamed. "What do you think you're doing?! Does life mean so little to you?!"

But try as she might to disguise them, the flames of outrage in her heart were not nearly hot enough to sway Erebus's course.

"I'm not interested in hearing you spout clichés," he said. "I asked you to choose."

There was only one thing he wanted to hear.

"Show me your answer, Leon. You can't dodge my question this time. I'll make sure of that."

Lyu froze. Her breath caught in her throat, like her lungs simply gave up and stopped working. And starved of air, the fire in her heart fizzled out. There was nothing she could do or say to avoid the choice presented to her.

"...I can't choose," she said at last. "You can't make me choose! How could I?!"

Her voice cracked and quivered. Lyu found she couldn't move a muscle, like her feet were stitched to the ground, while her blood raced so fast through her veins, it felt like it would burst out of her. She had only the strength to manage a single step back. She couldn't move her head at all, only shake it almost imperceptibly left and right in denial while her lips shivered.

But the god did not laugh at her feeble state. He only spoke.

"You can choose, Leon. But you refuse to. That in itself is an evil act."

"What?!"

Lyu was speechless. The dark god continued his rhetorical advance.

"I mean, just look at me," he said. "I could save them all with a wave of my hand, but I don't. Everyone agrees that it's evil to let people die while you have the power to save them. No ethical or philosophical argument, no matter how sophisticated, could ever justify that to the world at large. And the same goes

for you, Leon. Do nothing, and everyone will know you stood idly by while innocent people suffered."

Lyu felt as if she were being pushed closer and closer to the edge of a bottomless chasm. She heard a noise, like the last few cracks of a glacier before shedding a massive block of ice into the sea. Her mind felt as if it were breaking apart, and tears welled up in her eyes as the stress of the choice threatened to crush her.

"Come on," said Erebus. "Hurry up. There won't be a choice left to make at this rate. The girl will die, and it'll be your callous indifference that killed her. You wouldn't like that, would you, my little follower of justice?"

Erebus grinned. A vicious smile that ran all the way to his eyes, and he repeated the question that had led the two of them here, now with more anticipation than ever before.

"Tell me, Leon! Make a choice! What will your justice be?"

Lyu's sky-blue irises contracted to a pale speck. While the scales of justice trembled, she let out an ear-piercing shriek.

"Aaaaaaaaaaghhh!!"





INTERMISSION While the Scales of Justice Tremble

ASTERGA RECORD The Fall of Justice

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





INTERMISSION

While the Scales of Justice Tremble

Back in time, one hour before the elf's choice.

"Make haste, Shakti, or we'll arrive too late!"

Gareth sprinted through the half-ruined remains of Northwest Main Street, greatax slung over his shoulder. Word had just reached Central Park of a group of Evils led by Olivas, one of the enemy commanders, and Finn had sent Gareth ahead of the reinforcements.

"I know! Curses, if only we could send more people!"

Accompanying the old dwarf was Shakti of *Ganesha Familia*. Her traveling speed was leagues above that of an ordinary person.

"That would leave Central Park completely undefended, Shakti!" Gareth shouted back. "This one's for us to shoulder!"

Already the sounds of battle echoed in the distance. Gareth felt as though he could almost see the Evils up ahead to the northwest.

"We're almost there!" he cried. "Hurry, we'll take out all the enemy at the same—!"

However, Gareth never managed to set foot in district seven. A figure appeared out of nowhere, blocking his path.

"Grrrrrhhh!!"

"Gareth!"

A dull thud swept over the streets, and Gareth was flung backward. His feet gouged furrows in the ground as he came to a stop alongside Shakti. The two of them stared down the road, where the newcomer stood amid a rain of dust and pebbles.

"Why must I respond to these worthless requests?" came his voice, as cold and dark as blackened steel. "Then again, this entire scheme is a worthless endeavor. It stands to reason that any act carried out in its name is worthless also."

It was the conqueror himself, clad in black plate and with a helm that obscured his eyes. In his hands was a sword so thick and massive that his opponents didn't believe what they were seeing.

"Zald?!" Gareth spoke in astonishment. "So it's true—you chose evil, just like Alfia."

On the first night of the Great Conflict, Gareth had only run into Alfia before he was knocked unconscious. He had heard of Zald's presence, but only in rumor, so seeing him in the flesh, Gareth was forced to wear a bitter scowl beneath his helmet.

"It has been long since I last saw your weathered face, old dwarf," replied Zald. "Strangely, though, I only recall it in the trappings of a tavern."

"Heh, I remember those days," Gareth retorted. "I don't suppose you've come to enjoy a drink like old times? There's a nice spot near here that serves up some strong dwarven spirits."

"Are you sure about that?" asked Zald. "Have you forgotten already how I used to drink you and that god of yours under the table? Pass out this time, and a far worse fate awaits you than the silly pranks from the good old days."

Even as the pair reminisced over the Orario of eight years past, the tension in the air caused a single bead of sweat to drip down Gareth's face, while Zald stood unfazed.

Meanwhile, Shakti was simply bewildered by this sudden trip down memory lane she wasn't a part of.

What are those two talking about? Wait, did he just say he beat Gareth in a drinking contest? That's not possible, is it?

Ganesha Familia's reliable font of common sense was lost for words. Her brain simply went blank when it tried to picture what that scenario might look like. The black-clad man before her, scribbling on Gareth's drunken face like a mischievous child?

"Wait, stop it! We have more important things to worry about right now! Out of our way! We need to—"

Boom!

The earth quaked as Zald thrust his greatsword into it, interrupting Shakti's sentence.

"If you pass this point," he said, "then what I drink shall be no dwarven spirits, but a cocktail of your blood."

""Grh?!""

Gareth and Shakti grimaced as they readied their weapons and faced off against the black-clad man. Terror bound them like chains as the conqueror's crimson cape caught the wind and billowed.

"If that is still your wish," he said, "then let us drink. I shall fill a cask with your blood and down every last drop."

The conqueror lifted his greatsword with ease and leveled it at the two adventurers.

"Wraaaaaagh!!"

The adventurer closed in on the woman for an all-out attack. An attack she repelled with a single word.

"Gospel."

The silent, unseeing witch expelled a wave of sound, sending the adventurer flying.

"Gah!"

"Grh...! It's you...! Alfia!"

Riveria scowled as she checked the other members of her party. They were supposed to be the reinforcements sent after Gareth and Shakti, but all of them had been thrown to the ground or sent into stone walls.

They were on West Main Street. Riveria had just run into the second of the two conquerors, right as Gareth and Shakti faced off against the first.

"Once again you appear before me, elf," said Alfia. "Even eight years ago, you

were always the same. How many times do I need to crush you before you give up?"

Alfia regarded Riveria with closed eyes and a dispassionate air. The high elf clutched her staff tightly.

"I will always come back so long as you stand in our way!" she yelled against the witch's weighty cloak of silence. "What do you stand to gain by obstructing us like this?!"

She had appeared as soon as reinforcements tried to enter district seven. It was clear that Alfia meant to stop them from reaching their goal, but to what end, Riveria could not say. She could hear the screams and explosions coming from beyond her, but there was no way through without defeating the witch.

"I act on the orders of a god," said Alfia. "He said to let no soul pass, so that is precisely what I shall do. Perhaps you could say I am following the whims of a god poisoned by tedium."

What happened next came not from Riveria. Alfia stood dead-center in the middle of the road, but there was one angle she hadn't accounted for. It was the perfect spot for an attack. Leaping from the rooftops, an assailant carrying a sword almost as big as her entire body took aim at Alfia's head.

"Hup!"

It was Aiz. She acted without fear or hesitation, her entire existence devoted to eliminating the threat in front of her. However, it still wasn't enough.

"If you wanted to take me by surprise, then you should've learned how to hide your intent better, child."

Alfia deftly parried Aiz's blow. Using nothing but her bare hand, she knocked the flat of the sword aside without sacrificing a shred of grace. Aiz's eyes went wide in the fraction of a second before, as if sweeping an invisible fan, Alfia aimed her other hand at the girl's chest. Aiz managed to throw up her wrist-guards just in time so that the devastating blow only knocked her to the ground instead of tearing her apart.

"Aiz!"

Riveria screamed. But Alfia ignored her. Instead, she began moving toward the girl.

"Do not think I will show mercy to a child," she said.

She held out her palm, ready to unleash her boundless magic. Aiz flinched, bracing herself for complete and utter destruction...but the spell never came. Slowly, she unbraced her arms and looked up at Alfia in confusion.

"You..." said the witch, opening her eyes a sliver. For the first time, she appeared genuinely taken aback. Aiz didn't dare breathe while the remnant of *Hera Familia* prepared her next words.

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"You..." she repeated at last. "The Dungeon girl?"
""!!""
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Aiz and Riveria both went wide-eyed at the same time. Before long, however, Alfia's look returned to that of the silent witch once more.

"I see," she said. "I do not know how you managed it, Loki Familia, but it seems the girl is now yours. I presume this means Ouranos has not given up on Makhia."

As if able to see it all in her crystal ball, Alfia pierced straight through to the heart of the mystery. Riveria stood stock-still, staff in hand, refusing to either confirm or deny her theory.

"So," Alfia went on. "Tell me. Is this what you intend to make of your prize? A martyr?"

"Grr! Silence!!"

The elf's eyebrows seesawed in anger. Giving herself over to emotion, she pounced at her foe, staff in hand. Knowing her foe was capable of nullifying magical attacks, she forgot her training for the time being and called upon her skill in hand-to-hand combat.

"Krh!!"

Aiz joined her. Like a mother and child, this mage and swordmaiden wove

their attacks in perfect collaboration. Riveria hooked the foe's legs with her staff, while Aiz swung at the witch's arm. However, even this flawless coordination posed little more danger than the wind itself to Alfia. With a single step or tilt of the head, she dodged each and every blow, and the pair of adventurers never even scratched her dress.

For seven exchanges, Alfia and her opponents swapped positions, each time their attacks reaching only thin air. Then, on the eighth, Alfia reached out and grabbed Riveria's staff in her left hand and Aiz's sword in her right.

""Rgh?!""

"Even noise must be listened to," she said. "Once in a while, it teaches you something new... Not something that can ever give rise to hope, unfortunately."

With unimaginable force, given her slender frame, she threw Riveria and Ais back.

"Our fate remains unchanged, and our goal is the same. We will bring an end to the age of the gods."

She thrust out her right arm, and her gospel unleashed untold destruction. When all the sound had died down at last, Alfia was the only one remaining.

Riveria had quickly tucked Aiz under her arm and leaped somewhere out of range, but her long ears ran red with blood. A pure note, like a tuning fork, rang in her head.

"Preposterous!" she said, screwing up her dust-caked features.

Aiz, dangling from Riveria's arms, trembled in fear. "She's strong!" she remarked. "Stronger than Finn! Stronger than anyone!"

Her armor now was riddled with cracks, and her lips trembled as shards of metal fell from her body. Aiz saw in that fearsome witch a reflection of a hero from another time.

"She's...just like Father and the others!"



"Captain! Evils cultists spotted in all districts! They seem to be responding to

the attacks in the northwest!"

Beneath the reddening sky, Finn surveyed the city from the rooftop of Guild Headquarters, the large, Pantheon-like building on Adventurers Way. As soon as he heard Raul's shaky-voiced report, a bead of sweat dribbled down the side of his face.

"Move to intercept!" he said after a moment's thought. "Our top priority is ensuring the townspeople's safety!"

Ever since news of Olivas's assault came in, the situation had been steadily deteriorating from bad to worse. Pillars of black smoke were rising from across the entire city, and it took no great feat of hearing to pick out the sounds of screams, magic, and clashing steel that filled the air.

The fighting was just as fierce toward the center of the city as it was near the enemy siege lines, and every available adventurer was forced to fend off hordes of Evils cultists.

"Send Noir's unit to secure the factory district! Have the Berbera deploy south to intercept the other enemy force moving in from the southwest!"

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"""Y-yes, sir!"""
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To Finn's expert eye, the enemy strategies seemed unsophisticated. It couldn't be Valletta's work.

His intel comprised whatever he could glean from his rooftop vantage point and the reports coming in from messengers like Raul, but that was no impediment to the speed and precision of his commands. There was only one issue on his mind.

"This was clearly set in motion by a rogue commander, but it's as if there's a second foe, adding forces to the battle! Could it be Erebus?"

Finn could sense the god's divine will at work, pressuring his forces to stay away.

He must be trying to stop us from reaching district seven! I've sent multiple waves of reinforcements, but none of them can get past Zald!

The skirmishes springing up throughout the city were obviously distractions

intended to tie up allied forces and keep them from reaching the northwest. Even Gareth and Riveria had found their paths blocked by the two conquerors.

Owing to their mysterious absence following the start of the Great Conflict, Finn had expected Zald and Alfia to abstain from the rest of the war as well. Their sudden return came as something of a shock.

I can't spare any more forces! Damn, there's not much left I can do!

Finn wasn't given much time to respond, but he couldn't just start moving his forces around without thinking it through. Any sudden changes to the battle lines could open up holes in the allied defense that the enemy wouldn't hesitate to capitalize on. The only choice was to maintain the front lines and abandon district seven to its fate.

Everyone I sent to back Gareth up has fallen! Perhaps I shouldn't have let Ottar's lot continue their training after all! And Mia is out fighting Apate Familia and Alecto Familia! I can't call her back now!

Finn considered every option available to him, but one by one, he mentally struck them off the list. Raul, who was still standing behind him, began quaking in fear.

