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FINAL



FUJINO OMORI

ILLUSTRATION BY
KAKAGE

CHARACTER DESIGN BY
SUZUHITO YASUDA



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ASTREA RECORD

The War of Good and Evil

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

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ASTREA RECORD vol. 3 -SEIJAKESSEN—

DUNGEON NI DEAI WO MOTOMERU NO WA MACHIGATTEIRUDAROUKA
EIYUTAN

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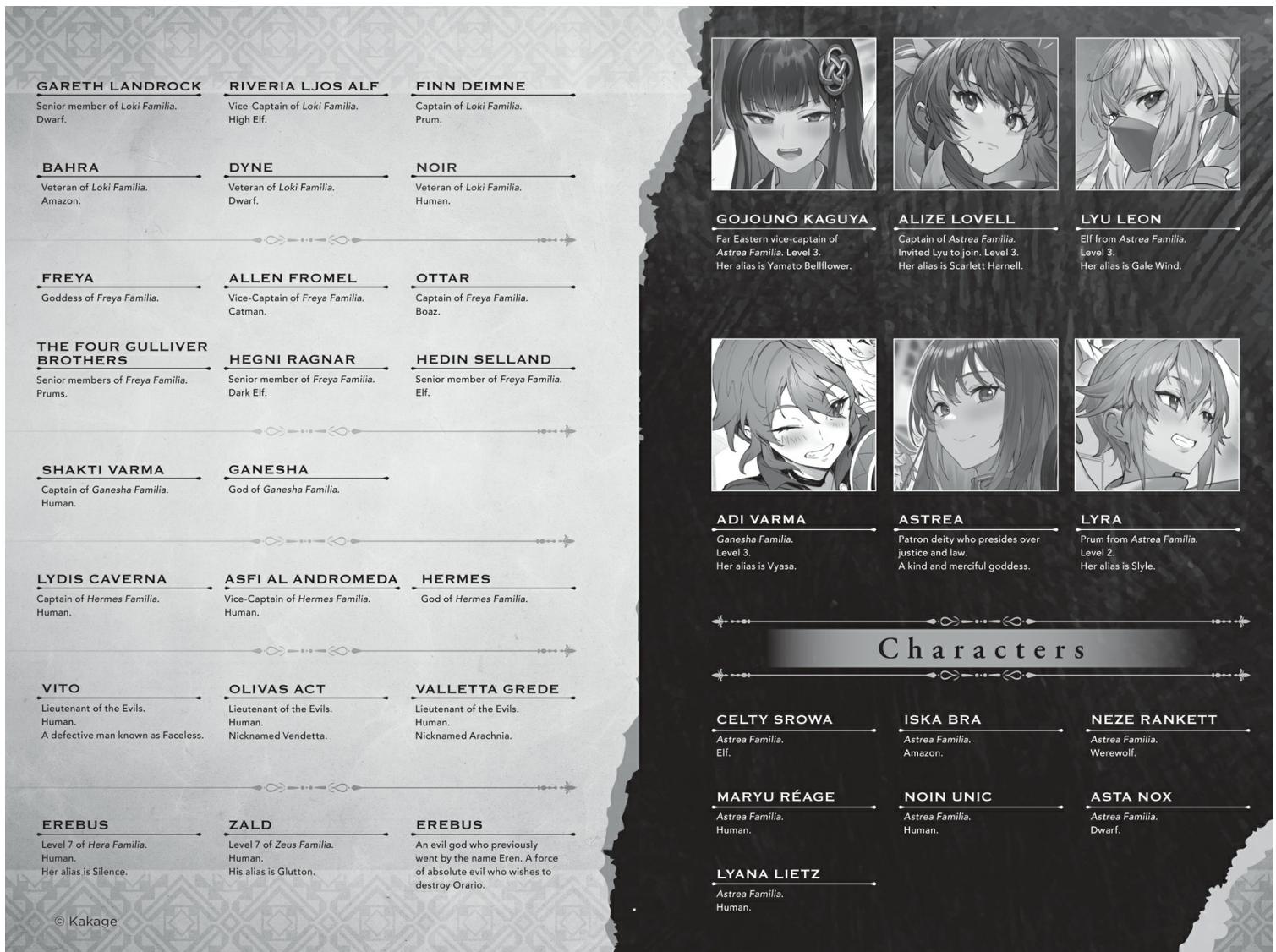
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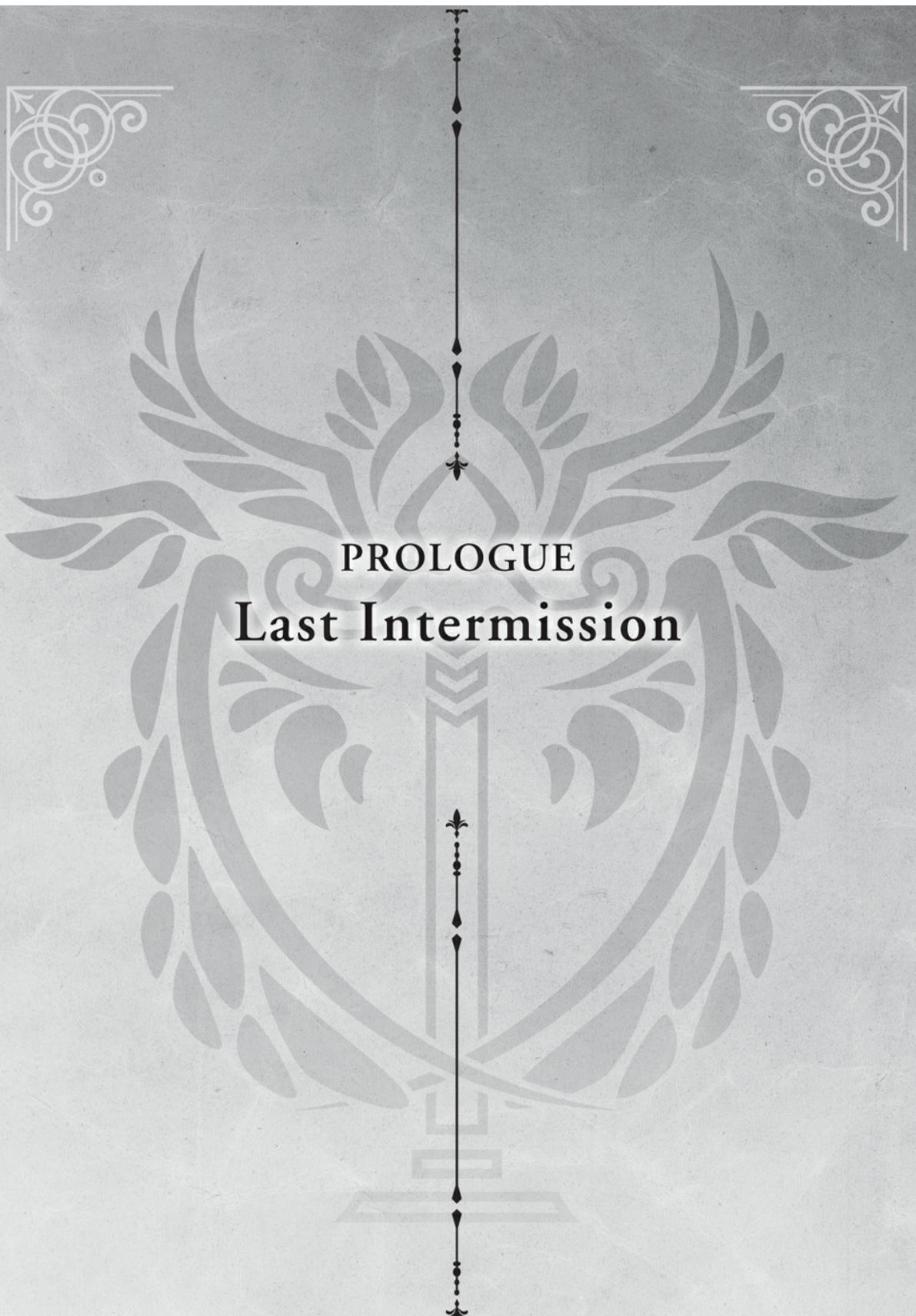
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PROLOGUE
Last Intermission

ASTREA RECORD
The War of Good and Evil

Story by Eujino Omori · Illustration by Sakage
Character Design by Sazuhito Yasuda





PROLOGUE

Last Intermission

This is a record. A record of a time in which evil flourished.

This is a memory. A memory I must never forget, of the justice left by passing stars.

And finally, this is a truth. A singular truth, of a smile unknown to all.

ASTREA RECORD



THE WAR OF

GOOD AND EVIL

The predawn skies were leaden and weighty. For a short few minutes, the stars had been visible before dark clouds gathered and blocked them out.

Some said they would not return until it was all over.

The city was dark. Every street and alley was scarred by war. Dust and rubble filled the avenues, lined by hollowed-out buildings. Half the city lay in ruins, like the rotting carcasses of so many giants. It felt like a dream nobody could wake from, no matter how much they tried.

The most unbearable thing was the silence. Ordinarily, a big city like Orario should be overflowing with the sounds of shopkeepers, busy townsfolk, and little children. There was none of that now.

Only a chilly, lifeless wind blew through empty streets. Orario was dead.

“Is this really our city?”

Raul’s thoughts spilled from his lips as he peered around at the destruction. He’d never seen anything like this.

“Everyone’s gone. I can’t hear a thing,” said Falgar of *Hermes Familia*, standing next to the boy. He looked around and growled like a lion forced out of its den. “It was better when everyone was condemning us, crying out in anger and pain. At least then the city felt alive.”

The streets were completely empty. Nothing made a sound, save the adventurers themselves. They could hardly imagine anything farther from the Orario they knew and loved. It was as shocking as it was disturbing.

“The place is a ghost town,” Falgar went on. “Nobody would believe that this is supposed to be the center of the world.”

Falgar’s words echoed Raul’s thoughts. How could the young boy have possibly imagined, back when he first left his hometown to step through the magnificent gates of the City of Heroes, that he would one day see the land of his dreams reduced to ruins?

“It’s like...we’re watching the end of the world,” said Raul. He wasn’t sure why, but he wanted to cry.

“Don’t let your emotions take over, young ones,” said one of Loki’s oldest

followers.

Falgar recognized the sagely man. “The Bowstring Blade...”

“I...I’m sorry, Noir,” said Raul, turning around.

The man who’d spoken was a human who had seen seventy years come and go, but age had done little to impair his tempered physique. His spine was straight as an arrow, and he stood at a respectable 180 celches, as lithe and spry as a weeping willow. He dressed in old-fashioned combat gear that closely resembled a kimono from the Far East and was the epitome of a seasoned master fencer.

That was Noir Sachsen of *Loki Familia*. The man had converted from his old familia some years back and was one of several mentors who taught Finn, Riveria, and Gareth the basics of being an adventurer. Along with the dwarf Dyne, who was still robust even in old age, and the Amazon Bahra, who possessed the mature beauty of a woman in her forties and the fighting instincts of a beast to match, the three veterans of *Loki Familia* were a shining example for its leaders to follow.

“Still, I must admit,” said Dyne, surveying the city. “In all our years, we’ve never seen carnage like this.”

“Hey, it’s not that bad. Remember when Zeus and Hera were warring with Horus and Sobek? It was like a Great Conflict every night!”

Bhra cackled. Raul, Falgar, and the other members of *Loki Familia* and *Hermes Familia* found it difficult to laugh at her tasteless joke, but it brought an awkward smile to their faces nonetheless.

The dozen or so adventurers were currently conducting their final patrol. It wouldn’t be long before the entire city would become their battleground.

Noir scratched his full beard, steeled himself, and directed his next words at the desolate streets.

“It’s not over yet,” he said. “The real showdown hasn’t even begun.”

The war room in the Guild Headquarters was busy, with people coming and going constantly. Finn was standing over a table covered in maps when the voice of his goddess caused him to look up.

“Got a report here from Noir’s team, Finn,” Loki said. “They’ve finished evacuating the residents. There’s not a single soul left anywhere in the city. They’re all holed up in one of our five designated strongholds: here, the arena, the Casino, Ganesha’s home, and our very own Twilight Manor.”

“Thank you,” replied Finn. “What about the adventurers?”

“They’ve already taken up defensive positions,” said Loki. Then, scratching her vermillion hair, she added, “I still can’t believe we’re really doin’ this. When you first told me what you were plannin’ when the siege started, I wasn’t sure what to think...”

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Once the night of the Great Conflict had passed, and evil retreated to the city's walls, Finn had ordered the fortification of five of the city's most prominent locations so they would have places to safely house noncombatants.

Construction had been going on in the background ever since. Even while the followers of justice searched for meaning, and the followers of beauty warred in pursuit of strength, Finn's astute mind had calculated what their side would need to have a chance in a decisive battle.

"We no longer have any choice," said Finn. "Not if we want to protect the people as well as Babel."

Finn had considered using Folkvangr, the home of *Freya Familia*, as one of the strongholds but decided against it because of its extensive size. Though it was large enough to hold many civilians, that size made it harder to defend. He also couldn't afford to concentrate their forces in a single location if their plan was going to work.

There was one other crucial thing Finn needed. He asked Loki to confirm.

"What about the barrier in Central Park?"

Loki shrugged. "We're settin' it up just like you asked," she replied. "Riveria's over there leading the other mages as we speak... But even she agrees it's a rush job. It ain't gonna hold once the enemy comes a-knockin'."

"That's fine," answered Finn, completely unperturbed, returning his gaze to the battle maps strewn across the desk. "It only needs to block their line of sight."

"The hell did you just say? A barrier?"

Beneath ash-colored clouds, within the city walls, Valletta stopped setting up chess pieces and shot Olivas a bewildered look.

"Yes. It's just appeared," he replied. Valletta had ordered him to keep a close eye on Orario's protectors, and to inform her immediately if it looked like they were up to something.

Valletta's face stiffened. She sprang out of her chair like a leopard and climbed the rugged stone staircase to the top of the walls.

"Well, shit..." she muttered, when she saw it.

"The barrier is made of ice," Olivas noted. "It encircles all of Central Park."

The cold, dry wind ruffled Valletta's hair. From this height, she could see that multiple layers of thick ice now covered Central Park from all angles. The sharp, overlapping sections of ice at the foot of Babel looked like a cactus flower.

"Not a magical barrier, but a physical one. Our enemy seeks to furnish its keep with walls, it seems."

Olivas wasn't wrong, but there had to be more to it than that. Valletta Grede knew how Finn thought better than anyone.

"Hah," she spat. "First they hide away all the civvies, now Finn's up to somethin' tricky! Heh-heh-heh, fine by me! Where's the fun in winnin' without a fight?!"

Her eyes narrowed as she attempted to discern the thoughts of her prum archnemesis.

"You're on, Finn! Let's make this whole city our board! Move your pieces, make your gambits, 'cause I'm gonna turn you into mincemeat, you hear me? Ha-ha-ha-ha!"

She laughed, twirling the chess queen in her fingers. Watching her made the Evils sentries break out in a nervous sweat, while Olivas merely gave a derisive grunt.

Then there was a rumble, like the growling of distant thunder. Everyone felt it in their bellies and their hearts. As the ground beneath her feet trembled, Valletta's face twisted into a smile.

"Listen to that," she said. "The beasts of hell are comin' for you!"



The tremors ran through the entire city. The source was deep beneath Babel, lying within the Dungeon itself.

“.....”

Freya listened to the Dungeon’s howl from atop the highest floor of her ivory tower.

“Lady Freya. You must seek refuge.”

The heavy footfalls behind her heralded the arrival of her most powerful warrior, Ottar. He was armed to the teeth and ready for battle.

“Why is that?” Freya asked without shifting her gaze.

“The other gods have already gathered at the Guild,” said Ottar, his voice strained with tension. “The final battle is almost upon us. Our enemy seeks the destruction of Babel. It is not safe for you here.”

“Ottar. Do you know what this is I’m wearing?”

“...I do not, my lady.”

Freya was not clothed in her usual black dress. It was the complete opposite—a pure snow-white robe, along with a translucent stole that wrapped around her arms like a celestial raiment. Even Ottar had never seen her in it.

“These are the same clothes I was wearing when Hera defeated me in battle.”

Ottar’s eyes widened in shock. “Why...would you wear that now?”

“For absolution,” replied Freya, speaking her heart. “Today I sever my past with Zeus and Freya and wash away the taint of defeat.”

She turned around at last. “I expect you to indulge me,” she said. “Both my divine proclamations...and my personal whims.”

“.....”

As Ottar stared into the silvery eyes of his goddess, he slowly understood what it was she wanted to say. Freya, meanwhile, looked her follower up and down before smiling.

“It has been a while since I last saw you dressed for war,” she remarked.

A golden pauldron covered one of the boaz’s shoulders, and his crimson cape and waistcloth were both woven from enchanted salamander fabric. He carried a number of daggers at his belt, along with the two crossed greatswords on his

back.

Beauty and practicality. Each stood at opposite extremes, yet in some ways they were perfect reflections of one another. Their change of costume reflected their true desire.

“What does your outfit mean to you?” asked Freya.

“It is a promise to carry out my intent.”

“And that intent is...?”

This time, Ottar’s reply was immediate.

“To conquer.”

“Do you intend to lose, Ottar?”

“I do not.”

“Then it matters not where I stand.”

With that, she broke eye contact and turned back to the city.

“I shall watch your victory from here. The view may be the same as it ever was...but there is no better place to see all of Orario.”

“.....”

“I shall be watching over you, Ottar.”

“...Yes, my lady.” And then, with unshakable loyalty, he added, “Victory shall be yours.”



The air was filled with the sound of roaring forges, and a deadly heat. Even in the face of countless attacks from the Evils, this workshop did not close. It was a testament to its artisans’ pride, and it was there that a new weapon was born.

“So this is it...”

Lyu took the wooden sword, taking stock of its weight and the holy power that resided within it.

"Made from a branch of the holy tree, just as you requested," replied the forgemaster, captain of *Goibniu Familia*. The exhaustion was clear in his voice as he wiped the sweat from his brow. "It works perfectly as a sword, of course, but you can also use it like a staff to amplify the power of your magic."

Lyu had indeed been the one to commission this weapon, using the memento of her hometown that Shakti had bequeathed her.

"A weapon made from Adi's gift..." said Alize, standing beside her. "Isn't that great? I'm so glad it got finished on time!"

But the forgemaster was more cynical. "It ain't finished," he said. "We were in a hurry, so I'm afraid it's a rush job. It'll do in a battle, but it's far from perfect."

That much was true. The final battle was fast approaching, and no forge could afford to take its time. Though the process was quite different for Lyu's weapon compared to a metal sword, it still involved a great deal of work on the magical side—work that would be impossible to complete without the assistance of a trained mage. As none were available, Goibniu himself had been asked to act as a substitute, but the result was a weapon that relied heavily on the latent power of its materials.

These facts, while unavoidable, were a matter of great shame for the forgemaster.

"...That's why you can't die out there," he said, folding his arms. "That weapon's a blot on our reputation. Come back alive so we can finish it properly, you hear?"

"Yes, I will," replied Lyu with a smile.

"Have you decided on a name, Leon?"

"*Alvs Lumina*. Lady Astrea thought of it."

The name meant *elven starlight*. It symbolized the bond between Lyu and her familia perfectly.

Alize beamed. "That's a great name!" she said. "And thanks to the supplies Asfi stockpiled, we've all gotten makeovers too! Now it really *feels* like the final battle!"

Alize was wearing a new set of armor that made her look like a flame in motion. Her boots and socks were white, and the latter came up to her thighs, where they met a miniskirt adorned with all kinds of ailment-warding accessories. Her cloak and jacket completed the image of a scarlet knight, and at her hip she carried her trusty one-handed sword, Crimson Order, which had been worked on by the smiths and now gleamed like it was brand-new.

"We've been hand-picked to slay the Dungeon threat," mused Lyu. "Finn placed his trust in us. I intend to live up to that trust."

Finn's plan called for two forces: one to protect Babel from above, and one from below. On the surface, they had to contend with the combined armies of the Evils, while underground, a monster was working its way up from the lower levels of the Dungeon and had to be stopped.

The latter team was composed of a relatively small number of elite warriors but included the girls of *Astrea Familia*. The subterranean battle was expected to be no less fierce than the war in the streets, so Finn had put in orders for the girls' equipment to be enhanced to the best of the city's current capabilities. The entire familia had received extensive upgrades, up to and including Asta, the party vanguard, but Astrea had insisted that Alize and Lyu be given special attention as they were, respectively, the captain of the familia and the elf who had aroused the interest of the dark god, Erebus.

Lyu's outfit featured contrasting whites and blues, combining the purity of justice with the brilliance of the wind. Her regalia was worthy of any guardian of order. Other than the parts covering the joints of the arms and legs, there was very little armor to speak of, and instead the equipment's focus was maintaining agility and magical defense.

Alize looked at her and Lyu's gear with a proud grin but just then the ground almost seemed to bulge beneath their feet, as a low grumble emerged from it.

"The noises from the Dungeon... They're getting louder. It's almost time," she said.

"Yes. The monster's nearly here."

The battle would begin at dawn, just as Finn predicted. All levity vanished from the girls' faces as they checked their equipment one last time. It was at

that moment that Lyra and Kaguya entered the workshop.

“Alize, Leon,” said the pink-haired prum girl with a lighthearted grin. “Time to get moving.”

“You finished your preparations, right?” asked the kimono-clad human by her side. “Then let’s walk into hell and slay some hell spawn.”

Alize turned to Lyu and nodded.

“Yes, we’re ready. Let’s go!”

“Give ‘em hell!”

“Come back safe!”

“Don’t break that, you hear?!”

Cheered on by the forge hands, Lyu and the other members of *Astrea Familia* made their way to Central Park.



The city was abuzz with tension over the upcoming battle. At Guild HQ, adventurers completed their final checks. Their minds were focused solely on the task at hand, and on nothing that lay beyond. The adventurers took stock of their trusty weapons, their armor that had been serviced by city craftsmen, and their ration of all-important items. There would be no room for error.

Veteran adventurers sparred with their fists or arm-wrestled each other. It was a common prebattle ritual for them. Younger recruits did their best to calm their nerves, while older warriors imparted a few encouraging words.

When we get back, the first round’s on me, kids.

Thus a promise was forged.

“Finn’s dressed to the nines, too, just like Ottar and Astrea’s crew... Can’t have our captain bein’ upstaged, now can we?”

Amid all the bustle, Loki sat in the Guild’s lobby, watching her captain with a grin.

The crimson robe Finn wore over his top-class equipment looked like a signature written in blood. The cloth ran over his right shoulder and was fastened in place at the waist, while the remainder flowed from his shoulders like a cape. His other arm was protected with a steel vambrace that extended past the elbow. To a prum, he must have looked like an incarnation of their goddess, Fianna.

Finn flexed his joints, testing the armor for flaws right as a scouting party returned and handed him a rolled-up scroll. Finn exchanged a few words with them, and then the scouts headed out once more. As they left, Finn unfurled the parchment—a map of the enemy's locations—and studied its contents in silence. As he did so, Royman came over, spraying spittle at him.

"I'm begging you, Finn! We've invested every last drop of our city's resources in ensuring you adventurers have the best equipment money can buy! You cannot fail us now!!"

Royman's nerves were every bit as frayed as those of the warriors fighting on the front lines. His flab jiggled as he nagged Finn like a nosy mother-in-law.

Finn didn't even spare the man a glance. He just replied, "We'll do everything we can," as another tremor rocked the building. At the same time, a flustered Guild woman ran in.

"We've just received news that the monster has reached the twentieth floor! The scouting party has suffered heavy casualties!"

In more peaceful times, the woman worked as a receptionist, but her lovely face was twisted with fear.

"They cannot continue the mission! They're requesting permission to evacuate! I'm sending the retreat order right now!"

The Guild woman shouted her report, causing almost every adventurer within earshot to turn and stare in horror. Royman went pale. Only Loki and the first-tier adventurers were able to stay calm.

"Accounting for the time it took this report to arrive," said Gareth, stroking his beard, "the beast should have reached the nineteenth floor by now. A little faster than we expected."

"Yes," replied Riveria, "but that's fine. *Astrea Familia* and I are done with our preparations." She eyed the staff in her hands. "We are ready to go anyti—Finn?"

The prum commander had still not said a word, and his eyes were fixed firmly on the contents of the parchment. There was a brief silence as everyone turned to him.

Possibilities raced through his head. After five excruciating seconds, Finn licked his thumb.

"...We need to alter the Dungeon team," he said. "Gareth, Aiz. You two go with Riveria and *Astrea Familia* as well."

"What?"

Riveria was taken aback at this last-minute change of plan.

"Hold on, Finn," said Gareth. "The plan was for the girls to keep the beast busy with their swift movements while Riveria hit hard enough with magic to take it out in one blow. What's changed? Zald and Alfia will be coming. We can't spare anyone on the surface."

Gareth was right. The threat of those two Level 7s far exceeded that of the Dungeon monster. Orario needed to meet them with everything they could muster, even if that meant dividing their forces unequally. It was none other than Finn who had come up with that plan in the first place.

"I thought so too, at first," Finn replied. "But I've just read this report on the enemy dispositions...and something's not right."

Finn walked over to the reception counter and spread the map on top of it, placing black-and-white chess pieces to mark allied and enemy formations.

"I worked out seventeen different ways the enemy could deploy their forces, and what we're seeing doesn't match any of them. The battle even hasn't started yet, and already I can't shake the feeling we're missing something."

Finn moved the black pieces one by one, reflecting the deviation in their predicted and actual locations. As he laid out the discrepancy for them, the other adventurers began to murmur in discomfort.

The last piece to move was the enemy queen, which ended up on the eastern side of the city. Finn narrowed his azure eyes and glared at it.

"...So, ya think the Evils are gonna show up down in the Dungeon as well?" asked Loki.

"That's one possibility," Finn replied. "But that's not the worst thing they could do..."

He opened his mouth to elaborate, then closed it and shook his head.

"...No, that doesn't matter. What matters is, my thumb is aching, just like it did on the night of the Great Conflict. We could be walking right into a trap again. I don't want to take that chance."

"Well, that's a good enough reason for me," said Loki. "Finn's thumb's cannier than the gods themselves sometimes."

"N-n-now wait just a moment! Surely you cannot be serious about making such important decisions based on some...random pain in your fingers?!"

While Loki seemed convinced, Royman loudly refused to accept Finn's patchy reasoning. But it was someone else who walked up behind him with soft footsteps and an answer at the ready.

"It's fine. Once we defeat the monster, we can come back. It won't take long."

It was Aiz, carrying a sword that seemed much too large for her strapped to her back. All eyes were drawn toward the girl who was so small, most in the room had to look down to see her. The first one to break the silence was the old dwarf warrior.

"Ha-ha-ha!" Gareth laughed. "Right you are, girl! Beat the monster quick enough, and it doesn't matter if Finn's prediction is off the mark!"

"We owe our lives to your hunches, Captain," added Riveria. "I'm perfectly happy to place my trust in you once more."

Royman couldn't believe what he was hearing. "H-have you all lost it?!" he shrieked. But Finn only smiled.

"Thank you, both of you. And you too, Aiz. I'm counting on you."

The golden-haired girl gave a single nod in response.



At the same time, on the rooftop of Guild HQ, Hermes surveyed the city. A voice from behind him caused him to turn.

“Hermes.”

“What’s up, Astrea? The war’s about to begin; you should get to safety.”

“I called you here because I have something important to tell you, Hermes. I believe Erebus has descended into the Dungeon.”

The moment she said that, Hermes abandoned any notion of persuading the goddess to go into hiding. For a few moments, he considered how to respond.

“...On the day of the Great Conflict,” he said at last, “Erebus appeared before us. That was part of a performance to draw our attention away from what was happening in the Dungeon.”

Erebus’s true goal that night was well-known by now. By preaching absolute evil and massacring multiple deities at once, the dark god ensured that all eyes and ears were on him instead of the Dungeon. As a result, nobody realized that a god had unsealed their Arcanum down below and summoned a nightmarish fiend.

“Unless Erebus can be in two places at once, then the god who unleashed their Arcanum has to be someone else,” Hermes went on. “In other words, he couldn’t have been in the Dungeon. He has an alibi, so to speak.”

There was no other way to summon a monster of this caliber besides breaking the divine taboo within the Dungeon. If the summoning really did occur during Erebus’s speech, it was physically impossible for him to have done it. In essence, the dark god had demonstrated his innocence to the entire city of Orario.

There was another reason Hermes found it hard to believe.

“There’s only one way down there, and that’s through Babel,” he reminded her. “Precisely where *Loki Familia* has been positioned all this time. If Erebus came within spitting distance of the entrance, there’s no way they wouldn’t

know about it.”

Finn had quickly decided to make Central Park the base of allied operations, and right now the foot of Babel was the most fortified location in the city. The Evils’s probing attacks hadn’t managed to come close to scratching the tower. Even disguised as Eren, Erebus would have an impossible time making it past the eyes of countless sentries.

“But you already know all this, don’t you, Astrea?”

Nothing Hermes said should have come as a surprise to the goddess. However...

“I do,” she confirmed, staring unflinchingly into his eyes. “But even so, I am certain he’s down there, leading the enemy as the incarnation of absolute evil.”

“.....”

“Hermes. You used to be his friend, did you not? Surely you’ve sensed something?”

Hermes was a god who armed himself with reason and logic. That was precisely why Astrea was sure he found his own words unconvincing. No matter how many times he reminded himself of the facts, he still harbored doubts. Astrea knew that. Her indigo eyes, as deep as the starry skies, saw everything.

A cold wind caressed Hermes’s cheeks. After a moment, he let out a deep sigh.

“...What does it change?” he asked. “Even if our hunch turns out to be right, and Erebus is there, why does that matter? Why come to me now?”

Hermes leveled his keen gaze at her once more.

“What do you want from me, Astrea?”

The goddess said nothing and simply stared back at him.



When the Age of Gods began, and divine beings first walked the earth, mortals learned what really happened after death. The legends, myths, and

fanciful stories of old were replaced with hard truths. After coming face-to-face with deities and their undeniable miracles, there was no choice but to accept this new reality.

Many were afraid. Many sleepless nights visited mortals who worried whether eternal paradise or torment awaited them. Many debates centered around the precise nature of the suffering that took place in the netherworld's deepest abyss.

But all those people would surely agree that if hell were to suddenly appear in front of them, it would look just like this.

It was the seventh of the Seven Days of Death, and evil's work was nearing completion.

"The quakes are still coming from the Dungeon..." noted Kaguya.

"...But apart from that, everything's so quiet," replied Alize, taking a look around. "It really doesn't feel like the final showdown is about to begin."

It was just before dawn, and Central Park was as still as a grave. Nobody spoke a word. They all listened to the rumbling ground, like the roars of a great dragon that slept beneath the earth. Grim expressions marked each of their faces. They all knew something big was coming.

However, some in the crowd tried their best to not let their nerves get to them.

"What's with that shield strapped to your back?" asked Neze. "It makes you look like a turtle."

"Who you callin' a turtle?" snapped Lyra. "This here's my secret weapon!"

Nevertheless, the animal girl's description was perfectly apt. The circular shield was almost as large as Lyra, and it would have covered her head as well if it extended just a little farther above her shoulders. It seemed more suited to a dwarf—not to mention the shield was an unusual amount of defensive gear for Lyra, who usually fought from the back ranks instead of up close and personal.

"I was gonna leave it behind, but then Finn told me to take it with me. I ain't got a clue how it's supposed to help, but who knows. It is what it is, eh?"

“...Is it?”

“...Whatever, forget it,” said Lyra with a wry smile and a shake of the head. “The point is, this ain’t just any shield. The great and almighty Perseus made it for me.”

Lyra grinned and glanced over to elsewhere in the crowd, where a soot-stained head of sky-blue hair was visible.

“Andromeda...are you okay?” Lyu asked Asfi, who was visibly disheveled. “You don’t look well at all...”

“It’s your *familia*’s fault,” the girl replied. “There’s so much work, I haven’t slept a wink. I haven’t even had a break for seventy-seven hours!”

“I-I’m sorry,” said Lyu. “I mean, I don’t think it’s my fault, but still...”

“I can’t take it anymore! If I die out there, make sure everyone knows it’s Syle’s fault, okay?!”

The overworked captain of *Hermes Familia* had deep bags under her eyes and looked like she had aged years in the course of a few days because of all the last-minute commissions. She had turned into a walking corpse, and Lyu had nothing to offer her beyond her deepest apologies.

Asfi let out a deep sigh. “But, Leon,” she said. “I can’t help but notice that sword you’re carrying. Not your wooden sword, the other one...”

Her eyes were fixed on Lyu’s hip. There, the elven girl carried two swords: the newly completed Alvs Lumina, as well as a weapon that Asfi swore she recognized.

“Yes,” replied Lyu. “It’s Adi’s.”

Its name was Sacred Oath, and besides the girl’s undying justice, it was the last thing of Adi’s that Lyu possessed. Lyu had already received Shakti’s permission to carry it. She stroked the pommel and looked back at Asfi.

“Today, she fights alongside us,” she said.

“I see...”

Asfi smiled, finding comfort in Lyu’s proud determination.

"In that case," she said. "Make sure you come back alive. For once, I'd like for us to bond over something besides suffering."

"That's what I intend to do. You stay safe out there, too, Andromeda."

This was the kind of camaraderie that could only be found on the battlefield. With that thought, Lyu offered the other girl a smile.

Then Gareth approached Riveria. It was time.

"Everything's ready," he told her. "We move on your mark."

Aiz stood beside her mother figure and looked up at her. The high elf's eyes were closed in contemplation. At last, she opened them, and...

"...Very well."

Dawn broke, signaling the beginning of the battle to end it all.

All across the city, adventurers took up arms as they prepared to protect their world.

And all around the borders of that city, evil grinned as they prepared to manufacture hell on earth.

"It's time."

Atop the city walls, Valletta licked her lips and leveled the point of her sword at the white-walled tower at Orario's core.

"Today's the day, kids! The day Orario falls!!"

""""Roaaaaaaaaahhh!!""""

The evil army's shouts seemed to shake the clouds in the sky. Meanwhile, atop Guild HQ, Finn raised his golden spear.

"Let me hear your voices! Today we fight for our city!!"

""""Hooraaaaaaaaahhh!!""""