"C-Captain!" he said. "We're running out of options! At this rate, all those people in district seven are going to die!"

If Finn did nothing, Raul's grim prediction would become the callous truth. The black-clad executor of Erebus's will would be free to turn district seven into his playground, and after that, it wouldn't be long before the balance of good and evil tipped heavily in the dark god's favor.

"No," he said.

He couldn't let that happen. Finn lifted his arm and pointed to the northeast. There, the beacon of justice remained lit, fighting to keep the darkness at bay.

"We still have them," said Finn. "Raul, get ready."

"Them?" repeated Raul, uncertain. "Y-you don't mean..."

But Finn's blue eyes remained fixed on the beacon of starlight that represented the city's final hope.

| "Astrea Familia Alize Lovell! Answer the call!" | | | |
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AHOGRGA RECORD The Fall of Justice

Story by Lujino Omori - Illustration by Kakage Character Design by Hughito Yasuda

CHAPTER 9

The Story of a Perfectly Normal Girl: Alize Lovell

I couldn't stand injustice when I was young.

For me, Alize Lovell, everything needed to be proper. It was the only thing I cared about.

I thought that the world could be enriched through logic, reason, and correctness.

As a child, I was always at the center of my group of friends and the first to speak out against wrongdoing. It didn't matter what gender or race they were—human, dwarf, or prum.

I began seeing myself as superior to others. I don't mean I was arrogant or boastful or anything. But I thought I had the right to do whatever I saw fit.

When anyone tried to get in my way, I made them sit down. Whenever I saw something wrong, I tried to fix it. I began to champion justice and righteousness.

Until one day, I hurt somebody. A boy who had been bullying one of my close friends.

The first time I saw blood, I felt myself getting farther from justice. The grown-ups were angrier with me than with the bully. Even my friend seemed scared of me and didn't talk to me much after that.

It was then that I felt things starting to change. The more I talked about logic, reason, and facts, the more I distanced myself from people. The more I tried to make everything right, the lonelier I became.

For the first time, I began doubting the values I had taken for granted until then.

What was "right"?

What was "justice"?

None of the grown-ups I asked could give me a straight answer. Not even my parents.

And so, like the naive child I was, I thought to ask the gods for advice.

All they did was smirk. "Justice?" they said. "Hah. Who knows...?"

They found my struggle amusing, just like they do now.

I was angry at them. So I left the city.

I went on a journey in anger.

I searched for my answer in anger.

I found *nothing* in anger.

And before long...I cried in anger.

But I couldn't turn back after everything I'd said and done.

One day, the rain fell so hard, I could almost forget my tears.

That was when I met her.

"What's wrong, little one?"

A goddess of justice.

Lady Astrea.



"Lyra! Kaguya!"

Astrea threw open the front door and ran out into the front yard of Stardust Garden. The two girls were there, receiving treatment from their fellow familia members. They had crawled all the way from the front lines before collapsing in the garden.

"Gah, couldn't you have given us enough time to do our hair, at least?" asked Lyra. "We ain't exactly presentable right now..."

Her indomitable quips couldn't hide the blood running down from her eardrums, and her forced smile was almost painful to look at. Seated on the

grass, she looked battered beyond belief, as though she had just run through a bomb-strewn battlefield.

Her heart laden with grief, Astrea turned to the Amazon girl looking after the pair. "How are they, Iska?" she asked.

"Of the two, I think Lyra got off the lightest," replied Iska, wiping the sweat from her brow. "I gave them all the potions I could scrounge up; I just wish we had some decent supplies."

She looked over Kaguya, lying on the ground as Marieux tended to her with magical healing and even more potions. Her silky black hair lay strewn across her face, and she had not regained consciousness, even now.

"Lyra...what happened?" asked Astrea.

"We ran into that dipshit god and Hera's chick; she whooped our asses. They let us get away, but we don't have a damn thing to show for it otherwise..."

"Erebus and Alfia..." said Astrea. All around her, the other girls gasped. Lyra and Kaguya had run headfirst into the enemy general and his Level 7 powerhouse. It was a wonder they'd come back at all.

"And that ain't the only bit of bad news," said Lyra. "In fact, this one's the real clincher. Turns out that bastard's after Leon."

"!!"

This time, even Astrea could not conceal her shock. Of course, Lyu had told them all about how, prior to the Great Conflict, the evil god had appeared many times before her in the guise of Eren.

It was often the case that gods, loyal only to their own interests, appeared before mortals to test them and their curious ways. Not for science or even pleasure, but an altogether separate motivation that only an eternal being truly understood.

And now, it had happened to Lyu.

Astrea wanted to know more. What exactly had the dark god talked to her about? But before she could ask, the human girl Noin came running in, bearing Raul's message.

"We've just gotten word from *Loki Familia*!" she said. "The city is under attack in all districts! Finn wants us to head to the northwest to break the enemy line!"

"Northwest?" repeated Lyra. "But that's where we got our asses handed to us! You don't think...?"

As if to answer her awful premonition, the far-eastern girl stirred from her slumber at last.

"That must be where Leon is," she said, digging her fingers into the lawn and sitting herself up. "That bastard won't rest until he's had his fun."

"Kaguya!" cried Astrea.

"Sit yourself back down, you walking corpse!" came Marieux's concerned voice. "I've only just healed you up. Any sudden movement is only going to make things worse!"

"Don't worry about me, Marieux," Kaguya replied, climbing shakily to her feet. "I'll do a lot better fighting out there than staying cooped up around here."

The girl wore a ferocious grin, but the sheen of sweat was impossible to hide.

"I'd listen to the doc if I were you." Lyra chuckled before adopting a more serious frown. "But I get your point. Let's all go get Leon together. Let's bring our girl back home."

She glanced around at the other girls, who all nodded. Finally, she turned to her goddess.

"You're not gonna try to stop us, are you?" she asked.

"As you wish," Astrea replied. "But allow me to pray for your safe return instead."

While the girls all steadily collected their nerves, Kaguya inquired as to the status of their missing member.

"Where's our captain, Neze?"

"She went to her room to rest," the werewolf girl said. "She's been working so hard lately. But she's probably in there thinking."

The ears atop her head twitched, and she turned her focus to the main

building.

"Thinking about justice. She's trying to come up with an answer for all of us."

The members of *Astrea Familia* all thought of their leader. A girl who bowed her head when the townsfolk threw rocks at her. A girl who showed her brightest smile when the doubt in her heart was greatest.

Right now, she was alone, grappling with justice somewhere far out of reach.

"I see," said Kaguya. "Well, we can't leave her there. Without our leader, we're nothing but a rowdy mob!"

Kaguya dashed off through the front doors of the home, with Lyra and all the rest of *Astrea Familia* at her back.



After meeting Lady Astrea, I started to learn about the nature of justice.

But I never got an answer. Even she never taught me that.

And in time, I came to feel that the only real answer was that there wasn't one.

One day, for what seemed like no reason, Lady Astrea said these words aloud: "It is simple for us gods to show our children the justice they seek."

"All we have to do is use our arcanum."

"With a wave of our finger, we can bring happiness to all our children."

"There will be no good or evil, just happy, smiling people."

"But that isn't right."

"That is not justice for this world."

If earth became a paradise where all our desires were fulfilled, we would have no reason to keep improving. Satisfaction brings peace, which in turn leads to stagnation. A poison that kills the world—that could never be what justice is.

The nature of justice...is to keep moving on. To keep asking questions, even when you think you've found the most beautiful star in the sky.

That applies to right now, too. Leon, Orario—they're all waiting for me to answer their questions about evil.

Sometimes I feel like the weight of justice will crush me.

Sometimes I feel like evil has it better than us.

They can have it all. Follow every pleasure, indulge every urge, and never struggle with contradictions.

Evil is instinctual. It tells us everything we're wired to believe is right.

So then, is justice the opposite of that? Something rational?

To always have to suffer because of the difference between our hopes and reality?

I don't know.

I don't know.

I don't know.

But I have to answer, I have to. I have to.

My answer is...



"Alize! The enemy's here! Leon's in trouble! Open up! Hurry! Open uuuuup!!"

Lyra pounded on the door to Alize's room with both fists, screaming through to the other side like a child anxiously calling for their parent. Astrea and the other girls stood in the hallway behind her.

Then Kaguya stepped up. "Sorry, Captain, but you leave us no choice! I'm going to have to break down this door if you don't come out!"

But just as she placed her hand to her sword, ready to draw it, there was a creak, and the door swung open.

"||"

There stood Alize, eyes closed and head downcast, without saying a word.

"Alize..." muttered Astrea.

There was an almost holy air around her, like a hermit who had just spent fifty years in the mountains and achieved enlightenment. The other girls couldn't help but treat her with reverence and awe.

"Captain," said Lyra, "does this mean...?"

"...you know the answer?" finished Kaguya.

Alize slowly opened her eyes, lifted her chin, and looked toward each of her friends in turn. They all held their breath as they awaited her next words.

Finally, she parted her lips.

The solemn atmosphere shattered into a million pieces.

"Sorry, girls. I tried my best! I tried so hard, my stomach started growling, but I couldn't think of anything!"

There wasn't a hint of shame in her words. All that contemplation in ascetic solitude was just for show apparently.

Meanwhile, each of the girls looked like pigeons that had just been shot out of the sky.

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Lyra looks like she's seen the world's biggest idiot, thought Astrea, a bead of sweat dripping down her neck as she watched the prum's face twitch.

Kaguya, meanwhile, seemed frozen in time for a moment, before suddenly coming to and taking a determined step toward Alize.

"Captain! Now isn't the time to be joking around! We have to—!"

"I'm not joking around," Alize said. "It's just that the answer is something it'll take our whole lives to find! For now, we have to keep making mistakes and getting lost!"

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""!""
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This was the solution she had come to just now, something she was proud to share with her comrades. Lyra, Kaguya, and all the rest of the girls couldn't believe their ears.

"So I can't give you an answer now! It's not just 'cause I'm dumb—it's impossible!!"

This, in itself, was Alize's answer. To admit that she was foolish and ignorant, and that was why she searched. To be a traveler, looking to the stars above and picking out the ones that truly shone.

Alize proudly placed her hand to her chest.

"So, girls! I want to stick with you all while we keep on trying to work out what the heck this justice thing is all about! Wink!"

Alize's jovial punctuation earned her the ire of her entire group and an array of ill-fitting smiles. All save Astrea, of course, whose expression was better described as a kind of hopeless endearment.

"All right, let's go find Leon, then! I need to go tell her all about my perfect imperfection! Onwaaard!!"

With that, Alize took off down the hallway, leaving the stupefied girls of *Astrea Familia* in the dust. Lyra was so exhausted by her behavior that she completely forgot what she'd been in such a hurry for.

"Who made her the captain?" she asked aloud. "And why did we ever agree to follow her?"

Standing beside her, Kaguya grinned and answered.

"Because she's Alize Lovell," she said.

"Aw, crap. You know what? You're damn right!"

On Lyra's face was a smile, and all the fear and worry was banished from her eyes.

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"C'mon, girls!" she bellowed. "Let's go!"
"""""Yeah!!"""""
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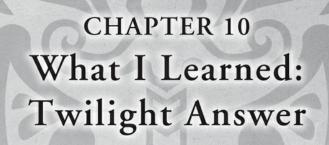
Lyra took off after her rambunctious captain, followed by the rest of *Astrea Familia*, and brought up at the rear by Kaguya.

"Well then, wish us luck, Lady Astrea," she said.

"Yes, good luck," replied Astrea. "And remember to always believe in yourselves."

After all of her children had departed, Astrea dropped her smile. For a while, she stayed still, taking in the silence of the mansion and reforging her courage.

"And so shall I," she said at last.



AFTGREA RECORD

Story by Lujino Omori · Illustration by Kakage Character Design by Hughito Yasuda

CHAPTER 10

What I Learned: Twilight Answer

Red evening light leaked through the cracked stained-glass window, like blood mixed with tears. Lyu stood by herself at the center of the church, steeped in despair.

"Tell me, Leon! Make a choice! What will your justice be?"

The evil god's question still rang in her ears. Her vision was distorted, like she'd fallen into a maze of broken mirrors.

She couldn't breathe. It was almost like she'd forgotten how. The light pierced her eyes, but she couldn't remember what it was or where she was standing. Her heart kept pounding, like it was trying to break out of her chest.

"Rest assured, Leon. This will be the last time I ask you about justice."

The dark god smiled. Lyu was clutching at her chest, about to start hyperventilating, and her face was deathly pale.

"So hurry up. Give me your answer. Don't wait for me to grow bored with you. You know what will happen to that girl if you do."

"Grh...!"

As if on cue, an explosion painted the window in sharp shades of red.

Unbelievable plumes of smoke rose off Asfi's body. It was difficult to believe that the scorched smell of skin and flesh was coming from her own body. She tried to regain her balance, only to remember that she had already fallen and now lay prone on the floor.

Her cloak had saved her life, but by now it had blackened and had basically disintegrated. It would not protect her from the next attack.

Asfi fought off the encroaching oblivion and forced herself awake. In her trembling arms, she gripped her whip.

"Haah... Haah...!"

Red drops of blood spilled from her lips as she panted, rising falteringly to her feet like a newborn fawn.

Olivas stood facing her, bathed in the bloodred of dusk, grinning.

"Adventurers always cling so stubbornly to life. You, girl, are no exception."

Olivas gripped his magic sword and swung it mercilessly at the dying Asfi.

"Urgh!"

"Asfi! Dammit!"