Orario became a war zone as armies filled the streets. Meanwhile, Riveria and

Gareth stood at the foot of Babel.

“Move out. We have a monster to slay.”

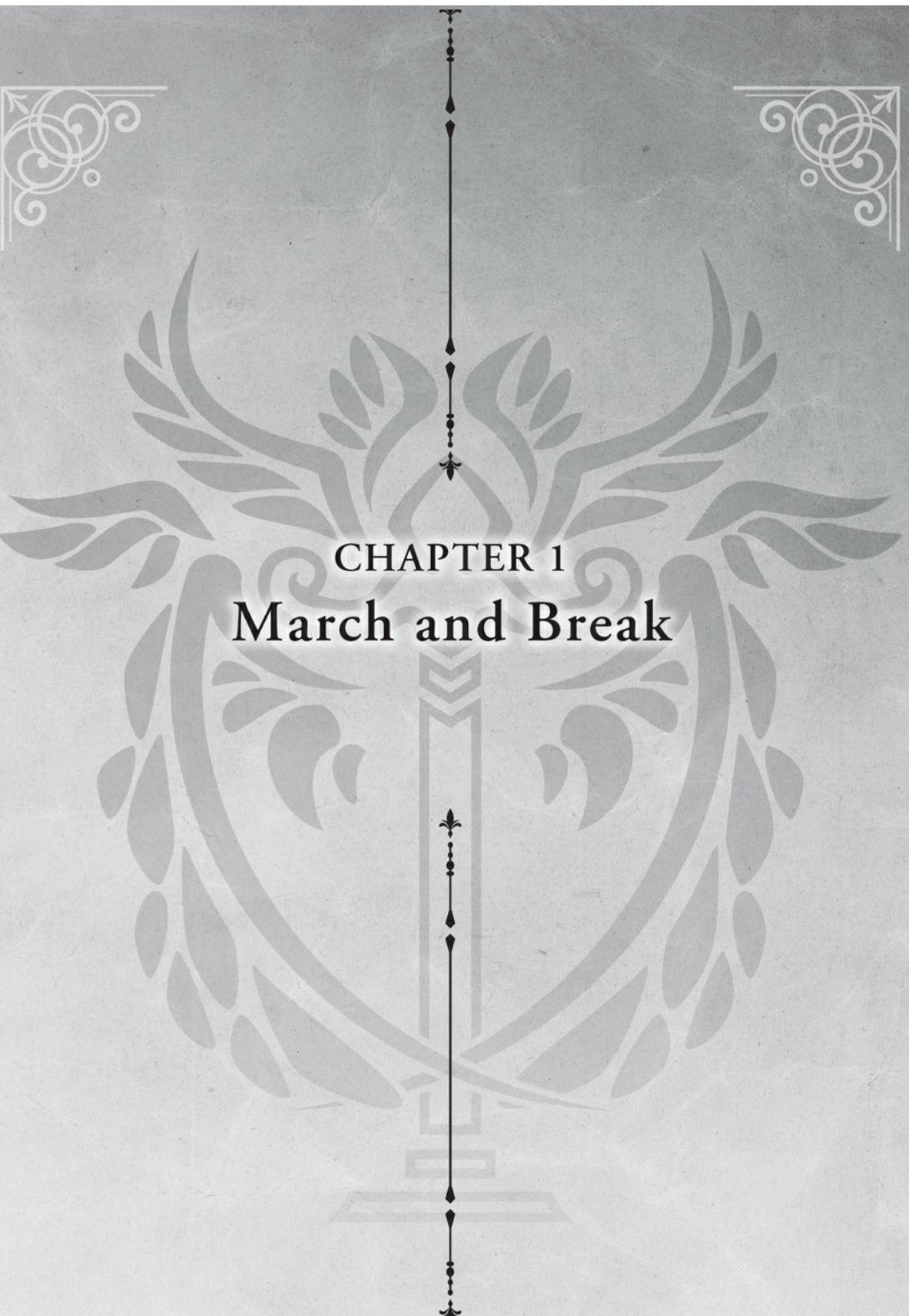
“Follow me, younglings!”

The two of them disappeared into the tower, followed by Aiz, and the members of *Astrea Familia* brought up the rear. They sprinted down the stairs, into the tower’s basement, and through the entrance to the Dungeon.

Standing on the brink of the abyss, Lyu unsheathed her two swords.

“Let’s go, Adi!”

Then she jumped in.



CHAPTER 1

March and Break

ASTREA RECORD

The War of Good and Evil

Story by Eujino Omori · Illustration by Sakage
Character Design by Sazuhito Yasuda



CHAPTER 1

March and Break

Any adventurer could tell that the air was different in the Dungeon. It was like an invisible line dividing the world above from the one below. The moment they entered, a chilly air filled their lungs, reminding them exactly how far they'd strayed from the watchful gazes of the sun and the moon.

But today the difference was even starker.

“Roaaaaaaaaagh!!”

Shouts filled the air on the first floor. It was more chaotic than ever.

“The monsters are agitated!” cried Kaguya, looking around. “I think something’s frightening them!”

“No shit!” replied Lyra. “The ground’s shaking beneath their feet, and it sounds like bombs are goin’ off or somethin’! There might as well be a damn fireworks display!”

She wore a cynical grin. All around her, goblins, kobolds, and other low-level monsters seemed to have taken leave of their senses and were running around like the world was going to end.

“The quakes are way stronger down here!” shouted Neze. “I didn’t really believe a monster could break through floors before, but I do now!”

To the girls of *Astrea Familia*, the earthquakes felt like a giant had picked them up and started rattling them like a pair of dice. There could no longer be any doubt about the danger of the approaching threat.

“““Groooooooooagh!!”””

“Horde of monsters, spotted dead ahead!” reported Noin, grasping her shortsword in one hand and buckler in the other. “Size is...I don’t know, but it’s a lot!!”

“They’re in a panic!!” added Celty, the elven mage. “They’re attacking anything that comes close!”

“What do we do, Alize?” asked Maryu, turning to her captain for guidance.

The column of *Astrea Familia* moved swiftly through the Dungeon. Alize gave her orders without a second’s delay.

“Just ignore them!” she yelled. “Our target is the big one!”

With her ponytail fluttering behind her, Alize pulled Crimson Order from its sheath and brandished its narrow blade. With one clean slash, she cut down three monsters that stood in the party’s way.

“““Gyaagh?!”””

“Don’t slow down! Don’t let anything stop us! Go, go, go!!”

“““Got it!”””

The girls answered their leader’s command with practiced swiftness. The mad rush of monsters ran face-first into Noin’s sturdy shield, and then met Kaguya’s and Lyu’s swords, Lyra’s boomerangs, and Neze’s twin blades.

Thus *Astrea Familia* carved a path through the sea of foes. But following behind them was the strike team’s smallest member.

“Leave them to me.”

Her golden hair seemed to leave a glittering trail as she moved. Aiz Wallenstein wove deftly between her allies, then raised her sword—Desperate, the Durandal Superior-class weapon.

“Die.”

As if parting the oceans, a single slash cut through the horde and reduced them to ash. The little monster hunter was unstoppable. She spun like a top, delivering another devastating swing, before leaping into a dance of death that dissolved the wall of foes like molten butter.

Her foes were the runts of the Dungeon, but that didn’t make her speed any less impressive. Noin clapped her hand to her mouth in astonishment.

“She’s so strong...!”

"That girl ain't any taller than me, but look at her go!" said Lyra. "And she's gonna keep growin'! You call that fair?!"

"Keep your envy to yourself, prum," said Kaguya. "It's distracting me."

But as a fellow swordsmaiden, even Kaguya was forced to acknowledge the young girl's skill.

"All power, no technique," she said, "but still, it's a miracle a child so young can fight like this. Now it makes sense why they call her the Sword Princess."

Kaguya looked over at the girl once more. Just then, a second figure appeared beside Aiz.

"Hai-yaaa!"

"Guhhh?!"

Lyu was quickly growing accustomed to wielding two swords at once and was making short work of the monsters. The skirmish continued for a short while, then, as the two combatants ran side by side, Lyu realized the girl had been staring at her for some time.

"...Is something the matter, Sword Princess?" she asked with an awkward smile.

"...Have we met?" Aiz replied.

Lyu's long ears twitched.

Yes, we have! It was dark, and I was wearing a mask, so maybe you don't remember, but we were basically trying to kill each other!

Lyu attempted to make sure that none of her awkward inner thoughts showed on her face. All she could think about were the events of five days prior.

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

"I don't understand. Which means...I have to beat you."

"Insolence!"

Mired in the pain of loss and embarrassment of defeat, Lyu had lost sight of

justice, and had been wandering aimlessly through the city when she ran into Aiz. A few tactless comments from the girl, along with her misguided interpretation of the situation, had led to a fight to the death.

A fact that, if revealed now, would be so disgraceful, Lyu feared that none of her fellow familia members would ever want to speak to her again.

There's no two ways about it—I gave in to my despair and attacked a little girl! I can't let Alize find out about this, and definitely not Lady Riveria!

Lyu was greatly concerned with appearance and dignity. If her familia discovered this transgression, their teasing was the least of her worries. As for Riveria, the respect Lyu's kind felt for high elves bordered on divine worship. It was unthinkable to allow her embarrassing secret to come to light.

Luckily, Aiz didn't seem to have worked it out yet. The mask had done its job, so that was some relief. However, Lyu's frantic mind still failed to spit out a coherent response.

“Your eyes...and your voice. They seem...familiar somehow...”

“Th-th-that's because...we got into a fight over the last Jyaga Maru Kun one time!”

Lyu spat out a big, fat lie that raised more questions than it answered. Aiz scrutinized the elf girl closely, while a bead of sweat slowly worked its way down Lyu's face.

“...Yes. That must be it,” the young girl said at last.

Completely fooled, Aiz moved on in search of her next target. Lyu didn't know whether to be relieved or concerned.

“...I'm lucky she's an airhead...”

However, there wasn't much time to think about it before she heard Kaguya shouting at her.

“What are you doing, standing still like an idiot?! The monsters are going to be on top of us any minute!”

“S-sorry!!” Lyu yelped, and she ran off to rejoin her allies.

By this point, monsters were beginning to emerge from the lower levels. War shadows, killer ants, orcs—all creatures that would only normally appear much deeper. Neze dispatched a few of them, and then called out to her allies.

“Where are we going to fight this monster, anyway? It’s gotta be as big as a floor boss!”

The animal girl furrowed her brow as quakes continued to rock the Dungeon, and Alize echoed her ally’s concerns.

“There’s only a few places we can realistically fight something that size! Plus, we don’t want to get ganged up on while we’re trying to focus on the big one!”

“Right you are, girls,” said Gareth. “We can’t have a scrap with a beast like that in the tunnels. A wide-open space would be much better.”

“A wide-open space, without too many monsters,” said Riveria. “There’s only one place I can think of that fits the bill.”

“You don’t mean...?” asked Kaguya, though she suspected she already knew what the high elf was going to say.

“The eighteenth floor—the Under Resort.”

“The Under Resort! And we’ll be fighting an absolute behemoth!” cried Alize. “I’ve never heard of anything that even comes close to this!”

Floor eighteen was a safe haven where no monsters spawned. While monsters could come up or down from the adjacent levels, to Alize’s knowledge, nobody had ever attempted to conduct such a large-scale battle there before.

However, the eighteenth floor also held special significance to the girls of *Astrea Familia*. Running alongside Alize, Lyra gave a short chuckle.

“Bet you this was Finn’s plan all along,” she said. “Guy like him, he’d have come up with a strategy the moment he heard the monster was on its way.”

“You mean...?!” asked Lyu, astonished.

“Yeah. That’s why we were waitin’ up top for so long. He calculated how long it would take us to reach the eighteenth floor and sent us off at the last minute so we would meet the monster there just in time.”

Lyra's words were little more than conjecture, borne of the confidence she placed in her people's hero, but *Loki Familia* remained silent, refusing to confirm or deny her theory.

Kaguya, on the other hand, could not hold her tongue any longer. "He's no hero—he's a demon! How can he think so many steps ahead in such an unprecedented situation?!"

The tone of her voice was a mixture of fear and awe. Her sentiments were echoed on the faces of every member of *Astrea Familia*. They could scarcely believe the prum hero had planned everything from the very first move.

"Let's not forget about the people fighting on the surface," Alize pointed out. "The Dungeon monster is one thing, but fighting all the Evils at once is even worse!"

"Plus, his top lieutenants are down here with us," added Lyu. "Is he really going to be all right?"

The two girls couldn't help but be concerned. For all Finn's genius, he was on a strict timeline and faced an impossible task. There were bound to be holes in his strategy, weren't there?

"It's okay," someone said.

"Huh?"

It was Aiz, running alongside them.

"It's okay. Finn's unbeatable."

In the young girl's mind, she was simply stating the truth.

"That's why he won't lose."

Lyu and Alize were a little taken aback by her directness. Meanwhile, Riveria and Gareth gave a little chuckle.

"Aiz is right," the high elf said. "We won't get anywhere poking holes in Finn's plan. Better to focus on the task at hand."

"Besides, the finest warriors of *Freya Familia* stand with him," added Gareth. "They make for troublesome foes, but there's no one I'd rather have on my side

in a war."

The old dwarven soldier shouldered his battle-ax and gazed at the Dungeon roof above.

"Finn placed his trust in us," he said. "Now we must place our trust in him."



"""Oooooouaghhhh!!"""

With a cry that shook the ash-gray clouds above, the minions of evil began their dark advance.

"The enemy is descending from the walls! East, West, South...they're coming from every direction!!"

Atop Guild HQ, in the northwestern district, Raul screamed his report. The armies of evil approached on all sides, leaving no hope of escape.

Finn, however, did not let Raul's panicking disturb him. He calmly proceeded with his orders.

"Mages! Magic swordfighters! Prepare to attack at will! Let them come into range, but don't give them a chance to set off any explosives!"

Finn's commands were carried across the battlefield either by messengers, or through the signals of magic-stone beacons.

"Oooooaughhhh!!"

Right on cue, the barrage commenced. Fire, ice, lightning—missiles of every element were hurled into the enemy ranks, detonating in earthshaking explosions.

The war with evil had well and truly begun.

"Besieged on all sides...?! I didn't know the Evils still had so many troops!"

By occupying the city walls, the Evils had turned Orario's greatest defensive feature into the bars of a cage. Royman watched the opening of hostilities from the rooftop of the Guild and quailed in fright at their foes' complete and utter

positional superiority.

“They must be sending everyone they have!” he cried. But Finn narrowed his eyes.

“Correction,” he said. “Not quite everyone.”

“Oh, it’s begun!” Valletta cackled. “It’s really started now!”

From her position atop the walls, she looked down at the city, where already the streets had turned to chaos.

“But you know,” she added with a grin. “Where’s the fun if we don’t add a little twist?”

She peered across the war zone—toward the rooftop of Guild HQ, where she knew Finn must be watching as well. Then, in a loud voice, she declared...

“I’m the kinda gal who likes a big, flashy opening! Feast your eyes on this!!”

The Evils lieutenant snapped her fingers. The sharp sound hung in the air for a moment. Then...

An explosion.

“Wh-what?! What was that noise?!?” cried Royman as a tremor knocked him from his feet and onto his rump. It was a quake unlike anything the Dungeon had spat out so far.

Scanning the horizon, Raul’s eyes finally fell on columns of smoke.

“I-it’s an explosion!” he yelled. “They’ve destroyed the city gates!”

“What?! Which gates?!”

Raul’s face went pale as he stammered.

“A-all of them...”

“...What?”

When Raul finally got over the shock enough to elaborate, he yelled his report

as loudly as he could.

“All the city gates have been destroyed! And that’s not all! Monsters are entering the city from outside!!”

Deafening screams and rumbling howls filled the air.

There were eight gates equally spaced around the circumference of Orario. And now, from every cardinal direction, monsters began flooding into the city.



“Aaaaaaagh!”

“Graaaaargh!!”

Stepping over the ruins of a collapsed house, the monsters poured into Orario like an invading army. Within the shelters, the city’s residents were pushed to the brink of despair. The heavy footfalls of a host thousands strong signaled the desecration of their home.

Meanwhile, jubilant cries rose up from the other side.

“Hah-hah-hah-hah! Ain’t that a beautiful sight?! Now this place has *really* gone to the dogs!”

To Valletta and her fellow Evils, the sight of monsters within the city walls symbolized the downfall of their hated foe. She watched with glee as the invaders advanced on the embattled adventurers.

“Let me see you cry! Let me see you break! Let me see you die! In the end, I’ll be the last one standing!!”

“Th-this can’t be happening... Monsters, here in Orario, the bulwark of the entire world?!”

Meanwhile, back atop Guild HQ, all the color had drained from Royman’s face.

“This is outrageous! Those monsters defile the legacy of our great and noble

ancestors!"

"It's the obvious move," replied Finn without batting an eye. "If I were in Valletta's position, I'd do the exact same thing."

"Wh-what?!"

"Valletta's job is to cause mayhem and destruction. For that, monsters make the perfect pawns. All she has to do is lure them into the city, and they take care of the rest. This is just another reason they wanted to occupy the walls."

In terms of pure combat ability, the Evils were sorely lacking compared to the entire city of Orario, which could call upon many upper-class adventurers. In such a situation, it made perfect sense to focus on quantity instead. Finn knew and understood this better than anyone, but Raul and Royman both found the prum captain's calm deduction shocking. The latter was especially bewildered, as he immediately went red-faced and began ranting at Finn.

"I don't believe you, Mr. Deimne! You *knew* this all along and did nothing to prevent it?! Why?!"

"Don't be ridiculous, Royman," Finn answered without turning around, "You know full well it would've been impossible to protect the gates. If we even made the attempt, Babel and the five strongholds would've fallen instantly."

His steely gaze remained fixed on the city as his keen mind analyzed the many factors at play.

"It doesn't matter if our enemy destroys the gates, the walls, or even the city itself. We can always rebuild, just like our ancestors built this city before us."

"...!"

"Don't forget our priorities," Finn reiterated. "We must defend Babel to the last. Failure is not an option."

A cold calculation. A rational choice. Even Royman hesitated to speak carelessly in the face of Finn's blinding determination.

"B-but even so!" he stuttered at last. "The city is almost in ruins as we speak! Do you have any idea how much it's going to cost to repair if things get any—"

"Groaaaaagh!"

“Wha—?!”

“That’s enough, Royman. The enemy is coming. Go back inside.”

“Grr...! Listen to me, Mr. Deimne! You had better win this war, you hear me? If you don’t, I’ll have some stern words for you!!”

After speaking like a true bureaucrat. Royman disappeared inside the Guild HQ building just as the sound of monster roars filled the air. Finn didn’t once look away from the battlefield to watch him go.

“Of course we will,” he muttered, now only to himself. “That’s what we’re here for.”

His azure eyes scanned the streets below, where the initial exchange of magical blasts, arrows, and breath attacks was drawing to a close. Waves upon waves of monsters and cultists descended on the strongholds in the city, and on the adventurers who guarded them.

Due north of Babel, in the fortified *Loki Familia* home, Dyne silently readied his weapon as he stood alongside Bahra and Noir.

“Here they come...” Noir muttered.

In the south, within the famed Casino that stood amid the ruined shopping district, Falgar gripped his weapon and lowered his center of gravity, while dozens of Berbera stood by his side.

“Let them come!” he roared.

In the east, Allen’s eyes burned with a murderous rage.

“...I’m gonna turn you into roadkill!”

He launched himself at the enemy. The city’s spear rapidly closed the distance between the oncoming enemies, and just as the two were about to clash...

The hero spoke.

“It’s time. The battle has begun.”

All across the city, combatants roared in agreement with his words—words they couldn't possibly hear. Their voices rose as one, united in opposition to the resounding voice of evil.



The gruesome death cries of monsters carried through the walls, accompanied by the endless clashing of steel. Within the Casino, all the lights had been switched off, and civilians huddled close together in the darkness.

“It...it's begun!” one of them said.

“The fighting's so close...!”

From time to time, a tremor would cause the building to rock as if it were a ship sailing the turbulent oceans, while the sounds of rampant violence filtered in from outside. The waves of Evils were the stormy seas, the monsters the tumultuous skies, and the adventurers the brave sailors at the helm. Belowdecks, all the citizens of Orario could do was stifle their screams and hope that the planks of Orario's hull would hold.

“Waaah! I'm scared!!”

Many of the young ones were crying, and it was all the grown-ups could do not to join them. The incessant tears of children mirrored their own desires.

It was then that one woman placed a reassuring hand on a crying girl's head.

“It'll be okay. The adventurers will protect us.”

It was a woman who had lost her own daughter—a girl called Leah—to the horrors of war. Once, she had turned her anger and despair upon the girls of *Astrea Familia* and thrown stones at them.

“W-will they really?” the child asked.

“Yes. Because no matter how many times they fall down...they always stand back up.”

The woman's faith in justice was so dazzling that the girl froze. She could see it in the woman's eyes; hear it in the strength of her voice. After a short while, she managed to suppress the rising feeling in her throat. She looked up at the

bereaved mother, with tears in her eyes, and nodded. Seeing that, Leah's mother smiled.

A man was watching the two of them from a short distance away. The same man Adi had once forgiven. A man who had cast aside his wickedness and stood in harm's way to protect Lyu.

"Stay strong...stay strong out there!" he yelled, raising his eyes to the ceiling. "We'll stay strong in here, too! We believe in you!!"

The man's words echoed in the hearts of everyone present. Across the hall, people clasped their hands in prayer and thought of their saviors.

And outside, adventurers let out a wild yell as if they were answering those prayers.

""""Roaaaaaaaaahhh!!""""

They fought bravely to defend the civilians' refuges: the Casino, the Amphitheatum, Guild HQ, and the *Ganesha Familia* home. They stood on the rooftops of buildings, pelting the monsters with projectiles both magical and physical, while simultaneously fending off the Evils with blade and shield. Anyone who was wounded and fell, whether friend or foe, met a grisly end at the jaws of the mindless beasts below.

Blood and war. Fiends and chaos. Surely, this would be the state of the world today had Babel not been built to seal the monsters below the earth.

Meanwhile, before the gates of Twilight Manor, the home of *Loki Familia*, Noir's blade cut through five of the monsters at once as they attempted to pounce.

"Now we have to deal with these fiends as well as our fellow man?" grumbled the old dwarf, Dyne. "Plus, they've no concern for the damage they cause this city with their magic!"

"The monsters are only from the surrounding fields!" yelled the Amazon, Bahra. "They're not that strong, so don't worry!"

With ax and fist, they cleared the enemy ranks, raising the morale of everyone nearby. The other members of *Loki Familia* were inspired by their brave actions

to do whatever they could in the city's defense.

Among them all was a single elf girl who had only recently become a Level 2.

"Alicia! Where's that support?" Bahra yelled back at her. "Are your teeth chattering so hard you can't recite the spell?!"

"Why don't you go back to the watchtower like Raul and Aki?" suggested Dyne.

"N-no! I'm the one who volunteered to be here! I-if I can't at least fulfill my duties, then I can't possibly show my face to the other elves...not to mention Lady Riveria!"

Alicia tried her best to ignore the teasing of her elders. Although this was far from the worst of the fighting, as she was stationed on the battlements of the manor, the terror of being in a real war for the first time was almost too much to bear. She tried to stop shivering and reminded herself of her mission and her pride. Then she raised her bow and unleashed a scattershot of icicle-shaped projectiles into the enemy lines. Her aim was lacking compared to a more seasoned mage, but it was still very effective at suppressing fire.

Noir smiled and wove among the arrows, delivering a fatal slice to the enemy forces as they faltered in terror.

"Still," he said. "They have us vastly outnumbered, and there are still suicide bombers to deal with..."

Noir paused to swig a healing potion before more enemies could arrive. He looked back at the manor he was defending, where hastily constructed fortifications ringed it on all sides. Even now, monsters swarmed the base of those outer walls. He and the other veterans had all leaped down into the fray, but the less-experienced familia members could only hole up inside the building and attack at range from the battlements. That was how fierce the fighting had become.

Plus, there were the bombers to consider. Right now the ranged unit was focusing their attacks on them, ensuring their bombs detonated behind the enemy front line, before they could get close to the fortifications. This strategy was working for now, but if the enemy advanced in earnest, there would be

little the manor's protectors could do to stop it.

Meanwhile, all it would take was one cultist to get close enough to blow a hole in the defenses, and the civilians inside were as good as dead.

An army of death. That was what people were starting to call it. Noir muttered curses under his breath. The enemy marched with no regard for their own lives or safety. Even the veterans had never seen anything like it.

"It's backbreaking work keeping the fortress safe while we fight off wave after wave. I can't believe you'd foist all this work on your elders, Finn..."

Noir cast a glance toward the silhouette of Guild HQ in the distance and gave a bitter smile. The events of a few hours earlier played through his mind.

"Noir, I'm leaving to assume command and carry out the defense of Guild HQ. The Twilight Manor is in your hands while I'm gone."

It was shortly after Finn had left for Guild HQ to share the details of his plan—shortly after the enemy destroyed the city gates and allowed monsters to flood the streets—that Finn returned to the Twilight Manor and spoke to Noir.

"We're countin' on ya, Noir!" Loki had said. *"We may have paid off the loan on this place, but we can't let the enemy put a single scratch on me and Riveria's love castle!"*

"*Oh, and take care of Loki, too, will you?*" Finn had added with a smile.

"That's an awful lot of work for one man," Noir had protested. *"Plus, given the city's layout, the northeast of Orario is where the fighting is going to be the thickest!"*

Orario sat at the western tip of the continent, while the brackish lake upon which Port Meren sat extended from the west to the southwest of the city. Even without Finn's strategic genius, Noir could predict where the vast majority of monsters would appear. The Evils could never hope to take direct control of the monsters and strategically guide them to a specific location like a proper army. All the tamers in the world couldn't make such a feat possible.

The Twilight Manor stood not far from the northeastern gates into the city. For Noir, the duty of protecting it was a poisoned chalice, and he could scarcely

believe the prum's gall in handing it to him.

But the brazenness of Finn's subsequent response made his previous words seem entirely reasonable by comparison.

"It's only you I can trust with this. Besides, I'm sure your old-man wisdom can come up with something. Isn't that how you, Dyne, and Bahra beat sense into us back in the day? What are you worried about?"

Noir still vividly remembered the prum's grin.

He made short work of a monster that attempted to catch him unawares, then gave a derisive snort.

"You picked a fine day to start respectin' your elders, young'un! If you ask me, we didn't beat you hard enough!"

"Finn was just a kid who didn't know the first thing about the Dungeon back in those days!" said Bahra. "Gareth and Riveria, too!"

"But those kids were strong, and they tore through waves of monsters without even needin' our help," added Dyne. "I still remember all the fights we used to have!"

Noir nodded in agreement, then fixed his eyes on some distant spot.

"And now, the fate of this city rests on their shoulders... It's a weighty burden, to be sure..."

He paused in contemplation, but the enemy would not allow a moment of solace. Seeing the approaching foes, Noir readied his sword. It was a single-edged blade, based on those from the Far East, and its name was Undying Vow.

"I suppose it's only fair," he said. "If Finn places his trust in us, then let's make sure he won't regret it!"

"Groooooooooaaaagh!"

The monstrous screams were deafening. The Evils and adventurers all shuddered at those inhuman sounds. The source of these screams, striking fear and awe into friend and foe alike, was a catman who had earned himself the

title of the city's fastest.

"Drop dead, freaks."

"Gyaaaagh?!"

Allen Fromel was waging a one-man war, making short work of the cultists with one sweep of his silver spear. He reminded people of a capricious kitten...if a kitten could tear its prey to shreds in a single blow. His speed allowed him to hit the enemy from the front or the back before they even knew what was happening, and whether they attempted to flee or fight back, all were trampled beneath the wheels of Vana Freya, the chariot of the gods. The mages on his side didn't even have chance to cast their spells before Allen's spear ran the suicide bombers through, and then, once he was already far out of the blast range, a chain of crimson flowers bloomed across the battlefield.

""""Wh-whooooooooaaaaahhhh!!""""

The other adventurers couldn't help but voice their shock. Allen's high-speed assault didn't even give the enemy time to detonate their own bombs.

Allen was defending the Amphitheatrum, in eastern Orario. Along with the northern districts, this region was where the majority of enemies were expected to appear. However, right now it was serving as the private hunting grounds of the warrior currently boasting the highest body count in the city.

Many of Freya's other followers were stationed here, bolstered by adventurers from other familias. They fought to protect the civilians taking refuge within the stronghold. Anyone or anything that approached the walls were swiftly repelled with bolts of fire and lightning, while the warriors created a wall of steel with their axes and blades. As Allen and the other members of Orario's most prominent familia continued to fight, their allies cheered them on.

Those cheers could be heard far across the city, atop Guild HQ, where a single prum hero smiled and said, "Nicely done." The efforts of *Freya Familia* on the east side of the city were steadily raising the coalition's morale.

However, once the enemy was completely eradicated, a member of *Freya Familia* shouted across to Allen from the battlements.

"M-Mr. Fromel! You're straying too far forward! Wh-what about defending the stronghold...?"

"That's your job. I'm here to run people over. That's all."

Allen's main strength came from his ability to fight alone. Staying too close to his allies would only result in trapping people beneath the wheels of his chariot. Normally, tightening Allen's leash was Hedin's job, but as the white elf was otherwise occupied, Allen was free to act as he pleased, and the most useful thing he could do now was disrupt the enemy ranks and sow chaos, plus filling any gaps in the defensive line.

"You need a first-tier adventurer to wipe your ass for you?" Allen sneered at his junior. "Don't tell me you still got cold feet."

"!"

"You heard that prum asshole's speech, right? There's nothin' left to lose. Those bastards took it all from us."

Allen's words were far from a typical pep talk, but they did their job all the same. He leveled a sharp gaze at his animal girl junior, and she snapped to attention.

"Y-yes, sir!"

The other defenders threw themselves back into the battle once more. Allen, meanwhile, paused and looked around. For a few moments, his gaze drifted in the direction of West Main Street and a certain tavern that stood there.

"I got nothing left to lose..." he repeated. "But if you're gonna try to steal from me anyway, then you'll get what's comin' to you."

Then a moment later, he put that thought behind him and once more dashed off in the direction of the enemy lines.

"Look at 'em, actually puttin' up a decent fight. Finn had to know this was comin'."

With a gentle tap, a pair of boots landed on the rooftop. Her fur-lined coat

swept around her legs as Valletta surveyed the city up close. She had descended from the walls into the trading district in the southwest and set up a temporary forward base atop the largest building in the area, allowing her an unhindered view of the city, and the war zone it had become.

“What a shitty little hero... I put all this work into surprisin’ him, and he doesn’t even blink!”

Valletta beamed with a malicious grin while two of her subordinates came running over to her.

“Ma’am!” one of them said. “All units are now engaged! We have a report to make regarding the enemy formation!”

“They seem to have concentrated their forces in five key locations!” the other piped up. “We haven’t spotted any adventurers *or* civilians anywhere in the streets!”

Valletta Grede raised a puzzled brow. “Eh? The hell’s that supposed to mean?”

“We believe the civilians are being kept in those five strongpoints, ma’am!”

“But even there, we’ve encountered only a handful of first-tier adventurers! We believe the remainder must be waiting somewhere in reserve!”

Ankusha of *Ganesha Familia*, Perseus of *Hermes Familia*—all these top warriors were conspicuously absent. Even of *Freya Familia*, only Vana Freya had been spotted in the wild. The stress was clearly getting to the two cultists as they continued their report.

“Plus, we’ve spotted a great number of enemy scouts—even more numerous than our own! We believe they must be trying to locate Lord Zald and Lady Alfia!”

Valletta pondered the matter for only a second before exploding into laughter.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha! So that’s your game, Finn! You rotten bastard!”

“L-Lady Valletta...? Is something the matter...?”

“Finn doesn’t give two shits about protecting the people! He’s using them as

bait!!”

Valletta stared out across the city once more.

“North, northwest, southwest, south, and east! Five strongholds, equally defended, making us divide our forces!”

The northern point was Twilight Manor, in the northwest, Guild HQ, in the southwest, Iam Ganesha, in the south, the Casino, and in the east, the Amphitheatrum. Some of Orario’s troops were putting up a perfunctory defense, but the bulk of Finn’s forces were lying in wait. It stank of an ambush, and there was only one thing Valletta could guess they were after.

“They’re comin’ after our trump cards!”

“You mean...Lord Zald and Lady Alfia?!”

“Exactly. That cocky bastard! He’s sayin’, *‘Take as many rooks as you want, ’cause I’m comin’ for your king and queen!’*”

Valletta drew her crimson tongue across her lips and pointedly looked at the heart of the city.

“The rest of their forces must be in there! That wall of ice ain’t for keeping us out; it’s for keeping them hidden!”

“The barrier is made up of ice. It encircles all of Central Park.”

“Not a magical barrier, but a physical one. Our enemy seeks to furnish its keep with walls, it seems.”

Valletta thought back to what Olivas had said when the barrier first appeared. Shards of ice, like petals of a cactus flower, surrounded the base of Babel.

But the purpose of that barrier was not, as Valletta first expected, to reinforce the tower while the adventurers fought elsewhere. In truth, the bulk of Finn’s armies had not taken a single step out of Babel’s shadow. The wall of ice had been constructed to obscure that fact.

“I—I see...” said one of the soldiers after Valletta explained all this. “It’s true. The scent of helpless civilians sheltering inside the strongholds is drawing all the monsters away from Babel.”

"W-was this Finn's plan all along?! To use people as bait?! Wh-what do we do now, Lady Valletta?!"

The strongholds were relatively close to the city gates. In all likelihood, Finn had chosen them for precisely that reason. As soon as the monsters set one foot inside the walls of Orario, they would catch the whiff of fresh meat and be drawn to the battlements, where bands of adventurers were waiting to dispatch them. This left the Evils unable to rally enough forces to seize Central Park.

The Evils soldiers could scarcely believe how much the enemy commander had seen through their plans. They looked up at Valletta for guidance.

The woman was silent. Her laughter had disappeared into the wind, and she now wore only a steely scowl, like a chess player pondering their next move.

If all their top dogs are waitin' at Babel, then a half-assed strike force ain't gonna cut it. Even if we ditch the monsters and send our whole army there, those strongholds are perfectly positioned to encircle us no matter which direction we come from. We march in there, it's gonna be a bloodbath either way, and not the good kind.

The battle of wits had begun. Valletta almost felt as though she could see her opponent, standing far away on the rooftop of Guild HQ, across the intermediary streets that served as their board.

But if we go after the strongholds first, we're playin' right into Finn's hand. That's why he set up the board like this. It's exactly what he wants...

At that very moment, across the vast divide, Finn was also scrutinizing the state of the game.

If Valletta wants to rid the board of these troublesome strongholds, she'll need Zald and Alfia. But our scouts are spread throughout the city. The moment those two Level 7s make a move, we'll know about it. Their downfall will ensure Orario's victory, and we have enough forces on standby to make it happen.

Finn's sole aim was to topple the enemy king and queen. To do that, he was

prepared to pay any price. So long as those two indomitable conquerors remained on the board, all of his stratagems were meaningless, no matter how clever they were.

And if you don't want to make a move, he said to the Valletta in his mind, then that's just fine by me. We're on our home turf, and a drawn-out battle favors us. You're the ones who are going to grow weaker as time goes on.

Just as Valletta feared, Finn wanted her to devote time and resources to taking down the strongholds first. He'd gathered the civilians in those five locations for precisely that purpose, knowing full well he was exposing them to danger in the process. They were bait in every sense, both for the enemy commander and for the monsters that swarmed the walls. Of course, Finn wouldn't give up the strongholds without a fight, but if the people inside had to die, the prum commander fully intended to capture a powerful piece in return for this sacrifice.

It was Finn's ruthless approach to command that earned him Valletta's begrudging approval. His cutthroat gambit was the key to setting up the board. Even the gods could agree on that.

It was truly as if the war were nothing more than a game to him—a game that he endeavored to win. High above the people and their individual woes, he and Valletta considered their options and made their trades with precision.

The gears in his mind finally slowed and Finn opened his eyes to peer across the city in the direction of his distant foe.

“All our pieces are on the board now,” he said. “From here on out, the battle is all up here, in our minds. So, what’ll it be, Valletta? What’s your next move?”

“Ain’t it obvious?! I’m gonna take that bait!!”

A ferocious smile worked its way across the woman’s lips.

“Get me Zald!” she barked at her subordinates. “Send him to Central Park! We’re gonna bring that wall of ice down!”

“Y-you wish to send Lord Zald in there alone?!”

"He may be Level Seven, but he can't take on all of Orario's top warriors at once!"

Her orders were like flames that she spat at her witless subordinates, causing them to quail in confusion and terror. Valletta laughed scornfully at their cowardice.

"You deaf, shitheads? That's Zeus's top dog you're talkin' about! Besides, who cares as long as he takes the adventurers down with him?! Countin' the monsters, we easily outnumber those stinkin' babies! Crushing their strongholds one by one'll be child's play, and once those grade A assholes at Babel are outta the picture, no one'll come runnin' anymore, and they won't have nowhere to run to!"

"B-but...!"

"Have the troops keep attacking the forts! Get everyone else together, call up Alecto and Apate's kids. They're gonna nip the adventurers' hope in the bud! We'll show 'em how a king does things!"

"Y-yes, ma'am!"

For all Valletta's cruelty, she was a frighteningly intelligent woman. As the Evils cultists ran off to deliver her orders, she shouldered her sword and looked out across the city.

"We don't need fancy strategies! We've got the most powerful piece in the world on our side!!"

Valletta knew not to trust her pieces too much, or too little. She also knew better than to let the intricate maneuvers of her opponent befuddle her. Above all, she knew that, in this situation, a direct attack was the most effective move. And so, she locked eyes with her foe across the vast distance and made her proclamation.

"If you're worried about the king, then you can have him! Wait right there, Finn! After I eat the bait, I'm comin' for you!"

"C-Captain! The enemy is altering their formation!"

The enemy lines shifted like a coiled viper. The cultists, previously content to wait behind the waves of monsters, now joined the assault on the strongholds.

“So Valletta’s chosen a head-on attack, just as I suspected she would!”

Finn squinted down at the streets, where he could see for himself how the battle was unfolding.

“Raul!” he cried. “Send a message to Central Park! *The enemy is on their way; stick to the plan!*”

“Y-yes, sir!”

Raul ran over to the magic-stone beacon installed on the rooftop and began operating the signaling mechanism as fast as he could. The beacon flickered in several different colors, and before long, a flashing light on the thirtieth floor of Babel issued a response.

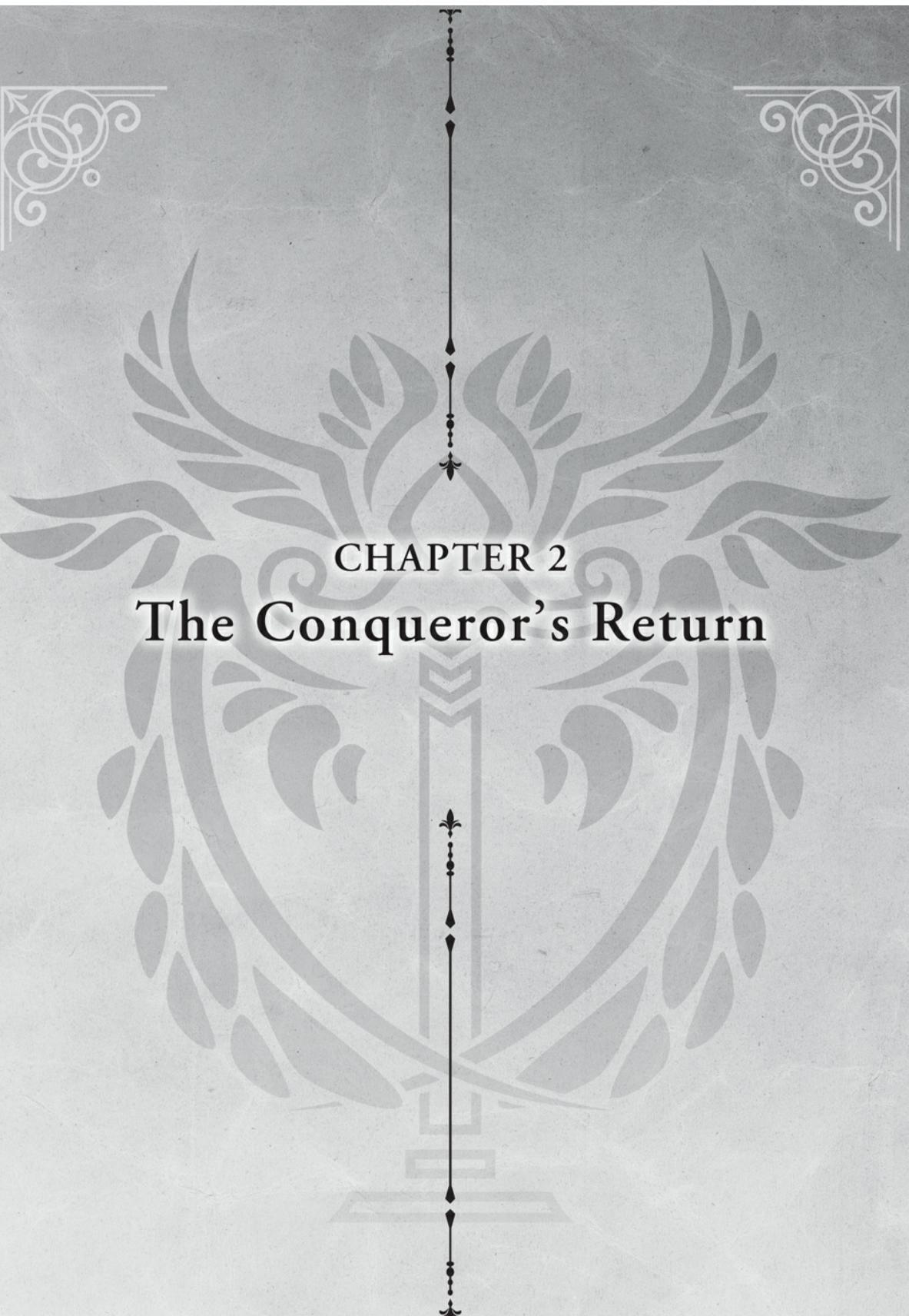
This system allowed messages to be transmitted almost instantly across any large distance. Codes were agreed upon in advance, and shortly after Finn’s order was sent out, the other strongholds responded as well. Messengers ran to and fro, shouting over each other to be heard, and at this present moment, the rooftop of Guild HQ was as busy as any normal day within its walls.

“I knew it was too much to hope that this gambit would stump our foe,” muttered Finn to himself. “The situation hasn’t changed, and we’re still at a heavy disadvantage.”

Finn had hoped that the bait would at least trip Valletta up for a moment, but it seemed the enemy commander was every bit as smart as Finn had suspected. The cultists and the monsters were still battering the strongholds and their attacks had not eased up at all. Instead, the strongest piece on the board was headed for Babel alone.

“I’m sorry, Ottar. It looks like we’re counting on you after all.”

His voice carried on the wind, ferried toward the ring of ice that surrounded Babel’s base.



CHAPTER 2

The Conqueror's Return

ASTREA RECORD

The War of Good and Evil

Story by Eujino Omori · Illustration by Sakage
Character Design by Sazuhito Yasuda



CHAPTER 2

The Conqueror's Return

A ruined plaza near the city's south gate had been strangely untouched by much of the fighting. The cries of combat were distant here, and even the violent crash of steel sounded more like the clanging of a smith's hammer accompanied by the roar of the forge. The battle standard of some familia lay discarded on the ground, sticking out of the rubble and fluttering in the bone-dry wind.

“.....”

Beneath smoky skies, the ruins stood like tombstones marking the graves of the city's dreams. Zald stood alone, taking it all in.

“What are you doing, Master Zald?”

From seemingly out of nowhere, a man with bloodred hair emerged. It was Vito, lieutenant of the Evils known as Faceless. Despite his abrupt appearance, however, Zald showed no surprise, as if he had known the man was there all along.

“Gazing upon the fruits of my efforts,” he answered. “Burning them into my mind. As humans, we forget things. Not just what we had for lunch, but even the streets we grew up in. This is something I don't want to forget.”

“And what, pray tell, is the value in remembering a doomed city? I never took you for a man of sentiment, child of Zeus.”

Zald and Alfia were the remnants of Zeus's and Hera's familias. When people said the word *conquerors*, everyone knew that it referred to them alone; symbols of the two forces that ruled Orario unchallenged for a thousand years.

Thus, this imprudent remark was tantamount to blasphemy, but Vito seemed not to realize or care. He only snickered as though something were highly amusing.

Zald did not even turn to answer the man, the sole follower of the dark god Erebus.

“Value is not something that is found, but created,” he said. “What you refer to as sentiment, I simply call...my payment.”

The conqueror’s statement sounded like a simple matter of fact. But no one could possibly understand what was going on in his mind as he gazed upon the ruins of his old home. Certainly not Alfia, another conqueror, or the gods above, either.

“Payment, you say? Payment for what, I wonder?”

“You are much like Freya’s mewling brat. You ask too many questions. I’m starting to see why Alfia detests this world so.”

Vito’s impertinent and persistent queries caused Zald to furrow his brow. For the first time, Zald glanced over his shoulder and locked eyes with the man.

“You are...Faceless, if I am not mistaken,” he said. “Are you sure you should be here?”

“Oh, but it matters very little where *I* stand, sire. Our victory ultimately hinges upon you.”

There was not a sliver of doubt in Vito’s words. He spoke like a philosopher describing the essential nature of reality.

“A few isolated losses here and there hardly make a difference in the grand scheme of things,” he went on. “Why should it matter if I’m a little late to the party?”

“Then why have you come?”

“Because I have a question, sire. A question I’ve been meaning to ask a hero like yourself for a long, long time.”

At this point, there was a slight but noticeable change in Vito’s tone.

“Because, make no mistake, you *are* a hero! You see, I’ve always found heroes fascinating! They aren’t content to live in an imperfect world! They rise up against absurdity! They fight against the irrational! How noble they are! How sublime! *They* are the ones worthy of my praise, not the gods!”

Vito's disdain for divinity was clear. He opened his eye a crack and spread his arms wide.

It was as though he had come face-to-face with a character from a fairy tale. His voice was as sweet as melted sugar, but his gaze was like that of a child who knew only betrayal.

"What I want to ask you, sire, is this: How could such a noble man as yourself turn your blade to evil?"

Zald stood unmoving, looking over his shoulder, without the slightest change to his expression.

"I see," he muttered. "You are a broken man; that much is clear. You fail to even realize your own contradictions."

At this, Vito gave a puzzled look, but Zald went on.

"What you feel for heroes is not respect—it is scorn. Forgive me, but I must ask: Is this because *you are blind to color?*"

"Hrk!"

Zald's question gripped Vito's heart like a vise. His eyes flew open with shock. But Zald didn't stop there.

"No...that's not all, is it? Your hearing, your smell, your taste; none of them work as they should. The only sense of yours that functions properly...is touch."

"H-how did you...?"

"Because I have eaten a great deal," came Zald's answer, "and my senses have grown sharp. Your defects are clear to me from sight and smell alone."

This bold claim was not a simple lie or misdirection. It was how Zald had earned his title—Glutton—and another part of his incalculable might.

"Imagine a slab of beef placed before you," he explained. "Before it even passes your lips, you can imagine how it must taste. The smell, the crispness of the edges, the texture as your teeth bite down...those are all harbingers of the flavor yet to come. In the same way, your defect was obvious the moment I set eyes on you."

Vito was aghast. All his former frivolity was stripped away, replaced by a mask of anxiety and sweat.

Zald, meanwhile, spoke without pity or ridicule, but the ease with which he cut to Vito's core caused him to twitch.

"It is that defect that births your hatred," he went on. "And it is your obstinacy that sustains it. Have you tired of playing at humanity already?"

"Grh...! You're a monster...!!"

But Zald didn't rise to Vito's insult. He simply chuckled at the ineffectual retaliation of a powerless man.

"Didn't you know?" he said. "Monsters and heroes are two sides of the same coin. It should come as no surprise whatsoever that I stand alongside people like you."

Zald was unperturbed. He had seen it all, heard it all, and eaten it all. The gulf of power between him and his fellow man was so wide, there was almost no reason to consider him the same species.

"But to answer your previous question," he said. "I fell to evil...because it was necessary."

At this point, the conversation between the two of them came to an end. All that punctuated the space between them was the soft moan of the wind.

Vito was still so shocked he couldn't move a muscle. Zald, meanwhile, simply turned his gaze forward once more. It was then that a cry came from the southwest, and an Evils soldier came running toward them.

"Lord Zald!" the messenger cried. "I bring orders from Lady Valletta! She requests you advance on Central Park to eliminate the adventurers lying in wait at Babel!"

"It is time... Very well. I have said my farewells to this city."

With that, Zald placed his helmet atop his head. His plate armor, so heavy that its weight would crush an ordinary adventurer, creaked as he walked. He turned and set his gaze on the alabaster tower at the city's center.

"All that remains is to annihilate Orario's disappointments...with my own two

hands."

With a sword as large as a dragon's jawbone strapped to his back, the man clad in all black set off. The cries echoing in the distance were like a hymn of praise in his name, or perhaps a song of lament for the despair he would soon bring. With his crimson cloak fluttering behind him, Zald left.

Vito watched him go, dumbstruck, before maniacal laughter began working its way out of him.

"Heh...ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! He can't be stopped... Not by us...and certainly not by the adventurers!"

He clenched his fists tightly in a vain attempt to stop them from trembling and spoke once more of the true nature of reality.

"Today marks the end...of Orario."



Finn's thumb trembled, as if it was screaming, and the city shook. Not a second later, Raul came running over from the signaling device bearing a new message.

"I-it's Zald!" he cried. "He's been spotted engaging our troops!"

"Tell me where!"

"On South Main Street, Captain! He's heading north!"

Before the building they were standing on could even stop shaking, another blast—the shock wave of the conqueror's attack—rocked the city.

"...Weak."

"Gwaaaaagh?!"

Each swing of Zald's blade was like cannon fire. Nothing could halt its devastating arc. South Main Street had become the venue for a concert of screams.

Scouts trembled in their boots at his mere presence. Adventurers flung

themselves at him, hoping to inflict even a single scratch—but he flattened everything in his path. Weapons and armor shattered like glass at his touch, and each footstep turned the cobblestone beneath his feet to dust.

Nothing could stand in his way. The former hero continued his advance toward Central Park unimpeded.

“Glutton sighted on South Main Street?!”

Nearby, in the adjacent pleasure district at the besieged Casino, Falgar spoke in hurried tones with another *Hermes Familia* adventurer.

“That’s right, sir! But that’s not all; the enemy is ramping up their assault! The monsters are growing fiercer! There’s not much more we can do at this rate!”

“Curses! Our target is right under our noses, but we can’t leave our posts! Is there really no one who can stop him from strolling through our streets as he pleases?!”

From his vantage point atop a nearby theater, Olivas watched the siege and chuckled.

“Fools. You’ve boxed yourselves in, and we intend to keep it that way!”

Spreading his arms, he shouted down at his forces.

“My loyal brothers! Take the fort before they have time to even weep!”

Cheers was too joyous a word for the horrendous cries of evil that rose from the dark host and quickly spread to all parts of the city.

“It seems our time has come earlier than I expected.”

The cries of evil rang in Basram’s ears like a feast being held all across Orario, and the animal person priest of *Apate Familia* roused his old, yet stout, frame and gazed at the Amphitheatrum ahead.

He stood atop a building on East Main Street, surrounded by his fellows as well as the Level 5 spirit warriors.

"Still, I would much prefer to be assaulting Braver's location rather than this colosseum."

The *Alecto Familia* and *Apate Familia* made up the bulk of the Evils' strike force, and thanks to their preliminary skirmishes, the Evils were confident they had mapped out all the allied strongholds. With their combined power, it would only be a matter of time before Guild HQ fell, and without Finn to lead them, Orario's forces would quickly fold.

And yet, the Evils refrained. Basram couldn't help but think this was Valletta's ill nature at work. She always granted her archnemesis Finn special treatment, even when such behavior bordered on strategic error. Perhaps she intended to leave him alive until the very end in order to prove her superiority once and for all.

There was always the option of disobeying her orders and marching on Guild HQ regardless, but what Basram was seeing here at the Amphitheatrum quickly put such thoughts out of his head.

"I never expected them to be able to muster a counteroffensive without opening holes in their defense. This is a threat that cannot be ignored."

The forces of *Freya Familia* were very close to eliminating their besiegers. If this happened, they would be able to sally forth and reinforce the other strongholds. Basram smiled bitterly at the thought.

Freya Familia was being supported by the blacksmiths of *Hephaistos Familia* and their magic swords. Their bombardment had prevented the Evils from making much progress on the barricades, a task that was made next to impossible by the presence of Vana Freya. Allen's speed was unmatched, and he tore through the attackers' ranks like a chariot of war.

If the Amphitheatrum garrison were allowed to go on the offensive, the balance of power would shift decisively in Orario's favor. They would first march south, rescuing the Casino from Olivas's forces, before joining the defense of Twilight Manor in order to liberate *Loki Familia*. At that point, Zald's one-man assault would be in peril. That was why it was Basram's job to keep the Amphitheatrum locked down and nip that possibility of relief in the bud.

"If we lose the power of Zeus and Hera, I would place our odds of winning this

war at about fifty-fifty... But given the adventurers' knack for seizing fate by the horns, perhaps it is even lower. Very irritating."

But despite his words, the black-and-violet-swathed priest wore a smile on his lips.

There could be no doubt that the ongoing battle here at the Amphitheatrum was the pillar of Orario's morale. Just like Braver at Guild HQ, eliminating this location meant dealing an unrecoverable blow to Orario's forces.

"In which case," said Basram aloud, "I am more than happy to obey Valletta's command. In the name of our goddess, Apate, we shall beat them back."

"""*Groooooaaaaahhhhh!!!*"""

With a shake of the beastman's golden staff, a dozen spirit warriors let out an earsplitting cry, and marched upon the enemy stronghold.

"Hey, Vena, I don't think Hegni's here, do you?"

"I heard he and Hedin are both behind that large wall of ice, sister!"

"Then what we really want to do is go over there and give them both a *big, warm hug!*""

Like Basram, the duo Dina and Vena were preparing for battle nearby. They stood, hands clasped, looking down from a rooftop at the Amphitheatrum in the distance.

Below, their subordinates were visibly anxious. The Dis sisters were infamous for slaughtering anyone who displeased them, friend or foe. The twin leaders of *Alecto Familia* shared a venomous smile, like the blossoming of a toxic flower.

"But wouldn't Hedin and Hegni be just so *happy* if we put all these *poor, crying* people to *sleep first?*""

The only care in these two sirens' heads was their twisted affection for *Freya Familia*'s elven brothers. The two danced gleefully in each other's arms, their voices swollen with perverse joy, before offering the name of their spell in support of the Evils assault.

“Let the first gate devour all. Turn all hope into despair! *Dialv Otua!*”

From the sky came balls of black fire. Like meteors of Armageddon, they rained across the land, causing widespread destruction. The walls fell, the people screamed, and adventurers burned, while the blacksmiths used their magic swords to intercept the projectiles, defending as many of the civilians as they could. Up until now, Orario had been displaying its superiority in the defense of this location, but in the blink of an eye, the scales of war were tipped.

“*Zeo Gullveig!*”

Then the Andhrímnir, *Freya Familia*’s formation of expert healers, unleashed their spell. The mending light spread in all directions, encompassing the entire arena and restoring everything within, save the barricades and walls.

No matter how many times they were skewered, sliced, or torn up, those brave adventurers stood up once more, throwing themselves again and again into hellish battle.

“Tch! So they came after all, just like that asshole said they would!”

Executing his rampage on the north side of the Amphitheatrum, Allen suddenly stopped and looked across at the sudden emergence of *Alecto Familia* and *Apate Familia*. The indiscriminate carnage put a sour look on his face.

“And...he’s in the south...”

For all the hell the followers of Alecto and Apate were raising, there was one sound that couldn’t be silenced—that of Zald’s advance on South Main Street. Allen had been hoping to secure a rematch with the black-clad man, but it was looking vanishingly unlikely he’d get that chance. Annoyed, he took his frustrations out on a group of monsters, turning them into diced meat with one swing of his spear, which sang like a silver flute in his hands.

“M-Mr. Fromel! Wh-what do we do?!”

For direction, all the younger members of *Freya Familia* looked to Allen, the only first-tier adventurer on the eastern battlefield. But Allen didn’t hear their

cries. His mind was on Central Park and the ice walls that surrounded the foot of Babel.

But after a short moment, as if to cast aside his regrets, or perhaps to uphold a promise he had made, he tore his gaze away.

"...We don't do anything," he barked back. "Just shut up and follow Finn's plan!"

With that, he dashed across the battlefield, eyes fixed on the spirit warriors advancing toward the northeastern walls of the Colosseum.

"If you got time to complain, then you're not fightin' hard enough!" he yelled. "We can't do nothin' till we get rid of these assholes!"



As time marched on, the prelude was slowly coming to an end. The conqueror's arrival had changed the entire state of the board. Zald strode along his path with calm and purpose, even as the battle grew wilder and wilder around him.

"Ghaaah?!"

It was the same as on the night of the Great Conflict. The man was without equal. Anyone who crossed his path became his prey. All he had to do was touch them, brush them, graze them, and his opponents were torn apart.

"You are all soft. Disgustingly soft. Too mild to even tempt my appetite, and yet..."

Within the recesses of his helmet, Zald's steely eyes narrowed.

I know they can fight harder than this... They're luring me in.

Zald already knew, as Valletta had surmised, that all of Orario's forces lay behind that wall of ice, waiting in ambush.

How many did their forces number? A hundred? A thousand?

Such details were none of Zald's concern.

“Thank you,” he said. “For preparing my feast. You’ve saved me a great deal of trouble.”

Beneath his helmet, behind his unchanging expression, Zald thought of the countless offerings that were waiting for him. The city’s finest warriors were nothing more than food on his plate.

He straightened his back, filled his lungs, and bellowed.

“People of Orario! In our absence, you have grown weak!”

His rumbling voice carried to every corner of the city. Adventurers and Evils alike froze and listened to his words. Even the monsters were so shocked at the noise that they stopped what they were doing and looked up to the skies.

“Come out, and cater to me with your very lives! Summon every scrap of power! Of wisdom! Of inner strength!”

Zald’s absolute demand put a sheen of sweat on every adventurer’s brow.

“That is the only way you can face the truth! Face my hunger! For the sin of weakness is far worse than gluttony!”

Finn and Allen both wore deep scowls as they glared toward the south of the city whence the voice came.

“Do not feed me disappointment, for I can stand it no longer!!”

There was no one in the city with the power to dispute his words. Zald had taught them all as much on that fateful night of tyranny.

“My throat burns with despair. Not even the fires of hell on earth can quench this bitterness!”

The man was unstoppable. No one in the city could block his path. The five strongholds and the tower of Babel quaked at his approach.

And before long, the man stood before the wall of ice.

“And so it falls to you to satisfy my thirst,” he roared. “To heat my blood and

boil my flesh!"

Zald lowered his voice and raised his sword, aiming to carve a gate to his next battlefield.

"Let the feast...commence."

A shock wave shook the city, accompanied by a peal of thunder. Countless shards of glass-like ice filled the air.

Zald stepped through the cloud of debris that had been kicked up and entered the arena. As the dust settled, the white walls of Babel came into view.

Then his eyes went wide.

"....."

There was no one there. None of the city's finest were waiting for him.

"...Where are they? ...Wait..."

"...There's only *one*?"

He narrowed his eyes as he studied the plaza that was conspicuously empty... with the exception of the one boaz who stood there.

Now that the icy dust had cleared, Zald could clearly see that Ottar was alone. The boaz glared back with a heart full of courage and opened his mouth to speak.

"We shall not be disturbed," Warlord said to the conqueror. "The task of bringing you down falls to me alone."



Raul spotted the signal from the upper floors of Babel and came running.

"C-Captain! Zald's reached Central Park! He's made contact with Warlord!!"

Finn's order was immediate. All the building tension in his body was instantly converted into movement, like a fisherman who had finally hooked the catch he had been waiting for.

"Activate the barrier!" he yelled. "Seal off Central Park and signal our allies!"

Raul hurried to a nearby desk and grabbed one of many flare guns lined up on it. Raising it overhead, he sent a blue streak trailing into the sky.

At the same time, an enormous glowing forcefield appeared.

"Huh?! What the hell's goin' on?!"

"A-a barrier has appeared around Central Park, ma'am! It surrounds the wall of ice, Babel...everything!"

This unexpected turn of events bewildered the Evils. Valletta looked on in shock.

Far off in the distance, she could see that dozens of mages had taken to the rooftops around Central Park and raised their staffs in unison. Evidently, they had chanted their spells well in advance, because the barriers appeared without delay, layer upon layer, all differing colors and elements, forming a hemispherical dome around the city center.

"A barrier?! They're trappin' Zald inside Central Park?! But why?!"

Although she didn't yet understand the reason, something about this turn of events gave Valletta a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. However, she didn't have to wonder for long before her answer came in the form of a bellowing roar.

""""Rrraaaaaaaaahhh!""""

It came from the center of the city.

"What is it this time?!" she spat in irritation, when a second subordinate ran over, even more flustered than the first.

"New enemies have joined the fray, ma'am! They showed up just after the signal flare was fired!"

The news made Valletta's eyes snap wide open.

“That’s the signal! We’ve hidden long enough! Now is the time to fight!!”

In the southwest of the city, near the trading district, the doors of a mansion built right next to the *Ganesha Familia* home flew open. Out came Shakti, leading an army of her familia’s elites with her powerful voice.

“I-it’s an ambush! We’re surrounded—aaaaaaagh!!”

Just as the Evils were certain that the stronghold was on the verge of falling, Shakti’s unit took their forces by surprise and struck them with a rear charge.

Meanwhile, in the shopping district to the south, an army of adventurers came rushing out of a different casino.

“Our enemy has overextended themselves by attacking all the strongholds!” yelled Asfi, leading the charge. “Take them out swiftly, before they have a chance to reform their lines!”

“You’re finally here, Asfi!” cried Falgar, his face awash with relief. “Perfect! All units, no more defending! Time to bring the fight to them!”

“““Raaaaaaaaaahhh!!”””

Falgar raised his greatsword high, and the stronghold’s defenders, only too eager to exact payback for the pummeling they’d received, descended from the barricades and launched themselves at the enemy. Working in perfect sync with Asfi’s strike team, the two forces pincered the horde of monsters and cultists.

“They’re everywhere! Have they been hiding in the buildings this entire time?!”

Olivas stood atop a building, spared from the carnage below but unable to avert his eyes from it.

“They knew we would gather our forces at the strongholds... This was a trap all along!”

The vigor in the adventurers’ voices confirmed his suspicions. It *was* a trap, and the Evils had fallen for it magnificently. Over on the roof of a trading-house in the southwest, the information from her eyes and ears forced Valletta to

confront this uncomfortable truth. Even if she didn't know the full extent of it yet, it was impossible to deny what was happening.

"L-Lady Valletta! Our forces at the strongholds...they've all come under attack by adventurers who came out of hiding!"

"An ambush? But it doesn't add up! Were they hiding there all along? There's too many! All the other adventurers were supposed to be at Central Park!!"

Valletta couldn't shake the apprehension that had crept into her voice.

"Unless...there's no one there!"

When the realization hit her, she emitted a wrathful snarl.

"That wall of ice was just a distraction! It was meant to make us think that they were hiding an army!!"

"Th-then...who is Zald facing? Surely they don't mean to ignore him completely!"

"Ottar!! It's gotta be that pig bastard! We been followin' Finn's lead this entire time, and now the board's set up just the way he wants!"

Finn's sole aim was the enemy king and queen.

The bulk of the city's forces had been gathered in Central Park to take out Zald and Alfia.

These were both myths that Valletta was made to believe.

The whole time, Finn had been leading them, as if by magic, with a beckoning finger.

The civilians had never been bait at all. The entire board was the bait. And by leaning so heavily on the power of Zeus and Hera, Valletta had ended up handing Finn the outcome he had truly been seeking.

"Finn, you bastaaaard!!"

The moment she realized the truth, that she had been dancing in Finn's palm all along, the veins in Valletta's forehead bulged, and she exploded with fury.

But far across the city, Finn continued executing his maneuvers without delay.

"All units, keep up the pressure! Don't let this chance slip through our fingers!"

The brave adventurers carried out his commands with enthusiasm.

"Ignore the monsters! Focus on the Evils up on the rooftops!"

Shakti hopped from building to building, beating back enemies with her spear.

"They don't have full control over the beasts! Force them into the streets and let the monsters tear them to shreds!"

Finn had entrusted command of the southwest district to Shakti, and the eagle-eyed captain lived up to her role by accurately discerning the relationship between the two enemy forces.

There were well over a hundred monsters in total, and there were at least five locations to attack. Even if the Evils had possessed tamers of sufficient skill, it was an impossible task to control the entire horde. There were simply too many of them.

Ganesha Familia, on the other hand, was home to many tamers. Shakti herself was one of the best in the entire city, and nobody understood the behavior of monsters better than she. One slip on the part of the Evils, and their greatest ally in this battle could very well become a crushing liability.

Over in the casino area, Asfi made another keen observation.

"Think of it like a pass parade!" she yelled. "The enemy only has so many tamers! Make them pay for that!"

The only enemies who could exert influence over the horde were those holding tamers' whips, and these were few in number. They each commanded just one of the stronger monsters in the hopes that the lesser ones would simply follow suit. For someone familiar with the behavior patterns of the species, then, this method was a crude but simple means of controlling an entire horde. However, if the tamer or the stronger monster was defeated, all

hell would break loose.

“““Raaaaaaaaaahhh!!”””

The adventurers hit hard and fast. They had cloaked their scents with deodorizing items so as not to betray their presence to the monsters or any animal people among the Evils. All throughout their hiding, they had been forced to listen to the dying screams of their friends, biting their own arms until they drew blood so they would not rush out and reveal themselves too early.

Now was the time to unleash their pent-up anger on the witless Evils.

“E-eek!!”

“Their attack...it can’t be stopped!”

The adventurers raised their voices, striking fear into the hearts of the monsters and cultists alike, turning the tables on their foe in an instant. Led by the veteran adventurers, they advanced on their targets, eager to repay the debt incurred on the night of the Great Conflict.

“Focus on eliminating the Evils! Now is the time to exact our revenge!!”

Asfi leaped into the fray alongside her allies, careful not to let the deaths of Lydis and Adi blind her. She wanted her black hatred to become scarlet courage.

The enemy’s greatest losses, however, were suffered to the east.

“Struggle for eternity, indestructible soldiers of lightning.”

There it was not a rallying war cry that announced the beginning of Orario’s ambush, but a single chant, spoken in a voice colder than ice. Just northeast of the Amphitheatrum itself, atop a magic stone factory, Hedin stood alone. His patience had been tested to the very limit, like a bowstring about to snap, and so, the instant the magical shield that concealed his presence dropped, he unleashed his boundless anger.

“Caurus Hildr!!”

What that bowstring let fly was no arrow, but thousands upon thousands of

balls of lightning that rained down without mercy on the Evils forces that swarmed the Amphitheatrum.

“Gaaaaaaaaagh?!“

“Ruooooooooooooougghhh?!“

Unlike Shakti and Asfi, there was no need for him to focus his efforts. The tyrannical thunder laid waste to human and monster alike without distinction, detonating the Evils’ suicide bombs and causing a string of explosions that tore through their ranks.

“Ggh?!“

“Zeeeeaaaaahhhh?!“

Basram’s spirit warriors were no exception. Madly and mindlessly focused on what was in front of them, eight of them were struck from behind by Hedin’s lightning, leaving only four still standing. The sharp-witted mage unleashed another barrage, eager to wipe out this threat while the opportunity presented itself, but while mad, the spirit warriors still possessed the extreme capabilities of Level 5s. Their unnatural recovery rate healed the wounds in the blink of an eye, or they used their animallike reflexes to dodge the blasts. However...

“Slaughter all until the feast is finished! Dáinsleif!“

Like a calamitous black star, the dark elf tore across the battlefield, swinging his sword with extreme speed.