Olivas toyed with his prey, intentionally avoiding the killing blow and instead blasting her along the ground. Falgar looked over toward where she lay, dashed against the rubble, but neither he nor anyone else in *Hermes Familia* was able to cut a path through the unending horde to reach her.

"Look at you," Olivas sneered. "The sacrificial lamb, bleeding and burned, unable to even scream. I wish I could have this moment forever preserved in a painting, Andromeda!"

His body shook with an almost religious fervor. Then he turned and addressed the people around him.

"People of Orario! Do not avert your eyes! Gaze upon that which your cowardice has bought and weep! Let your cries be heard all across the city!"

The people were frozen in shock. They couldn't even continue fleeing. All they could do was stare at the torment unfolding before them, their hearts and minds possessed by guilt and despair.

"Stop it... Stop it!!"

"Help her! Somebody help her!"

These were the two parents who had lost their young daughter.

"Grgh...!"

This was the man Ardee had spared.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha! Hee-hee-hee-hee! Fools, can you not see that my allies hold your rescuers at bay? Her fate is sealed!"

Olivas had to try not to double over with laughter at the hopeless wails of the townsfolk. Their cries only fed the flames of his evil.

"There is no hope for any of you! This is the end, adventurer. After you, it shall be this city that burns!"

Framed by the cracks of the stained-glass window, Lyu saw her friend on the verge of death. That scene, painted in the shades of the setting sun, stole away what little determination she had left. Her heart filled with a despair she couldn't shake. Another friend, about to be lost, just like Ardee.

"We stand at a crossroads, Leon. But don't worry. No one's looking, so choose."

The god's whispered tones were sweet and intoxicating.

"The one or the many. Your friend or the faceless masses. No one will know it was them you chose to forsake."

A diabolical crescent etched itself into his lips as the evil god pressed the bouquet of ruin into Lyu's unwilling arms.

Her heart raced. The world turned black-and-white, flashing rapidly between light and darkness. The crossroads approached. The time was nigh to make that terrible decision and see which way the scales fell.

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"Leon," said the mad god. "What is your justice?"
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"l... | ...! | ...!!"

"She'll come."

While the scales of justice trembled, a second voice rang out. One that was not Lyu's own.

"!!"

Lyu lifted her head. Erebus allowed his gaze to follow hers. The two of them looked through the broken window at a silent battlefield bathed in dusk.

"She'll...come."

Stained in the evening light, Asfi climbed to her feet.

"What?" said Olivas, wrinkling his brow.

"She will come. Our hope."

Asfi stood at death's door. It was hard to point to any part of her that wasn't burned or bleeding. Her legs trembled, struggling to bear her weight as the blood drained from her veins. It looked like the slightest breeze would bring her down.

But her eyes shone bright. They shone with faith and determination, banishing the suffering and pain she felt.

"Leon will be here."

When she heard the girl's words, carried over to her on the wind, Lyu gasped.

"Leon?" sneered Olivas. "You mean *Astrea Familia*? Hah! Foolish girl! You must be mad! To think a messenger of justice would suddenly appear now, right when you need her? That's the very height of folly! What could have possibly convinced you to spout such ridiculous claims?"

The evil lieutenant laughed, joined by his dark host. Their shadows stretched long and dark in the setting sun. Standing in their shade, Asfi closed her eyes.

"I know she will. Because..."

She looked up, and clutched her chest.

"If I can't believe in Leon," she yelled, "then what can I believe in?! Nobody else has given so much, lost so much, and hurt so much, all for the sake of peace!"

Asfi had seen it with her own eyes. She saw how *Astrea Familia* worked to keep the people smiling. She saw how Lyu kept on fighting, even when the evil became too great to bear.

No matter how loud the Evils' laughter, the path of justice would never disappear.

"There's no way I would lose faith in someone like that! That would be the same as losing my faith in everything!"

Lyu felt her fists quiver.

"A foolish hope! And still you cling to the false promises of justice! Look

around you!" Olivas swept his arm in the direction of the terrified townsfolk. "Who among them can say they agree? Look at their faces! Not a one still holds trust in the justice you preach!"

In stark agreement with his words, the faces of the townsfolk were dark with despair. Among them were the young men who tossed stones at *Astrea Familia*, the woman who denounced them, and the parents of little Leah. They hung their heads in shame, as if now facing a trial for their actions.

"They rejected justice!" Olivas howled. "Why should it save them now?! Haha-ha-ha! It shall not! And all of them know this!"

Olivas's words rang true. Lyu stood in the crevice between agony and despair. She still didn't know what justice was. She hadn't reached her answer. And there were no stars to which she could turn.

And yet Asfi smiled.

"It doesn't matter if they despair. It doesn't matter if they falter in their faith. Those girls...will never forsake them."

"What?"

Before Olivas's puzzled gaze, before Lyu's shocked eyes, Asfi's mind dove into the past and recalled a powerful memory.

"Because forgiveness...is a part of justice, too. A dear friend once taught me that."

"I've been thinking, Leon. Do you think forgiveness can be a part of justice?"

A memory of a story she had heard from the girl herself, about the time she defended a man who had erred.

"!!"

In the crowd, the purse snatcher tightened his fists as he thought back to that day.

"Aah... Aaah!"

Leah's mother, who had heard those words straight from Ardee's mouth, wept.

"If justice has hurt you, made you doubt, and still you find yourself wondering...then that's the mark of a true believer."

All the members of the Evils froze to listen to her words. Even Olivas just stood there, wide-eyed.

"That is the way of the righteous! Someone who still dares to walk the path of justice!"

Her voice touched everyone's hearts. The people, the adventurers, the Evils, and even the god of primordial darkness. Erebus stood there in shock as a single tear ran down Lyu's cheek.

"So yes, she's coming. They're all coming. Leon, our hope, is coming!"

Asfi's heartfelt words rained down like a shower of stars, and before she knew it, Lyu was crying.

"Hmph! What nonsense. Enough of this, you're only wasting my time!"

Olivas snarled at the unquenchable flame of determination in Asfi's eyes. He raised his arm as if to bring a swift end to this idle distraction.

"Kill her, my brethren!!"

The Evils cultists all brandished their blades, descending on where Asfi stood, eager to grant her a swift death. Before she could think to stop herself, Lyu had started running. She leaped through the shattered glass window, exited the church, and cut down one of the cultists with her sword.

```
"Gaaagh!"
```

"What?"

"Leon!"

Both Olivas and Asfi cried out when they saw her, but Lyu barely heard their shocked voices as something took control of her. Her fingers gripped her sword. She swung, slicing through the crowd of darkness like a gust of wind.

"All alone, little girl?" Olivas laughed. "Did you come here to die?"

Sure enough, Lyu's actions had solved little. She had chosen neither path set before her but had run straight from the crossroads instead. Soon, the evil god would make good on his promise and command his legions to put the innocent townsfolk to death.

All she was doing was acting on impulse. Even her brain was screaming at her, demanding to know what she intended to do with a heart still so full of doubt.

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"Now, die!"
```

She heard Olivas preparing his magic sword.

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"Leon!"
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She heard her friend screaming her name.

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"…"
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Only a cruel death awaited her. Very soon, those flames would engulf her, leaving naught of her fledgling justice but—

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"Roooaaaaaaghhh!!"
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The sounds of heavy footfalls. A voice trembling with fear. But an indomitable spirit. Before Lyu's eyes, the flames that were about to consume her disappeared.

```
"...Wha...?"
```

All she could manage was that one, feeble sound. Someone had covered for her rash mistake. The purse snatcher. He had jumped in front of Lyu, arms outstretched, taking the blow meant for her. The smell of burning flesh accompanied a billowing cloud of smoke, and when it cleared, the man fell to his knees.

```
"Khrrrh!"
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He was not an adventurer. No familia counted him among their ranks. He was just a criminal who had attempted to rob a god and been acquitted by Lyu's friend. A petty thief who could only run away from a fight...or so Lyu thought.

```
"You... Why...?"
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Lyu could barely keep her voice steady as she interrogated the dying man.

"I just wanted...to give somethin' back...to that kid who bought it..."

The man didn't even turn back, as if there were no face he could possibly show her that would be appropriate. Thus only his words told Lyu how he felt.

"I been thinkin' how to do it...for a long, long time... Guess I finally saw my chance..."

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""
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Lyu noticed her own hands were trembling. Her breath caught in her throat, and she was steeped in a feeling she couldn't quite explain.

The man tilted his head and looked up at the sky.

"Hey," he said, as if speaking to somebody up there. "Did I repay my debt...to justice?"

Then he collapsed loudly. After that, there was no sound. Time itself stopped. Everything mixed together and melted away, leaving only a blinding white. A singular justice that went on and on in Lyu's mind.

The next moment, she saw it.

In a field of golden wheat, dyed orange by the setting sun, she stood there, bathed in light.

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"Leon."
```

She was smiling. Just like she had been back then.

```
"Justice will go on."
```

Those were the words that Lyu had learned from her. The words the grief and loss had caused her to forget for a time. That was her answer. Justice never died. Even if it wasn't right at first, it could carry on in a different form. Just like how the man who Ardee saved had gone on to save Lyu, justice could endure and pass to someone new.

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"Ardee..."
```

Lyu's quivering lips spoke her name, even though she wasn't really there.

And then what she had always wanted to tell her but never had the chance.