“Gaaaaagh?!“

“What?!“

Basram looked on in shock as Hegni sliced one of the spirit warriors clean in half from shoulder to hip. It was a wound even the creation’s regenerative abilities could not heal. Hegni and Hedin very rarely cooperated closely, but when they did, the result was devastating.

““““Basram!““““

Meanwhile came the voices and weapons of four prum brothers. Like Hegni, they entered the battlefield with calm disregard for the barrage of lightning summoned by their ally. The Gullivers carved a path through the monsters,

arriving before the dark priest and launching their spear, hammer, ax, and sword in his direction.

“Grh!!”

“L-Lord Basram, what are you...? Gaaagh!”

The sturdily built priest hooked his arm around an ally, pulling him in to act as his own meat shield. While the hapless cultist was torn apart by the spear and blade, then smashed to pieces by the hammer and ax, the sheer force of the prums’ combined attack sent Basram flying back as well. He looked down at his right hand, which was now missing the third and ring fingers, and clicked his tongue in annoyance.

He raised the staff in his left hand and rang it, summoning the four spirit soldiers who’d escaped Hedin’s assault to his side, thus blocking any further follow-attacks from the Gullivers.

Elsewhere, two girls squealed with joy.

““There you are, Hegni, Hedin!!””

It was the Dis sisters. Initially deployed to assault the south side of the Amphitheatrum, they had spotted the targets of their twisted affection on the northeast and headed straight over. The murderous gazes of Orario’s white and dark elves fell on them, sending a shiver coursing down their spines as they unleashed a magical greeting in the form of a fiery hail.

The *Freya Familia* elves responded with a storm of lightning and the flashing steel of the dark warrior king. Flames and thunder canceled each other out, while the dark elf’s steel sang a deadly duet with the stiletto blade of his foe.

Only seventeen seconds had passed since the ambush began, and already the bulk of the Evils troops had been wiped out, leaving only the lieutenants unharmed.

The smoldering corpses of Evils and monsters comprised the backdrop for what ensued. The twisted twins invited their kinsmen to a deadly tea party, while the wicked priest composed his dark hymn for the four warriors who fought at his side.

The arrival of the city's first-tier adventurers had thrown the city into chaos, and in the east, Orario was about to see its fiercest battle yet.

"A-allied forces taking heavy losses, ma'am!! They're steadily isolating our troops, cutting them off from the chain of command, particularly in the east!"

"They're using the monsters against us! We started with the advantage in numbers, but if this keeps up...!"

The subordinates' voices and their accompanying woes piled up in Valletta's ear. It was obvious this was no slapdash ambush: it was a carefully calculated plan with the aim of surrounding the Evils in five locations at once.

As much as she hated to admit it, she could deny the truth no longer. Finn had played her like a fool, and Valletta was angrier than she had ever been in her life.

"Damn you, Finn," she growled. "You really think this stupid little scheme is going to help you?! You're gonna give up on your only shot at beatin' Zald so you can mop up our weaklings instead? Leave Ottar to die in a one-on-one? And you think that's a *good* plan? You're outta your goddamn mind!"

Her scowl deepened, and she spat out the unalterable truth.

"Once that boar bastard goes down, it's over for you! You hear me?!"

Finn's move was one Valletta's calculating mind could never have created. It was bizarre, mind-boggling, and difficult to see therein any genius whatsoever. If this was the culmination of Braver's plays, then Valletta could scarcely believe her archnemesis's idiocy.

"Don't think for one second this 'power of friendship' bullshit is gonna turn things around! Is that really your plan, Finn?!"

Though he could not hope to hear her furious yells, far across the city, Finn replied all the same.

"No, Valletta. It's not," he said. "It's a matter of risk versus reward. Our

choices were a pitched battle that would almost certainly result in heavy losses, or a duel between the two strongest forces in the city. We chose the latter.”

Finn spoke with determination.

“We chose Ottar. He gives us the highest chances of beating Zald.”

Though they were from different familias, Finn had witnessed the power of the boaz man firsthand. He thought back to a moment from fifteen years ago, before the Age of Darkness even began.

“You don’t know Warlord like I do, Valletta. You don’t know what he’s been through.”

In that time, Ottar had suffered tremendously. While his strength was great enough that it made others quake in their boots, there were those in the city who had surpassed him. Ottar had tasted the ignominy of defeat many times at their hands.

“But I know. I know what Zeus and Hera did to him, and I know that never once was he content to stay defeated. I know something you don’t, Valletta, and that is that Ottar will never give up!”

The cliff Ottar wanted to climb towered ruthlessly high. At the top was a pressure weighty enough to crush any common man. Even if he climbed all the way up, that still wouldn’t let him reach the thunder that sparked above it. And even if he reached it, the lightning could easily tear him to shreds.

Everyone knew that Ottar’s quest was not brave; it was foolish. Yet the man continued on his foolish path nonetheless. For he could not abide his own weakness, nor could he allow his goddess to wallow in infamy.

Raw persistence, willpower, and self-loathing alone drove him to conquer that indomitable peak.

“Ottar has the teeth to bite back at Zald! If he can’t do it, then no one in this city can!”

That was the hero’s plan.

That was Warlord’s obsession.

Finn focused his azure eyes on the magical dome surrounding Babel.

“Isn’t that right, Ottar?” he said.

“Finn and I... We always looked up to you.”

In Central Park, Warlord and Glutton stared each other down. Clad in his multitude of armaments, Ottar slowly raised and clenched his fist.

“The peak of despair, and a roiling anger. These are what you left me, and I always swore I would leave them behind.”

It was not adoration. Nor was it envy or hate. To Ottar, Zeus and Hera represented nothing more than a wall that needed to be scaled.

“The time to fulfill that oath...is now. It is today.”

Ottar raised his gaze, fixing his eyes on those of the warrior in black before him.

“Today is the day I surpass you. Today is the day my teeth tear at your flesh.”

Zald’s mouth, the only visible part of him, curled into a grin.

“Very well, mewling brat.”

It lasted only a second, replaced with a howling roar.

“You face me alone! The weight of this city’s fate lies on your back! And still you seek to devour me?”

Zald’s voice tremored with glee and a thirst for battle. Even his thick armor seemed incapable of repressing his aura, which caused the hairs on Ottar’s skin to bristle.

“Very well! Let us see what you can do! Become a beast! Cast off your weak flesh and consume mine! At long last, a feast I can enjoy!”

Ottar pulled out two longswords as Zald made his move. Glutton unsheathed his black slab of steel, then raised it up to the sky as if in prayer.

“Which will win the day: your obsession, or my disappointment? Let the gods above bear witness!”

High above, a goddess stood on the uppermost floor of Babel.

“Oh yes, I’m watching.”

From her private seat, Freya alone gazed down at the battle about to unfold.

“A baptism. A battle where the very fate of the world hangs in the balance... And, if all goes well, this will be the moment my child ascends.”

Her silver eyes locked on the combatants below.

“Go forth, Ottar. This is your greatest test yet. Do not disappoint me.”

Her words were the signal for the duel to begin. The two fighters, swords raised, let out a yell and dashed for each other.

““Rrraaaaaaaaahhhh!!””

Pure brute strength drove their weapons. Power surged from their muscles to their steel, unleashing a shock that rattled the very earth, and which could be heard in every part of the city.



A titanic clash of blades ensued, sending sound waves rippling throughout Orario that people mistook for the explosive belches of flames spat forth by a fire-breathing wyrm. The cacophony was so overwhelming that the rumbles of the Dungeon monster seemed to pale in comparison.

“It’s started!” cried Asfi, shuddering as she stood in the casino area of the pleasure district. “The battle between Orario’s champions of yesterday and today!”

“Each blow feels like an earthquake!” said Shakti, from the home of *Ganesha Familia*. “It’s unbelievable!”

“If you lose out there, I’ll kill you!!” spat Allen, in a brief moment of pause during his rampage around the Amphitheatrum.

While adventurers around the city were shocked by what they heard and felt, they were not disheartened by it. The thrum of Warlord's blades instilled in them a sense of courage, and they turned their own claws upon the Evils with renewed vigor.

The forces of Orario and their foes were roughly equal, and with their enemy's strongest piece locked inside Central Park, the adventurers held the upper hand on the outside.

"Grr, the fight's still goin'. This ain't a complete wash like on the night of the Great Conflict. Looks like that pig bastard's been trainin'..."

Valletta's lips curled into a nasty snarl. But she only allowed herself to succumb to anger for a moment before readopting the cruel coolheaded persona that earned her the alias of Arachnia. With a calm mind, she reevaluated the impact of Finn's plan, and of Ottar's duel.

None of it matters so long as Zald wins—which he will. There's something more important I've been thinking about...

She turned back and addressed her subordinates.

"Look lively, numbnuts! I wanna know the name of every last first-tier adventurer who's fightin' out there in the streets!"

"Y-y-yes, ma'am! I-it will only take a moment..."

The flustered subordinate was about to hurry off to gather the information his mistress requested, when a man with bloodred hair appeared and answered her query.

"Besides Braver and Warlord, I have also spotted Vana Freya, Bringar, plus Dáinsleif and Hildsleif," he said.

"You picked a damn fine time to show your face, Faceless. Where have you been all this time?"

"I was curious as to how Glutton fared and went to see for myself. I apologize for my tardiness, my lady."

Valletta was a little taken aback by the uncharacteristic honesty of the man's apology. She knit her brows and waited to hear the rest of Vito's report.

“Vana Freya is defending the stronghold, while Dáinsleif, Hildsleif, and Bringar are engaged with the *Apate Familia* and *Alecto Familia*,” he went on.

Freya Familia had devoted themselves to the defense of the Amphitheatrum, in the eastern quarter of the city. The most heated battle in Orario’s history was taking place there, second only to the one in which Ottar was engaged at the foot of Babel.

“As for Nine Hell and Elgarm...I couldn’t say. I haven’t seen hide nor hair of either of them—nor, for that matter, the girls of *Astrea Familia*.”

Vito surveyed the view from the trading house rooftop once more. While *Astrea*’s followers were not exactly linchpins of the enemy force by most standards—the highest among them were Level 3—they had quickly become beacons of hope in the city’s eyes. Vito was keen to emphasize that they were not a force to be taken lightly.

There’s no way Finn’s still keeping cards close to his chest at this point. Which can only mean...

Her eyes narrowed like daggers. The theory she was currently entertaining was outlandish, but if Finn was behind it, anything was possible.

“Listen to me, Vito. I want you to head through Knossos and enter the Dungeon.”

The look on her face was graver than any Vito had seen before. At the mention of Knossos, their subordinates standing nearby shuddered.

“Hmm? And why is that?” Vito replied.

“Because everyone up here is focused on Zald,” said Valletta. “I ain’t seen anyone gearin’ up for the monster that’s about to come outta Babel.”

She gnashed her teeth in vexation.

“That can only mean one thing: Finn’s sent a team down there to deal with it. That’s gotta be where *Astrea Familia* is at, plus that damned high elf and dwarf of his.”

“A little overkill, no? Especially when his forces are so valuable here on the surface.” Vito opened his eye a crack. “You don’t suppose he knows about our

little shortcut, do you?"

"Suspects, maybe. No way he knows for sure. If he did, he'd have done somethin' about it by now."

But the fact this was only a hunch made Finn's actions all the more incredible.

"I don't believe ya, Finn! Actin' so decisively when you ain't got a shred of proof! It's insane, I tell ya! I've never met anyone who's got half the nerve you do!"

Of course, she didn't know that Finn had changed the plan to be this way at the last minute due to the tingling of his thumb. Vito was silent for a while, but he soon realized, as Valletta did, that Finn's plans endangered their own.

"...Very well, I shall take a contingent and head down there at once. That is where the key to our victory lies, after all. But are you sure you don't need me up here?"

"You're the only one I can trust with this, Faceless," Valletta shot back. "Olivas is a useless piece of shit. Besides, I still got one more trick up my sleeve."

Valletta's mind went to her secret weapon, and she relished a chance to unleash it.

"I'm sure you ain't forgotten," she said to Vito, "but the upper gates are all closed off after what we did to our allies."

The mass exodus that took place on the night of the Great Conflict was made up in part by the Evils' own gods. Erebus had fully intended all along to use them as sacrifices.

Of course, the followers of those sacrificed gods had not taken the decision lightly, and the Evils secret base had suffered heavy damage in the ensuing unrest. As one final act of resistance, the cornered gods had destroyed the gates leading to the upper floors of the Dungeon.

"Which means...?" asked Vito.

"You'll be headin' to the middle floors—the eighteenth floor, to be exact."

The corners of her mouth curled upward. The prelude had almost reached its finale.

"If there's gonna be a war, it'll be there."



An enormous tremor rattled every bone in the adventurers' bodies. It felt as if they were standing over a dragon's open jaw, readying to jump in.

The brow of every member of *Astrea Familia* was slick with sweat. Lyu's fingers tightened around her swords.

"It's getting closer!"

They were currently on the seventeenth floor, and the tremors from below were growing stronger by the second.

Lyu sliced a minotaur in two, carving a path for her allies. She was desperately trying to turn her mounting tension into strength rather than fear.

"We're almost at the eighteenth floor," noted Aiz, clearing the hordes with her sword.

"And these rumbles are no joke!" added Gareth, swinging his ax. "No doubt the monster will meet us there as planned!"

The strike team had been able to maintain a good pace and were quickly approaching the deepest part of the seventeenth floor—the Great Wall of Sorrows.

"I suppose that means we needn't worry about being late to the party," said Kaguya, narrowing her eyes and licking her lips in anticipation.

"Yeah, in fact, the timing's so perfect it's scary!" cried Lyra. "The heck is wrong with you, Finn?!"

This location was meant to be home to the Goliath, a Monster Rex, but right now it was startlingly empty. It was as though all the powerful monsters of the Dungeon had gone into hiding.

"We'll take up our positions before the enemy arrives," said Riveria. "As soon as we reach floor eighteen, take the high ground. We'll start the battle with a fusillade of spells!"

“Got it!” came Alize’s spirited reply. “Leave it to us!”

She sprinted off ahead, and the rest of *Astrea Familia* followed. But just then, Lyu spotted something strange. A scarlet ember was dancing in the air.

“...Sparks? Where are they coming from...?”

But Alize didn’t notice the girl’s confusion. “I see the way to floor eighteen right ahead! I’m going in!”

She leaped through the hole at the end of the room, into a dark tunnel that slanted downward. Soon, the light of the exit came into view, and Alize jumped out into the world beyond.

Instantly, she felt a blistering heat.

Her ears were deafened by a thundering roar.

And hellfire stretched as far as the eye could see.

“Wha—?!”

Lyu was at a loss for words.

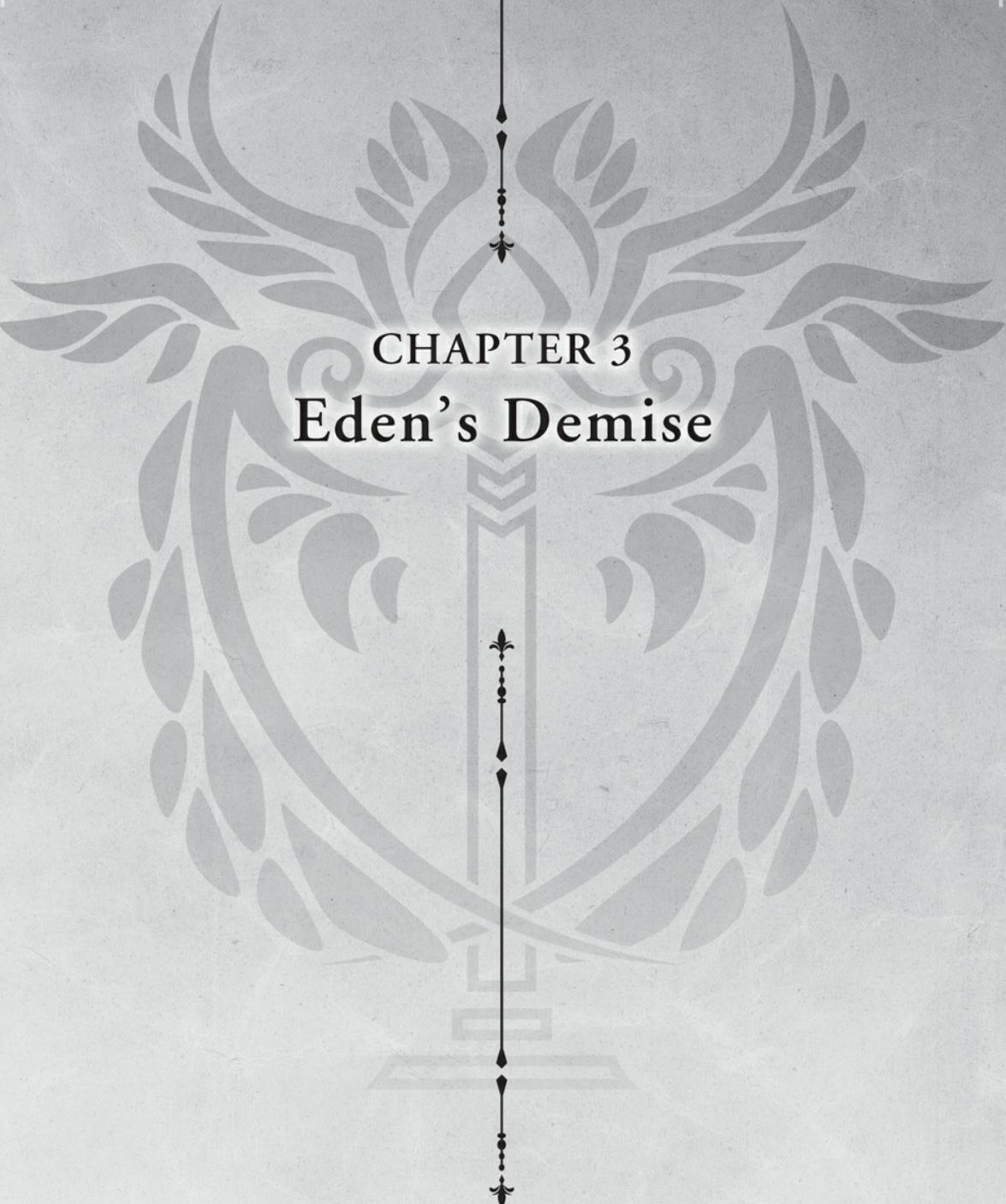
Kaguya, Lyra, and Aiz couldn’t speak, either.

The girls of *Astrea Familia* froze.

Riveria and Gareth paused, their eyes wide.

“...What...happened...?” muttered Alize, stupefied.

The Dungeon paradise was on fire, and it now looked like a gateway to hell.



CHAPTER 3

Eden's Demise

ASTREA RECORD

The War of Good and Evil

Story by Eujino Omori · Illustration by Sakage
Character Design by Sazuhito Yasuda



CHAPTER 3

Eden's Demise

The crystals were melting. The forests had been reduced to ash. The land itself cracked and burned. Glittering lakes had become bubbling pools that belched blistering steam, and droplets of molten crystal rained from above like hail.

It was a vision of apocalypse painted in scarlet and crimson. Not a memory remained of the Under Resort the adventurers knew.

"Is this really...floor eighteen?" Lyu muttered in disbelief as the girls of *Astrea Familia* stood dumbfounded beside her. "The paradise we all know and love, reduced to...this?"

Lyu recalled the vow she had exchanged with her friends just two weeks prior. *Astrea Familia* had promised to be buried here when the time came, but there was no sign of that paradise now.

"The trees are burning..." wailed Celty. "All the greens and blues...they're gone."

"I ain't never seen anythin' so...horrible," muttered Lyra.

Aiz lifted an arm to her sweat-soaked brow. "It's so hot..." she complained. "It's hard to breathe..."

"This is like hell itself," said Kaguya.

"It...it can't be," cried Riveria, the horror plain on her face, "but this is just like..."

"Yes." Gareth completed her thought. "It's the same as the Dragon's Urn on the deep levels!"

The rocks in the walls and floors disgorged a terrifying heat, like magma. The two first-tier adventurers scanned the area, taking it all in.

“What’s the Dragon’s Urn, old man Gareth?” asked Alize, but she didn’t get to hear his answer before the ground at her feet split open, unleashing a column of fire.

“Whoa?! What’s happening?!” cried Iska.

“The ground just exploded!” yelled Lyana.

The strange phenomenon occurred three times, the ground shaking violently with each burst.

“A large group of monsters got engulfed by the flames,” cried Neze, “and they’re coming this way!”

While floor eighteen was a so-called safe point where no monsters spawned, a good number of monsters still ventured in from the adjacent floors seeking respite. Clad in fiery armor, bugbears and mad beetles advanced toward the adventurers.

“I’ve never seen anything like it!” shouted Kaguya. “We have to fight them!”

She drew her katana and lunged for the horde.

“The monsters are a pain in the butt, but...”

“Those pillars of fire are a real danger, too!” Lyu finished Lyra’s warning. “What incredible heat... A single hit from one of those and we’ll be incinerated!”

The two girls leaped with impressive agility, fighting burning monsters while dodging fiery columns that shot up from their feet. All the while, the sheer heat scorched their flesh, leaving no doubt in their mind that these flames were responsible for floor eighteen’s dramatic transformation.

Kaguya paused during a break in the hostilities to cry out to her allies. “Why is fire coming out of the ground?” she yelled. “What’s going on?”

“It’s coming from the floor below,” came Gareth’s reply.

“Wha—?!”

Riveria studied the landscape. “It’s the monster we’re looking for,” she concluded, after drawing on the wisdom she and her fellow first-tier adventurer

had obtained over the years. “It must be. It’s blasting its way up through the floor as we speak.”

“By spitting fireballs?! That’s insane!” cried Neze. Her thoughts echoed the minds of everyone else in *Astrea Familia*. Compared to Riveria and Gareth, they were practically greenhorns. While they looked on in utter shock, the first-tier adventurers went on.

“The Dragon’s Urn is a deep level that only Zeus and Hera have ever reached,” Riveria explained. “We only have Guild reports to go on, but we have heard tales of attacks that cross floor boundaries.”

“From floor fifty-two onward, the Dungeon becomes hell,” added Gareth. “I wouldn’t be surprised if our quarry is using the same tactic it would down there.”

The girls of *Astrea Familia* were stunned. “So this is what it’s like down on floor fifty-two?!” spat Lyra in disbelief. “You’ve gotta be kidding me! That’s crazy!”

The Dungeon was an abyss that defied all reason. Lyra was only now beginning to realize its true extent.

Alize, meanwhile, eyed the fiery landscape, then gave a cheerful smile and a nod.

“So this monster’s as powerful as the ones you find past floor fifty, huh? Yeah, that’s scary! My alias is Scarlett Harnell, but that might not be enough to save me here!”

Alize thumped her chest with a smug grin.

“Why do you sound so proud when you say that?!” Lyu shouted.

The rest of the girls fell about in disbelief. Aiz tilted her head in confusion while Lyu shook her head, wondering if it was a good or a bad thing that Alize’s foolishness had banished the tension in the air.

“Never mind, just form up as Lady Riveria indicated!” she said in the end.

“That’s right,” Riveria agreed. “The monster hasn’t broken through yet. We still have time to—”

But before she could give any concrete orders, a new voice interjected.

“Do not interrupt.”

All sound disappeared at once. The adventurers froze in stunned silence, as if their voices had been stolen.

Out of a cloud of whirling sparks stepped a woman in a jet-black dress. Despite the scorching conditions, everything around her seemed cold and desolate.

“We bear witness to the final moments of the Age of Gods.”

Her words flowed like poetry. Her ashen hair fluttered around her shoulders.

“In death, as it was in life. Obtrusive, violent, and cruel.”

Her voice carried like the tinkling of a bell.

“Do not resist. There is no need to add your voices to the world’s death knell. You can simply remain forever silent.”

Her words sounded like a prayer, but they were an omen of the end times. A prophecy of destruction laid down by the second conqueror before the astonished adventurers.

It was Lyu who recovered first and spoke the witch’s name.

“Alfia... Silence!”

“I-it can’t be,” stammered Maryu. “H-how did you get here?!”

“It’s not just Babel’s sentries—you would’ve had to sneak right through our main base! How did you manage that?!”

Alfia remained cool throughout Kaguya’s interrogation.

“I see no reason to answer that.”

Then her neck turned ever so slightly, placing Riveria and Gareth squarely in the path of her unopened eyes.

“I see you are not surprised, followers of the Trickster.”

“Finn warned us,” answered Riveria. “He said there might appear a foe even more deadly than the Dungeon monster.”

“Yes,” added Gareth. “We wouldn’t be here were it not for his canny hunch.”

“I see. In any case, it matters not. Demise is imminent.”

Alfia quickly seemed to lose interest in the pair. What she said next was a pronouncement of death.

“Promise to neither cry nor act. Remain silent, and I shall leave you in peace.”

“““Hrh?!”””

“You shall be exempt from despair and destruction. Free from resentment and loss.”

The woman was dead serious. Her words cut *Astrea Familia* to their core.

All—save Lyu, Kaguya, and Lyra—were seeing her for the first time. The raw power behind each of the Level 7’s words was incredible. It was as if she were a messenger of hell itself, come to spread word of humankind’s downfall.

She held the power to carve out the silence she desired for herself. That much was undeniable.

Any adventurer in Orario ten years ago would call her the Grand Silent Witch.

Any god in heaven would call her the world’s final boss.

She was lofty, supreme, and no mortal could intrude upon her silence for even a moment.

Alfia spoke as if she were tracing the score to her requiem with her finger.

“Promise me to wait out this tower’s fall and the end of an era without word or deed. If so, then—”

“Nope, sorry!!”

One insensitive young redhead shattered the weighty mood.

“I don’t get all this ‘bringing an end to the Age of Gods’ stuff, but if you think I’m gonna stand around while Orario crumbles, then you’ve got another think coming!!”

Alfia’s lips parted gently in surprise. The jaws of the rest of Alize’s allies, on the other hand, hit the floor in shock.

Alize ignored all of them and continued shooting off. “You’re trying to destroy the city! That’s ridiculous! Besides, we’ve already come all this way! You really think I’m just gonna go, ‘Oh, okay then,’ and not do anything just because you asked?!”

Riveria and Gareth went uncharacteristically wide-eyed, while Aiz blinked multiple times.

“Well, I’m sorry, but our justice doesn’t care what you think! What do you think of that, eh? Too hot for you to handle? Well, that’s too bad!!”

Alize puffed out her modest chest and put on the smuggest smile she could muster, eyes closed. The only sound that ensued was the roaring of the flames.

Kaguya was the first to break the silence.

“...Heh. Ha-ha-ha!”

“Talk about disrespectful. Sheesh...” Lyra hung her head in defeat. “...But I guess that’s what we all love about ya. Never change, Captain.”

She gave a warm smile. Lyu couldn’t help but agree. Alize’s outburst gave them all courage. So long as she was there for them to look up to, the disciples of the stars could go on fighting adversity for as long as it took.

Freed from the grip of silence, Lyu’s fingers curled around Adi’s blade.

“Hwah-hah-hah-hah!” Gareth chuckled. “I see not even Silence can put the fear of the gods in you, lass! Hold on to that courage—you’ll need it against her!”

“We could all take a leaf out of Alize’s book,” added Riveria with a smile. “If Alfia hates noise so much, then perhaps we should be making more of it.”

"Yes. Let's take her down," said Aiz, tightening both hands around the hilt of her sword. "Everyone else is working hard. We won't lose like last time."

All of them saw something in the enthusiastic young girl. It couldn't quite be called hope—but it inspired them nonetheless, and each of them leveled their weapons at the witch standing in their way.

"Hmm."

For one short moment, while her face was obscured by the sparks...Alfia smiled. Then any trace of amusement was obliterated.

"The rallying hymn of foolishness mistaken for courage," she said. "Orario has not changed."

The air about her suddenly gained an unbearable weight.

"Very well. If you will not watch this world's demise in silence, then perish alongside it. Let the cries of life and war return equally to nothing. That is the mercy I offer you."

Suddenly, unbelievable waves of magical energy began radiating off her.

"Get ready!"

Riveria immediately set up a magic circle and started chanting, while Alize raised her sword, Crimson Order.

"Let's go, girls! There's a world that needs saving, so we've got a job to do!"

"Yes, Alize!" came Lyu's reply, and she and the other adventurers all launched themselves at the ashen-haired witch.



"Raaaaaaaaaahhh!"

The curtains of battle rose as Gareth led with a mighty swing from his battle-ax. The witch's response was a single word.

"*Gospel.*"

"Graaaaaaaagh!!"

With an unfairly short chant, a wall of sound hurled Gareth's stout frame backward. The adventurers, however, knew all about Alfia's spell by now and had been expecting it. They continued their assault without hesitation.

"Hup!!"

"*Tempest!*"

Gareth's distraction gave Lyu and Aiz the time they needed to follow up. They raced across the terrain like panthers, approaching the witch from opposite sides and unleashing a pair of upward swings. Any average monster would have been torn to shreds by the two hurricanes, but...

"I see the echoes have still not died down."

Alfia was not an average monster. She was a monster among monsters. As the two blades approached her flesh, she spoke the next word in her hymn.

"*Rugio.*"

Another sound of destruction.

"Wha—?!"

"Aaaahhh!!"

Lyu and Aiz were flung back as if they'd stepped on a mine. The elf crossed her swords and dug her feet into the floor, while the lighter Aiz soared through the air like a ball. The two girls had leaped into the spot Gareth had only just vacated and were immediately enveloped in explosive magical energy.

"That was a spell key!!" yelled Lyu, recognizing the nature of the force.

By reciting the spell key, a spell could be detonated at will, releasing the latent energy in an instant. Lyu realized that this was what Alfia had done just seconds after dealing with Gareth. The scary thing was, she had released the spell once already, so what Alfia was detonating was not a new spell, but the residual energy left behind by the first.

Usually, spell keys were used with spells that utilized homing projectiles or beams, so that the caster could detonate the projectile at will. Lyu had never seen anyone do what Alfia had done, a kind of two-stage attack that cast a spell once, then triggered the residual energy for a follow-up attack.

“Wait, what?! What just happened?!” shouted Alize, looking left and right between the combatants. “I blinked, and now old man Gareth’s on the floor, and Leon and the Sword Princess got blown back as well!”

“She uses sound magic!” yelled Lyra, never taking her eyes off the foe for an instant. “Weren’t you listening when Finn explained it to you?”

“The casting time is ultrashort, hits as hard as Nine Hell’s magic, and you can’t even see it coming!” yelled Kaguya.

“And if that ain’t enough, the wave’ll bust your eardrums and make you dizzy as hell! Every hole in your face’ll be oozin’ blood—even your eyes!”

“Ew, gross! I can handle a nosebleed or two, but that sounds nasty! If even old man Gareth got blasted off his feet, then I hate to think what it’ll do to me! It’d break every bone in my body!”

“...And yet, you all remain in once piece,” spoke Alfia above the hubbub of *Astrea Familia*. “How curious. A magic item, perhaps?”

Kaguya and Lyra could freely attest that a single spell from Alfia was enough to end the battle then and there, but Gareth, Lyu, and Aiz all staggered to their feet, ready for more. From each of their ears hung a small purple piercing in the shape of a miniature harp.

“Precisely,” answered Gareth. “Finn devised them, and that Perseus lass crafted them for us!”

“One for each of us,” added Lyu. “So don’t expect us to go down easily!”

They were originally a type of accessory called a Silence Lyre, which Perseus had developed to protect against the alluring songs of mermaids and sirens. However, at Finn’s orders, Asfi had modified them to ward off the damaging effects of all sound-based attacks. It combined active and passive noise cancellation, generating a field around the wearer that dampened incoming sound waves. It was a piece of equipment custom-made to counter Alfia, and were it to be given a name, that name would probably be something along the lines of *Alfia Velador*—Witch Bane.

Aiz picked herself up from the ground and swung her sword as she readied herself once more.

“Evidently, the noise will not die out so easily,” Alfia muttered. “How irritating...but at the same time, it reminds me of something.”

She spoke of the past without much visible emotion.

“You and that elf always did have an answer for everything, dwarf. A wall to our sword, a veil to our magic. And now, these cheap tricks.”

““Grh...!””

“Your own past has saved you,” she said. “All that noise was not in vain after all.”

She spoke of the long feuds between the *Loki Familia* and *Freya Familia* and those of Zeus and Hera. The only reason Riveria and Gareth were able to respond so decisively this time was because they had been beaten so soundly and so often in the past.

Yet the witch spoke dismissively of those events fifteen years ago. She considered them but more noise. Riveria and Gareth shot her a rotten glare.

“Then let us see, shall we? Let us see how long that legacy will hold.”

A second passed as Alfia’s unassuming words hung in the air. And then the onslaught began.

“Urgh?!” cried Lyu.

“Dammit! This ain’t fair!” shouted Lyra.

“How are we supposed to get close when she keeps blasting us back?!” complained the dwarven vanguard, Asta.

Alfia’s magic could not be stopped. Even the adventurers’ specialized defensive enchantments could not completely attenuate the raw power of her attacks. Lyu and her allies were dashed across the ground and hurled into crystals that shattered on impact. At long range, fighting Alfia was an impossible task. She alone surpassed all the mages that faced her combined, including Riveria. She cast faster and hit harder. A contest of magic was doomed to end in failure.

“Ignore it! Keep pushing!” came Riveria’s command. “Overwhelm her with numbers and don’t give her breathing room! Keep casting!”

The high elf sprinted to a different position, using concurrent casting to keep up her own attacks. Obeying her orders, the melee fighters leaped into action.

“Leon, Kaguya! Let’s go!” cried Alize.

“I’m coming, too!” came the voice of Aiz.

The four launched themselves at their foe; Alize in the lead, with Lyu and Aiz at her sides, and Kaguya bringing up the rear. All four of them attacked in concert...only for their whirlwind of blades to hit nothing but empty air.

““““Grr!!”“““

“Don’t even raise your swords if you lack the skill to use them properly.”

It was like Alfia could see the future. With just a lean of her torso, a tilt of her head, or a brush of her fingers against the sword edge, she deflected or avoided every blow without even opening her eyes.

The four girls reeled in shock. Time seemed to slow to a crawl.

I can’t touch her! thought Alize, her eyes wide.

Even four of us can’t land a single hit! observed Kaguya, scowling in frustration.

I’ve never seen a mage move like her! Sweat beads formed on Lyu’s brow. *It’s like...*

Aiz’s heart thrummed to the melody of the unknown. *She’s a frontline fighter, just like us!*

Soon, the witch seemed to grow bored of only dodging.

“Give me that.”

Her arm shot out, and in a flash Desperate was hers.

“Wah! That’s mine! Give it back!”

Aiz ran over and began hopping for her stolen weapon like a bullied playground kid. Quickly, the other girls caught on to the witch’s intent and pulled her back, but by then they were too late.

“Let me show you how to use a sword.”

There was a roar, like thunder, and the streak of steel seared a burning horizon into the girls' retinas. Mere moments before all four were bisected, the old dwarf jumped in the way, greatshield raised.

"Raaaaaaaaahhhh?!"

Like a replay of a few moments past, Gareth was blown back, though he succeeded in protecting the lives of Aiz, Lyu, Alize, and Kaguya. All five were scattered across the ground, along with the shattered remains of Gareth's shield.

"Leon! Alize! Kaguya!" shouted Neze.

"That attack just sent all of 'em flyin'!" yelled Lyra. "The hell was that, anyway?!"

Her eyes trembled in fear. It was Riveria who answered with a scowl. "That was one of Zald's techniques!"

None among *Astrea Familia* could believe what they were hearing.

"You're joking," spat Kaguya, lying flat on her back. Her arms trembled as she reached up, peeling the dazed Aiz off her stomach and tossing her aside. "Glutton's swordplay? She's supposed to be a mage!"

It was Alfia herself who provided the answer.

"I can reproduce any technique if I've seen it even once before," she explained. "While I cannot pretend to possess Zald's physicality, I can imitate his swordplay, at the very least."

The girls of *Astrea Familia* couldn't believe what they were hearing. Least of all Noin and Asta, who gulped in terror. As frontline fighters themselves, nobody understood better. The witch who stood before them made a mockery of hard work and effort.

"The Monstrously Gifted..." muttered Lyu.

"You're not human!!" screeched Kaguya.

It was then that Gareth crawled to his feet. "No point in comparing yourselves to her, girls! She's exceptional even by Hera's standards! A mage who fights on the front lines, but not as a magic swordswoman! A category unto herself! An

avatar of destruction, dominating with sheer talent!"

"I know not if that is insult or praise, dwarf, but it is noise either way."

Alfia tired of the adventurers' words, and raised Aiz's sword to shoulder height, testing its weight.

"This weapon does not suit me, after all," she said. "How ridiculous it looks in these twigs I call my arms. You may have it back."

She tossed the sword, dumping it carelessly onto the ground at Aiz's feet. The golden-haired girl stooped and took Desperate in both hands, her brow dripping with sweat.

"My heart's pounding... I've never felt scared of another person before!"

"Rest assured, I despise your kind as well, girl. All I ever evoke in the eyes of children...is fear."

A wave of sound marked the recommencement of hostilities. Aiz and the other adventurers did their best to leap out of the line of fire.

A horrifying melody of silence. Swordplay, magical ability, inborn talent: none of it mattered against the Monstrously Gifted. She was the storm, and all the adventurers were the sailors clinging to their ship for dear life. That was simply how powerful Hera's Level 7 was.

"Alize! Girls! Get back!"

"The chant's complete! Get ready!"

Lyana and Celty shouted, their voices cutting through Alfia's ceaseless barrage. As back-rank fighters, they had been spared the brunt of the attacks so far. Together with Riveria, they raised their staffs, unleashing a vortex of magical energy.

"Wynn Fimbulvetr!"

Fire, lightning, and three blasts of arctic wind that far outclassed the rest. This magical bombardment could fell a floor boss, but all Alfia did was extend her arm and speak a single word.

"Ataraxia."

The magic dispersed as though colliding with an invisible wall.

“Wh-what the...?!”

“All our projectiles are being nullified just before impact!”

Celty’s and Lyana’s faces paled.

“Grh!” Riveria scowled. “She can use that barrier even after she’s just cast a different spell!”

The mages had timed their combination attack for the precise moment it would be impossible to block—right after Alfia had unleashed her magic on the frontline fighters of *Astrea Familia*. Alfia, however, had seamlessly pivoted to defense in mere moments.

“You never learn, do you?” Alfia said. “How many times do I have to silence your paltry spells? I was under the impression the elves were a wise race, young one. Is that not the case?”

“Young one?! I’m older than you!!”

Of course, Alfia was by far Riveria’s senior when it came to adventuring, and the high elf understood that. That didn’t stop the witch’s remark cutting her to the bone.

“That makes it worse,” Alfia shot back. “It means your years have taught you nothing, you ill-tempered spinster.”

The high elf snarled, her anger so plain that it startled the young Aiz, who jumped in fright.

“Rrrrrrrrrrrghhh!!”

“Don’t lose your head!” cautioned Gareth. “To think that anyone could set you off like Aina did...”

But more concerned than anyone else by Riveria’s outburst were her fellow elves.

“Lady Riveria’s lost it!” cried Celty.

“Wh-what do we do?!” asked Lyu.

“Drop the comedy act, numbskulls! We’re in the middle of a fight, here!”

Lyra chided the two elves, then turned her attention back to her foe, a cold sweat making its way down her neck and into her clothing.

Still, that high elf is right; her abilities are crazy! She can put up a wall so quickly after batterin' us with spells!

It was unreasonable. It was unfair. It defied magical common sense. Even Alfia's level wasn't enough to explain it.

There's supposed to be limits to what ultrafast casting can achieve! She's practically castin' two spells at the same time!

Such a feat was supposed to be impossible. One of the central rules of spellcraft stated that spells could not be cast without performing the corresponding chant. And it was impossible to recite two chants at once, no matter what rare skills a mage possessed. If one tried, the words would become muddled and both spells would fail.

"There's gotta be some trick to what she's doin'! How's she able to mix offense and defense so easily?!"

Lyra glared at the witch, unable to unravel her mysteries. Alfia looked down on her with disappointment and spoke a single word.

"*Gospel.*"

This spell contained more energy than all the previous ones. Sound transformed into pure destruction, breaking the ground apart and sending everything flying.

"It's a wide-area attack!!"

"We can't evade it!!"

"Grrrrhhhh!!"

Alize, Lyra, Lyu, and the other girls of *Astrea Familia* were engulfed in the blast. The entire floor shook, and the sound of shattering crystals filled the air.

Soon, only the distinct sound of a tuning fork lingered. The dust cleared... revealing two dwarves, protecting the party with their shields.

"E-Elgarm, you saved us..." stuttered Neze, seeing the old dwarf's damaged

state.

“Is everyone okay? You did well, too, young one.”

Gareth’s words were directed at Asta, who stood alongside him, her own shield up and at the ready.

“W-well, I’m a dwarf, too, after all...!” she replied.

“Do you have a spare shield? I’m afraid this one won’t do anymore.”

“O-of course! Here you go!”

“Appreciated. However, I fear for our prospects. We shall have no weapons or armor at this rate...”

Gareth tossed aside his shield, of which very little now remained, and Noin passed him a new one. Alfia was burning through their equipment faster than a floor boss. The party’s sound-cancelling accessories could only accomplish so much. One look at Asta’s full plate made this obvious, seeing how it was cracked from head to toe.

“There’s no gap in her attacks to exploit!” cried Riveria. “And there’s not much time! Soon—!”

But right on cue, there was a sound so loud it outclassed even the Level 7’s spells.

“Another attack from below! It’s a big one!” cried Kaguya, barely managing to stay upright. But she didn’t get another word out before an enormous explosion drowned out all sound.

Like a waterfall in reverse, a column of fire erupted from the ground, spanning the entire height of the cavern.

“It’s coming through the ground!” cried Aiz, raising her arms to shield her face from the blistering heat.

“What is this monster supposed to be, a volcano?!” yelled Lyra. She watched as the great tree at the floor’s center was consumed by the flames and crumbled to ash.

“There’s a big hole in the center of the floor!” shouted Lyu.

The attack left a void about twenty meders in diameter, and a rumble like the horns of heaven announcing the creature's arrival.

The adventurers all turned to stare at the abyss in shock.

"Oh no... It's here!"

"...A demon wreathed in flames," Alfia calmly declared.

And then...

"The Dungeon's cry made manifest. A monster's first birthday."

"Grh...!!"

A divine voice wormed its way through the labyrinth of suffering until it reached Lyu. She spun to face its source.

"The birth of evil. A nightmare made real. In the name of primordial darkness, I have upheld my oath."

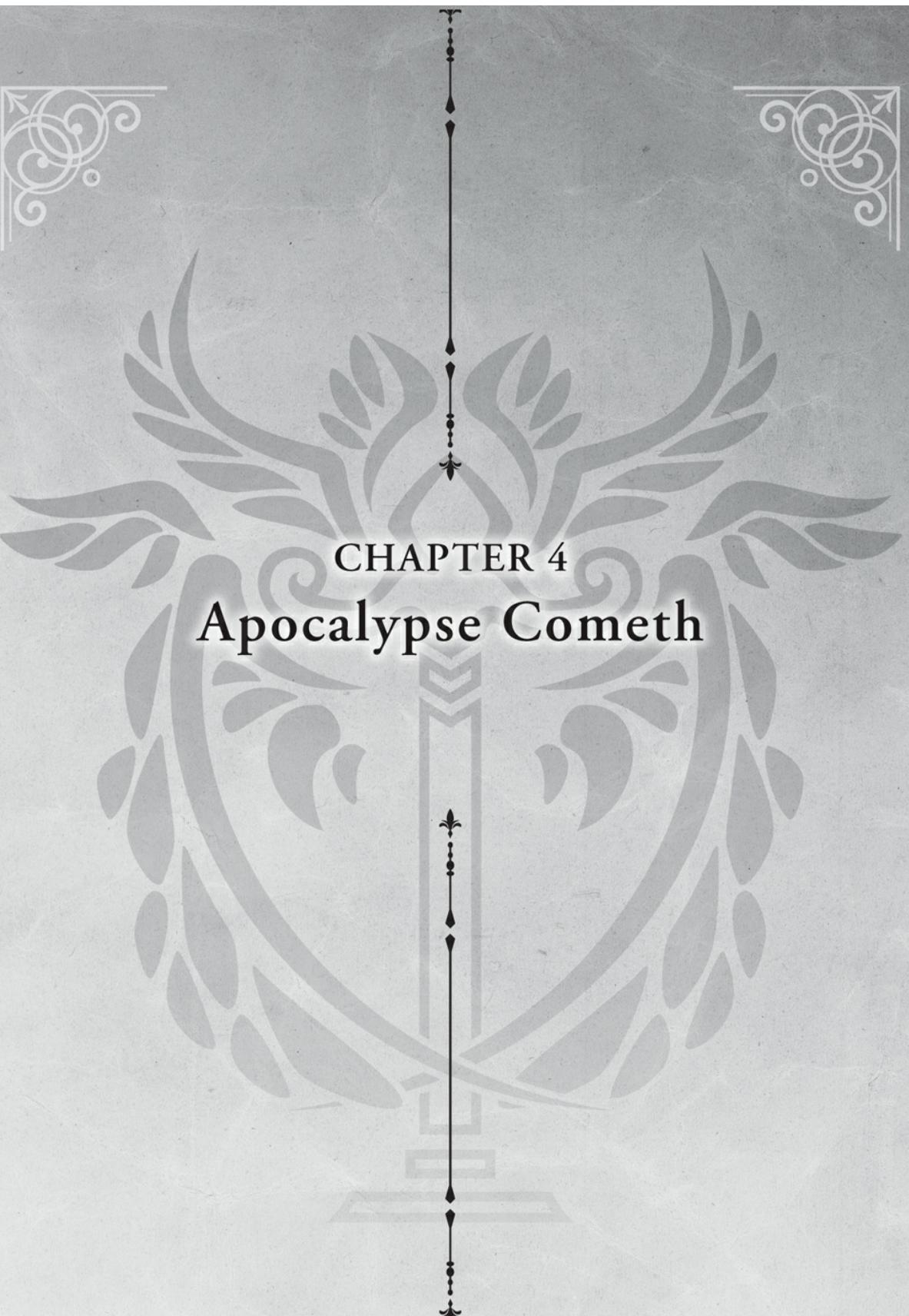
Framed against a pillar of flames that seemed to go on without end, a single figure approached, a contingent of troops at his back. Lyu froze when she saw him, and her lips trembled.

"It's you... Erebus...!"

The dark god stepped out of the veil of scarlet and into stark relief.

"Here I am," he said. "And I brought the apocalypse with me."

Three pillars of flames erupted behind him, and a harbinger of destruction climbed out of the abyss.



CHAPTER 4

Apocalypse Cometh

ASTREA RECORD

The War of Good and Evil

Story by Eujino Omori · Illustration by Sakage
Character Design by Sazuhito Yasuda



CHAPTER 4

Apocalypse Cometh

“Graaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!!”

The adventurers clutched their heads. The creature's roar shook every last pebble on the eighteenth floor. Even Alfia gave a slight grimace, while the monster rose into the cavernous space and spread its crooked wings, shedding black motes.

“Wh-what is that?!” cried Neze.

“Some kind of winged serpent... Is that a dragon?!” yelled Alize. “How does something that big manage to fly?!”

“It's disgusting...” said Kaguya. “I think I'm going to throw up! I've never seen a monster so hideous!”

Its head alone was enormous and misshapen, with a ragged jaw resembling that of a demon spawned from the deepest abyss. The creature itself was massive, but its limbs were thin and spindly, like a chimerical amalgamation of a snake and a malnourished human. It was only after much difficulty that Alize correctly identified it as a dragon—a creature that stood at the top of the monster food chain as an apex predator.

“An anomaly born from divine transgression on the thirty-seventh floor. As for a name...how about Delphyne?”

The dark god named the beast on the advent of its ascent.

“Can you see that hole, children? It goes all the way down to hell.”

He spoke with excitement, brandishing his divine might.

“That right there is a gate and symbol of the underworld, my friends. And

we're taking it all the way to the top. Once Babel falls and the Age of Gods is over, only then can a true legend be born."

"Grh...!"

"Yes...an Age of Chaos."

As Lyu watched on, Erebus flashed a twisted smile.

"Rejoice. And die. Accept the oblivion I offer you. This new world has no need for the light of justice."

As if agreeing with his words, the creature from below, Delphyne, let out an ear-shattering roar. The god was calm, but his followers were already panicking.

"L-Lord Erebus!" one of them said. "H-hurry and get to safety!"

"W-we will not be able to keep you safe much longe—"

It only took an instant. The whole world flashed black and crimson, and all that remained of the Evils lieutenant was his arm and the echo of his words.

"E-eeeek!"

The other Evils fell over themselves. Erebus, on the other hand, merely cast a glance over his shoulder.

"A little close for comfort, that one," he said without a care. "I suppose it is me you're after, isn't it?"

Smoke still billowing from its mouth and nostrils, Delphyne glared at the dark god.

"Very well, then. This is your last job, my followers. Get me safely to Alfia's side, and it's all over."

"...!"

"We can't let the leading man make such an undignified exit so ahead of schedule. Else this show would turn into a comedy."

Erebus's followers had given their lives to see him this far, and they were prepared to sacrifice more still. They let out a terrified yell, steeling themselves to pay the ultimate price. Fire rained down from the heavens, but the cultists spared no opportunity to martyr themselves, throwing themselves in front of

their god and becoming cinders in his place.

"Hmm. I was not expecting to see a beast so vile," said Alfia. "Truth be told, I doubted Erebus's words. But it seems there is no end to the mysteries this Dungeon can bring forth."

Alfia stood and watched the monster, evaluating it, while the flames bathed her pale skin in a scarlet light. Meanwhile, the adventurers dripped with sweat. With the creature's arrival, the temperature on the eighteenth floor had spiked, but that wasn't the only reason. Now that they had seen with their own eyes the undeniable proof of the beast's ability to smash through floors, they quickly realized that time was running out.

"Blast!" growled Gareth. "That thing doesn't care what side anyone is on! And its power is unbelievable...not only did it burrow a tunnel between floors, but all of Under Resort will soon crumble at this rate!"

"We have to fight it!" yelled Riveria. "But Alfia's still a danger as well..."

It was at that moment, while Finn's two most trusted lieutenants gazed up at the avatar of destruction circling overhead, that it happened.

The pair suddenly heard a wind. They turned to see Aiz, her sword rattling in her hands, her shoulders rising and falling with every heated breath. She looked like she'd lost her mind.

That thing... That thing... That thing...!!

It was like she'd come face-to-face with an archnemesis she'd sworn to get revenge on. There was no light of reason in her eyes, just anger—a burning, seething fury.

The world blinked in and out of focus. Her magical energy spilled forth like a storm. And the beating of her tiny heart rang in her ears and refused to stop.

"Aaaaaaaaaagh!!"

Her hair fluttered out behind her like a glittering golden trail as she threw herself at the dragon.

"Aiz?! Wait, come back!!"

The girl couldn't hear Riveria's plea. She was the wind. Words had no meaning

for her now.

Standing between her and her target were hordes of monsters driven equally mad by the roaring flames and overwhelming fear.

The girl slaughtered all of them. Her golden eyes glimmered in the dark like the flashing steel of her blade.

“Ruuuuuughhh?!”

A violent tempest. Severed limbs. Gouts of flames and showers of blood.

Lyu and the other girls stood slack-jawed with shock, as that magic-infused whirlwind tore through all it touched.

“Out of my way! Out of my WAAAYYY!!”

Nothing could divert the young Aiz. She moved like an arrow in flight. Soon, the wall of monsters blocking her path was gone, and she came upon Erebus fleeing Delphyne alongside his followers.

“Oh. Didn’t expect to see you here,” the dark god said, chuckling. “Come to help your old foe, have you? Much apprec—”

But the young girl ignored even the god’s words. She sailed right past him, slicing an oncoming fireball in half. The sliced projectile scorched the air to the left and right, leaving Erebus startled but unharmed.

“...Are you not even listening to me? You’re a genuine agent of chaos in a little girl’s clothes.”

The dark god’s surprise, however, lasted only for a moment, before his lips formed a smile once more.

“Excellent timing. Your heroic sacrifice will grant me just enough time to reach safety. Time for me to get moving. Let’s see, where around here offers the grandest view?”

Erebus scanned the ruins of the eighteenth floor. His divine eyes picked out a cliff that looked relatively undamaged.

“Ah, my VIP seat,” he said. “Perfect for watching the end run its course.”

Alongside what few of his devout followers remained, Erebus headed straight

for it.



“Aiz! Curses, I never expected her to lose her temper like this!”

The roar of the wind joined the bursting fireballs, causing the entire floor to shake even more. It was like an act from a heroic legend, watching the young girl depart to face the monster alone, and Riveria frowned as she envisaged what tragic fate lay at that tale’s end.

“Aiz cannot face that thing alone!” shouted Gareth. “No matter how crazed she is, it’s too powerful!”

“Grh...!”

Riveria was torn. She wanted to go save Aiz, but she couldn’t turn her back on the Level 7 standing before her. To even stand a chance against Alfia required the combined strength of their entire party, and if Riveria left, only a crushing defeat awaited those who remained. But just as she began to struggle under the burden of command...

“Go!!” someone called.

““!!””

Riveria and Gareth went wide-eyed with shock. It was Alize’s clear voice that cut through the battlefield.

“You and old man Gareth go save the Sword Princess!” she said. “We’ll handle Alfia somehow!”

Alize’s decision was quick, but it was reckless. Riveria couldn’t believe what she was hearing at first.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Alize Lovell! How can a group of Level Threes at best hope to take on a Level Seven?!”

“We’ll be okay! I still remember Braver’s plan! No matter how many times she knocks us down, we’ll stand right back up again!”

The girl’s enthusiasm left the high elf speechless. Alize placed her hands on

her hips, exuding her trademark smugness.

“Our justice is as unbreakable as we are pure, pretty, and perfect, don’t you know?! Heh-hem!!”

Then she adopted a serious expression.

“So please trust me, okay, Gareth?”

The old dwarf was silent. Without affirming or denying her words, he adjusted his helmet. Then he turned toward the dragon.

“Let’s go, Riveria. I’d wager you won’t be able to focus without Aiz at your side, anyway.”

“Grr! I’m sorry, *Astrea Familia*!”

Riveria made her decision. Both Gareth and Alize had seen through her facade completely. All she could do was leave those brave girls with one last parting gift.

“Gather, breath of the earth—my name is Alf! *Veil Breath*!”

Her sacred protection enveloped every member of *Astrea Familia* in a verdant glow. It was armor that would protect them against magical and physical attacks.

“This shall keep you safe so long as the magic lasts! Please, take care!”

“Alfia is in your hands, lasses! When this is all over, we’ll have a feast, and I’ll treat you to some real dwarven spirits!”

With that the two departed. With staff and greatax in hand, they left to assist Aiz.

“All right, girls! Drinks with old man Gareth confirmed! And Nine Hell gave us this nifty buff as well! Can’t complain about that, can you?”

“Yes we can, you idiot!!” came Lyra’s swift rebuke. She looked like she wanted to strangle the life out of her bigmouthed captain. “What the hell do you think you’re doing, makin’ promises we can’t keep?! We’re gonna die out here, and it’s gonna be all your fault!!”

“Oh, Lyra, you’re so pessimistic! We’re not going to die yet, don’t be silly!”

“You absolute moron...!” cried Lyra, clutching her head in her hands. It was all the other girls could do to keep the smiles on their faces. Meanwhile, Kaguya, who had been examining the aura bestowed by Riveria, stepped forward.

“Under normal circumstances,” she said. “I would agree with the prum here, but just this once I have to side with the captain.”

The smile on her face was sickeningly sweet.

“After all, I have a debt to settle with that woman there,” Kaguya said, glaring at Alfia. “I will have my revenge, even if my decapitated head must bite out her throat!”

Lyu appeared beside the not-so-innocent maiden and said, “If it will ease Lady Riveria’s burden, then I’ll fight as well. Somebody needs to eliminate that witch, so it might as well be us.”

She leveled her own glare at Alfia. Wisps of flames danced around the ashen-haired woman. All of *Astrea Familia* drew their weapons.

“Are you finished with your little play-pretend?” the witch said.

“Yes, we’re finished,” replied Alize. “And it’s not pretend; our determination is very real.”

“Then perish. I shall choke the life out of you so you never sully this world with your noise again.”

After that final pronouncement, her magic swelled. The air itself groaned, but Alize’s smile was unfaltering.

“Sorry, but being noisy is the one thing we’re good at!”

All eleven of the girls wore brave smiles.

“We’re gonna keep going until you’re ready to give up!”



Delphyne’s roar echoed throughout the floor. Every gout of flames caused the floor to shake, but there was a certain wind in the dragon’s eyes that it couldn’t get rid of.

“Raaaahh! Aaaaaagh!”

Aiz’s face twisted in madness and rage. She used Airiel to cloak her body in an armor of wind that granted her unparalleled mobility, allowing her to leap all the way up to the monster’s face. The beast attempted to stop her by swinging its heavy wings and tail, but Aiz repelled every blow with a hurricane of steel. As soon as she touched down, she launched herself at the creature once more.

It was an unprecedeted clash of fire and wind. Her ceaseless attacks, like an everlasting tempest, caused the beast to howl in anger.

“Aiz! Come back! ...Curses, she’s not listening to me! Her anger is in control!”

“Not even my ax can handle a beast of this size!”

No matter how many times Gareth hurled his weapon, it bounced harmlessly off the creature’s thick scales. Riveria’s magic fared little better, as the dragon’s fiery breath vaporized it utterly before impact. And she couldn’t rely on her more hard-hitting spells for fear of striking the rampaging Aiz by accident. Only the young girl had found any success attacking the beast and keeping it in check.

“Wait, look...!”

The dragon’s skin bubbled as if it were boiling, emitting steam and an ominous purple light. Then Delphyne’s wounds closed before Gareth’s very eyes. Even the shattered scales quickly reformed.

“It’s healing itself...!” Riveria spat.

“As soon as we land a solid hit, this happens!” said Gareth. “Unless we concentrate our attacks, we’ll never cut a path to its magic stone!”

Their opponent was nigh invincible to begin with, but even when they managed to do some damage, the creature’s regeneration rendered it meaningless. Gareth clenched his jaw in frustration. The beast’s vitality seemed bottomless, and half-hearted attacks would not cut it. The only way through was to rely on the strength of numbers, just as Finn’s plan had dictated.

But it didn’t seem possible to pacify Aiz without leaving themselves open to the dragon. Besides, with her tiny body surrounded by gale-speed winds, there

was currently no way to even get close to her.

“Aiz is giving it everything she’s got. It’s unfortunate, but right now her anger is the only thing keeping that monster at bay.”

“But it won’t last!” cried Riveria. “She’s using more power than her body can handle!”

True to her reputation as a monster slayer, Aiz’s abilities were specialized in defeating them. Only Riveria and Gareth understood the true depths of her might, which Aiz drew upon with zero regard for the consequences. With every wind-infused slash, the beast was forced to defend instead of attacking, but at the same time, Aiz crept closer and closer to her own destruction.

“We have to stop her!” roared Gareth, raising his ax and dashing after her—when all of a sudden, he stopped.

“What’s the matter, Gareth?!”

When Riveria turned her head, Gareth was looking in the complete opposite direction, toward the eastern end of the floor. There, in the distance, the high elf glimpsed several figures rising from the blasted terrain.

“What the...?!”



“*Agallis Arvesynce!*”

Alize’s chant summoned a torrent of magical energy that burst forth from her body, followed by the sound of dynamite. Her arm, her legs, and her sword—all were bathed in the same fiery glow, the color of her crimson hair.

“A fire enchantment?” said Alfia, unperturbed. “Is that the best you have?”

“You bet your butt it is! A pure, pretty, and perfect girl like me needs a pure, pretty, and perfect spell to match! What do you think? Now you know why they call me the Scarlett Harnell! Heh-hem!”

Alize’s proud look lasted only a moment before she got down to business.

“Form up, girls! Start operation Float Like a Butterfly, Sting Like a Bee!”

““““Got it!“““

Responding quickly to their captain’s order, the girls formed a ring around Alize.

“Three in the back, five in the middle, and three in the front. I suppose they have to bolster their defense now that Elgarm’s not with them.”

From his vantage point atop a crystal bluff, Erebus watched the battle unfolding below. Only two of his underlings remained by his side, utterly exhausted.

“They’re not doing so bad holding their own against a Level Seven like Alfia,” he said. “Especially considering one good hit from her will tear any of them in half.”

Astrea Familia’s performance was nothing short of exceptional. They were fighting an opponent four levels higher than themselves.

Any adventurer could tell what a hopeless endeavor it was. Even a single level gap was enough reason to throw in the towel. It was like fighting a foe on another plane of existence. Erebus might as well have been watching eleven bunny rabbits take on a fire-breathing dragon.

“But their teamwork is extraordinary,” he went on, “and that’s an adventurer’s greatest asset. That’s the one thing that gives them a chance to go up against unwinnable odds and come out on top.”

Watching that teamwork somehow plug the gap between their levels, Erebus couldn’t help but smile. When Alize lunged forward, the mages quickly covered her assault. When Lyra and the other support crew in the center of the formation launched their projectiles, Lyu and Kaguya were there with perfect timing to press the advantage. Healing spells and buffs from the rear constantly kept the party fighting fit.

This was what adventurers were truly capable of. Having the courage and the faith to put their lives in their allies’ hands, even when one slip could spell doom for all of them.

Preparations like Perseus’s accessories and Riveria’s magic were the distillation of a thousand battles’ worth of accumulated experience.

This fight was essentially a Dungeon raid; a party of adventurers combining their strength to take down a formidable boss.

“They’re doing well, even accounting for Alfia’s little *handicap*.” Erebus grinned. “Now, where will things go from here, I wonder?”

But the witch’s answer to that, as for all things, was the same single word.

“*Gospel*.”

That word produced an invisible, yet deafening wall of sound.

“Grh?!”

Although Lyu managed to take only a glancing blow, she was still tossed through the air. Alize wasted no time in giving her command.

“Maryu! Healing!”

“Leave it to me! *Rea Vindemia*!”

The eldest member of the familia cast her spell without delay, and the curative light enveloped not only Lyu, but also Asta and Noin, who had sustained wounds of their own on the front lines.

“Don’t forget all the potions and elixirs Braver gave us! Just stay alive and I’ll heal you right back up!” yelled Neze from the middle rank. Along with Noin and Iska, she was spending the battle using curative after curative on her allies. There were even magic potions in her arsenal, so the mages on the back rank didn’t have to worry about suffering from Mind Down.

This focus on magical resistance must be the prum’s doing, thought Alfia. *My sound is not getting through. Especially with that high elf’s protection in the way.*

Silently, she observed the actions of her opponents.

Their ceaseless attacks are testing my nerves. Plus, they are cautious. They neither stray too far, nor come too close. Instead, they constantly force a response, whittling down my patience.

She could come to only one conclusion.

“They are trying to tire me out,” she said.

At that moment, a sneak attack came from behind her. Alfia moved effortlessly to the side, dodging the attacker's blade without a second thought.

"She's a monster!" spat Kaguya in frustration, after her blade failed to so much as nick a single strand of ashen hair on the witch's head. "How many of my attacks has she avoided so far?!"

Astrea Familia had been forced to fight defensively ever since parting with their *Loki Familia* allies. However, that hadn't stopped Kaguya and the other front liners from making bold attempts on their foe's life. Yet the unflappable Level 7 did not show so much as a single bead of sweat on her brow.

A wave of sound gouged the earth, and although Kaguya's evasion was immediate, she was still tossed backward. Thrown clear of the battlefield, she struggled to her feet and used her sword to cut down a flame-wreathed monster that leaped toward her. Afterward, she raised her blood-and sweat-stained face and cut a path through the smoke and cinders to rejoin her allies.

Kaguya was keenly aware that one direct hit would be the end of her. "We can't take this much longer, but that witch hasn't even paused to catch her breath!" she muttered. "If she doesn't wear out soon, this will all be for—!"

"Oh, I see you've already started without me. My fault for arriving late, I suppose."

"!"

She spun toward the direction of the new voice.

"However, it seems the feast is far from over. I can't wait to join in."

It was a man sporting hair the color of boiling blood—the Evils lieutenant known as Vito. He arrived on the eighteenth floor with a contingent of eight troops.

"It's you!" growled Kaguya, recognizing the man as the one she had fought in this very place not two weeks past. "Why are you here?! Did you come via Babel?!"

"Oh, it hardly matters, right? The fact is, I *am* here, and eager for our second dance." He opened one eye a sliver and flashed a fearless smile. "Aren't you?"

“Ah, Vito. You made it.”

The keen eyes of Erebus’s follower quickly picked out his master, watching from on high.

“It is good to see you safe, my lord,” he said, in spite of the vast and uncrossable distance between them. “Pray do not do anything *too* reckless. You are liable to get scorched to ash sitting out in the open like that. That would mean the loss of my blessing, and I wouldn’t be able to enjoy my feast like that very much, would I?”

Vito turned his focus back to the girl standing before him, and his lips curled up in a grin. Kaguya did not even bother to hide her displeasure.

“Back again, you disgusting cretin? I suppose the only reason you were down here that day was to scout things out?”

“Quite right,” replied Vito. “Sending a god into the Dungeon is risky business, as I’m sure you’re aware. Everything had to be planned out perfectly to avoid any little mishaps.”

He showed little reluctance in addressing her query, almost as though it didn’t matter.

“However, meeting you girls back then was a strange twist of fate,” he went on. “Perhaps our paths are destined to cross?”

“I sincerely hope not,” replied Kaguya. “Having to see you once is bad enough. Get out of my sight before I throw up.”

She grimaced at the man through the billowing smoke and heat. Just then, she heard Lyra’s voice.

“Kaguya, what are you doin’?! —Hey, what?! More enemies?! Argh, that’s the last thing we need!”

Lyra spotted new trouble and was about to come over to assist, when...

“Get back, Lyra! And don’t tell the others!”

Kaguya’s furious rebuke caused the prum girl to stop in her tracks.

“If we let them split our focus, we’ll be overwhelmed! Besides, I am more

than a match for this group of powerless fools!"

"Y-you're unhinged! You can't take 'em all by your—"

"Make up for my absence, prum! Now go!"

"You what?! How am I meant to fight for two people at once?!"

"Now!!"

"...Argh, fine!" said Lyra, caving to Kaguya's stern glare. "But you owe me a drink back topside!"

The priority was the Level 7. Lyra knew that, and she also knew there wasn't any room for error. Thus, she disappeared back through the curtain of steam and rejoined the battle.

"Heh-heh-heh. I do hope you weren't including me when you said 'powerless fools,'" taunted Vito. "Even a man like me has a sense of pride, you know."

"Shut it, scum. Be grateful I even give you the time of day. I would like nothing more than to tear that woman's head from her shoulders."

Then a dauntless smile appeared on Kaguya's lips.

"But don't think I forgot how you made fools of us all back then. I'll cut you into ribbons, so I never have to see that smug grin of yours ever again!"

"Ha-ha-ha! What a foulmouthed young lady you are! Then let us dance, as you wish."

On his cue, Vito's subordinates rushed into battle, and the dance began in earnest. Evil on one side, and the cold steel of a Far Eastern blade on the other.

Three cultists came rushing forward, two from either side and one from the front, brandishing their poison-tipped swords. Kaguya made short work of them before instantly slicing a fourth enemy who jumped down from above. One of the cultists writhed on the floor, coughing up blood, and reached to detonate his explosive device, but Kaguya slammed her toes in his face, knocking him out.

The hem of her kimono fluttered, offering a glimpse of her fair legs. Then, without even looking behind her, Kaguya spun around and parried a thrust aimed at her back before slicing the assailant in the stomach faster than his

eyes could open wide in surprise.

“Hrgh!”

“Gurgh?!”

The name of her sword was Higanbana, and the blood droplets left in its wake aptly looked like fallen petals.

It was a sword forged in Orario for the sole purpose of cutting down villainy. With an expertly crafted edge, it had carried Kaguya through many a battle against evil. Though shattered in the girl’s previous encounter with Alfia, the fragments had been recovered and reforged, resulting in a successor to the weapon’s legacy.

Five Evils servants littered the Dungeon floor. Only four remained, including Vito himself.

Kaguya’s one-woman war raged on in service to her friends fighting the Silent Witch elsewhere.