```
"Thank you..."
```

The evening light faded to nothing. The very last thing Lyu saw was the girl's smile.



"That ordinary man...stood up for her?! The helpless...becoming the protector?!"

Olivas could not conceal his surprise. To him, the residents of Orario were nothing more than a convenient hindrance, bringing down the adventurers of Orario, as well as allowing him to satisfy his own sadistic desires.

Yet one of them had acted on his own initiative, to protect those who fought on his behalf.

"Does that mean...he believed in justice after all?!"

That was the flame that threatened to capsize evil's rule. A drop of justice that shone in the all-engulfing dark. Olivas was right to fear it, for it was a sign the people's despair was turning to hope.

"Leon... Ardee..."

Seeing the path her late friend's justice had taken, Asfi quietly shed a few tears.

Lyu stepped in front of the fallen man, wiping her eyes and looking straight ahead with clear determination.

"Erebus," she said. "You want to hear my answer? Here it is."

With the god listening in the church far behind her, Lyu laid her heart bare.

"Justice will go on! Justice is the light of every star we leave behind, so that those after us can follow!"



Lyu's powerful voice struck awe into the hearts of the adventurers, and their fingers tightened around their weapons.

"Even if our flesh and blood withers and fades, justice will never be silenced!"

Her brilliant determination, brought back from the brink of death, entranced the townsfolk and commanded their total attention.

"That is why I will never give up!"

Her voice carried to the church, where the evil god stood alone, grinning.

"I will fight against despair with my dying breath! Until all that I am is ash!"

Her voice carried to Asfi, who gave a fragile smile on the verge of tears.

"I will count each saved life a blessing and pass on my justice to all!"

Her voice rang in the eardrums of everyone present.

"I will never let justice die! That is my answer!"

Lyu looked now upon a new path. A path of light, crafted from the dust of fallen stars. Deep inside her heart, her friend's dreams burned brightly still, banishing her hesitation. She stared unflinchingly at the minions of evil, who still weren't sure how to respond to her resounding determination.

"Ha! Inspiring words, girl. Let's see if you can live up to them!" growled Olivas, undaunted by her righteous message. Already recovered from his momentary upset, he transformed his scowling features into a hideous smile. "Look around you! Your honeyed words will not save them now!"

Sure enough, the situation looked dire. Asfi was at death's door, unable to aid Lyu in the fight. Falgar and the rest of *Hermes Familia* were also on their last legs. Lyu stood no chance of turning it around on her own. And soon, Erebus would make good on his promise and slaughter the bystanders for Lyu's failure.

So Olivas was confident, sneering at the lone elf who dared stand in his way.

"You've changed nothing, girl," he said. "Soon you and all those wretched people will—"

"Oh, I don't think so," came a voice. "'Cause we're here now."

There were those in this city who could follow up on Lyu's determination.

Lyu's eyes went wide. Olivas gasped. Asfi clenched her fist, welcoming the moment she knew would arrive.

Everyone spun around to see the source of the voice. It came from high atop the city walls. Framed against the setting sun stood a single girl. Her sudden appearance shocked the Evils and adventurers both.

Olivas staggered. "Y-you!" he cried. "It can't be...!"

Her flame-colored hair danced in the wind. And in a proud, strong voice, she declared, "Justice has arrived!!"



"The sound of battle has changed," muttered Alfia. "Did somebody pass me?"

She stood on West Main Street, having suffered not a single scratch that would call her overwhelming superiority into question. She knitted her narrow eyebrows and pondered. Her opponent, Riveria, on the other hand, was battered and beaten, but she wore a triumphant smile.

"Astrea Familia!" she said. "I always knew you girls were resourceful, but I never expected you to be bold enough to take the walls while the bulk of the Evils marched into the city!"

Her keen elf eyes picked out the figures standing atop the fortifications. She had been watching them ever since they initiated their ambush, taking the walls' defenders by surprise and using them to swiftly reach the northwest district.

"This must be your work, Slyle," she said. "Your quick and decisive thinking reminds me a lot of our own prum!"

"Yeah. They got there so fast," agreed Aiz, appearing beside her, also covered in cuts.

Alfia shook her head and turned to leave. "It's pathetic," she said, "that they can't even hold their own positions without our help."

However, Riveria and Aiz weren't about to let her get away.

"Where do you think you're going?" Riveria called out after her. "Aren't you worried what we'll do if you leave?"

"If I help," added Aiz, "will you let me cut up all the bad guys? I can do that and help at the same time, I promise."

Riveria grinned at Alfia like a merchant beginning negotiations. "My long-range magic can reach the battlefield from here," she explained. "I'll probably damage the city in the process, but it's already in shambles, thanks to you."

Riveria was deliberately provoking her. But that didn't mean what she was saying wasn't the truth. If Alfia really wanted to uphold Erebus's will, she couldn't leave Riveria unattended.

"...Impudent woman," she muttered before turning back to face the two adventurers, their staff and sword at the ready.

Meanwhile, on Northwest Main Street, Zald glanced over in the direction of Olivas's army.

"I could butcher the two of you right here," he said, "but it is already too late."

He turned to look back at Gareth and Shakti, who stood on the brink of defeat, their weapons and armor all but destroyed.

"Eight years have passed since Zeus left the city," he said. "I suppose even baby chicks grow up in time."

"That may be true," said Shakti with a fearless smile, "but those girls are special!"

Beside her, Gareth offered a grin as well. "Why not stand down and let us pass, Zald? It's not like a couple of old soldiers will make a world of difference at this point."

"I cannot," came Zald's reply. "Erebus instructed that no adventurer should pass, and I mean to uphold my end of the deal."

With that, he pointed his slab of black steel at the pair. It was easily larger than a full-grown man. Gareth and Shakti both scowled as they saw the conqueror still intended to block their path.

"So then, what if I'm not an adventurer. Is that okay?"

At that moment came a voice. A clear, sonorous voice that cut through the thick tension hanging in the air. Gareth and Shakti wheeled around, and they both went wide-eyed with shock when they saw who it was, as did Zald.

"It's you..." he muttered. Though the helmet covered his face, the surprise in his voice was obvious. He pondered a moment, and then...

"Very well," he said. "Zeus always did harbor a fondness for you. In light of that, you may go."

On his lips he wore a smile.

"I'm sure that font of evil will be pleased to see you...though I doubt he quite intended a meeting such as this."



"Alize! Everyone!"

The elf's voice cut through the evening sky as the members of her familia assembled before her. Some leaped from wall to wall, while others handled the long distance in a single drop.

"Leon!" cried Alize, running straight over to Lyu. "We came to get you!"

The other girls then gathered around her, each saying their piece.

"Finally found ya, you little runaway," said Lyra, both arms behind her head. "You know, we busted our butts lookin' for you. Anythin' to say for yourself?"

"Apologies are weak," added Kaguya, walking over with a modest smile and a graceful walk, before flashing Lyu a devious grin. "Show your repentance by acting as my peon for a week, you idiot."

"Lyra, Kaguya... Gladly. I will make it up to you, whatever it takes!"

Seeing their two smiling faces, Lyu was filled with remorse...but more than that, with joy. A fire spread through her cold arms and legs as the other voices

of her troupe joined them.

"We were worried about you!"

"Well, that cheered you up, didn't it?"

Olivas froze in shock. "Astrea Familia?!" But soon his smile returned. "So what? One measly group of second-class adventurers isn't enough to stop our army!"

The cultists let out a cry of triumph and swarmed the girls, attempting to overwhelm them with numbers.

"Hm," said Alize. "We can't have a decent conversation with all this noise. And there are people to save, too..."

The girl was undaunted by the oncoming army. With one hand on her hip, she puffed out her chest underneath her breastplate and cried, "Let's do this, everyone!"

In her right hand, she pointed her blade, Crimson Order.

"Nobody else gets hurt! Your days of tormenting the weak are over!"

On her command, the other girls all brandished their weapons and attacked. Like the snap of a bowstring, or an outburst of emotion, they leaped into action with a singular cry.

"Haaaaaaaahh!!"

The two forces met. A swing of Lyu's wooden sword leveled numerous foes in an instant, while Kaguya's blade dispatched her enemies swiftly and silently. Lyra's boomerangs swept the battlefield, denying the fanatical cultists the opportunity to martyr themselves, while magical bombardments mercilessly swept up the leftovers.

There was no hesitation. The girls moved as one. In each of their eyes shone the light of determination. All of them had realized one very important thing—that while they may not yet have their answer, they could still go on, guided by the light of the stars, walking alongside their undying justice.

Their offensive was swift and devastating. Like a surging river, they collided with the Evils horde and forced it back in an astonishing display of flashing

swordplay and booming magic.

"...They're fighting," said a man, one of the townsfolk, as he stared in wonder. "So fast...and so strong."

"All...to protect us...?" asked another.

They were not combatants. All they could do was hide behind those who were. To see the adventurers fight so fiercely on their behalf moved them, and a sorry feeling worked its way up their throats.

"We don't deserve this..."

The man recalled what that gray-haired young girl had told him. That each lost life was a burden the girls of *Astrea Familia* would never forget. Yet even so, they always strove to walk the righteous path. Blinded by grief, he and others had repaid their goodness with stones, and the guilt was almost enough to crush him.

It was then that a single war tiger approached.

"Hey, will you cheer them on?" he asked.

"Huh...?"

"It doesn't matter what you did in the past. Those girls are fighting for you."

It was Falgar, finally able to break through enemy lines, thanks to *Astrea Familia*'s timely arrival. Though too injured to fight, he addressed the crowd on the adventurers' behalf.

"Please," he said. "Lend them your strength."

The young man started to cry. Tears welled in the corners of his eyes, and he choked.

"Get them..."

Then, with all his heart, he screamed the words he had been unable to say for so long.

"Go get 'em, Astrea Familia!!"

Following his lead, more and more voices erupted from the crowd.

"Come on! You can do it!"

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry for everything we did!"

"Win this thing and come back, so we can give you a proper apology!"

Men and women, old and young. All added their voices to the chorus. At the center of them all stood Leah's mother.

"...Honey, I think it's time."

"...Dear?"

"Our little girl may be gone...but we don't have to hold it against them anymore."

Her husband's voice cracked as he spoke, and he fought to hold back his own tears.

"We were supposed to protect her...and we didn't. We've blamed those girls for so long, but that isn't what Leah would want... It's time to make amends."

The woman began sobbing, then broke down into tears. She fell to her knees, weeping.

"I believe in you... You can do it!!!"

At long last, she found it in herself to support justice again.

"My, how the tables have turned."

Staring out of the window, Erebus feigned surprise. There was no smile on his lips this time, only a wide-eyed look.

"I'll be. You really did it. There's no arguing it. You forged hope from despair before my very eyes. Just you and your ten companions."

There was nothing in his voice but pure admiration. For all his divine wisdom, even the god who claimed to represent pure evil could not perfectly know what was happening on the game board after it was flipped it over.

"So, Leon... Is this your answer?"

Erebus watched closely as the elf girl flitted like a gale wind between her enemies' weapons, faster and stronger than anything else on the battlefield.

Then, in a flash, the evil god's diabolical smile returned to his lips.

"If so," he said, licking them, "I shall have to uphold my end of the deal. I shall not rest until every last bystander breathes their last."

Erebus placed his hand onto the deserted railroad switch, ready to unleash a bomb-laden cart onto the rails and reveal to Lyu just what reward her answer had earned.

"Let's see your precious justice carry on after this," he said. "We'll see how undying it is after a good old-fashioned massacre."

"Before you do that," came a voice, "do you think you could indulge me for a bit?"

For the second time, Erebus's face was tinged with surprise. A pair of footsteps echoed on the wooden floor, and a figure stepped out of the darkened church aisles and into the light.

"...Astrea?" said Erebus, stupefied by her sudden appearance.

"Yes, Erebus. It's me. It is good to see you again...though I suppose it was only a few days ago that I was last in your presence."

Her walnut hair flowed like a celestial river, and her indigo eyes twinkled like the stars. Erebus gave a twisted smile, unable to hide his shock.

"Wait, you seriously came here? Alone? I knew you had moxie, girl, but damn! Ha-ha-ha, well, this I didn't expect at all. Great job, O Goddess of Justice."

Erebus did not ask *how* she had come here. He expected it was probably Zald who let her through the blockade. The neurotic Alfia was one thing, but Zald was precisely the kind of man to do it, too. He was keen-witted, honorable, and closely in tune with Erebus's own wishes.

Astrea answered the dark god's leering gaze with a stout, firm bearing.

"Of course I did, Erebus," she said. "After all, it's important to repay the favor of looking after my children."

"Oho, well, I'm honored." Erebus laughed. "But did you not think I might leap on you and plunge my knife between those ravishing breasts of yours?"

His eyes became a pair of upturned crescents. Erebus flicked his wrist, and as if by magic, a knife as black as night appeared in his hand. It was the very same knife that had sent so many gods to heaven at the climax of the Great Conflict.

"There's no reason I kept you alive," he said. "You could just as well have died that day instead of one of them."

His eyes were filled with a pure and bitter bloodlust, as they were on the night he carried out his mass execution.

"Is that your evil, then?" Astrea asked. "To defend yourself with a blade against mere words?"

"...No, it isn't," said Erebus. Then, with a theatrical shrug, "Or at the very least, it isn't my style. All right then, let's talk. There's something I've been meaning to ask you, as well."

"About justice?"

"Precisely. I wondered what the goddess of justice herself makes of all this. Just as an aside, you understand."

His smile deepened. The deities of good and evil stood opposed as the sounds of battle rang out over their conversation.

"Let's talk, god to goddess, while our children play at war outside."

Raised yells shook the old rafters like distant thunder. Erebus listened as though to sublime orchestral music, then launched into his question.

"So, Astrea," he said. "Answer me. What is it that mortals call justice?"

The question that Lyu and Kaguya had been so hard-pressed to answer. Astrea's reply was comparatively simple.

"The stars," she said.

"Huh?"

Inquisitively, Erebus arched a single eyebrow.

"It doesn't have to be stars, either," Astrea went on. "You see, there are many justices here on earth."

"Very poetic," replied Erebus, unconvinced. "But I'm not here to listen to you

deflect the question. I don't care what these mortals mistakenly believe. Which is the real justice? Absolute justice, if you will?"

But Astrea only smiled and shook her head.

"Listen well, Erebus. There is no such thing as absolute justice."

The two stood, face-to-face, framed against the stained-glass window and the starlight magic of Lyu and her friends that caused it to light up in a kaleidoscope of different colors.

"If one justice ever reigns supreme, then the mortal world has failed, and our children will be forgotten. There will be no freedom; only tyranny, oppression, and control."

"Isn't that what you want? Just think: perfect order, no more wars. Everyone living in peace and harmony, just the way you like it."

Erebus gave a slight, mocking smile, but Astrea flatly rejected his suggestion.

"There can be no peace through oppression," she said. "All it does is establish a new power structure: one that justifies the violence of the oppressors. Eventually, submission becomes stagnation, and stagnation becomes regression. The whole world rots away into nothing."

"But mortals don't need that to hurt each other—just take one look outside. Why does it make a difference whether there's one justice or many?"

"Because different ideologies can coexist," said Astrea, giving a smile at last. "All those seemingly incompatible justices can join hands and work together... like they do now. Like those girls do. That is the light that we call hope."

For the first time, it seemed that Erebus had no comeback. He stood there pondering what Astrea had told him, resting his elbow on his hand and cradling his chin like a child.

"I see... Stars, you say. Hope. A myriad of justices, working together, perfect for the imperfect mortals who call this realm home."

He considered Astrea's words courteously, turning them over in his head, muttering to himself and nodding along to his comprehension. There was a certain congeniality to his manner not unlike that of his alter-ego, Eren, and not

at all how one would expect an emissary of evil to act.

However, Astrea stayed silent, for she already knew what he was going to say next.

"...But a patchwork justice can't possibly give me the answer I seek," he said. "What a shame."

He turned back to her, flashing her a goading grin.

"Erebus," said the goddess, leveling a serious glare. "Why is it you want to know about justice? Why do you want to know about the future of this world if your aim is to end it?"

It was the first time Astrea had asked Erebus about his motivations.

"Is that why you came here?" Erebus replied. "To ask me that?"

"Yes. I would like to know your divine will."

"I see. Well, apologies," answered Erebus with no small measure of exasperation, "but I've already answered that question for your girls. Ask them if you want to know, but I can't promise you'll like the answer."

""

Astrea just stared at him in silence. Erebus gave a cynical grin back. For a while, neither of them spoke. Then, the sounds of the battle outside began to change.

"Not hearing so many weapons," said Erebus, casting a glance through the window. "Justice must be nearing its well-deserved victory. I suppose we've been talking for far too long, haven't we?"

Then he turned his back. "Very well," he said. "Since you were so brave to come here all by yourself, there will be no slaughter today. Come, Vito."

Erebus casually began walking away, and his unremarkable lieutenant slipped from the shadows. He had been standing guard the whole time, even when Alfia was there. As he rejoined his master, he gave the fickle god a sigh and a smile.

"Will that be all?" he asked.

"Yes, I think so," Erebus replied. "It's been an exceedingly worthwhile trip, and I got to meet someone I didn't expect. Let's head back. Tell Alfia and our troops to stand down."

Abandoning his pact with Lyu, Erebus jovially made to leave, then at the door, he turned and looked back.

"Farewell for now, Astrea. The next time I show my face, it will be to usher in this land's demise."

With that, the evil god and his follower departed, leaving Astrea alone within the ruined church. With no one left to answer her, she asked a single question.

"Erebus," she muttered. "What is it you want?"



"Hraaaaagh!"

Lyu roared as her sword struck home, shattering the magic sword in Olivas's hands and leaving a deep gash in his chest. The impact broke bones and drew a spray of blood, knocking the man off his feet and into a pile of rubble.

"Grh!"

"Lord Olivas!"

One of his subordinates ran over to him.

"Lord Olivas, we must retreat!" they pleaded, helping their commander to his feet. "We cannot hold out much longer!"

Olivas wiped the blood from his mouth and glared back at Lyu with bloodshot eyes.