She surged forward. Vito’s attacks were on another level compared to those of his underlings, yet Kaguya subtly altered their trajectory even while dodging the onslaught of the frustrated Evils. The enemy blades sliced through strands of her beautiful, silken hair, and left cuts in the cloth of her kimono, but the only look on Kaguya’s face was one of scorn and disdain.

Then her sheath sang as she drew her sword. Flashing Blade: a technique of her accursed bloodline, an iai slice that cut through three foes at once.

“Gaaaaagh!!”

Their bodies hit the floor, and Kaguya wiped the sweat from her brow. Then she directed her gaze forward once more at Vito, who stood completely unharmed.

“Magnificent!” he said, clapping. “What beauty and strength! Look at all these grown men and women who couldn’t keep up with one little girl! Am I the only half-decent dancer around these parts?”

Then a cold, brutal smile returned to Vito’s lips as he watched her struggle for breath.

“You must be getting tired by now, mustn’t you, princess?”

“...You repulse me. Shut your mouth!”

Steel clashed with steel, and the dance went on.

While Kaguya and Vito fought under a curtain of dust, Lyu and the other girls were trapped in a conflict of their own.

““Haah!””

Lyu and Alize came at their foe from opposite angles. Alfia gently brushed aside the former’s wooden sword with her palm, while trapping the latter’s blade between two slender fingers.

“Argh! Why are you so fast? It’s so irritating! And how come you’re not feeling the heat from my sword? Is that your magic-nullifying power as well?!”

“Do not bombard me with questions, child. All it means is that you are weak.” The witch’s face was laden with disappointment. “However,” she said. “Your speed and power have definitely improved, red one. You must possess a rare skill.”

Lyu was also powering herself up with Mind Load, but the increase in Alize’s stats were too drastic to explain any other way.

“Heh.” Alize chuckled, pulling a smug grin. “How observant of you! Yes, my skill, *Rubrud Beckia*, lets me—”

“Alize! Don’t just blurt out what your skills do to the enemy!”

Lyu silenced her talkative captain before she gave the game away and slashed at Alfia. The witch released Crimson Order and stepped back, avoiding the elf’s blow.

“You are especially noisy,” she said with a deep sigh. “I must be rid of you at once.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment, thank you very much!” chirruped Alize, a feisty grin forming on her lips. “After all, being noisy lets me distract you like this!”

Alfia knit her brows dubiously, and a second later, her suspicions were

answered when a short figure leaped out from behind her.

“Raaaahhh!!”

“!”

Lyra emerged from her veil of dust and sparks and attacked, but Alfia reacted without a moment’s delay. She spun around, catching the prum’s body blow on her elbow.

“A shield bash? Are you pretending to be a dwarf, prum?”

“Shut it, lady. I’m just doin’ what I was told... But damn, nothin’ fazes ya, does it? I shoulda known, but still...”

After her attack failed, Lyra immediately jumped back to a safe distance, knowing a single counterattack from the witch would be the end of her. She screwed up her face in frustration, looking down at the shield in her hands—the one she had been wearing on her back this entire time.

“At least I finally figured it out, though.”

“Figured out what?” replied Alfia, her closed eyes scrunching together.

“That thing you got that nullifies magic—it ain’t no barrier spell; it’s a passive enchantment.”

“.....”

Alfia seemed to tremble ever so slightly in response to Lyra’s declaration. It was the first reaction of hers that could be called genuine surprise.

“What do you mean, Lyra?” asked Alize.

Lyra jerked her chin in the direction of the ashen-haired witch.

“You know how when she activates her barrier, she holds out her hand and chants? Well, it’s all just smoke and mirrors to make it look like she’s casting a spell.”

Alize thought back to when Alfia had been attacked by Riveria and the other mages. At that time, the witch had acted exactly as Lyra said, seeming to cast an ultrafast barrier spell immediately following an offensive one.

“Yeah...and when I attacked her with my fire-enchanted sword, the heat

didn't seem to bother her at all! But now that I think about it, I remember the flames disappeared right where she touched the blade, even though she didn't cast any kind of barrier that time."

Lyra nodded. "That's 'cause it ain't a barrier spell at all. It's like your fire enchantment, or the Sword Princess's wind. Only, hers is invisible, always protectin' her from any magic."

The *Astrea Familia* girls all stood around the battlefield, huffing for breath, listening to Lyra's explanation. They all wore the same look of surprise, which then turned to understanding.

"I get it," said Lyu. "So it's not that she's really fast at switching between offense and defense; it's that her defense is always on."

"This explains why you seem to be able to cast two spells at once!" said Neze.

There was a short pause as Alfia remained silent.

"...What of it?" she said at last. "Simply understanding changes nothing."

"Yeah, you're right," said Lyra. "But we know one more thing, at least. So long as we're fightin', you can't turn that armor off. You gotta keep it up the entire time."

If Alfia made one mistake fighting the girls of *Astrea Familia*, she would inevitably be hit by magic. And magic was deadly, no matter the origin. That was why short-term buffs were so valuable in a Dungeon raid.

No matter what Alfia did, there was always that chance—even if only a tiny, tiny chance—that a spell would finally land and result in her defeat. If Alfia wanted to eliminate that chance, there was only one choice: She needed her armor, even if that armor came at a price.

"You ain't showin' it, but an enchantment that nullifies magic can't come cheap, eh? How much you wanna bet it's tankin' your Mind as we speak?"

"Lyra, you mean...?"

"Yep. All we gotta do is keep up the assault, and sooner or later, she's gonna get Mind Down."

"So it all comes down to who can last longer? Well, that's nice and simple!"

exclaimed Alize. “That’s one more path to victory confirmed!”

The battle had been wearing on for some time now, and it stood to reason that Alfia’s Mind consumption far outclassed that of the girls.

“You hate noise so much, you’re prepared to pay whatever it takes to keep the walls of your silent paradise intact...” muttered Lyu. “That is your weakness!”

Alfia finally parted her lips to speak.

“Correct,” she said. “As painful as it is to admit, that Level Two prum has outwitted me for a second time.”

Alfia had let Lyra slip through her fingers when she’d confronted the witch alongside Kaguya in the streets of Orario. If that had not happened, the prum would not be here to expose the witch’s scheme now. A humiliating turn of events for the all-powerful Level 7 but cause for congratulation as well.

“There is more to you than meets the eye, prum, and there is more to ability than strength, skill, and strategy. I would do well to remember that.”

“Gee, a big, scary Level Seven tryin’ to butter me up? I think I’m gonna wet myself.”

After a lighthearted chuckle, Lyra fixed Alfia with a glare.

“So, whatcha wanna do, queenie? We can keep doin’ this until one of us gives up the ghost, or you can drop your enchantment and finally face that noise you’re so scared of.”

This, too, was strategy. Of course, Lyra wanted to taunt the witch into removing her armor and offering even a sliver of vulnerability, but if Alfia didn’t take the bait, that was fine as well. That would only mean sticking to the original plan of wearing her out, only with the added bonus that now there was light at the end of the tunnel. Revealing the Level 7’s trick had granted the girls of *Astrea Familia* courage and raised their morale—so much so that it hardly mattered whether the odds had really shifted.

However...

“...You all seem to be misapprehending the situation here.”

In truth, Lyra had not come even one step closer to uncovering the truth behind the witch's silence.

"What I call noise is not your artless cacophony, wretched though it is... It is the hateful tune of my own gospel."

"What...?"

"You have correctly uncovered the true nature of my *Silentium Eden*. While it protects me, all forms of magic are automatically nullified."

Alfia put a hand to her chest and spoke in an unsettlingly soft tone.

"That includes magic originating from *within*. Do you understand what that means?"

She raised her head and explained.

"While it cannot nullify it completely, this enchantment drastically reduces the power of my own magic."

The moment it dawned on them what the witch was saying, Lyra, Alize, Lyu—all the girls of *Astrea Familia*—paled in shock.

"My silence is no armor," Alfia declared. "It is a double-edged sword. A seal upon *all* hateful noise, including my own."

That was the one point that Lyra had failed to realize. Of course, it was perhaps the most important one of all.

Alize couldn't speak. *Wait, but that means...*

Lyra shivered in fear. *All those crazy attacks she's been peltin' us with...*

Lyu felt the despair creep up her limbs like frostbite. *That's her weakened state?! She hasn't even been using her full power?!*

"Listen now, and listen well," Alfia spoke. "For *this* is the noise that gives me such grief."

A sound that was just barely audible rang out, and the invisible shroud covering Alfia's body flickered, like a mirage. The next moment, tremendous blasts of magic billowed out from her.

"She undid the protection?!" exclaimed Lyu.

“This gale!” Lyra yelled. “It’s all the magical energy that was being kept inside!”

A terrible thought came over Alize, and she instinctively screamed, “Get back, everyone! Get away from her!”

But then the witch spoke in a cruel voice.

“It’s too late,” she said. Breaking her veil of silence, she lifted one arm in the girls’ direction.

“*Gospel: Satanas Verion.*”

First came her usual ultrashort chant, and the true name of destruction followed. For a moment, the world was robbed of sound, and then came the gospel.

“““!!!”””

It was destructive and deafening. The soft timbre of a ringing bell concealed a magical scream. The followers of justice didn’t even have a chance to raise their voices before a wave of sound engulfed them, dragging them into a vortex of destruction.

“Wha—?!”

Kaguya clapped her hands over her ears and leaped away as a dust-filled gale hit her like a tidal wave. The whole floor shook. For a moment, even Delphyne’s cries couldn’t be heard. A flood of sound waves hit their eardrums, and the ground tremored like an earthquake.

After being tossed repeatedly this way and that, Kaguya finally climbed to her feet and looked up...finding nothing but a fan-shaped zone of death.

“Captain...? Lyra...? Leon...?!”

There was no answer to her frenzied cries save Vito’s laughter.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Is there no limit to their power?! Glutton and Silence both!”

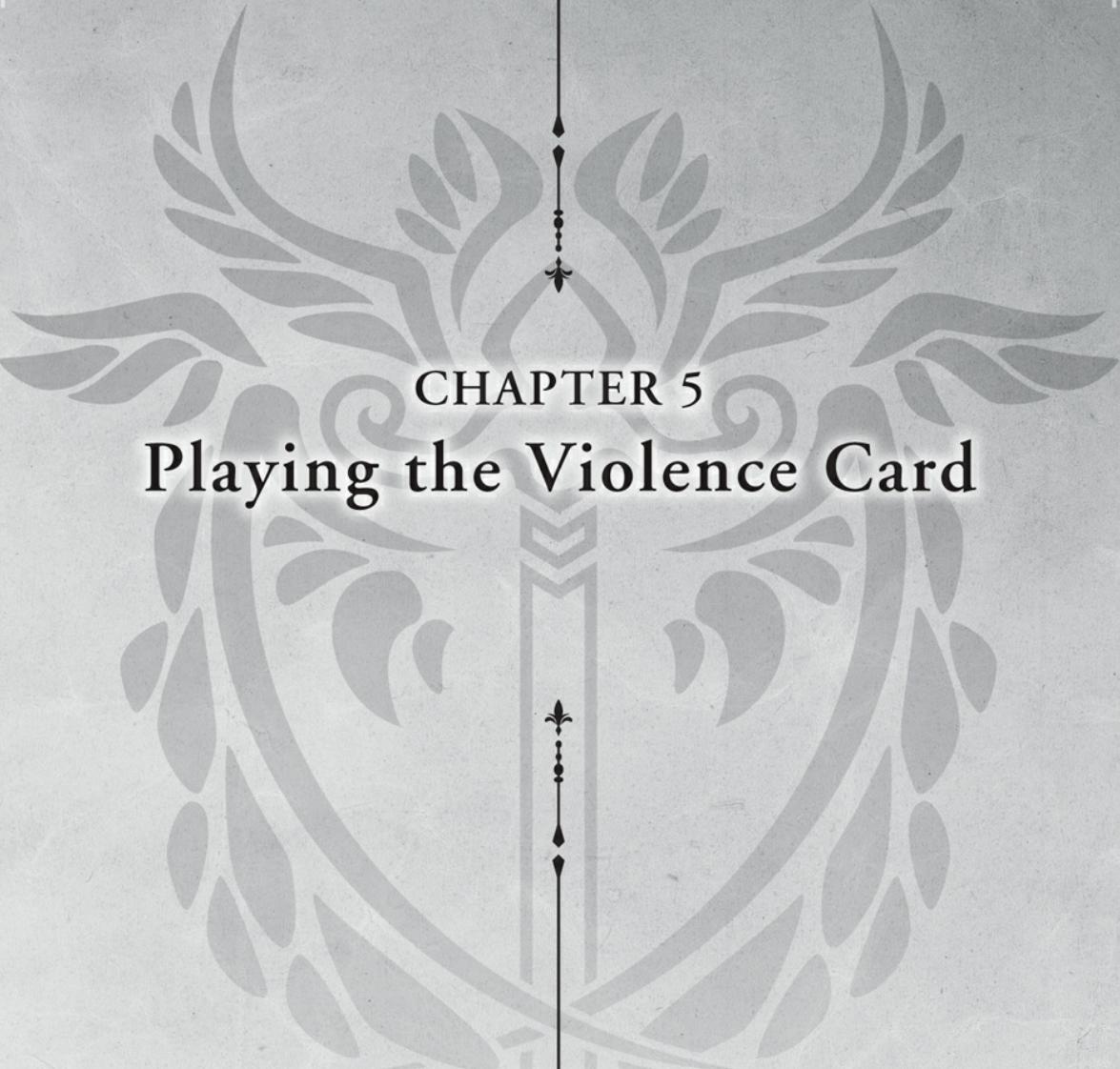
Even as the blast waves washed over him, he laughed like a broken man.

“There can be no future for Orario while those fallen heroes stand with us!”

Soon, the dust cleared, revealing that Alfia was the only one still standing. The followers of justice were strewn across the shattered ground, or lying among fragments of broken crystals, like so many tattered rags.

The witch gazed at what she had wrought with a sorrowful look in her eye.

“All my power can do—all it has ever done—is take.”



CHAPTER 5

Playing the Violence Card

ASTREA RECORD

The War of Good and Evil

Story by Eujino Omori · Illustration by Sakage
Character Design by Sazuhito Yasuda

CHAPTER 5

Playing the Violence Card

The witch had unveiled her true might, and its effects were felt even on the surface, in the streets of the Labyrinth City itself.

“This quake... It isn’t like anything else we’ve felt so far!” exclaimed Asfi, pausing in the Casino and looking at the floor.

“Was it the adventurers, or the monster?” muttered Falgar. “Or something else entirely...?”

Shakti felt it, too, over at the home of *Ganesha Familia*. “Did the enemy manage to break through?” she pondered. “Alize, Leon...!”

The quake was much shorter than the rumblings of the Dungeon monster that had rattled the city before, but this one came at a troubling frequency that alarmed any trained and experienced adventurer, even if they didn’t fully understand why.

While adventurers and Evils alike looked to the ash-laden sky for answers, the roar of monsters continued to echo in the streets.

“Sounds like things are gettin’ pretty lively down there,” sneered Valletta, the only one in the city with a smile on her lips. “Guess it’s all going accordin’ to plan, right, Lord Erebus?”

She looked out across Babel. Just then, a frightened subordinate raised their voice.

“L-Lady Valletta, what was that?!”

“Don’t get cold feet now. That’s the countdown to victory. The more the city shakes, the closer we are to winnin’.”

Valletta took little pains to ease the soldier’s fears. Instead, a ferocious glint twinkled in her eye.

"Still, if you guys are scared, then the adventurers must be shittin' their pants. Their morale should be droppin' like a stone right now."

The tide of war was constantly in flux. Every tactic, every bead of sweat on a soldier's brow, every external factor—all of these tipped the scales of battle one way or the other. Valletta was not too ignorant to realize that these quakes shook the hard-earned faith that Finn's plan had won.

"Now's the time!" she howled. "Finn's made his move—now let's make ours! Hey, you! Get in contact with Jura's people!"

"Th-the tamers...? Y-you mean...?!"

All the blood drained from the cultist's face. Valletta's cruel smile confirmed his darkest fears.

"Yeah. We're gonna play our card. Let the rest of the monsters loose!"



Clang-a-lang-a-lang-a-lang!

The harsh sound of an alarm bell rang throughout the city.

"The watchtowers!" cried Asfi. She and Falgar dispatched their opponents at the same time and turned in the direction of the sound.

"Enemy reinforcements?" the war tiger bellowed. "It can't be! There's still *more* of them?!"

At that moment, a scout ran over. "A large horde of monsters is approaching from the southeast, sir! Including several large species that we haven't seen in the battle so far!"

"Tch! Nothing that should pose a threat. Let's move to intercept before their numbers grow too great!"

Returning his greatsword to his back, Falgar set off at once.

Until now, hordes of monsters in the streets below had forced the adventurers to conduct their battles on the rooftops. However, Mind and arrows could only last so long, and so at Finn's urging, the adventurers focused

on culling these creatures. Now, at last, they could take to the streets again, eager to take back their city and force the monsters out.

However, in the midst of all this, Asfi paused.

“That’s strange,” she muttered. “Something doesn’t feel right.”

The Evils were acting odd. They were strangely cooperative, opening a path for the adventurers. Instead of fighting, they focused all their efforts on shoring up their own defenses.

The reason soon became clear.

“Take this, you fiend!”

“Roaaaaaaaahhh!!”

A cleanly severed arm flew past Asfi’s eyes—the arm of the upper-class adventurer who’d shot past the front lines to engage the enemy by himself.

“Huh...? Aaaaaagh!!”

The next moment, he was crushed between a monster’s jaw. His dying screams were only the first as adventurers all around them started crying out.

“What?!” exclaimed Falgar as he deftly blocked the attack of a lizardman. The force of the blow was unbelievable, as was the number of wounded allies littering the battleground. The newly arrived monsters were already dominating the area around the Casino.

“They’re overwhelming us!” cried Asfi, looking down from the rooftops alongside a contingent of terrified mages.

They’re nothing like the monsters we’ve dealt with so far... What’s happening?!

All across the city, the adventurers were in a panic. Screams issued from each of the five strongholds, including the home of *Loki Familia* to the north. It was there that the dwarf Dyne came to his ally with news.

“Noir! The monsters have stepped up their assault! We can’t hold them off!”

“What?!” Noir wheeled around in surprise. Just then, the Amazon Bahra spoke up as well.

“They’re tearing through our defensive garrison!” she said. “At this rate, the stronghold will fall!”

“Grh...!”

Noir trembled in impotent rage, but the monsters marched on unimpeded. It was over at the home of *Ganesha Familia* where one scout first realized the true nature of the assault.

“W-we’ve spotted tamers at the rear of the charge! They seem to be controlling the monsters!”

Ganesha himself stood at the battlements, surveying the carnage below.

“From the monster’s behavior, these tamers clearly aren’t as skilled as Shakti and her crew,” the god reasoned. “So why are the monsters so powerful?!”

He gazed off in the distance, where he could clearly see the Evils tamers cracking their whips. One didn’t have to be a god to see that their skill was somewhat lacking.

Monster taming was one of the most dangerous professions, and unskilled practitioners usually met a grisly end in the jaws of their targets. Strangely, however, these powerful monsters were not rebelling against their amateur masters, and instead appeared oddly docile, as if they had been entranced.

Shakti was doing her best to respond effectively.

“Grr...! Send out our troops! Do not let those beasts come near the fortifications!”

Then, after hearing the screams of her allies, she shot off toward the monster horde.

Meanwhile, among the Evils, and especially the tamers, tensions were high.

“Damn you, Valletta, makin’ me do this shit...”

Despite the heat emanating from the red dragon he rode, a cold, anxious sweat had broken out on the brow of the *Rudra Familia* tamer, Jura Harma. His animal ears twitched each time the dragon looked up at him with cold, lifeless eyes.

He felt like he was another beast in a cage, just like the rest of them.

“Argh! Let’s just get this over with!”

The animal person tamer cast aside his misgivings and cracked his magical crimson whip. The red dragon wearing a collar around its neck roared and began its charge, while dozens of winged lizards took to the skies.

“They’ve got wyverns, too?!” exclaimed Falgar in surprise, seeing the flock approach the Casino. “Did they bring them all the way from the Valley of Dragons?!”

The mages on the rooftop began launching their spells at the airborne attackers. Asfi had been watching the battle unfold alongside Falgar and had initially come to the same conclusion, but...

If so, they’re too strong! They shouldn’t be able to break through a defensive line held by upper-class adventurers!

She defended the mages with explosives and her blade, but she still couldn’t figure out how this was happening.

That was when a fireball from one of the beasts exploded on the main street.

“Gaaaaagh!”

“Somebody heeelp!!”

The monsters were slaughtering her allies. The color drained from Asfi’s face as the tide of war steadily shifted against them.

“Could it be...? Are all these monsters...irregulars?!”

“Nope, wrong!” Valletta said to no one in particular, gleefully addressing the terror and confusion she knew the adventurers all felt. “They’re just plain old Dungeon monsters! I mean, I guess we’ve been trainin’ ‘em in Knossos, but what difference does that make to you guys?!”

Now that her hidden card had been revealed, Valletta flashed a sinister grin. Everywhere she looked she could see monsters preying on adventurers, bathing the streets in blood. She was loving it.

“Good thing I told Ikelos’s goons to get all these monsters together. Some of them came all the way from the deep levels!”

Valletta had tasked Hazer and other hunters of *Ikelos Familia* with capturing monsters from the Dungeon, while Jura and the rest of *Rudra Familia* were asked to tame and control the more powerful specimens. To facilitate this, Valletta had also strong-armed a hexer possessing the advanced ability Enigma into creating a prototype magic item—a crimson whip that allowed any monster to be tamed, regardless of the tamer’s skill.

It was a triumph of teamwork, coming from the diverse familias that made up the Evils conglomerate.

“Kill, my monsters, kill!” Valletta howled, “Make that Finn cry!”

“C-Captain! The monsters keep coming! They won’t stop!” came Raul’s report, half screamed across the rooftop of Guild HQ.

Finn stood at the building’s edge, grimly surveying the city. He could see the truth of Raul’s words, but he couldn’t show despair lest it spread among his allies.

“Situation report!” he barked.

“Our scouts all across the city have been wiped out! The stronghold garrisons are down to their last defenders! We had the Evils surrounded, but now we’re struggling to hold the line!”

“Grh...! Fall back and defend the strongholds! Use magical bombardment, even if it causes damage to the city!”

A *Loki Familia* member hurried to transmit Finn’s orders, but his fingers were shaking. He didn’t need to be a general to see that things were very quickly going from bad to worse.

“These monsters have the power to turn the tide of war in an instant,” grumbled Finn. “Did they really gather this many enhanced species? No, that’s impossible! There’s still something you’re hiding from us, isn’t there, Valletta?!”

Finn Deimne was far from omniscient. He couldn’t read minds or pull facts

from thin air. All he could do was rely on the reports of his subordinates, his own observations, and his uncanny instinct for detecting danger. Although he was vaguely aware of other entrances into the Dungeon, he could not have fathomed the Evils had a way to safely extract a large horde of dangerous monsters, especially at a time when the existence of Knossos was not publicly known.

Whatever secret made this feat possible, Valletta had managed to keep it hidden all this time. Finn grimaced...and just then, the impossibly loud sound of clashing blades shook the skies above Orario.

“Oh no... It can’t be!”

Everyone heard it, adventurers and cultists alike. And so did Valletta.

“Hee-hee-hee!” She chuckled. “Sounds like the other fight is already over!”

She looked toward the city’s center—toward Babel and the thick wall of ice surrounding it.

There, in Central Park, a duel had just reached its conclusion. The boaz man fell to one knee, his armor and flesh both ruined.

“Grh...!”

“You lasted longer than I expected,” said his opponent, the conqueror. In contrast to Ottar, his plate armor was unscathed. Zald shouldered his greatsword and peered down at the broken man.



“Grh... Hrh...!”

The roaring flames on the Dungeon’s eighteenth floor virtually drowned out the groans of someone trying to stand. To the north, Aiz fought madly against Delphyne, while here, the girls of *Astrea Familia* were lying on the ground.

“...Hey... Any of you still alive...?” Lyra croaked. It was Neze who answered her, one foot in the grave.

“I am...” she said. “But I don’t have a clue why. How are we not dead after

that?"

Alfia's magic had hit them head-on. That level of power should have far outstripped the meager defense granted by Asfi's accessories.

"It was Riveria's magic...!" exclaimed Lyu. "Without it, we would have been obliterated!"

She looked down at her palm, where the green glow of Riveria's magical protection had completely vanished. It had saved *Astrea Familia* from destruction but faded in the process.

"I see you are all still in one piece," said Alfia. "Has my magic waned that much? ...No, it is that high elf who deserves the credit. She has grown strong."

"Grh...!"

Lyu screwed up her face in disgust as Alfia drew closer without a sound.

"However," the witch said. "That protection will not avail you a second time."

But just as she prepared to finish them off, the dragon roared, and Alfia calmly glanced in its direction. What piqued her curiosity most was Aiz.

"So their battle continues," she said. "That little girl fares well against a god-slayer who calls the Dungeon home."

Her form, clad in wind, moved like a storm.

"This may only be a prelude, but it is worthwhile nonetheless."

The beast belched fire, burning away the wind's shackles. The earth convulsed beneath its feet, and everything it touched turned to ash and dust. Watching it was like witnessing the end of the world.

Lyu trembled. There was no room for doubt after seeing it with her own eyes. The dark god's prediction—the destruction of Babel and the manifestation of the underworld—was all too real. It made her heart pound and turned her blood to ice.

Kneeling on the ground, unable to lift a finger, she instead peered up at Alfia.

"Do you feel nothing?" she asked her.

"About what?"

“All this. Do you see it and feel nothing?!”

Fire flickered against the witch’s face, but she showed no emotion whatsoever, as if regarding nothing more or less than the ironclad rules of nature at work.

To Lyu, Alfia’s callous disregard was more than she could bear...or comprehend.

“Your allies are slaughtering people! They revel in death and destruction! They summoned that...that *thing*...to destroy hope! Doesn’t that make you *feel* something?!”

“The noise irritates me,” the witch answered, “but that is all.”

Lyu could scarcely believe the emptiness in her voice. “Wh-wha—?” she stammered. But Alfia went on.

“A slayer of gods. The end of justice,” she said. “There is no doubt this is the incarnation of evil. But if it can erase my disappointment, then so be it.”

Alfia looked down at her palm.

“For my disappointment is the one thing I truly cannot bear.”

In the distance, the wyrm roared. The wind bellowed. But Lyu didn’t hear any of it. The battle faded to silence. What Lyu wanted to hear, more than anything else, was the witch’s answer.

“...What... What is your disappointment...?” she asked. “What could be so disappointing to make the city’s greatest protectors side with evil?!”

At first, Alfia held her silence. Before long, all of *Astrea Familia*—Alize, Lyra, and everyone else—were waiting for her answer. Then at last, and perhaps on a whim, she spoke.

“Very well,” she said. “Since you have made it this far, I shall tell you.”

She peered upward through the cavernous stone roof to the battlefield of her fellow conqueror and the apocalyptic skies that lay above it.

“Tell you the tale...of our disappointment.”

“Nine hundred and forty-seven,” said Zald, counting the strikes that had been dealt. “More than I expected, but not enough.”

His weighty voice echoed throughout Central Park.

“Mewling brat. Draped in the finest adornments this city can offer, and still you are no match for me.”

“Grh...!”

Ottar was beaten black-and-blue. Cracks ran through every plate of his armor, including the golden pauldron atop his shoulder. All his weapons had been destroyed, leaving only a single greatsword.

His armor aside, the man had taken heavy punishment, too. The conqueror’s sword had left deep gashes in his rocklike skin, and even Ottar’s ace in the hole —his transformation ability—had not been able to save him.

He looked up into Zald’s eyes. They were weighty and discouraged.

“Pathetic,” said the conqueror. “Truly pathetic. If you are the greatest defense this city can muster, then there is no other choice.”

Strangely, miraculously, as though tuned in to his fellow conqueror far beneath the earth, Zald raised his eyes to the sky as well. To the ash-gray clouds that blocked out hope and smothered the city. Far off to the north, and what lay beyond.

“Orario needs to be destroyed. There is no avoiding that.”

Ottar struggled to his feet, but at those words, he froze.

“What...do you mean? No avoiding it? What are you talking about?!”

“I am saying there is no other way,” answered Zald. “We must tear down the Dungeon’s gate, release the monsters within, and cull humanity’s numbers. I had sorely hoped it would not come to this.”

“Our disappointment,” said Alfia, “is weakness. Powerlessness. A feeling you must all know well.”

“Weakness? Powerlessness? Whose weakness?!” asked Alize.

The witch's ashen hair was framed against the sparks. "Orario's," she said. "This whole world's. And above all, our own."

For a moment, a trace of pity almost seemed to cross the witch's face.

"What're you talkin' about?!" groaned Lyra, barely able to stand. "Explain it like we're a bunch of babies!"

"Explain our weakness?" Alfia replied. "Is it not painfully obvious? We slayed the Behemoth. We felled Leviathan. But against the Black Dragon, we were powerless."

Lyu gasped. "The Three Great Quests!"

Alfia did not deny it. "So mighty were we that even the gods recognized our strength," she said. "Yet we were nothing compared to that foul beast. It was a massacre—I have never witnessed one like it, before or since."

"Grh...!"

"The Black Dragon tore us to shreds and devoured us. Those of us who lived recall only the rivers of blood merging into a single crimson sea."

It was the battle that ended *Zeus Familia* and *Hera Familia*. Just hearing of it was enough to render the girls of *Astrea Familia* speechless. Even though a survivor was recounting it firsthand, it didn't feel real. This witch had brushed off the girls' attacks like it was nothing, and now she spoke of the powerlessness she felt before the dragon's might.

"In the end," she said, "we fled. Those of us who did not die."

For the first time, Alfia looked angry. Angry at herself and the other so-called heroes who deserted their task.

"It was then that I realized something," she said. "These methods can never succeed."

"...What do you mean?"

Alize was only barely able to speak, but Alfia ignored her. Her words burned with a righteous, indignant tone.

"Adventurers. You cannot handle true despair. Your hope is a lie—to

yourselves, and to the world. We cannot escape the end! Not while we cling to our gods!"

"The world needs heroes," said Zald. "But how are heroes born, and how do they grow?"

"What are you...?" asked Ottar, stunned.

"Is it even possible while the gods still walk this earth?"

The conqueror posed his questions. But it wasn't long before he also offered what he believed to be the answers.

"It was not our intention," he said, "but we proved that it is not possible. We proved that our current heroes are doomed to failure."

Beneath his helmet, the warrior narrowed his eyes. His lips curled in rage as he declared the source of his resolve.

"No hero of the Age of Gods can slay that beast! Thus, we are left with only one choice!"

"We must go back! Back to the Age of Heroes spoken of in myth and legend!"

Ottar's eyes widened in terror.

"You...you can't mean...!"

"Yes! We must reverse the wheel of time! Return to an age when true legends walked the earth!!"

Zald raised and clenched his fist. His own words elevated him past his grief, toward a cruel and barbaric solution.

"When monsters roamed free and fear ruled the hearts of men! When humanity stood on the brink and still chose to fight!"

The age Zald spoke of was from at least a thousand years ago. Before Orario,

before adventurers. Before even the gods came down to wander the mortal realm. When all races lived in darkness, and natural selection separated the weak from the strong.

“They chose to be the predator! They refused to be the prey! They tore through despair and went beyond what others deemed possible!”

Several brave men and women stood up to change all that. Men and women still spoken of in legends to this day.

“They were fierce! They were brave! They earned their place in history! And no one alive today can claim to be their equal!”

The great blaze in the Sanctuary. Exterminating the bullmen in the capital. Guarding the continent with spear and hunting hound. Recapturing the Lonza Mountains. Uniting the animal tribes. The revival of Orland. Leaving hoofprints throughout history. And the ultimate hero: the man who plucked out one of the great wyrm’s eyes.

These were all feats that people of today could never dream to match. Even now, they were considered the crowning achievements of mortal beings everywhere.

And so, after they confirmed what they believed to be the hard limits of the Age of Gods, Zald and Alfia came up with a solution. When Ottar realized what it was, his voice trembled.

“You wish to take us back to ancient times?!” he demanded. “And to do that, you would release monsters from the Dungeon? Destroy the peace our heroes strove to uphold?!”

“I would,” said Zald without hesitation. “The world has grown soft. Only in chaos can a true hero be born. It is the only way!” he roared, as if the fires of his own failures were burning him up inside. “This is the only path forward! If we do not change course, the apocalypse will come for us all!”

This was Zald’s wail of despair. This was what had driven the old heroes to the dark side.

“We must pay the price of millions to produce the one! The one hero capable of overcoming the Black Dragon!”

“A thousand years,” said Alfia as she let her thoughts drift to the past. “A thousand years since the gods came to earth and gave mortals their blessings. A thousand years to devise a course of action against the ancient beast, and what do we have to show for it?”

Her words were a confession. Hollow guilt wrapped in a cloak of silence. All the girls of *Astrea Familia* bore witness.

“Everything our familias wrought... Everything our gods wrought... It was all for nothing!”

Lyu, Alize, and Lyra had no words. They had never seen the witch show such emotion before.

“Never had there been a man of such majesty as him! Never had there been a woman so fearsome and noble as her! Yet I watched their blood spill! Their limbs fly! I listened to their death cries! All of it, gone in an instant, leaving me with nothing but despair at this world and everyone in it! Even ourselves!”

By this point, there was no stopping her. The words spilled forth uncontrollably, fiery with hate, and Alfia spat them at the ground as though she could burn away all the sins of her past.

After a while, she regained her composure and lifted her gaze.

“But all is not lost,” she said, calm again. “A heroic tale can still be written.”

Mired in despair, the witch spoke of the same idea her fellow conqueror had described.

“In ancient times, there were no Falna. Though the spirits aided them, humankind repelled the monster threat with nothing but their own skills. Is that hard to believe?”

It was the truth. The people of old laid the foundation for the modern day, including the city of Orario itself.

“Starting with the first hero, a line of great men and women performed impossible feats...culminating in the robbing of the Black Dragon’s eye and the removal of monsters from the surface world.”

Their tales were still told today. An unbroken tapestry of heroes stretching all the way back to antiquity. They had even managed to drive off the very beast responsible for Zeus and Hera's downfall.