"I-impossible," he growled. "Our force was clearly superior, so why...?"

Among the girls of *Astrea Familia*, minds and weapons unbending, it was Lyu who answered.

"Because of our resolve to believe in justice. That is why we won."

"You sniveling whelp!! Curse you!!"

Olivas's face became twisted with demonic rage. He clenched his jaw tight enough to shatter his teeth, then yelled, "Retreat!"

Humiliated, angry voices swept the crowd, and the evil horde turned and hastily left.

"Hmm, probably better to let them go," remarked Kaguya, allowing her sword arm to fall limply by her waist.

"Yeah," said Lyra, putting on a brave face despite her trembling knees. "Our side's in no condition to chase 'em down, least of all you and me."

"But at least we managed to save everybody," said Alize, resheathing her sword and beaming like the sun. At that moment, a jubilant cry erupted from the townsfolk.

"YEAAAAAAAAAAAH!"

Alize turned to see that many were openly weeping tears of joy. Some were even smiling. The surviving adventurers raised their arms as if to say, "Good job!"—all sharing in the taste of victory these girls had won.

Alize smiled warmly, basking in the moment for a while, before walking over to Lyu.

"Leon."

"Alize..."

It had barely been five days since the two last stood face-to-face, though each of them had changed so much in that short time that it felt as though they hadn't seen each other in years. Both had been following their own path, questioning what was right and searching for justice.

"You asked me what kind of justice we all follow," said Alize, as the other girls all looked on. "After you left, I kept on thinking about it... But it's no use. I can't come up with an answer just yet."

Contrary to her words, the flame-haired girl wore a bright smile. And so did Lyu.

"Neither can I," she replied. "Even now that I know what justice really is, I still don't know what we can call *our* justice."

"That's the same as me, then!" said Alize, her face lighting up. "Let's keep on searching together!"

"Huh?"

"For what we can call our justice!"

From a distance, Asfi heard the girl's voice and smiled.

"Asfi, are you okay?!" cried Falgar, running over to check her injuries...but when he saw the mysterious smile on her lips, he paused. "...Asfi?"

"You were right, Falgar. I do know what needs to be done."

Reminding her war-tiger comrade of the words he had once told her, Asfi spilled the feelings that were in her heart.

"I know who has to speak up. I know who has the power to banish Orario's despair."

It wasn't the Braver or the Warlord. It wasn't any of the other first-class adventurers.

"If our enemy calls himself evil, then only the girls of justice can raise the banner of hope."

Falgar looked on in surprise while Asfi let her mind melt away at the sight of the setting sun.

"There is no simple answer to what is justice," said Alize. "The more we keep moving forward, the more complicated it becomes. Different people, different times, different places—there's no one justice that fits all. But even so!"

Alize raised and clenched her battered fist.

"Even so, we have to keep pursuing it! Even if the gods themselves make fun of us!"

With a defiant smile, she spoke the undeniable truth.

"Because the pursuit of an ever-changing justice is something only we everchanging mortals can do!"

Back at the church, the girl's goddess smiled.

"So when we die and go to heaven, let's shove it in their faces! Tell them we found our justice! We may struggle, we may make mistakes, we may lose some fights, but we can tell them the answer we found and prove it with our entire lives!"

"Alize..." muttered Lyra, eyes wide in wonder.

"Don't worry, girls! If I die first, I'll come down from heaven to give you all a good poke!"

"Heh."

Kaguya closed her eyes and chuckled.

"So keep on moving forward, without fear!" said Alize.

Her will was proud and strong. Her eyes twinkled bright. Her oath was solemn. Seeing Alize give her speech to the girls of *Astrea Familia*, she felt the stagnation vanish from her own heart.

"Alize..."

They could correct their mistakes. They didn't have to choose the right justice the first time. So long as they weren't afraid. So long as they kept moving forward.

This won't be the last time I waver, I'm sure.

No doubt they would hurt again. Despair again. Lose their way again.

But the important thing was to continue their journey. The long, long journey in search of justice.

"Come on, girls, let us be born anew!"

A loud voice cut through the twilight, echoing in every corner of the city.

"Right here and now! Let everyone in Orario hear it!"

Over on West Main Street, Aiz looked up to the sky while a warm smile crossed Riveria's lips.

"A song of light that cuts through despair!"

On Northwest Main Street, Gareth stroked his beard, and Shakti gave a fond

smile.

"A cry of justice that brings new hope!"

Up on the roof of Guild Headquarters, Raul gazed on in wonder while Finn offered a look of respect.

"We follow our duty! We balance the scales! Until the day the stars claim us!"

The song of justice commenced.

A solemn oath to keep on pursuing the righteousness in their hearts.

The red-haired girl held her crimson sword of order tight.

"Be a fortress of law! An honest crown! A light that banishes evil! Protect your friends, connect your hopes, and entrust your dreams to them! Justice will go on!"

The words of that song were burned into the city and its people. They were etched into Lyu's heart, never to be forgotten.



"When dark clouds blot out the sky, we must never forget the stars that shine behind them!"

The light of justice had been laid low by evil, but still it endured. Now, that light rose into the night sky once more, bathing the City of Heroes in starlight.

"In the name of our goddess! Like comets in the sky above, we leave our starry trails on this earth where'er we go!"

The adventurers filled the air with joyous cries.

The people wept openly.

And Lyu and her friends added their voices to their leader's pledge.

"This I swear, on the sword and wings of justice!!"

Their voices shook the city. The hopeful cheers of the people could be heard on every street corner.



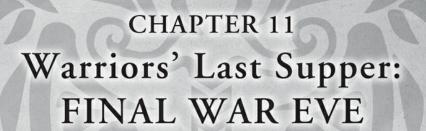
Somebody cried. "How can we see the stars when dark clouds gather to hide them?"

Somebody sneered. "Just like evil swallowed the justice we all took for granted."

The girls smiled. "Then we will cut through the darkness and bridge earth and sky with stars."

Despair was banished, chaos groaned, and light returned to Orario.

On that day, justice was reborn.



AHOGRGA RECORD The Fall of Justice

Story by Lujino Omori - Illustration by Kakage Character Design by Snouhito Yasuda

CHAPTER 11

Warriors' Last Supper: FINAL WAR EVE

The curtain of night fell, turning the skies above Orario a deep blue. The thick gray clouds gave way to a shimmering starlight, illuminating the city and compounding the beauty of the softly glowing magic-stone lamps.

The streets were filled with raucous cries unlike anything heard before. Valletta stood atop the city walls, looking down upon Orario.

"This place was like a fuckin' wake a few hours ago. Now it's burstin' with life. How'd they do it?"

Several hours had now passed since the failed invasion of district seven. The Evils' forces had withdrawn, causing the front line to shift back to the enemy encampments on the walls themselves. The adventurers, for their part, seemed content to shore up their defenses instead of harrying the retreat, and so an impromptu ceasefire came into effect.

"Olivas, you dumbass," Valletta muttered. "Just couldn't keep it in your pants, could you? We were this close to breaking their hope, and now they're startin' to get ideas."

Still, for all her cursing, Valletta didn't seem too bothered by this temporary setback.

Just then, she heard the sounds of two pairs of light, bouncy footsteps behind her.

"Everyone's having so much fun in Orario tonight, aren't they, Vena?"

"Oh, yes, Dina! It makes we just want to...wish them all a good time!"

It was the twin leaders of *Alecto Familia*, the Dis Sisters, their fingers intertwined as they danced. Their innocent smiles belied the oozing malice that slipped through the cracks in their seemingly compassionate words.

""Hey, Valletta?"" the two said in deviously innocent tones. ""Are we allowed to give them our scarlet bouquet?""

Valletta always found the twins a pain to work with. "Haven't you been listening to me?" she said. "They're crazy, those adventurers. The more we pointlessly torment them, the stronger they'll grow. Besides, if you give away our location, then Finn's spear'll come out of the sky and nail ya."

""That's scary!""

The two girls did a complete about-face, trembling in fear at Valletta's suggestion. They may have been broken, but they weren't stupid. The top adventurers of *Freya Familia* had been locked in combat for a few days now, and while the twins had been eager to interfere—especially to get at Hegni and Hedin—they had been scared off each time by a contingent of powerful Einherjar, eyes sparkling, and instructed not to obstruct the "holy ritual."

So instead, the two imps contented themselves with enjoying the ongoing humiliation from a distance. It wouldn't do for them to suffer an injury as a result of a casual skirmish and be unable to hold their knife and fork (meaning their sword and staff, respectively) when the coveted dessert arrived.

Valletta thought similarly, though the object of her obsession was, of course, Finn. Still, you couldn't catch her admitting an affinity with these broken sisters. She would sooner deny they breathed the same air or walked the same earth. Instead, she made a derisive snort at their words.

"You never can predict which way this city will go," came a voice as an older yet well-built animal man ascended the steps from the market district. "For all our trickery, there is no substitute for a purebred first-class adventurer. I bring shame upon the name of my mistress, Apate."

"Basram," said Valletta. "How goes the spirit warrior biz?"

Basram answered while waving the ringed staff in his hand.

"Two more days, and everything will be ready. Ingenious though they are, the spirit warriors are not without caveats, one of which is that such a large force requires regular *tuning*."

The spirit warriors that had been so effective against *Freya Familia* were *Apate Familia*'s secret weapon. However, they needed adjusting after every battle by a team of highly skilled mages and hexers. Otherwise, the

adventurer's physical body and the spirit it was infused with would begin to reject each other, leading to mental disturbances, physical breakdown of the flesh, and eventually, complete loss of control. At that point, even Basram's ringed staff would no longer be able to exert influence over them.

Basram's words, that there was no substitute for a purebred first-class adventurer, rang true. No amount of trickery could reproduce their power without running into issues.

"As long as they're ready to go, I don't care," sneered Valletta. "All we need to do to stamp out this new hope is to have ourselves another night like before... Not to mention our god's special plan."

It was Basram's spirit warriors that formed the backbone of the Evils' elite forces. Without them, Valletta and the other Evils were unable to initiate any large-scale maneuvers. That was why any engagements had been mostly limited to skirmishes until now.

Just as Finn had predicted, they were waiting for the opportunity to act.

It was at this point, as Valletta rested one foot on the battlements, gazing down at the city below, that Vito appeared, his bloodred hair quivering in the wind.

"We sure did underestimate this *Astrea Familia*," he said. "And here I thought Loki and Freya were the only serious threats this city had to offer."

All the top Evils executives had now gathered, save for Olivas, who was still recovering.

"To think these girls could reignite the city's hope with their justice! Oh, they must surely be chosen by fate!"

The man threw up his arms as if cheering on the heroes of a children's fairy tale. Valletta shot him a wicked glare and spat at her feet.

"Wipe off that smarmy-ass grin, Faceless. We wouldn't be in this mess if you and your dumbass god hadn't slinked off somewhere by yourselves. I'm expectin' a full apology from the both of you. Where is he anyway?"

His gaze as prickly as a needle, Vito didn't stop smiling as he answered.

"I'm afraid," he said, "my god has already departed."

Opening one eye a hair's breadth, he twisted his lips into a gentle smile.

"To usher in this land's demise, as the harbinger of absolute evil."



A two-story tavern in the center of town was one of many buildings to open its doors to citizens unhoused in the aftermath of the Great Conflict. Today, the light shone in through the windows, and a merry atmosphere filled the air.

"Munch munch, glug, glug. Ahhh, what a meal! That'll bring a guy back to life, that will!"

A human man who was enjoying the generous helpings of food and drink happened to be the very same ne'er-do-well who had stood up for Lyu and protected her from Olivas's fireball.

"I can believe it, seeing you," said Lyu, wearing her mask. "I don't know how you're still alive. I did what I could to save you, but it's still a miracle..."

Whatever blood the man had lost was quickly being replenished by the man's astonishing eating speed. Alize, sitting right next to Lyu, spoke up.

"You should have seen Leon!" she said, looking like a proud parent for some reason. "'Ardee let him go so he could protect me!' she was saying. 'I can't let him die!' But yeah, apart from maybe Asfi, you were the most badly injured by far. It was touch and go for a while."

The man stopped eating and wiped his mouth on his arm before proudly presenting the armor he was wearing. It was still black with scorch marks.

"Heh-heh. That's why I always wear this armor here! Upper-class adventurers get the niftiest things, I tell ya!"

Lyu narrowed her eyes in immediate response to that remark.

"There's no way a pickpocket like you could afford an upper-class adventurer's equipment. You wouldn't happen to have stolen it, would you?"

The man froze, his thievery exposed.

"Uhh... I... I'll give it back! I swear! I'll get it fixed and apologize to the familia, just don't toss me in the clink!"

Lyu paused. Beneath her mask, she cracked a smile.

"...Very well," she said at last. "I'll trust you, then. If you are willing to make amends, then I shall look the other way."

"Wait, did I just hear that right?" asked Alize. "Didn't you always use to say that no bad deed ought to go unpunished?"

Now that she mentioned it, Lyu had changed. But it was surely a change for the better. Because thanks to her friend, she now knew how important it was not to get caught up on one kind of justice, but instead to listen, to understand, and to keep interrogating her own beliefs.

"It's just...Ardee taught me that sometimes you have to be willing to forgive," she said. "...Wait, what's that? Why do you have such a grin on your face?"

"I'm just so happy, Leon! You're finally growing up! Look at you, all mature and stuff! Makes me wanna give you a hug! C'mere!"

With that, Alize leaped at Lyu from the side and wrapped her arms around her. Their soft cheeks touched, and Lyu's turned a bright shade of pink.

"A-Alize?! G-get off me! You can't do that when all these people are watching! ... Eep! Stop nuzzling my ear!"

The man chuckled at the sight of these two followers of justice, laughing and frolicking as young girls should—even if one of them was remarkably more eager than the other.

"Well, er..." he said all of a sudden, rubbing the underside of his nose. "I don't mean to make a big deal of it or nothin' but...I guess I could try not stealin' stuff no more."

His nervousness and embarrassment slowly gave way to determination. As if a weight had been taken off his mind, the man smiled.

"I'll try my hand at bein' an honest man," he said. "It's the least I could do for that kid watchin' over me."

"I'm sure Ardee would be overjoyed to hear that," said Alize, beaming, and

even Lyu offered a smile.

"Thank you," she said. "For protecting me...and for remembering her."

The three of them shared a smile, and Lyu sank into contemplation. It was Ardee who had allowed this to happen, and although she wasn't here anymore, Lyu felt proud to have called her a friend.

Justice would always go on. Ardee had passed hers to Lyu and this man, and now it was theirs to carry.

At last, the man, perhaps embarrassed, said, "Gotta go take a piss," and excused himself. Lyu couldn't help but smile watching him go, envisioning the justice that walked alongside him.

"Sorry to interrupt what I'm sure is a lovely conversation," said Kaguya, approaching the table with a bottle of rice wine in her hand, "but...are you sure we can afford this luxurious feast?"

The girl's cheeks were slightly flushed. She looked around at the other patrons of the bar. There were regular townspeople and adventurers both, all enjoying copious servings of food and booze. It was like a banquet, and those who had been exhausting themselves day after day found their energy steadily returning.

Some of the residents were thanking the adventurers profusely, while others were tearfully apologizing. Among them, Kaguya spotted the young man who had thrown stones, and Leah's mother. The two of them were on their knees, begging forgiveness from the other *Astrea Familia* girls, some of whom were trying their very best to look angry rather than amused.

Kaguya smiled, but it wasn't enough to dispel her well-grounded fear.

"I know everybody's feeling positive again after last night," she said, "but isn't this a bit much? We *are* still fighting a war, you know. Where are all these supplies coming from?"

"You know what? I don't know, either!!" chirped Alize, puffing out her modest chest.

"You're the captain, you're supposed to know these things," sighed Lyu. "I

heard it was Hermes Familia that gathered it all."

She shifted her gaze over to a nearby table, where Falgar was sinking his fangs into a piece of roast meat. He noticed her watching him and smiled back.

"Ah, don't worry about that," he said. "The things we gathered from the shopping district at Asfi's request are still in storage. This is something else."

Then the young war tiger looked out the window, at the trading-houses outside, and shrugged.

"This is something our god scrounged up from who-knows-where."

"Man, I sure am tired! Day after day of hauling crates into the city through Ouranos's secret tunnels!"

Blissfully unaware of his follower's conversation, Hermes was at that very moment on the second floor of a trading-house, speaking of his troubles to someone else.

"Transporting food and supplies from Demeter's secret storehouse... I've handled a lot of unpleasant jobs in my time, but this might have been the most tedious of them all!"

"Thank you, Hermes. But are you sure the Evils occupying the walls did not see you?"

His conversation partner was none other than Astrea.

"No worries there," Hermes replied, placing his hand theatrically on his chest. "The only ones who went in and out of that secret route through the Beor Mountain Range were me, Laurier, and a few of the other lower-class adventurers. We were extra careful not to attract any attention. In fact, it's because there were so few of us that it took so long for us to finish bringing it all in."

The Hermes Familia information network was not restricted to the walls of the Labyrinth City but extended beyond as well. The Guild gave this neutral party special permission to leave and enter the city as they wished, and they nearly always had agents operating in foreign lands. These tunnels were the reason Hermes Familia could operate with the same speed and secrecy, even

when the city was under siege.

"For the same reason," Hermes went on, "I'm afraid it wasn't possible to bring in any reinforcements that way. Sorry about that."

"Not at all. That's more than enough," replied Astrea, shaking her head. "Thanks to you, we have food, medicine, and supplies for all of our children."

The supply situation in Orario was dire enough that it had Finn and the others at high command scratching their heads for some time now. Solving this problem had the potential to flip allied morale in an instant.

"Soon everyone will have the energy to fight again. Thank you so much, Hermes."

"Hey, as long as you're happy, Astrea. Speaking of which..."

Hermes straightened his back and adopted a serious tone.

"Could I trouble you for a reward, perhaps?"

"A reward?"

Astrea tilted her head. A beat passed.

"Mommy Astreaaa!! I worked so hard for you!"

Hermes seemed to regress to childhood, and he leaped into Astrea's arms with all his might. But the goddess's eyes simply widened in surprise for a moment before she effortlessly stepped aside.

The goddess of justice was no less agile or dexterous than Hermes. The sword and the scales were both her weapons, and meting out judgment was another thing she presided over, so she was by no means ignorant the ways of combat.

However, this was not enough to dissuade Hermes.

"Please, please, Astrea! Let me lie in your lap! Pat my head and call me a good boy!"

The overenthusiastic god was insistent on taking a trip to ga-ga land, and Astrea was running out of ideas for how to deal with him when...

"Hmph!"

"Guh!!"

A crushing blow caught Hermes by surprise.

"Stay away from Lady Astrea, or I'll slap you silly!"

"You just did!"

It was Asfi, her cheeks red with indignation. Hermes rolled along the floor until he collided with the wall, and when he looked up, he saw the blue-haired girl striding toward him.

"Where have you been all this time anyway?! You had me worried sick, disappearing without a word! Take this! And this!"

"I'm sorry, Asfi! I'm sorry! No—wait—stop—not the face! Not my beautiful face! You're beating it all out of shape!"

The heavy blows steadily chipped away at Hermes's vitality, and it was only after Astrea stepped in, saying, "Asfi, I think that's enough..." that they finally stopped.

Even then, Asfi continued to pant heavily like a raging bull.

Hermes rose unsteadily to his feet. He swept his hat off the floor, brushed the dust off it, and adopted a more serious attitude.

"Look, it's just...I needed you guys to stay in the city and fight. I didn't think it was a good idea to burden you with knowledge you didn't need. For what it's worth, I feel awful, you know, for not being there when you needed me."

The god gave a guilty smile and patted his follower on the head, but Asfi was unconvinced by this display.

"Don't do that," replied Asfi, rosy-cheeked for a different reason this time, "and don't pretend you thought about me at all."

"I did! Look, after this is all over, let's all go pay Lydis and the other fallen children a visit."

At these words, Asfi clammed up. She looked down, hiding her misty eyes, before replying, "...Fine."

"Get a room, you two. Geez, is it steamy in here, or is it just you?"

At that moment, who should walk in with blatant disregard for the mood but Lyra.

"W-w-w-we weren't...!" stammered Asfi, her voice breaking. "I mean, I—I—I wasn't...!"

But Lyra had no interest in teasing the girl any further and simply stated what she had come for.

"I went to Finn and asked him about that *Hera Familia* woman. I need you to make me a magic item, Perseus."

A cunning smile appeared on her lips. The two conquerors stood unmatched by any in Orario, but Lyra was nothing if not a strategic thinker. Through fair means or foul, she would even the odds as best she could.

A look of surprise crossed Asfi's face, before quickly giving way to despondency.

"I'm already handling a large order of earrings from Braver..." she said.

"Yeah, that's not going to be enough," Lyra chirruped back. "But I told my plan to Finn, and he agreed. So hop to it, item maker."

"I can't just churn them out, you know! And I bet you've got something extravagant in mind, too! I am still injured, you know!"

"Oh, just pull a few all-nighters and you'll be fine. I hear you got some armor that'll make a good starting point. Me and some of the mages'll help you out, so don't worry about it!"

Lyra grinned and began ushering Asfi away, ignoring her cries of "Hey!" and "Stop pushing!" Eventually, her screams disappeared down the hallway. A short moment passed before either of the gods spoke.

"...Hermes. I met with Erebus."

This came from Astrea.

"I heard," replied Hermes, "how you went off by yourself behind enemy lines. I almost fainted when they told me."

As soon as the two gods began speaking, the tension in the air spiked. His

expression, like hers, was solemn and divine.

"So?" he said. "How was he?"

"He hasn't changed a bit. He's just like he was back in the heavens. All he wants is to destroy Orario, nothing else."

Upon hearing that, Hermes closed his eyes. He looked like a wise old sage who had seen it all before and was weary of it.

"The god of the underworld, huh? I won't deny he's similar in mind to Loki and myself, but I never thought he'd join up with the Evils and work against us."

Or perhaps, his was the look of a concerned friend.

"Is this really what you want, Erebus? Can we no longer share a drink together...like old times?"



"Hey, sorry I'm late."

Far beneath the Labyrinth City, in the midst of the blackest gloom, two evil gods spoke face-to-face.

"Enough games, Erebus. You nearly died out there."

The one who voiced his concerns was a dark-skinned male god with short, crimson hair, built as sturdily as the strongest adventurer.

"You have invited ruin upon the familias of myself and of Thanatos. How do you intend to right this wrong?"

"I'm sorry about that, I really am," came Erebus's flippant reply. "Honestly, I feel terrible. So how go things on your end?"

The evil god clicked his tongue, wanting to grill Erebus further on the issue but knowing it to be a pointless endeavor. Instead, he answered the other god's question.

"It's gone well," he replied. "Sickeningly well. It's on its way as we speak."

Here the flame-haired god walked past Erebus, placing a hand on his

shoulder.

"My part in this is done," he said. "Figure the rest out yourself."

"Oh, I will," replied Erebus. "Thank you, Rudra."

He watched as he whose name meant "the most frightening one" departed with his terrified followers in tow. Scorch marks marred Erebus's clothes where the god had touched him.

Then, Erebus turned and resumed walking forward, into the depths of the inkblack gloom. His footsteps echoed as he went.

"It's time for the final movement," he said. "The beginning of the end, Orario."



The dawn following Olivas's defeat signaled the fifth of the Seven Days of Death was starting. Once again, ashen clouds gathered overhead, as if marking an end to the temporary ceasefire.

However, unlike before, the city was silent. For once, the day saw no intermittent skirmishes with the cultists. For the guards who kept a vigilant eye on the city walls, watching for enemy movement, it was almost disappointingly calm.

However, this calm did nothing to abate the tension the city's inhabitants felt. An eerie hush lay over the entire city. Gareth stood in Central Park, glaring up at the city walls that loomed in the distance. Many adventurers were stationed here, as were the citizens who had lost their homes.

"You've been quiet, Evils," he said, cracking his neck. "Ever since last night, we haven't heard a peep out of you."

"Have they...given up?" came the small voice belonging to Aiz. She tilted her head in inquiry.

"Of course not," said Riveria. "They're just watching us. They still have full control of the city walls."

The high elf looked around at the walls before closing her eyes and focusing solely on the sound coming into her long, pointed ears.

"If anything," she said, "most of the noise is coming from outside the city."

"Yes, they're getting ready," said Gareth. "There's a storm on the way; that's for sure."

As the seasoned first-class adventurers conferred, the inexperienced Aiz seemed unable to follow. Riveria opened her eyes and spoke.

"Aiz," she said. "Get ready."

"Ready?"

"Yes. The final battle approaches."

She looked up to the sky, as if addressing her words to everyone in the city.

"Whatever you can do, whatever there is left to do, make sure it's done."

Over at the *Astrea Familia* home, Stardust Garden, a single woman approached the door of the mansion and knocked.

"Excuse me," she called out, "is Leon here?"

Noin led her into the main parlor, where Lyu's face lit up with surprise upon seeing her.

"Shakti?"

Lyu immediately felt a wave of guilt wash over her as she recalled their last conversation.

"If we are to weather this crisis, we need to use everything at our disposal... even her. That is my justice."

"I don't believe you... You're lying! That can't be true! It's unacceptable!"

Lyu had refused to give her a fair chance, and instead screamed and denounced Shakti like a child having a temper tantrum.

This is awkward... I don't feel that way anymore, but I still said all those mean things to her...

But as she was meekly avoiding her gaze, wondering why Shakti had come

here, the woman herself walked up to her.

"Here, Leon, take this," she said.

"What? Is this...a holy tree branch?!"

Lyu looked up at her, amazed, and Shakti nodded.

"From Lyumilua Forest, where you were born. They were among those black-market goods we confiscated. Then the war started, and there was never a good chance to return them to you...so I'm doing it now."

Lyu was aware of *Ganesha Familia*'s investigation just prior to the Great Conflict. It was Ardee herself who had told her about it.

"It's unlikely we'll be able to return them to your village," said Shakti, "so will you take them instead?"

Lyu faltered at Shakti's offer. "Me? B-but I abandoned that place. I don't have the right to—"

"Ardee wanted you to have them."

"]]"

It was like she'd known what the girl was going to say, and Shakti had come prepared to pass on her little sister's will. Lyu's eyes went wide. In her head, a memory played of a sunset street. Of a kindhearted friend who only wanted to see her smile.

"It's not meant to be a memento or anything like that," said Shakti. "It's just... what she would have wanted."

Lyu was silent. Not because she was wondering whether or not to accept, but because she was trying to keep the emotion from creeping into her voice.

"...Thank you," she said at last, and she reached out and took the offering. The branch glowed, as if in recognition of the link between the girl and her home soil.

"That was all I came for," said Shakti. "Good-bye for now."

With that, the woman turned to leave. But Lyu stood up and followed. In the hallway, she shouted after her.

"Shakti! I'm sorry about what I said! I was only thinking about myself, I'm sorry! Nobody's suffered more than you have...nobody!"

Shakti stood and listened to Lyu's apology, and when she was done, she looked over her shoulder and smiled.

"It's okay, Leon. You were standing up for her that day. It made me happy."

Shakti stared out into the distance through the hallway windows. Her swaying bangs hid her eyes.

"Now," she said, "I can finally go see her."

And this time, she left. Lyu followed her now-absent gaze and looked out of the window. In the west, the sun was setting, lighting up the ashen clouds and casting an orange glow across the city.

"Ardee. I won't forget what you taught me. I'll treasure everything you left me."

Her fingers tightened around the branch of the holy tree. She thought of the girl's sword, which Lyu had retrieved and now lay in her possession. It was the justice that girl had left behind to which Lyu dedicated her determined oath.

"I'll use it all...to fight."



"I'm sorry I didn't come here sooner."

Only a few minutes after leaving Stardust Garden, Shakti stood amid a sea of graves. Simple graves, marked only by broken swords or wooden sticks. This was the makeshift cemetery where all those who had lost their lives in the Evils' attacks were buried.

"...I didn't want to come here," she said. "You aren't even sleeping there beneath the soil."

This was the case with many of the graves. A great many only housed whatever body parts remained or simple mementos of the deceased. A part of their soul. The victims' true bodies were either blown to oblivion or lost

beneath the rubble.

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"...Shakti."
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A pair of heavy footsteps stopped behind her. Shakti answered the presence without turning around.

"I wished to grieve alone, Ganesha," she said. "I thought I told you that."

Ganesha spoke in an oddly subdued voice.

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"Will you not cry?"
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"I can't. Not yet."

"Then I will!!"

"...What?"

"OOOOOOHHH!! ARDEEEEEEEE!!"

The god's silence lasted all of two lines. Shakti spun around to see him bawling his eyes out.

"MY PRECIOUS FOLLOWER!! AAAAAAAAAAAAAAGHHH!!"

Tears and mucus streamed down his elephant mask. Manly tears and manly mucus, of course. Shakti just stood there and stared, mouth half-agape, before finally shaking herself back to her senses.

"S-stop it, Ganesha! Get a hold of yourself! If anyone sees you, it'll bring shame to our familia!"

"No! Never!"

Shakti attempted to reach out to him, but the god deftly stepped out of her reach.

"Ardee!" he cried. "I loved your kindness, your sweetness, and the way you'd giggle like a rascal whenever you knew you'd done something wrong! I loved the way you treated everyone with kindness and sincerity and how you brightened up our lives! I miss you so MUUUUUUUUUUUH!!"

There was no end to his words, his feelings. Everything he had kept bottled up, he now spilled with pride.

"ARDEEEEEEEEEE!! AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHH!!"

The god wept on Shakti's behalf. He howled into the sky. These were his honest tears, hot enough with emotion they could melt the iciest glacier. Shakti watched him in shock for a moment, before smiling.

"You really are a noisy god," she said.

Then, after a moment, she looked up to the sky.

"Ganesha, the rain's coming."

"AAAAAAAA—Oh? Rain?"

At her words, Ganesha lifted his gaze as well. Thin red clouds floated in the evening sky.

"I don't see any rain. There's a few clouds, but—"

Then, Ganesha stopped speaking.

"No, you're right," he said. "Looks like a shower's on its way."

Courteously, he turned his back to Shakti.

"Wouldn't be surprised if we got a little wet, standing out here like this."

Behind him, nobody saw the rain that rolled down Shakti's cheeks.



Time flowed on. A mournful silence settled over the city as the citizens carried out funeral after funeral. There simply weren't enough healers to stop the critically injured from becoming the dead.

The ashen-haired witch would likely welcome this silence, but to her dismay, it could not last forever. Twilight became moonlight, and night fell once again, ushering in the sixth of the Seven Days of Death.

"…"

The hall-clock standing against the wall steadily carved away time. In the war room at Guild Headquarters, Finn and Loki sat in their chairs, eyes closed, surrendering themselves to the passage of time.

At last, Finn opened his bright blue eyes and spoke.

"They're here."

As if summoned by his very words, a pair of footsteps raced up the hallway, and the door burst open.

"O-our scouts! They're back with their report!" cried the flustered Guild woman, shattering the tense silence of the room. "They've located the target, as instructed! It's even worse than we imagined!"

The color drained from her face as she shakily relayed their terrible findings.

"It's on its way here, destroying everything in its path!"

This report, which Finn and Loki had been waiting so patiently for, confirmed their worst fears.

"That bastard Erebus," spat Loki. "This is what he was after the whole time."

"Yes," said Finn. "It looks like our time is up."

He stood up from his seat and began instructing the Guild employee.

"Dispatch messengers to every familia. I want all forces in Central Park by midnight tonight."

"Y-yes, sir!"

The woman disappeared down the corridor without another word. Then the prum hero made to leave the room as well.

"Where are you off to all by your lonesome, Finn?" asked Loki.

Finn's answer was simple.

"I'm going to gather the strongest warriors we have."



The sun was beginning to set. Off in the east, beyond the sea of clouds, the veil of night approached. Yet these fierce cries that filled the streets had known no pause.

"Rooooaaaaaaaaghhh!!"

The boaz's greatsword met the catman's spear. Though the two stood bloodied and beaten, these beasts still raged.

With the Evils' attacks had ceased, this corner of southwest Orario was the only active battlefield in the city. Here, Folkvangr was remade amid the ruins. Here, first-class adventurers engaged in ritual combat to claim each other's lives and create the most powerful Einherjar ever seen.

"That damn cat..."

The white elf had just lost his weapon and now kneeled on the ground, clutching his arm. He grimaced through the blood spilling from his lips.

"Dammit, dammit, dammit...!!"

"""Dammiiit!!"""

Even the Gulliver Brothers and their legendary cooperation could not compete with the boaz man's extraordinary strength. The four of them were lying on the ground, staring skyward, unable to hide their frustration and anger.

Sitting against the rubble, the battered dark elf extended one quivering arm and dragged his beloved sword toward him.

"I lost...again..." he said, "to Ottar...and Allen, too... But this time...my regret burns like a flame, powerful enough to destroy all who stand in my way!"

Hegni took his sword in his arms, embracing a hope that even the pain of defeat could not diminish.

There were no tears to be shed—only blood. Hegni understood that. As did Hedin. As did the Gullivers and the two still fighting.

The other members of the familia stood around them, allowing no one to intrude upon this sacred space. Among them were the bare minimum number of healers necessary to allow the battle to go on. All of them watched with bated breath as Ottar and Allen fought to the last.

They didn't have to wait much longer before the decisive moment came. Allen charged in like a chariot, while Ottar stood fast and held his greatsword out to block. The devastating collision of blows caused a thunderous crack as

the earth split beneath their feet. Shock and noise reigned, and when it finally gave way to a deafening silence, it was the catman who had bent the knee.

"Ghaah..."

Seeing defeated stance, Ottar lowered his weapon.

"Allen..." he said. "Thank you."

His voice was clear, his eyes unclouded, his anger and frustration gone. Allen, meanwhile, clenched his fists tight.

"I wasn't...doin' this...for you, asshole!"

""

"I wanted to win... I wanted to be strong!!" he said, teeth about to crack. His frustration was mirrored by the rest of his peers. Eventually, he slammed his bruised fist into the ground.

"Fuck!!"

Consumed with self-directed rage, Allen admitted his painful defeat.

Somewhere far out of sight, a pair of beautiful ears heard all, and a pair of silver eyes saw all.

Allen gave a few labored breaths and then staggered to his feet.

"Looks like you're goin' on ahead, Ottar. If you lose now, then don't bother showin' your face again, you hear?!"

"...Of course," replied Ottar, sharpening his gaze. "Leave him to me."

A solemn oath thus forged, Ottar turned his back on Allen and the others. His muscles gleamed like steel, forged anew by the fires of camaraderie. He stepped out of the field of rubble to see a small figure who had been watching the battle by himself.

"...Finn," he said.

"I'm sorry it's not Freya meeting you like this," the figure replied, "but I'm afraid we're short on time."

Ottar already knew what was coming. He had known from the moment he set

eyes on the blond-haired hero.

"Is it time?" he asked.

Dusk moved on and became night. The blackened veil swept over the sky, chasing the last vestiges of sunlight over the western horizon.

"Yes," replied Finn. "Time for the final showdown."



AFTGREA RECORD

Story by Lujino Omori - Illustration by Kakage Character Design by Snouhito Yasuda

EPILOGUE

All You Need Is Justice

With night's arrival, lights and sounds were extinguished all across the city. Magic-stone torches and lamps were switched off to conserve precious resources, and people huddled together in silence. Not out of fear of the night, but of what they all knew was approaching.

Eventually, the only light remaining was that coming from Central Park. Familia members from all across the city had gathered there. *Astrea Familia* was no exception.

"All of Orario's forces in one place," mused Lyra as she looked around. "Wonder what all the fuss is about."

"Don't play dumb," chided Kaguya. "You know very well."

As did they all. Alize was grim-faced as she cast her eyes around at the other girls, then spoke what was on everyone's mind.

"Yes," she said. "The final showdown is almost upon us."

Shakti of *Ganesha Familia*. Asfi and Falgar of *Hermes Familia*. Ottar and the Einherjar of *Freya Familia*. Riveria and Gareth, along with Aiz, Raul, and all the others of *Loki Familia*. Some silently felt the heft of their weapons, others fidgeted from side to side, while still others closed their eyes and waited.

Fear and nerves. Will and spirit. All these and more consumed the minds of those in Central Park, while Lyu quietly muttered beneath her mask.

"It's midnight."

All across the city, those clocks that still worked let out a chime. Their hands overlapped, signaling the end of one long day and the beginning of another.

All eyes were focused on the south gate of Babel, where a single prum stood.

"Listen up," he said, and with that, the commotion died down in an instant. All present eagerly awaited—demanded—his next word, and Finn was

unhesitant in giving it to them.

"The enemy's true goal has been revealed. Everything until now, including the Great Conflict—it was all in preparation for this."