"Those heroes did what we could not. That alone speaks volumes."

When Alfia finished her tale, the girls of *Astrea Familia* just stared at her in shock. None of them could find it in themselves to say a word. The roar of flames continued in the distance, and in the end it was Lyu who spoke up.

"Then what you're saying..." she said through trembling lips. "Your despair... Your goal... It's...!"

"No hero born of gods will ever suffice," Alfia answered. "We must cast them off and raise a true warrior. We must return to the Age of Heroes."

"Wh-what...?!" stammered Neze. "Then the reason you're trying to destroy Orario..."

"It is to save the world."

This was the reason Alfia had returned. This was why she conspired with evil to bring death and destruction. This was why she and Zald joined Erebus, obeyed his commands, and sullied their own hands. They had made up their minds. They had decided that the fate of the world outweighed everything else. For the mortal realm to truly thrive...Orario needed to fall.

The girls of *Astrea Familia* were stunned. None of them could find the right words. In the end, it was Lyra who spoke.

"So you guys are after peace as well! Why not team up? We both want the same thing, don't we?!"

"We could not be more opposed, prum. You have not seen what we have seen, nor felt the despair that we have felt. The threat of that beast is far greater than any of you can possibly imagine."

Alfia remained resolute. Fear of the Black Dragon dominated her mind.

"Our views are hopelessly incompatible," she concluded. "For Zald and me, there is no other way."

"Grr...! You can't—!!"

Lyu began to argue back, but then it happened. The wind howled, and the air shook.

"Wh-what was that?!" cried Neze.

"Look over there!" yelled Iska, pointing to the center of the floor. There, some mysterious force caused the winds to swirl at an incredible pace.

"A tornado?! Here in the Dungeon?!" cried Lyra, her voice barely audible over the noise. "What monster's doin' that?!"

The whirling winds stretched all the way to the cavern roof, taller still than Delphyne itself. All of *Astrea Familia* turned and stared. They had never seen anything like it in their lives.

"None of them..." said Alize at last. "That's no monster!"



I hate you.

I hate you, I hate you, I hate you!

Why are you here? Just to kill people? Just to destroy things? Just to make us sad?

Can't you see you're making us cry? Can't you see the world would be better off without you?

Die. Go away.

Or else...I'll kill you! I'll kill you all!!

That was her cry. A cry of vengeance. Of grief turned to anger, and then hate. It was the darkness in her heart made manifest.



“*Tempest!*”

A cry.

“*Tempest!!*”

A howl.

“*Nizelle!!*”

A violent rampage.

There was a flash of light and a deafening roar as the wind turned black as night.

“No...it can’t be!!” growled Gareth.

“It’s Aiz!” said Riveria. “She’s combining her magic with her skill!”

The huge tornado that took up the entire space contracted down in an instant, shrouding the young Aiz in a fearsome wind. The next moment, she threw herself at Delphyne.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaagh!!”

Clad in jet-black wind, her weapon sliced the great wyrm’s flesh, spilling blood as hot as boiling magma. The girl’s armor of storms kept her safe, however, and each slash produced six sharp blades of devastating wind that tore at the beast’s hide.

“Rooooooooooooagh!!”

Delphyne howled in agony, experiencing true pain for the first time. All the while, the black wind continued eating away at the dragon’s flesh so quickly that its regeneration could not keep up.

“She’s...she’s winning!” cried Riveria. “But...!”

As if to confirm her fears, at that moment a magnificent crack rang out, and a split appeared down the length of Aiz’s sword.

“Desperate got damaged?!” bellowed Gareth in disbelief. “That beast’s hide is stronger than a Durandal weapon?”

The pair from *Loki Familia* knew all about the darkness that lurked in the

Sword Princess's heart, but this was their first time seeing it manifest. Riveria's eyes trembled in fear.

"Stop it... Stop it! You can't keep this up! You'll die!" she screamed. But Aiz did not answer her. Her eyes were dark and hollow, and she could not be stopped.

As if feeding on her hatred, the black wind grew in volume and intensity.

"Aiz!!"



Up until a few moments ago, it had been fire and infernos that ruled the eighteenth floor. Now, in the blink of an eye, the ominous black wind replaced it all. All of *Astrea Familia* could only watch in terror.

"The Sword Princess..." muttered Lyu. "She's fighting that thing by herself!"

"She's just one human!" yelled Lyra. "How the hell's she doin' that?!"

Meanwhile, Alfia looked on in admiration.

"Exceptional," she said. "The black wind. Unparalleled power. No wonder Hera wanted it."

Despite her distance from the raging battle, the winds emanating off it extinguished her voice. They scattered the flames and sundered the earth. Alfia needed to shout for the girls to even hear her.

"See that?" she cried. "That is the power of loss! Of fear and despair! That is the pinnacle of mortal strength, which can only be achieved by those who walk the darkest path!"

"Hrh...?!"

"Those are the heights our ancestors attained! That is the peak they gazed upon! Like her, we must know sacrifice! Like her, the many must die so that the chosen few can ascend higher! Only then will we find the strength to slay the Black Dragon!"

This was the reasoning behind the conquerors' choice. Aiz was living proof that their quest would bear fruit, and that a return to the Age of Heroes was the

only way.

“No! That’s not right!” yelled Alize.

“Is it not? Then show me.”

Alfia turned and addressed the girls. Unlike her dark master, debates and philosophy did not interest her. What she wanted was very simple.

“Show me a greater power. Show me proof I cannot deny.”

“““!!””

The black wind was born of rage and despair. It was Alfia’s argument made manifest. To dissuade her, the girls needed to surpass it.

“Justice! Determination! Willpower! If these are so important to you, then show me why!”

The woman who had been defeated by the Black Dragon stood firm, defying the girls to answer.



Elsewhere, Erebus listened to the witch’s cry.

“Hmm. I like the sound of that. That’s a scream only a woman who’s known despair can make.”

A grin formed on his lips.

“Now, Leon. And the rest of you adventurers. Can your justice measure up to that?”

The god wore Eren’s smile. He spoke aloud, though the storm hopelessly obliterated his words.

“Let’s pick up where we last left off,” he said. “With absolute evil awaiting justice’s answer.”

He tore his eyes away from Alfia and the girls to look at the other battlefield, cloaked in sparks and flames, where a single warrior fought a faceless man.

“That woman’s insane!” Kaguya yelled after she heard Alfia’s declaration.

“She wants to turn back time and plunge us into the Age of Heroes?!”

But the expression of her opponent, Vito, was calm.

“Is that so wrong?” he asked. “I, too, was surprised at first, but her reasoning is sound, no?”

“Sound?! She wants to bring death and destruction to us all! How could that ever be right?”

“Because her desire is grounded in reality. It’s based on fact.”

“!”

Kaguya inhaled sharply. Vito opened one eye a sliver and continued.

“Facts of which you know nothing, may I remind you? To you, their actions may seem evil, but Glutton and Silence have no doubts their cause is just.”

“Wha—?!”

“They fight to save the world; to protect it. Is that not the same cause you uphold, even though your methods may differ?”

“Grh...! That’s not...”

Kaguya could insult their plan. She could call it foolish and inefficient. But the one thing she couldn’t do was deny the reality that Zald and Alfia knew. The conquerors believed the only path to victory was a path of torment and suffering. Even if Kaguya felt otherwise, she could not dispute the validity of that choice.

“Don’t you people say it all the time? Good and evil are just two sides of the same coin. We all possess our own facts. Our own truths. Each of which persuades the coin to fall one way or the other.”

As Kaguya stood speechless, Vito’s grin widened more and more.

“Let me ask you a question, fair maiden. How do I seem in those eyes of yours? ...Oh, don’t give me such a horrid look. I’m all ears.”

“You’re a bloodthirsty, blood-crazed maniac. All you know how to do is murder.”

“I see. You certainly don’t hold back, do you? However, while my murderous

habit may be a fact, it is not my truth."

Beneath Kaguya's scornful eye, Vito offered a shrug. Then he raised his hand and ran a finger along his eyelid.

"To my eyes, young lady. You are nothing but a loathsome gray."

"...What?"

Vito fixed his scarlet eye on Kaguya. The red was the red of fresh, still-slick blood, while the light seemed fake, like an empty window.

"I was born with a peculiar defect," he explained. "Everything I see is colored the same ashy gray."

"...!"

"Similarly, people's voices sound like a rasp to my ears. The finest food and drink taste like foul, rotten waste. Never once have I smelled a scent I would call fragrant."

Vito was not only colorblind—each of his senses was hopelessly impaired, save touch. He was forced to live and experience a different world from everyone else.

"Ah, but if only that were the end of it," he went on, ignorant to Kaguya's surprise. "You see, one day, I discovered something."

Vito still wore the same scornful smile. Only now, his disdain seemed turned upon himself.

"In my canvas of eternal ash, only one color shone true: the vivid red of other people's blood."

"!!"

That was Vito's past. His truth.

To the young Vito, the world was a cold and barren place. His parents spoke of beauty that did not exist to him. His fellow boys wore smiles, but he didn't understand why. Their happiness was lies. Their love for the world was fake. It had to be, because all he knew was gray.

It was all bland. Tasteless, scentless. Every noise sounded like the wailing of a

chained beast.

It was ironic, because Vito's life was not otherwise a troubled one. The folk of his village were merry and kind, and appreciated the world they lived in. Meanwhile, the mind of that young boy grew more twisted by the day.

The young Vito, however, was shrewd, and canny enough to conceal his defect. He lived a false life among his peers, pretending that he was one of them. An act that only deepened his sorrow.

"The world is filled with light," they would say. To Vito, those words were nonsense. But fearing ostracization, he played along. He lived as though he believed it, while inwardly cursing his kinsmen's lies.

The smile on his face and the thoughts in his mind were ever at odds, grinding against each other like sandpaper, whittling down the young boy's sanity until one day, he'd had enough.

He turned his fists on a girl of his village—a sweet young thing who greatly admired him.

In his rage, he spilled her blood—a sight the peace of his village had so far denied him.

For the first time, Vito beheld the nectar of the gods. A fresh wine that surpassed all others in its sweetness.

"Never shall I forget that day! Oh, how I wished to see it once more!" howled Vito, giddy with reminiscence, before his voice strained in grief. "Alas, no matter how much of my own blood I shed, that vibrant hue would not reveal itself."

He locked eyes with Kaguya.

"For as twisted luck would have it," he said, "only the blood of *others* suited my needs."

The Far Eastern girl could not believe what she was hearing.

"You see, I tried everything," Vito went on. "Yet without fear, without grief, without pain and despair—without any of these negative emotions, the blood looked just like everything else."

“What...?!”

Kaguya’s eyes went wide. She searched his expression for some trace—anything—that would expose his tale as a twisted joke, but she failed. The look in the man’s eyes told her everything he said was the truth.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha! And once I realized that, I couldn’t help myself! What if I cut someone, I thought? What if I beat them with a stone? What if I kill them?!”

Heinous acts beyond description.

“From that point on, my world had color! Life returned to my withered heart, and I gave myself over to the demands of my broken mind!”

Passion gripped his voice.

“When people screamed, I heard it! When people bled, I saw it! When people burned, I smelled it! Oh, and the smell! It was like nothing else!”

Passion, and a disgust for the flaws that made him who he was.

“Heh-heh-heh-heh-heh! How could the world be this way? How could I be cursed only to gain humanity through inhumane acts?!”

“!!”

“What is this, if not a paradox of creation? What is this, if not some divine comedy of errors? Should I be expected to kill myself and erase the gods’ mistake?”

Vito paused, as if lending the conundrum ample thought. But soon, any semblance of sorrow was washed away and replaced with anger.

“No,” he said. “That cannot be the way! The people of this world don’t know their privilege! They go ignorant about their lives, experiencing pleasure, while I have to kill for it! Is that not an injustice that ought to be addressed?! If I am a defect this world produced, then is this world not at fault for producing me?!”

The man weaved his indignant tirade, arriving at last at his noble conclusion. He threw his arms wide and bared it for the world to see.

“There is only one way to strike back at this imperfect universe,” he said. “And that is to destroy the world of mortal men! The great error must be

corrected! *That* is my purpose!"

Kaguya shot the man a dirty glare.

"...And that is why you stand with evil?" she asked.

"Yes. Because to proclaim my truth, I must first disprove what you girls call *justice*. Then, in order to stop this world creating any more poor victims like me, it must be remade."

The winds of war carried the words of the dark follower's quest to his master's ears. Sitting atop his precipice, Erebus listened in silence. Vito turned and shot him a smile both loving and scornful.

"Those detestable gods shall see their creation destroyed, and I can only hope a new and perfect world will be born in its place."

But Kaguya was not convinced.

"So what? You expect me to pity you?" she spat.

"Not at all," said Vito dismissively. "I simply wanted you to understand the difference between facts and truth."

He flicked his wrist, and his bloodstained knife appeared once more in palm of his right hand.

"Who knows, maybe some small part of you will agree with me...and make you stand still while I cut you down!"

He flew toward her without warning. Kaguya blocked his brutal blade with the steel of her own sword.

"You cannot become good just by willing it! You cannot be a hero through intent alone!"

"Grh...?!"

"I am living proof! I am cursed to be reviled! That is why I must kill you!"

This was his truth. His ash and his defect. Anger and ironclad faith drove his blade. His strikes rained down on Kaguya without mercy, forcing her to give all she had just to block them. Her clothes, her skin, all grew ragged with cuts.

"This is my evil!" he roared. "This is my justice!!"



“Good or evil? Right or wrong?”

Beneath the gray skies, Zald spoke.

“It matters not how future generations will remember us. All that matters is the oath I swore to uphold.”

He stared at the boaz man before him, beaten to the knee, wearing a look of pain and frustration, and carried on regardless.

“That alone I can never go back on. I must complete my duty.”

“Grh...!”

“And so I must devour all that stands in my way.”

A quiver began in Ottar’s hands and worked its way up his arms. Zald couldn’t tell if it was pain, or anger. Perhaps it was fear of what he knew was coming. Either way, the conqueror showed no interest in a man who could no longer stand.

“We’ve spoken for far too long,” he said at last. “I will not wait for the witch. I shall oversee Orario’s demise personally.”

His long, crimson cloak fluttered as he turned and strode over to the white walls of Babel.

“With this sword...Babel will fall.”

However, just as he passed the fallen Ottar...

“...Wait!”

He heard the flagstones crack, beneath the weight of a foot that was not his own.

“...You stand?”

Zald turned to see a shell of a man, his knees crying out in agony. Yet more than any vengeful spirit or enraged animal, Ottar looked to him like a newborn fawn.

His legs quivered. His entire body dripped with blood. His jaw hung open, his breath ragged and hoarse.

Zald turned and took in the grim and pathetic sight.

“What do you expect to do now, stubbornly clinging to life?” he asked. “Do you really think you can stop me like—”

But Zald never finished his sentence. There was a flash of steel.

“!”

A silver streak traversed his sight from right to left. Reflexively, Zald pulled his head back, but not fast enough. The blow caught his plate helm, stripping it from his head and flinging it high into the air.

“My helmet...!”

Humiliation further twisted Zald’s bare, scarred face. Was it a sneak attack? No. From the moment Zald laid eyes on his foe, such a thing was impossible. This was a swing so mighty even the ever-vigilant conqueror could not move out of the way in time. Its source was none other than the very last sword that Ottar possessed.

The boar man huffed in exhaustion, but leveled a fiery gaze at Zald’s exposed face. Time seemed to stop, and it only restarted after the helmet hit the ground with a loud *clang*.

“What...was that?” said Zald. “On second thought, you need not answer... I can smell it. I know what that is.”

“Grh...?!”

“It’s anger. You are more furious than any man I have ever seen.”

The source of Ottar’s trembling was obvious to him now. It was not fear or pain, but unbridled rage.

Ottar burned with flames of indignation. Like an engine, they drove him to stand and granted him unrivaled strength.

“Do my words touch a nerve?” Zald asked. “Or do my actions incur your righteous fury?”

Zald remained unblinking in the face of Ottar's fearsome scowl. He peered into the boar man's rust-colored eyes and scoffed.

"It matters not what you think," he said. "My path remains unchanged. To save this world...we must destroy it."

"Enough."

Ottar's single word cut through the man's farce.

"What did you say...?"

"I said enough. Your excuses mean nothing to me."

"My excuses? What do you mean?"

"I mean, I couldn't care less about your self-righteous words!"

Ottar listened to the cries of his own aching muscles, the curses of his own crumbling body. They spoke in Zald's voice on the night of Ottar's defeat. *You are weak. Pathetic.*

Ottar allowed those words to fuel his anger, and with trembling lips, he spoke.

"There is only one thing I wish to ask you, Zald, and it is this."

His line of sight drifted down to the plate mail that covered the rest of Zald's body.

"...How far has the sickness spread beneath that armor of yours?"

"!!"

For the first time, Zald showed pure shock, just like the witch when her trickery was revealed.

"When I fought you, I felt nothing of this duty you claim," said Ottar. "All I felt was a burning desire!"

Ottar was not a man of learning. He didn't have the knack for cunning like

Finn did. All the boaz man knew was combat. Only in the heat of battle could he find enlightenment.

“That night when you bested me... I was afraid of you...!”

He cast his thoughts back to the events of six days prior. To the night of the Great Conflict, when he tasted complete and utter defeat at Zald’s hands.

Ottar had been forced to confront the embodiment of his limitations, a wall he could never cross. It was only now he realized how fearful he had been of it.

“That was why I didn’t see it back then. But I do now!”

Thinking back to how he had been that night, eyes clouded by despair, Ottar could only curse how low he had allowed himself to fall.

“You want to be a mountain for us to scale! That is all that drives you! You wish to propel us forward, just as your heroes did eight years ago! Just as Maxim did!!”

His roar rang throughout Central Park. It carried beyond the wall of ice and the mages’ barriers. To many adventurers, it was just a meaningless string of words. But a single goddess at the peak of Babel recognized their significance and narrowed her silver eyes.

Zald, on the other hand, only laughed.

“...Heh.”

He stood before Ottar like the devil himself, defiant and grinning.

“That’s a fanciful theory you’ve concocted, mewling brat. I’m not sure that I follow it, myself.”

“Grh...!”

“But let’s suppose for one moment you speak the truth. Why would that provoke you?”

“Because you have put me to shame!”

Ottar’s answer was simple, and full of raging fire that roasted his flesh from within.

“You’ve made a fool of me, each time I misjudged my strength! You’ve taught

me only what it's like to suffer in defeat and wallow in despair!"

These were Warlord's bitter memories. This was his truth. Time after time, he fought for the glory of his goddess, only to be humbled at the hands of Zeus and Hera. Though today he was known as the city's mightiest warrior, Ottar's road had been a tumultuous one, marked not by triumph but by defeat.

"And even now, I am weak! Even now, I allow the two of you to block my path!"

Ottar never directed his hate at others. Not his goddess, whom he loved and respected like no other. Not Zeus nor Hera, who constantly stood in his way. Not even Zald and Alfia, who laid waste to the city he called home.

Ottar's hate always circled right back to himself. When adversity, injustice, or calamity got the better of him, he always blamed his own weakness first.

"I am weak," he roared. "I am pathetic! That is what I curse, not your disappointment!"

Zald grinned.

"And so?"

"Nothing you say can change my mind! There is only one thing I must do!"

"And that is?"

"I must defeat you!!"

"Just try, if you think you can, mewling brat!!"

As Ottar made his passionate declaration, wildness filled Zald's eyes.

"You have never beaten me, child! What makes you think this time will be any different?!"

His temper flared, like a mirror reflecting Ottar's own rage.

“You’re a loser! You always have been, and you always will be!! I’ll put you right back where you belong—in the mud!”

“Then I will turn that mud into bricks, and use those bricks to build my kingdom!”

Ottar was not afraid. His strength came from both his oath to his goddess and his own determination. This was his truth. His mud and his bricks. Humility and failure were his bread and water, sustaining him on the way to the mountain’s peak.

Zald raised his slab of steel and swung it, greatly amused by Ottar’s fire.

“If that’s your game, then prove it to me! Let me hear you roar! Show me that in the heart of every loser, there’s a winner yearning to be free!”

These were the words of his god, repurposed to provoke Ottar’s ire. To rekindle his spirit. To revitalize his bones and sinew.

His oozing blood became a coat of red-hot armor. His eyes took on the wildness of a fierce beast, and the boar growled.

“Roooaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!!”



The melody of blades. The song of war. It could be heard all across the city. It was the anthem of a man who refused to stay down, no matter how many times he was beaten.

It rattled eardrums and shook the air. Atop Guild HQ, Raul couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

“The noise coming from Central Park...it’s started up again!” he cried, the blood returning to his face.

“Ottar still stands...” agreed Finn. “The battle’s not over yet!”

Clenching a fist as if he could physically secure his victory, the prum hero handed down his orders to a *Loki Familia* aide standing nearby.

“Raise the flag!” he yelled. “Rally the strongholds! Let this cry fuel the flames

of war!"

The subordinate ran to the flag of the trickster god, raising it high and waving it for all to see. Before long, the other strongholds responded in kind, flying their colors from the parapets.

Over at the home of *Ganesha Familia*, their patron god saw the signal and bellowed with pride.

"It's Warlord! He has not fallen!"

Shakti commandeered this reversal of fortune to rally her struggling allies.

"Stand up! Listen to that chime! Orario will not fall while that bell tolls! Add your voices to the chorus!"

"Raaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!!"

The adventurers' cries shook the earth, transmitting their willpower across the city. Loki, Freya, Ganesha—all of Orario's top factions took to the frontlines to howl in the face of adversity.

These were the cries of the weak—of those who strove for ever-greater heights. Wild beasts yearning for their time in the sun. Even those who could not fight could sing, could aid, could bolster, could heal. For justice dwelled within each and every one of them—a powerful light to burn the darkness away.

With the song of war to lead them, they drew their swords, raised their shields, and gripped their staffs.

"Graaaaaahhh!"

"Stop it, Bete, you'll die!!"

"Like hell I will!! You think I got any business dyin' out here?!"

Ignoring Selenia's cries, the gray wolf allowed the beat of the boar man's war drums to flow through him, driving him on while the weak kneeled, subdued, behind him. Seeing him fight so hard in the flames of self-destruction irritated a certain follower of Ishtar standing nearby.

"Samira! Izaila! Don't let that beastman's group outdo us!!"

“Ge-ge-ge-ge-geh! Stop right there, uglies!”

“Whoa! It’s the toad!”

The sound of Aisha’s sword, Phryne’s charge, and Samira’s wild blows all combined into the song of the Berbera, laying waste to any monsters that stood in their way.

Meanwhile, a horde of magic swordfighters attacked a lone group in unison.

“Four o’clock! Attack incoming!”

“Filvis! Watch our backs!”

“*Dio Grail!*”

The proud elf’s chant produced a barrier to protect her friends. As the fires beat against it, the barrier creaked and groaned, but held firm.

“Ersuisu! Hurry! Run, run, run!!”

“Shut up! I’m the one who has to carry you! Just chant already!”

“*In the name of all that is holy—I heal you! Dia Frater!!*”

With Nahza handling all her other functions, Amid sat atop the animal girl’s shoulders, casting her spells.

“Captain Tsubaki! Don’t do it! Those spirit warriors’ll grind you into paste!”

“If *Freya Familia* falls, we all fall! So fight! Kill! Any man or woman who holds back is an embarrassment to their craft!”

Tsubaki ignored her underling’s cries, flying into battle with a sword in each hand and her whole body red with blood.

“Isn’t that right, Mia?!”

The dwarven proprietress swung her shovel, taking out not just a deep level monster, but also two spirit warriors in a single blow.

“You really need to ask? It don’t matter whether you’re an adventurer or a blacksmith, all that counts is you’re the last one standing!! So give him a good kick in the rear, boar boy!!” she yelled toward Central Park.

Spirits were burning. The city was on fire. The cries of adventurers, the verses

of mages and healers, the hammer-song of blacksmiths—they all combined into a flaming inferno capable of banishing the darkness from every corner. All directed their voices toward the center of the city, where two great men warred. The people grasped at victory, just as that boar did.

“Look, Ouranos... This is the city of heroes.”

Fels paused amid his tireless errands and looked out over the city. Listened to its wild yet noble voice. And, lacking eyes with which to cry, chose to add his own voice to the cacophony.

“So will it ever be, even now that Zeus and Hera are gone!”

The city believed in heroes. It believed in the lights that lay beyond ash-gray skies. Its people combined their strengths, their skills, their wisdom, and their magic, to ensure that good triumphed over evil.

Asfi, on the verge of exhaustion, heard the cries of the city, and a flame lit anew in her heart.

“Falgar! Move our front lines forward!!”

She leaped at the monsters attacking her allies, thrust her dagger, and bathed in their ash. Wiping it, as well as her own blood, with her arm, she did what needed to be done.

“We can’t waste this flame Warlord has lit! When it goes out, our city falls!”

“Grh... Understood! Move out!!”

Willing his battered body to move once more, Falgar did what needed to be done.

Over in the casino area, the city’s song breathed new life into the war zone. Adventurers were a wild breed; people who spent all their time in an underground labyrinth infested with hideous creatures. It hardly came as a surprise that they had determination and drive. Nobody knew more about surpassing one’s limits than they.

To the Evils, however, this mysterious resurgence was a terrifying mystery. The adventurers’ pluck threw their commanders for a loop.

“Curse you, adventurers!”

“Don’t they ever run out of strength?!”

After the deep-level monsters had begun to turn the tide of battle, now it seemed as though the adventurers stood a chance again.

The fight for the Labyrinth City was not yet over.

The song of battle went on for many more verses yet.

“What’s Zald *doing* in there?” snarled Valletta, watching the adventurer’s flags go up across the five strongholds. “Why does it take so long to kill one boar?! ’Cause of him, Orario’s gettin’ ideas again!”

It could not be said that Arachnia underestimated her foe. Orario had earned its name as the center of the world, and Valletta knew that better than anyone. She knew she had to curb this spike in enemy morale before it was too late, and so she turned to her subordinate and gave her next orders.

“Release all the monsters we got,” she spat. “Every last one of ’em!”

“A-all of them? But, ma’am, there aren’t enough tamers to go around! If we do that, the monsters will attack people on our side, too!”

The Evils squad captain spoke reason. There were barely enough tamers to keep the monster population in check as it was, and that was with every man and woman in active duty. But Valletta answered his concerns with only a cruel smile.

“We don’t need tamers! Let ’em die for all I care! If a monster gets ’em, that means they were too weak to help us in the first place!”

“Grh...! U-understood, ma’am!”

His face pale, the cultist hurried to carry out her request. He still had his misgivings, but wasn’t willing to die for them.

Valletta placed little stock in such niceties as “trust” and “comradery.” She ruled with an iron fist, and if that earned her the ire of those under her command, then so be it. In return, the strict hierarchy worked wonders for the speed and efficiency of her leadership.

To her, the men and women in her care were nothing more than pawns, to be used and abused as she saw fit.

“Run in front of the monsters and lead ‘em to Central Park!”

There was only one way to stop Orario from reigniting its fighting spirit, and that lay at the center of the city—Ottar and Zald’s battle, the source of the ceaseless wails that the city took for hope.

Valletta lifted her twisted sword. Her fur-lined coat fell around her legs as she aimed its tip at the white-walled tower.

“I ain’t waitin’ for Zald any longer! We’ll trash that barrier and bring down Babel, then flatten that boar bastard as well!”

“M-more monsters spotted!! They’re heading...straight for Central Park!!”

That message was like a bomb dropping on the rooftop of Guild HQ.

“They’ve reached the barrier! They’re flooding in from all parts of the city, sir!”

Raul paled and stared at the hemispherical barrier in the center of town, which buzzed and sparked beneath the weight of the monsters’ claws. The horde filled the streets, converging on the barrier while preying on any adventurers who stood in their way.

“Grr... Valletta...!!”

Finn ground his teeth and cursed. He had already caught on to his opponent’s goal—to let loose every last monster they had and concentrate their forces in Central Park.

“Master Allen! The monsters are nearing Master Ottar and Lady Freya!”

“Grh...!! You guys stay here; I’m headin’ over there!”

“M-Master Allen?!”

Allen was reinforcing the front lines alongside Tsubaki and Mia, but the moment he heard the report, he wasted no time. He dashed off toward Central Park, leaving the poor messenger in the dust.

But he alone was not enough to turn the tide of war. A large monster approached the barrier and turned on the mages maintaining it. Asfi watched

on in horror as it devoured one of them in a single bite.

“The mages!” cried Asfi. “The barrier will collapse!”

“Get away from them! No!!”

Falgar screamed in vain. He wanted nothing more than to run to their aid, but knew the moment he deserted his post, all the civilians’ lives would be forfeit.

In stark contrast to his grief, the nearby Olivas chuckled with joy.

“Heh-heh-heh-heh! I like the way you think, Valletta! I think I’ll join in the fun! I want to be there when this city falls!”

Leading his followers into the city center, Vendetta lent his own bloodthirsty hands to the cause.

It was a parade of death. Hordes of monsters coursed down the eight main streets, converging on the central barrier. A small collection of Evils troops watched the march from the rooftops and thanked their dark gods they weren’t down there in the thick of it.

Dragonfire, and the flames of magic swords, beat against the barrier, causing cracks to appear across its surface. Its fall was inevitable. It was only a matter of time. Nobody could reinforce the mages or so much as leave the strongholds to which they had been assigned.

Bete, Aisha, Phryne, and Samira clicked their tongues in frustration. Filvis, Amid, and Nahza gave in to despair. Tsubaki, Mia, Hedin, and Hegni, locked in battle with the sirens; the Gullivers, holding their own against Basram’s spirit warriors—all their faces turned sour. Fels watched on in horror as their crystal orb fell from their hand and shattered to pieces on the floor.

“No, stop... Stopppp!!”

There was nothing the adventurers could do but rock the gray skies with their screams.

“Hyah-hah-hah-hah! This is the end, Orario!!”

Atop her rooftop, Valletta laughed wildly, safe in the knowledge her victory was close at hand.

Evil rallied in triumph once more. The iron hammer raised, ready to come down and end the folly of justice once and for all.

The people were running out of prayers.

The adventurers succumbed to despair.

Even the gods looked on, powerless and ashamed.

All of them knew, deep in their hearts, that the end approached.

“.....”

Among them all, one man stood still, looking out over the war zone that his home had become. Then, turning his back on his familia's stronghold, the man called out to his allies.

“Dyne.”

“Yup?”

“Bahra.”

“You got it.”

The two other veterans of *Loki Familia* gathered at Noir's side.

“You don't have to say it,” the Amazon said. “We know what you're thinking.”

“...Sorry. But let me say one thing anyway.”

The old man grinned a mischievous smirk.

“It's been a real pleasure workin' alongside you old dogs!”

The three shared a smile, evoking memories of the first time they ever strode through the Dungeon's gates side by side.

“...Guys? Where're you goin'?”

It was Loki who spotted them as they got ready to leave, as she watched the war play out from the mansion's bridge. With her divine insight, she didn't fail to spot the do-or-die attitude in each of their expressions.

Noir looked back over his shoulder and flashed her a smile.

“Loki... See you.”

“...W-wait! Noir!!”

But the three veterans turned and vanished on the wind.

Sorry, Loki.

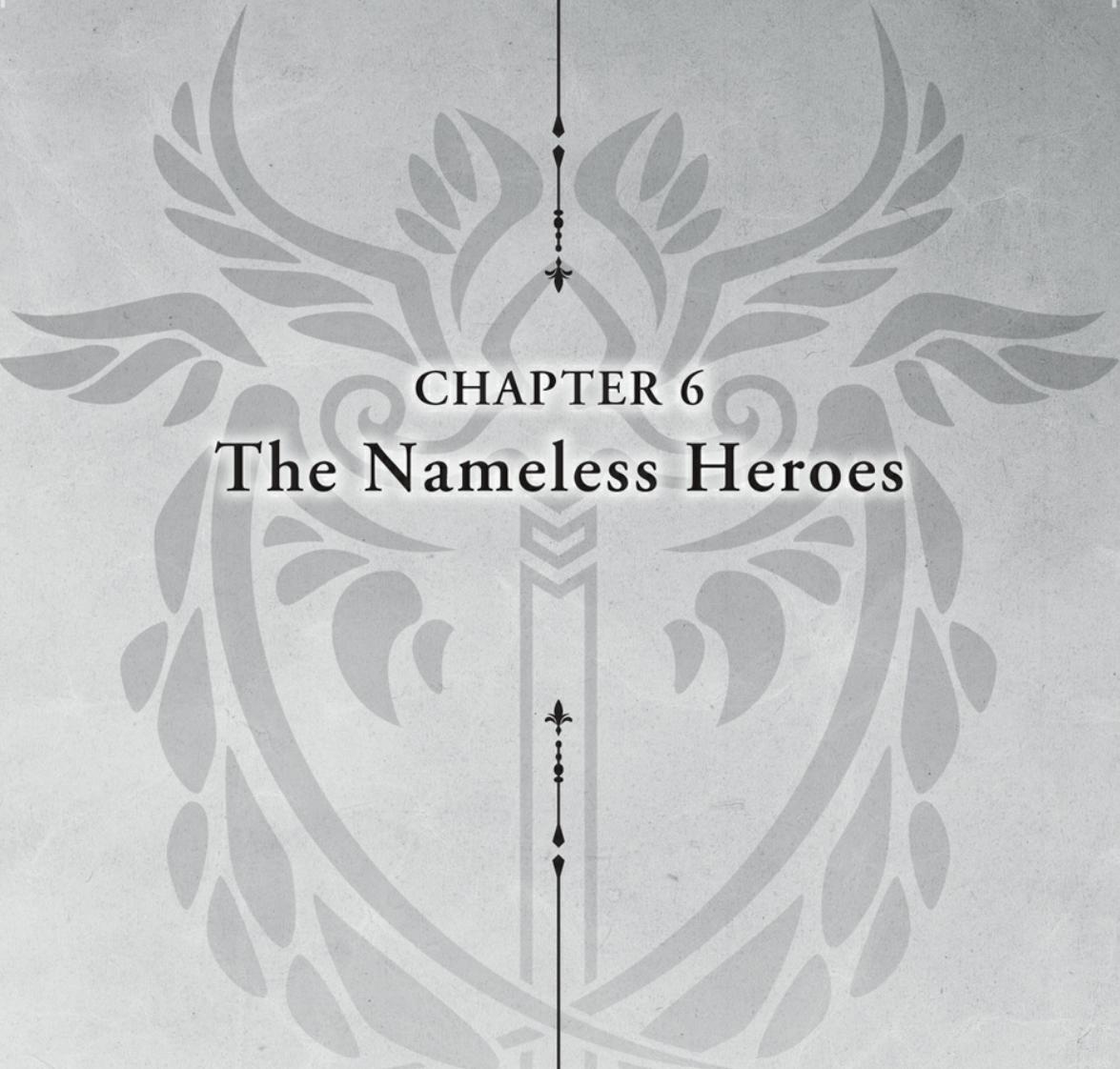
It's a real shameful way to go, defyin' our mistress like this.