```
"...What?"
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Lyra, dumbfounded, spoke for all her incredulous peers, who couldn't find the words to respond. The Braver's words had stunned them all.

"Their true aim," he said, "is to summon a monster of the Dungeon."

This was the conclusion he and Loki had reached in the war room.

"The Evils have committed the sin of sending a god into the Dungeon," he explained. "By using the god as bait, they plan to lure this monster to the surface."

```
"Wha-?!"
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Asfi was dumbstruck. And it wasn't just her. All the adventurers were in an uproar over this new and unexpected piece of information. It was Kaguya who cried out before the flood of revelations overwhelmed her.

"W-wait," she cried. "What's this monster they plan to unleash? Surely you don't mean some insignificant mook?"

"The details don't matter, but suffice to say we believe our scouting parties have identified the target."

As if already running short on time, Finn conveyed only the facts to all present. After the girls of *Astrea Familia* had repelled Olivas's assault, Finn realized something strange about the exodus of gods that had occurred on the night of the Great Conflict. So two days earlier, he had a scouting team conduct reconnaissance in the Dungeon. The information those scouts brought back was revelatory.

"The target was sighted at noon on the twenty-fourth floor, travelling upward toward the surface and destroying everything in its path."

```
"""...?!"""
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Kaguya and countless other adventurers were lost for words.

"According to the scouts' reports, the target is extremely large. Given the speed of its ascent and the scale of the destruction, the Guild believes that its combat ability is at least on par with a Monster Rex of the deep, perhaps greater."

Soon a great panic swept over the crowd.

"...You can't be serious," said Falgar in disbelief.

"You're telling me," cried Asfi, her voice a shriek, "that the Evils sent their own god into the Dungeon to lure a force of nature up to the surface?!"

"Which means," cried Alize, connecting the dots in her mind, "the enemy's goal is...!"

"Yes," said Finn. "To destroy Babel from beneath."

At the very apex of Babel, Freya's mirthless eyes gazed down on the adventurers gathered below.

"So they unleashed the might of a god within the Dungeon, calling forth that jet-black monster..."

"Yeah, and in the deep levels, too," added Loki, seated on the arm of an armchair. "Those pitch-black critters are basically bred for killin' gods. Dangle a divinity in front of 'em and they'll go crazy tryin' to get it... Even Ouranos's prayers won't be enough to keep 'em sealed down below."

Loki Familia had encountered something similar once before, two years ago, when an evil god lured Aiz, then Level 1, down to the twelfth floor. There, the god unsealed his arcanum and summoned the Black Wyvern, an anomalous being whose power far outclassed the level where it appeared.

Loki could only assume that this monster would be similar.

"And to think this all managed to escape our notice, or even Ouranos's," remarked Freya, arching a well-trimmed eyebrow. "Or perhaps it's fairer to say...they concealed it from us."

"Yeah, I hate to admit it, but the Evils really pulled one over on us this time. That damn Erebus and his schemes."

Meanwhile, away from Babel, on the edge of Central Park, Hermes muttered

his thoughts aloud, gazing over at the adventurers gathered in the square.

"So this monster," he mused. "I suppose there's no question when it was summoned—on the night of the Great Conflict, right in the middle of the mass exodus."

Astrea, standing nearby, nodded.

"Yes. It's the only moment a god could have activated their arcanum without our knowledge."

All the gods were slowly realizing the full extent of Erebus's plan.

"The pillar of light that appears when a god is sent back is a manifestation of arcanum energy," Astrea went on. "Take into account nine of them and..."

"Yeah, there's no way we could detect what was going on underground with that kind of energy up here on the surface."

There was simply too much interference. Erebus's massacre on the surface completely masked the arcanum used in the monster-summoning down below.

Hermes narrowed his eyes. "It was a sacrifice, a diversion, and a smokescreen all at once," he growled.

The nine pillars of light. They weren't just meant to strike terror into the hearts of Orario's citizens. There was a more sinister purpose behind them.

"And to think they didn't just send back our gods," continued Hermes, "but some of their own, as well. They sacrificed their allies just to make sure we didn't catch on to what they were up to. That's ruthless. And I'd put money on it being part of the plan all along."

Astrea cast her eyes downward. "I just can't believe it," she said. "It's all so terrible."

Her eyes were tinged with sorrow as she spoke those terrified words.

"It can only be Erebus who planned this. We're all dancing in the palm of his hand..."

"That's why he calls himself absolute evil," said Hermes. "There's no god crueler on this earth right now."

The messenger god followed up his casual remark with a fiery glare into the darkness.

"This explains why the Evils haven't been putting their back into it lately. They've been letting us grow weak while their real force comes up from below. All these skirmishes and guerilla warfare...it was just to buy time."

And now, the enemy's greatest weapon was on its way. Once it arrived, it would be all-out war.

Meanwhile, Lyra seemed to be having trouble accepting Finn's words.

"What the hell?!" she cried. "I thought Zald and Alfia were bad enough, but now we've gotta fight off a Dungeon boss as well?! We're doomed! Tell us you got somethin' up your sleeve, hero!"

Her panic spread throughout the crowd, and soon all of Central Park was in an uproar. Lyu was aghast at the prum girl's uncharacteristic dismay.

"L-Lyra! I know things look bad, but you mustn't demoralize us further!"

"Nah, it's fine. Just watch."

"Huh?"

Lyra gave a sly grin. "Who do ya think is standin' up there? He's our race's shining beacon of hope!"

It was all an act. The next moment, that beacon spoke.

"We fight."

"""!!!"""

Lyu, Alize, Kaguya, and all the adventurers gazed in shock. All except Lyra, whose faith in her hero had never been in question.

"We must split our forces in two," Finn explained. "One group to stay up here and protect the tower from the Evils, and one to intercept and slay the monster before it reaches the surface."

Finn looked around at the adventurers' stunned faces as he told them of his plan.

"The bulk of our forces will make up the former group," he went on, "while

the latter will comprise only our strongest warriors. Our enemy's goal, whether above or below, is the destruction of Babel with this pincer attack. We must not let them succeed."

His calm and level words nonetheless worked the adventurers into a frenzy. Each of them noisily offered their own opinions of the enemy's strategy.

"You call it a pincer attack, but that doesn't do justice to what we're dealing with here!" cried Asfi.

"True," Falgar agreed. "The enemy is encircling us vertically instead of horizontally."

"We won't be able to directly support a team that's multiple floors deep," mused Shakti. "Or vice versa, for that matter. If either team falls, it's over for Orario."

It was Kaguya who finally said what everyone was thinking.

"Easy to say, but can it be done?"

But Finn was unperturbed.

"I assure you, it can."

"|"

Kaguya was taken aback by the prum's strong-willed words.

"But only we can do it," he went on. "What is about to commence may well be the largest conflict since the age of the gods began and 'quality over quantity' became the law of the land."

His azure eyes were as pure and still as the surface of a moonlit lake.

"If we do not fight here," he demanded, "then who will? If Orario cannot succeed, then who can?"

His calm voice trembled with latent determination.

"Only we possess even the slightest chance of victory. But we will not stand idle while that chance slips through our fingers!"

Before long, the crowd stood silent. All of them hung on Finn's every word. His speech imparted purpose; his words inspired courage. There was no tremor

in his voice that could spoil the flag of battle he raised. Faced with his rousing leadership, every last adventurer found the heart to fight.

"There is one more thing I must ask of you," he said. "Are you content to remain defeated?"

The whole crowd flinched, their eyes flayed wide. Lyu, Alize, Kaguya, Aiz, Riveria, Gareth, Raul, Asfi, Falgar, Shakti, Ottar, Allen, Hegni, Hedin, and the Gullivers. Each of them felt a flood of emotion as they recalled the events of that traumatic day.

"Do not lie to yourselves!" Finn yelled, his face a scowl. "We are defeated! The enemy has humiliated each and every one of us! So I ask you, my fellow lost souls: Look to your side! Where are your friends?"

Lyu's fists shook.

Ardee was gone. All that remained was a burning anger and a grief no words could soothe.

"Look behind you!" Finn cried out. "Where are your loved ones?"

A solid chunk of the adventurers grimaced in pain, remembering the ones they'd failed to protect. That night of destruction and hellfire had stolen them all away.

Finn's words ignited their emotions, propelling their spirits far beyond what all the fear, anxiety, and despair could suppress.

"If they are gone, who is left to avenge them? Who will carry on their wishes? To whom falls the task of vindicating our anger and grief?! It falls to *us*!! So do not let the despair hold you back! Break free from those chains! Do not let sorrow consume you! Let it be your courage and take back our future with your own two hands! Let nobody else experience the pain we have suffered!!"

All fists were clenched. A dwarven warrior raised his stout arms. An animal person archer roared. Even an elven mage forgot their modesty and bellowed at the top of their lungs. Meanwhile, an Amazon and a human pumped their swords in the air, and the prums placed their tiny hands to their chests.

"We already know the taste of defeat!" Finn yelled. "We drink the muddy

waters we find there and nourish ourselves on it! In defeat, we grow strong! And we will *not* lose again!"

His moonlit eyes quivered with the irrepressible force of his spirit.

"Show me your pride, adventurers! You are the most tenacious, defiant, and hardheaded curs this world has ever known! We may have lost the battle, but show me who will win the war!!"

"This land is where legends are born! This is our city!!"

Central Park erupted into howls. Human and demi-human alike heard Finn's passionate words and replied with unrestrained vigor.

Kaguya was shocked. "Our morale...it's unheard of."

Astrea Familia stood in shock as the fiery emotions of the crowd swirled around them. Their hearts raced, and their skin tingled.

"See? I told you he could handle it."

The prum girl enjoyed a little chuckle at the whole thing playing out like she thought it would.

"Lyra..." muttered Lyu.

Lyra looked back up at Finn. "He's a swindler and a cheat. The worst kind. He shouts his lies loud and proud and keeps repeating 'em until everyone's on board. Then it becomes the truth."

Her words were the words of his greatest critic, but her eyes were those of a girl in love. A girl who had found her light in the deepest depths of despair and had never let it go.

She smiled like a flower in bloom. "His words are our courage. That's why he's our race's greatest hope."

At her words, all the girls of *Astrea Familia* suddenly smiled. They knew what the fire in their hearts was; it was the courage that Finn had given them.

"The hero's a swindler, huh? Yep, that sounds like something Lyra would say!" Alize laughed.

"In that case, let us all help make his lies the truth," said Lyu.

"This is nothing," yelled Finn, "but a trial for every one of us would-be heroes!

A far greater threat awaits the world even after we succeed here!"

The Black Dragon. Apocalypse Incarnate. It was waiting at the end of the world, and this battle just a stepping-stone on the way.

"We must finish what Zeus and Hera began, and prove ourselves the next generation of heroes, in name and in deed!"



Finn's words pierced the darkness and carried on the wind to evil's ears.

"Look at you go, Finn. Can't wait to kick the shit outta ya!"

Atop the colossal city walls stood Valletta, eyes trained on the soft light emanating from Central Park.

Vito turned Finn's words over in his mind. "The land where legends are born. Ahhh, what a beautiful idea. I shall take great pleasure in destroying it."

Meanwhile, Olivas simmered in a mixture of humiliation and rage. "Curse you, Orario... This time... This time... I will annihilate you..."

Somewhere in southern Orario, the two Dis sisters danced in the moonlight amid the ruins of the city, locked in a mutual embrace.

"Not long now, Hegni!" said Dina.

"See you soon, Hedin!" said Vena.

""Let's have some fun together!!""

Meanwhile, beneath the city, Basram arranged his spirit warriors for combat, dominating their minds with a single wave of his staff.

"Oh my, how scary," he said in response to the rumbling roars echoing down from the surface. "The city of heroes is exceedingly tumultuous today. We must ensure our evil is up to the task of subduing it."

And finally, to the city's northwest, Zald stood in an abandoned church, bathed in moonlight, and wearing a smile upon his lips.

"The roar of a beast unwilling to be devoured... Good, very good."

"He's the same noisy prum he's always been," replied the second conqueror, turning her closed, expressionless eyes to the sky outside.

Evil had completed its rise to power.

Justice had finished its fall from grace.

All that remained was as the dark god said: a battle between good and evil, between the ideologies of right and wrong.

"We fight against absolute evil!" Finn declared. "So let us all fight in Lady

Astrea's name!"

He held his spear aloft and cried:

"Let us fight for what is right!!"

The city shook as its inhabitants' cries pierced the heavens, where their lost ones dwelled, and the people constructed a bridge of oaths to reach the stars. Like a meteor, their light ascended, blazing a trail across the crystal-studded sky.



A conflict between order and chaos.

A battle like no other.

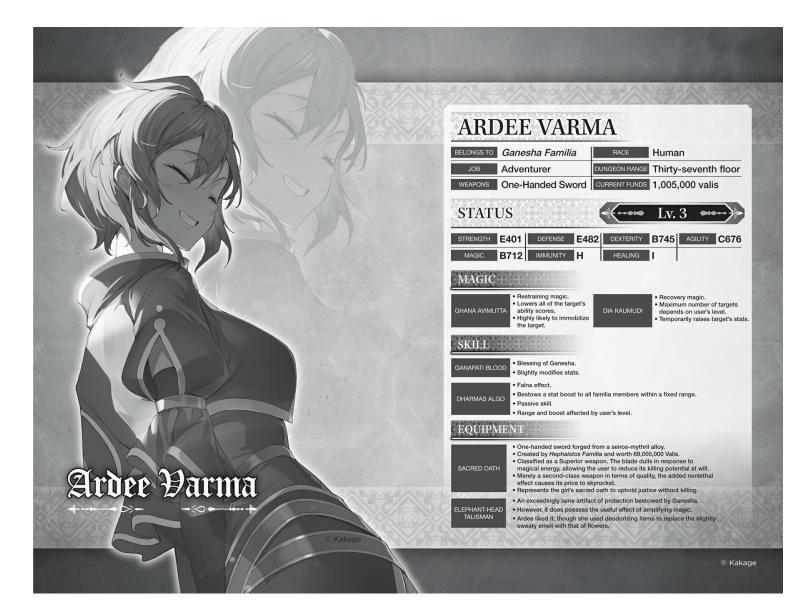
The memory of forgotten heroes.

It would come to be known as "The War of Good and Evil."

Mortals and gods would sing of it.

The stars themselves would write of it.

And so the greatest battle in Orario's millennium-long history began on that fateful day.



Afterword

I'll leave you with my tales of woes for a bit.

Converting a script intended for a game into a book was unexpectedly difficult (at least, in my experience). For example, in a game, you can easily switch scenes with a fade-to-black and/or some special effects, but if you have only text, a sudden scene change can seem abrupt and can wreck the pacing and flow of the writing.

Another thing is when you take out all the passionate voice acting and scene-appropriate music, the text can seem staggeringly dull by itself. Three or four scenes' worth of moments get crammed into a single page spread, and the story just flies by without giving you time to digest it. I was always prepared for this to be a problem ever since Volume 1, but this time was even worse, and I found myself standing alongside Lyu, screaming, "Go away, Erebus. It's not your time yet!"

But I learn a lot when creating adaptations. It feels like I'm gaining experience points and leveling up alongside our wayward elf and the other characters in the story. Adapting a game into a novel requires addition. Adapting a novel into a game requires subtraction and sometimes multiplication. It's an embarrassing process to have to reveal, but I do it in the hopes of leaving my tracks in this afterword and reminding myself how far I've come.

Now for the acknowledgments.

First, to Usami, my editor, I give my utmost thanks for supporting me throughout this second volume. I'm going to get some sleep now, and I hope you do, too. Second, I'd like to thank Kakage for once again decorating this volume with their wonderful illustrations, and I apologize for the trouble caused by any controversy over the size of Lyu's breasts. I would like to make clear that

I am not a radical flat-chest extremist by any means, and I like big boobs, too, honest! My sincere gratitude goes out to all the staff at WFS for their help and assistance in obtaining materials. And finally, a very big thank-you to all the readers who chose to pick up this book.

This long struggle, recorded on the infinite stars of the boundless sky, will finally come to an end in Volume 3, *War of Good and Evil*.

I hope you will see this tale through to the end, come what may. Thank you for sticking with me this far, and until next time.

—Fujino Omori

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