I hope you can forgive us.

Noir danced across the rooftops, carving his final regrets into his heart. The other members of *Loki Familia* watched on in shock as the three veterans shot off like arrows and disappeared.

Their destination...was Central Park. Noir's lips curled up as he prepared to unleash his sword.

“In return, I'll show you what an old dog can do!”



CHAPTER 6

The Nameless Heroes

ASTREA RECORD

The War of Good and Evil

Story by Eujino Omori · Illustration by Sakage
Character Design by Sazuhito Yasuda



CHAPTER 6

The Nameless Heroes

“Central Park is under attack from every direction!” came Raul’s despair-filled voice. “They’re targeting our mages! The barrier won’t last much longer!”

Finn swore he could hear Valletta somewhere, laughing at him. He put his mind to work immediately, searching for a way out, but grim fate was not content to wait for his answer.

“None of the strongholds can spare anyone to send help! We’re doomed!”

“The horde’s just too big! What are we supposed to do?”

“Even Vana Freya can’t defend Babel from all sides at once! Anyone else we send in there is just going to get themselves killed!”

Finn was at a loss. He couldn’t divert any more first-tier adventurers without sacrificing the defense of the strongholds. Finding the numbers was an impossible task, especially since Babel needed protecting from every angle.

Perhaps if I abandon one and redirect the guard... No! If I sacrifice the people now, morale will drop to an all-time low! We can’t suffer another loss like we had on the night of the Great Conflict. We may save Babel, but it’ll all be for nothing if the city and its people are lost! Valletta still has forces monitoring the city walls. Not much, but enough to make things difficult for us!

The hectic situation demanded every aspect of Finn’s powerful mind, and it was critical that he maintained the guise of the coldhearted hero: prepared to make any sacrifice if it would bring him victory.

The only choices left now were suicidal, guaranteed to cause the chain of command to crumble. But if they were the only way forward, then...

“...Hmm?”

It was at that moment, lost in thought, that Finn’s wandering eyes fell on

something.

“C-Captain? What’s the matter? What have you seen? ...Erk!”

Raul followed his gaze and saw it, too. To the north, three figures, making a beeline for Central Park.

“Is that...?” he asked, shocked.

“...Noir?”

Finn completed the question, equally dumbfounded, as he recognized them. The three veterans of *Loki Familia*, running wildly through the streets, cutting down all in their path.



“Yaaaah!!”

“Gruuuuh!!”

Noir’s slash drew a death cry from the monster. He continued on through the ruins of North Main Street, slicing apart the parade of fiends, starting from the back.

“You got any more, Dyne?”

“Yup, picked these ones up just now.”

“Well, hand ‘em over, then!”

Dyne passed something to Noir, which he slipped under his clothes.

“Now we’re ready! Let’s give those monsters what for!” yelled Bahra, waving something she’d snatched from the *Loki Familia* home before their departure—the trickster’s flag.

“Right, then! Off we go!” cried Noir, and he and Dyne joined her, disappearing into the monster horde.



"Wh-what are they doing? They've lost it!" cried Raul, watching events play out from the rooftop of Guild HQ. "You can't fight them alone! Come back!"

But Raul's screams went unheard by those he sought to warn. The veterans all wore grim, determined smiles, slicing and dicing a path through the horde.

"Noir...don't tell me."

Finn already knew what they were thinking. There was only one solution to the current predicament, and Noir, Dyne, and Bahra had figured it out first. The veteran adventurers had gone on ahead, sparing Finn from the difficult decision that had to be made.

Over on the enemy side, the Evils were beginning to notice, too. It was Vendetta's squad who spotted them first.

"M-Master Olivas! We're under attack!" cried a scout. "A handful of adventurers have engaged the monsters in the north!"

"What?!" Olivas scowled. "Those foolish adventurers! What do they hope to accomplish?"

Burning with indignation, he led his troops northward.

Meanwhile, the other adventurers saw the changing tides.

"The monsters...they're heading north?" remarked Shakti, perplexed.

"C-Captain! Look!"

Her subordinate pointed to a spot amid the horde...where a single faction's war banner flew.

"...*Loki Familia*?"

Beside her, Ganesha wore a look of deepest regret.

"...So that's what you've chosen, brave warriors..." he said, his heart full of anguish.

Even the younger ones among them were starting to notice.

"Don't tell me..."

"...They plan to die out there?!"

Falgar and Asfi watched on in shock. Bete, Aisha, Samira, Filvis, Amid, Nahza, Tsubaki, Mia, Fels, Hedin and Hegni, and the four Gulliver brothers—all knew what the frenzied cry of the veterans meant.

“““Rooooooooooooahhh!!”””

It was a funeral dirge sung by old warriors and meant for the new. As they hacked a path, turning red with the blood of their foes and themselves, they left behind a comet tail of light. They held out life’s flaming torch for the next generation to take, and with it, they burned the raging shadows to ash.

“Noir!!” Finn screamed. For the first time, and the last, he dropped his guise. For one moment, he was not the callous commander...but a fledgling hero concerned for his dear mentors.



“Haah... Haah... ...Rrraaaaagh!!”

Noir howled. Losing strength by the minute, he focused all his remaining life force into a thundering roar.

When did it start?

As his body weakened Noir retreated to the dark, dusty confines of his mind.

When did it start, I wonder?

The creeping feeling of inevitability. How long ago had it begun? And when did it replace the drive of youth?

His arms were tired. His vision faltered. His legs, like withered trees, refused to obey him anymore.

The gods’ blessings could only prolong his life so much. Soon enough, the realities of the flesh began to sink in.

I suppose...

He was getting too old to be a hero. He could hold his own for now, but another three years, and who knew?

I suppose it's time to hand off...

His life. For hope. For the next generation.

"Listen to me, all you tired old dogs out there! Let's show the little ones how it's done!"

By Noir's side, the dwarf Dyne lay down a challenge to all his peers. With a burly arm, he lifted Noir back to his feet. Bahra patted the dust off his back and laughed a boisterous laugh.

"We're goin' on ahead to take all the glory!" she yelled. "If you don't like it, then try to keep up!"

Even if they couldn't see her face, anyone could imagine the brazen smile across her lips as she invited the city's old veterans to their final feast.

"You *Loki Familia* scoundrels..." muttered one, an animal man. "Always showin' us up!"

"Tryin' to egg us on, are ye?" growled a dwarf.

"You think we'll let you outdo us?" snarled a human.

Senior adventurers from every familia grinned and set out to uphold their pride. Leaving the future in their juniors' hands, those old men and women each embarked on a one-way trip to the city center.

In the southern stronghold, Falgar looked on in shock as the older cohorts set off on their final journey.

"You... You're kidding, right? Don't go!!"

He tried in vain to stop them. They all departed with a daring smile and a twinkle in their eye.

"The veterans... They're all leaving!"

Asfi's eyes quivered like the rippling surface of a lake. It felt like she was reliving the past, watching her captain say good-bye for the very last time.

Over in the southwest, Shakti barked after her deserting subordinates.

“Where do you think you’re going?! Return to your posts! Jaf! Rahza! Kain! Have you all lost it?!”

These were people who had defended Orario long before she became captain. Tears formed in her eyes as she called out to them.

“Please don’t follow in Adi’s footsteps!”

Long in tooth and claw, these grizzled warriors hurled themselves into combat, a smile on each of their faces. Though the monsters’ breath scorched them, claws tore at them, and jaws bit down on them, their noble charge could not be stopped.

Together, they beat back the monster horde making its way to Central Park, leaving the melody of war that thrummed at its center untouched.

“...You old bastards. What are you doin’ here?”

Allen paused and glanced toward Noir and the others. He had headed to the center of the city straightaway and had been fighting here ever since, yet the old men and women were no less tattered and bloodied than him.

“Sorry, Vana Freya,” Noir replied with a grin. “After this, the rest is up to you.”

The old man paused only to answer Allen’s question before sprinting off once more. Allen said nothing, but his gaze wandered ever so slightly downward.

“...The adventurers, they’re followin’ Noir and them into the center of town...” muttered Loki. “It’s like they’ve all chosen to die...”

Her usual devil-may-care attitude was nowhere to be seen. She didn’t have any of her usual jokes. She, Alicia, and the other members of her faction simply watched from the parapets in silence.

“Be seein’ ya, kids! Take good care of our god after I’m gone, yeah?”

“Master! You can’t leave us! Masteer!!”

An elderly human said his final farewells and left. His disciple, too wounded to move, could only watch as his figure grew smaller and smaller.

“Don’t worry, the bonds of blood will always connect us!”

“Wait! Waaaait!!”

An old animal woman mage smiled at her daughter, her apprentice, before heading off to give her life for the cause. The stronghold walls were like the bars of a cage, preventing the young girl from giving chase.

“This is the song of those whose names will not be remembered...”

Hermes muttered a few sad words, like a eulogy, as he watched the city’s greatest sacrifice.

“Or perhaps...this is just another page in the familia myth.”

“What’s the big idea?” Valletta spat, watching it all play out. “You think a few old bags of bones are enough to stop this monster horde?”

The laughable production put a sneer on her face.

“Go ahead! Throw your lives away! It ain’t gonna change a goddamn thing!”

Maybe, thought Noir as the laughter of evil and the roars of crazed beasts rang in his ears. His clothes were stained red with blood, but still he fought.

“Roaaaaahhh!!”

Dyne and Bahra were just like him. Marks of crimson ran down their cheeks, but their fists and ax could not be stopped. They were not alone now—all around them, many of the city’s most venerable adventurers gave their lives to halt the monstrous advance for even just a single second.

To safeguard the voice of a hero.

It was just then that Olivas appeared on the scene, accompanied by his loyal followers. From atop the roof of a building, he yelled down at Noir and the others fighting in the streets.

“Your time has long since passed, dusty fossils! Why do you continue this fruitless struggle?! You must know the horde is too great! Babel *will* fall!”

“Is that right? Well, you won’t mind if we just delay the inevitable for a while, then!”

“And try to take as many of these monsters down with us as we can!”

Nothing Olivas said could strike fear into the adventurers’ hearts. Bahra and Dyne just laughed and continued their slaughter.

“If you want to stop us so bad,” shouted Noir. “Then why don’t you quit your yapping and come down here yourself?!”

“Grh...!”

“Don’t tell me you’re scared of a few monsters?!” he added with a taunting grin.

“Y-you feeble little man!” fumed Olivas. “To arms, my followers! Ready your bows and magic swords!”

He raised his arm, and then...

“Attack! Kill them all!”

On his signal, bolts of fire and lightning and a hail of arrows rained down.

“...Heh.”

The lightning scorched Bahra head to toe. It was a fatal wound. She dropped to her knees, a smile on her lips.

“...Ha-ha...”

The explosive flames hit Dyne dead-on. The results were devastating. He fell to the ground with a grin.

“Gaah!!”

Blood gushed forth as Noir was riddled with arrows. They skewered his vitals, feathering his back. There was no surviving that.

Yet Noir made sure to watch the last smiles of his friends. Urged on by their final will, he roared loudly enough for the three of them.

“Raaaaaaaaahhh!!”

Then he cut down a monster, shook off the blood, and dashed forth. Olivas and his men watched on in utter shock as Noir summoned the last of his strength and ran toward the city center.

All eyes were on him and his final mad sprint. The last bright gleam of a soul’s final moments. It burned a memory into the eyes of all who saw it.

“Dyne... Bahra... Noir...”

Finn watched, too. His predecessors, leaving to join the great march in the sky. And Noir, who put off his departure for just a little while longer.

“Captain! You’ve got to send someone out there! Save them!!” Raul screamed and pleaded with tears in his eyes.

“...We can’t,” was Finn’s answer. His head was hung, his hair over his eyes, so no one could see his emotions. “We have no one to send. We have to protect the strongholds and our people. Noir’s insubordination has left holes in our ranks... Fixing them takes priority.”

“Captain!!”

“Do not defy me, Raul. This is an order.”

“No! Please! We can’t! They...!”

Raul shook his head in denial. He failed to realize how tight his captain’s fists were clenched, or how much they shook. He let the tears stream down his face, no matter how pathetic it made him seem.

“They’ve done so much for us! They’ve taught us, rescued us, watched over us! And we’ve done nothing for them!”

“.....”

Finn did not cry. No tears stained his face; only rivulets of crimson rolled down his knuckles.

It’s not your fault, Finn.

Far away, Noir thought of what he wanted to say to the young prum.

We’re only passing the torch.

We've sat around, outliving our purpose for long enough.

It's time we let you take over the story.

This is your age. Make of it the greatest tale of heroes this world has ever seen.

These were the words that Noir bequeathed to this city.

"Seventy years and change, huh?"

The sea of monsters turned. Noticing the lone swordfighters who had foolishly challenged them, they let out a bloodcurdling roar.

Noir kicked off the floor and leaped high into the air. Staring down at the endless horde, a wicked grin spread across his lips. One hand slipped beneath his kimono.

"Nothin' but trouble, every last one, yet I wouldn't change a thing about 'em!!"

The air roared. A massive wave of heat surged past as an enormous explosion spread out from the point Noir landed.

It was a combination of dozens of the Evils's self-destruction devices, plucked from the corpses of fallen cultists.

The result was a gigantic vortex of flames, with a power far surpassing any that had been seen in the war so far.

The last light of a dying generation, a supernova that lit up the faces of all who saw it.

Any nearby monsters were incinerated immediately; even their magic stones did not survive the blast.

When the dust had settled, not a trace remained of the first-tier adventurers who had given their lives. Not even ashes to remember them by. The only proof they had ever existed...was a large void in the monster horde on the north side

of the barrier.

“They blew themselves up in the middle of the horde...?”

Olivas was stunned as he gazed upon the fruits of a struggle he had called fruitless. The old adventurers had proven without a doubt the truth of their words and the strength of their wills.

“Curse you... Curse you aaaall!!”

His wild bellows joined the chaos of monster screams as they noticed the gaping hole among their number.

“Noir... All of you...”

Compared to the vastness of the monster horde, that hole was only a drop in the ocean. They had bought a minute of time at best for the boaz at its center.

But for the adventurers who would decide this city’s fate, it was a crucial win.

Loki shed no tears. She only said a few words.

“I’m sorry... And...thank you.”

“NO!!!!!!R!!”

Instead, it was the young man who cried. A boy forced into a war zone where he didn’t belong. Raul’s painful cries rent the city.

Elsewhere, a single chariot stopped and heard the news of the veterans’ sacrifice.

Another one returns to dust.

Another one falls by the wayside.

All I ever hear is screams.

Screaming’s not going to save anyone.

Why can’t they do anything?

Why are there only corpses in my wake?

You guys are useless.

Why can no one follow in my tracks?!

“Rrraaaaaaaaagh!!”



“Grr! What’s taking so long?! Why is Babel still standing?!”

Valletta was furious. She’d watched the aged adventurers carry out their suicide attack and chalked it up as a petty hindrance at most. However, in spite of that, the monsters still hadn’t succeeded in bringing down the barrier, and it was starting to get on her nerves.

“It doesn’t matter how many idiots they send to their deaths! We have numbers on our side! Now break that shield already!”

Indeed, even if all Orario’s venerable adventurers gave their lives, they couldn’t eliminate more than a small fraction of the monster population.

Even Valletta’s subordinate understood this. Thus, he could only report to his mistress the facts.

“M-ma’am... We’ve spotted a strange ring of light surrounding Central Park. It’s tearing apart any monster that tries to approach!”

“A ring of light? What the hell are you talking about?!” she snapped, before looking to the center of town, whereupon her eyes went wide.

For she witnessed the truth of the scout’s words for herself. There, around Central Park, and amid the surging crimson sprays of monster blood, was a halo of silver and black.

“It’s the Chariot!” the Evils cultist wailed. “Nothing can stop him!”



Around and around and around he raced, pulverizing any monster that stood in his way. His legs were wheels. His blood was fire. His vision tunneled to a

single point, trapping Allen in a world of absolute speed.

Faster. Faster. Faster.

Tear 'em to shreds when they step too close. Even if you're movin' so fast it hurts like hell when you strike.

My fingers are broken. My head is poundin'. My heart won't stop racin'.

But who cares?

I'm a chariot. Breakin' rules is what I do.

Those old bastards are out there buyin' time. I gotta make the most of every last second.

Maybe I'm too worthless to save ya, but I'll make your sacrifices worth somethin'.

“So give your lives to me, you old dogs!!”

Allen yelled, even as the extreme speed caused his eyeballs to bleed.

“Give 'em to me! Give 'em to him!”

He yelled his heart out, making his purpose known to the old veterans who even now continued to lay down their lives.

“You listenin' to me, Ottar?! You better beat that asshole!!”



The roar of the Chariot, the light of the veterans—all of it protected the battleground at the center of town. It was there that Ottar locked eyes with the conqueror and roared.

“Roaaaaaaaaahh!!”

I unleashed my strongest attack. A sword slash that could fell a dragon. But like a conductor waving his baton, the man parried my blow with no effort at all.

He was a monster. Nothing less than a demon whose sole purpose was to fight. He had eaten many things, made their blood and flesh his own, and now he had come for me.

His fiendish fangs could tear out my throat in an instant.

I had given everything I had, and it wasn't enough. I had surpassed my limits, and it still wasn't enough.

I howled and heard a cry of war in return. Blood dribbled from the man's lips. His greedy eyes fell on me, and for the first time, I felt fear.

“Nruggghhhhh!!”

I blocked the man's heavy sword with my own. The steel of my blade cracked, as did the bones in my wrist.

Every one of my techniques had been in vain. As for outwitting the man, I had abandoned that hope long ago. He was my better in every way that mattered.

Defeat drew near. Only one weapon of mine remained.

My willpower. The humiliation that accompanied my constant failure. The fires of rage that burned within me and demanded I bring glory to my goddess's name. I allowed those emotions to become my strength and poured them into my blade.

““Graaaaaaaaahhh!!””

I was always alone.

I fought for my goddess alone. Sought strength for my goddess alone.

Never once did I seek to learn from others or cooperate with them; instead I fought my battles with only my blade by my side.

I am not proud of that, but nor am I ashamed. I only did what I needed to do.

Because the peak I saw, the one that always lay so far out of reach, it was one I could only climb by myself.

But now...

“You listenin’ to me, Ottar?! You better beat that asshole!!”

For the first time in all these years, my arena of solitude played host to the voice of another.

“Nothin’ but trouble, every last one, yet I wouldn’t change a thing about ‘em!!”

For the first time in all these years, I felt touched by the sacrifice of another.

For the first time, I desired victory not for my goddess, or for myself, but for others.

At some point, the power of the one had become the power of the many.

All around me, I heard the clashing of blades. I heard the cries of brave men and women risking their lives. I heard the song sung only here, in the city of heroes.

I heard the voices of all of you here on this earth, and all of you in heaven above. *Become a hero.* My whole being demanded I answer the call. So long as those voices echo, my bones will never break.

The mantle of hero means nothing to me. I have never cared for fame or glory.

But then, what is this flame that burns in my heart? What is this fire that runs through my veins? Why do your voices stir my very soul?

I do not know.

But I do not need to know.

All I need is for this feeling to empower me—to strike down he who stands before me!!

“Ottar!!” Shakti yelled as the waves of sound from Central Park washed over her.

“Warlord!!” cried Asfi.

“We’re counting on you!” said Falgar as the pair sliced their way through hordes of monsters.

“You can do it!!” screamed Raul, his face still wet from watching the veterans sacrifice themselves.

Hearing the sounds of battle unfold, Ganesha filled his lungs and bellowed. “Never give up!!”

Hermes prayed. “May you reach what you seek.”

Loki watched. “Do it for us.”

Every last god and mortal in the city turned to face that sound and entrusted their prayers to the wind.

And finally, Ottar himself. As he watched the blood drip down Zald’s chin, he turned his thoughts inward and prayed to the one and only object of his unbreakable loyalty.

My lady, please forgive my foolish ways. Today, I fight not just for you—I fight for them!!

I began to chant.

“Silver moon’s mercy and the golden plains. I offer this body to the lord of battle!!”

I sang the one song allowed to me.

“Charge bearing the goddess’s will!!”

I prepared the most destructive blow available to me.

“Hildis Vini!!”

A golden light enveloped my body. It enveloped my sword, my final weapon, transforming it into a blade of radiant light.

The spell did nothing but raise my weapon's power. Simple, but devastating, and the product of my strength crossed with my magic, was a force that no one could stand against.

Across from me, Zald roared, his eyes wide with fury.

"O Father, forgive me, for I thieve from the plate of the gods! Let my flaming tongue devour! Let my burning fangs consume! Rea Ambrosia!!"

The flames that technique brought forth were surely not of this world. Zald's weapon was clad in the fires of calamity, and with one swing, those fires spread to every part of our arena.

But none of it mattered. Every fiber of my being had but one purpose—to obliterate the man who stood before me!

The wall of ice had begun to melt and crack from the flames that roiled within it. What crystalline structures remained reflected firelight across the city. Finn stood with one foot planted atop the balustrade of Guild HQ, shouting his message back.

"Don't stop now, Ottar! Keep going! Surpass him and leave us all behind!!"

From far above, Freya watched as heroic fire fought with golden light. She raised her voice and bequeathed her message below.

"Go forth, Ottar. Bring me victory!!"

This fight would begin and end in a single blow. It would come down to a single instant. Both men flexed their fabled strength and raised their slabs of ungainly steel, their swords of light and fire. Each prepared his mightiest technique and aimed it at the other unstoppable force that stood across from him.

“Roooaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!!”

His foe was the conqueror and he the untamed beast.

Blades of gold and fire collided.



And a shock wave was born.

The entire city shook with a force unlike any it had ever felt.

“““Grhhhhhh?!”””

Adventurers, Evils, citizens—even the monsters—had to brace their legs so the blast winds did not blow them away.

Gouts of flames and raindrops of golden light spilled forth from the arena at the city’s center. So powerful was the blast that the ice wall continued shaking for some time, and even started breaking apart.

“The ice wall...and the barrier! They’re coming down!”

Asfi watched as a huge slab of ice sheared off and slammed into the ground, filling the air with crystalline dust.

Meanwhile, Shakti strained her ears.

“I...don’t hear fighting anymore.”

The air had fallen painfully silent. Atop Guild HQ, Roymen came running onto the rooftop, almost tripping over his own feet before reaching the balustrade and pressing his stomach against it.

“Who won...?” he asked, straining his eyes to see into the distance. “Who won?!”

“Zald did, obviously!!”

Valletta cackled, reveling in glee as Orario held its breath.

“Finally settled your score with this city, huh? Took you long enough! Come

out and let's see ya already!"

She narrowed her eyes, casting a diabolical grin toward the cauldron of fire around Central Park.

She laughed. She laughed and laughed and laughed, and then—

“...Ha?”

—she noticed something. Deep within the sparks and fire. Deep within the billowing smoke. The twinkling of a pair of eyes.

“The dust is clearing...” said Falgar.

“Someone’s stepping out!” cried Raul.

All eyes converged upon Central Park.

And then...



When they caught sight of the city's champion, Asfi shed tears of joy.

"It's Warlord!" she cried.

Then came the cheers.

"""*Hooraaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!!*"""

It came from every corner of the city. From the hearts and lungs of deities and mortals alike. All of Orario united in proclamation of their joy.

"Ottar!" exclaimed Allen with a hint of anger.

"You did it!" cheered Ganesha.

Loki's eyes went wider than ever before. "You defeated him! The mightiest being this city has ever known!" she cried.

Even Hermes felt the excitement creep into his voice.

"You've surpassed Zeus and Hera!" he said. "A thousand years of history!"

Nobody escaped the sweeping frenzy. All across the city, those who stood in the light of justice felt their hairs bristle and their hearts ignite. Even the citizens cowering in their strongholds knew. They knew their sword had pierced evil's breast. One after the other, they stood, and their confused murmur slowly transformed into cheers.

"Raise your voices, adventurers!"

There was one man who would not let the changing tides go uncapitalized upon. Zald's defeat was the spark that could rekindle the coals of victory.

"Salute your champion!" Finn yelled. "Your one and only: Warlord!"

""*Roaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!!*"""

Finn's burning fuse set its charge alight. From every corner of the city came an outflux of emotion, and the people's clamor caused the earth, and even Babel itself, to quake.

""*Ottar!! Ottar!! Ottar!! Ottar!!*"""

The people chanted their victor's name. The sound echoed beyond the mountains and rose above the clouds.

“H-he defeated Master Zald?!”

“Impossible! No one can best Master Zald!”

“Th-then how...?”

This shocking turn of events was bitter news to the Evils. Morale was plummeting in the wake of their champion’s defeat, and this effect was only hastened by the rallying of Orario’s troops that was happening all around them.

It was a complete and utter reversal of fortune.

“Th-this can’t be...! It’s impossible...!”

Even Evils lieutenants such as Olivas were beginning to show concern. In fact, his humiliation seemed even greater than most.

“Was it those old fools...? Should I have stopped them after all...?”

One didn’t have to be a god to realize it was the efforts of Noir and the other veterans that had left Ottar with just enough time to seize victory. Realizing he was partially responsible for their success, Olivas tore at his hair and let out a maddened scream.

“Zald...lost?”

Valletta stared off into space.

“Hold on. You gotta be shittin’ me. There’s no way. There’s no way...”

Her shocked stupor gradually gave way to a deranged anger.

“There’s no waaaaay!!”

She shot a deadly glare at the boaz man standing in the distance, then issued an order to her troops.

“Listen to me, you tamer shits! Ottar’s gotta be on death’s door after that! Send in the monsters and finish him off!!”

The tamers jumped to attention and hurried to execute their leader’s command. They lashed their whips, commanding their ruby-studded giants, and the monsters unquestioningly followed.

The horde converged on Central Park, where the flames of war still raged.

“Ooooooooooouuughhh!!”

“Grr...”

Ottar grimaced, watching them approach. The battle had left him severely injured, and it was a miracle he could even stand at all. His allies attempted to keep back the horde, but the mages' barriers had already failed, and monsters streamed in from all directions, overwhelming the defenders.

“Dammit... Ottar!”

Even Allen had reached the limits of his stamina. He could no longer protect Central Park as he had been doing. All he could do was crouch atop a pile of rubble, watching as the monsters breached the plaza.

It was at that moment, when all hope seemed lost, that the *clack-clack* of a pair of glamorous heels rang out across the battlefield.

“Stay strong, Ottar. I will not permit you to bend the knee here.”

“...! Lady Freya...”

Appearing before the boaz man was a silver-haired beauty of peerless defiance. From her position atop the tower, Freya could see clearly the perils of exiting Babel, but had chosen to do so anyway.

She stepped close to her warrior and looked up into his eyes.

“You are victorious, Ottar,” she said. “A true lord of war.”

“.....”

“Always stand tall, Ottar. No matter who you face. No matter how painful. You must always bear my glory for this city to see.”

“...Yes, my lady.”

There was no other answer Ottar could give. He stood straighter and concealed his pain, becoming his goddess's rock once more.

“I shall now update your Status,” said the goddess. “Stand still and stare down our foes until I am finished.”

Freya moved behind Ottar. His armor was in tatters, revealing a large gash from his shoulder to his flank. It was there that Freya penned her ichor,

rewriting the hieroglyphics that covered Warlord's muscular back. Before long, they glowed with the sublime light of ascension.

"Your great deeds have been recorded. Take up your sword, Ottar."

The boaz man silently obeyed.

"You have strength enough to wield it?"

"Yes..."

"It is you who stands atop the peak?"

"Yes...!"

Ottar answered each word from the goddess's mouth with complete and utter conviction.

"Then show us. Remove those ghastly fiends from my sight."

"As you wish, my lady."

Ottar twisted, his body like seasoned oak. The muscles in his shoulders bulged as he positioned his sword behind him, preparing to execute his goddess's will—a spinning slash with the two of them at its center.

All the while, the monsters drew nearer. When they came close enough, they pounced. The fangs of beasts, the claws of monstrous birds, the cries of dragons.

""""Rooooooooahhh!!""""

But Ottar was simply silent, his spirit spent in his previous duel. Warlord only raised his hefty blade and swung.

What came next was a vortex of annihilation.

The creatures were erased without a sound. Ottar's sweeping blade bisected every last one of them before they could even cry out in pain.

"Wha—?!"

A partial cry of shock escaped Valletta's lips.

The large monsters crumbled, drumming the earth in a melody of death, while the smaller ones returned to dust, their magic stones destroyed.

Ottar's one attack had wiped them all out.

"That whole horde... Gone, just like that!"

Valletta couldn't believe her eyes. But it wasn't only her; every adventurer who witnessed it reeled in shock.

"Such overwhelming power..." said Asfi. "That can only be...!"

It was Falgar who completed her thought. What he had just seen was so destructive as to belong to a higher category; another plane of being.

"The power of a Level Seven!!" he said.

"Ottar has well and truly surpassed us all!" exclaimed Shakti, witnessing the birth of a new ruler, a person on the same level as Zald was.

The title of mightiest adventurer was an invaluable weapon in and of itself. Simply usurping it from the Evils' side was enough to turn the tide of war.

"All units! Eliminate the remaining enemy forces!"

Finn pounced on the opportunity to issue his next order. While the enemy faltered, he raised his spear to finish them off.

"Their morale is in tatters! Don't let up now!!"

"""*Raaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!!*"""

It was a fledgling cry of rebellion.



"Orarioooo!! A filthy city of contemptible heroes!!"

As the reality of defeat set in on his army's side, Basram roared with anger.

"This cannot be! I refuse to let it be so! I refuse to accept your wretched, righteous faith!!"

His goddess's domain was injustice, unfairness. Everything rotten and crooked. That was why he could not acknowledge the truth—that fair and righteous justice, free of trickery, had triumphed. Zald's defeat painted a bitter scowl across his usual calm and priestly features.

"Kill those tiny weaklings, my spirit warriors!! Show them that our profane ways trump the rule of law!!"

No longer concerned with keeping up his gentle facade, Basram swung his ringed staff in fury. In response, his four spirit warriors emitted a soulless yell. The Gullivers combined their weapons to block a single greatsword swing, yet the force of the blow sent all four of them flying backward.

They had struggled in the fight so far. The enemy Level 5s had them completely outclassed. All four prums had lost their helmets, their dashing features marred with blood.

Yet still they did not back down.

"""Dvalinn, what have you found out?"""

"The human uses fire, and the elf and dwarf use lightning, while the animal person has no magic. Only the latter two possess regenerative capabilities."

"""Berling, are there any other foes around?"""

"Not that I can see. They must have been scared off. And our fellow adventurers are keeping the other spirit warriors busy."

"""Grer, have you worked out their strengths and weaknesses?"""

"The human is fastest to respond to Basram's staff, while the dwarf is slowest. Of all of them, the elf is the least proficient with a blade; it's likely they used some other weapon when they were an adventurer."

"""Alfrik, put it all together!"""

"We must take them out one by one, before anyone comes to help. First the elf, then the dwarf!"

The four prums readied their weapons. Among the siblings, Grer excelled at observational skills, Berling at reconnaissance, and Dvalinn at magical sensibilities, while Alfrik's superior analysis skills enabled him to make quick

decisions on behalf of the group.

“Last time, we panicked, and it ended up as four one-on-ones.”

“Yup.”

“That was silly.”

“For us, four four-on-ones is the only way!”

Four pairs of hawklike eyes fell on the spirit warriors under Basram’s control. The dark priest shuddered, before steeling his courage and swinging his ringed staff.

“Silence, you incessant chatterboxes! Don’t think for one second you could even begin to understand the true depths of my goddess’s majesty!”

The staff chimed, and the four spirit warriors flew into battle.

In response, the four siblings hit the deck.

They let their foes sail right over them, crashing into the ground behind their backs in a devastating explosion of dust and rubble. The Gullivers seized the moment to draw their weapons and make good on their word.

“Ghhhi!!”

They spun around and immediately ganged up on the elf, as planned. Greatsword and greatax came flying in from the foe’s left and right, which the spirit warrior easily blocked with a sword each. However, that was simply a distraction, allowing the greatspear to lunge for the elf’s throat. Expecting this, too, the spirit warrior leaped back—straight into the path of the greathammer.

This powerful blow sent the spirit warrior flying, separating it from its allies.

““““You’re first in line!!”””” the brothers yelled, lunging after it.

“Tch!”

The Gullivers’ plan was to split up the spirit warriors and eliminate them one by one. Basram couldn’t allow this plan to succeed, and so he clicked his tongue and swung his staff, ordering his remaining three servants to catch up and stab the prums in the back.

“.....”

However, even when they came from behind, the four siblings handily evaded the spirit warriors' blows, and their fierce charge went unhindered,

“Your back isn’t your only blind spot!”

“Be aware of attacks from all angles!”

“Leave no gaps in your defense!”

“You have to be ready to dodge, block, and counter all at once!”

Folkvangr. The clash of first-tier adventurers that took place just prior to the final showdown. It was there the Gullivers had discovered the secret to defeating Basram’s spirit warriors. It all came down to tactics. The Level 5s boasted superior might, and their attacks were damaging, but so long as the four prum brothers could endure that and focus all their energy into setting up a four-on-one fight, there was hope for victory.

““““If that boar can do it, then so can we!!”“““

The fires of envious rage burned within them as they sought to replicate Ottar’s feat. Spear, sword, and ax all sliced off one of the elf’s limbs, moments before the final hammer crushed its head.

“Impossible!!”

Basram couldn’t believe what he was seeing, but the Gullivers spared him no notice and moved swiftly on to handling the dwarf. With only three foes now remaining, splitting them up was even easier than before.

Basram had made a critical error and underestimated how significant this shift would be. When it was four-on-one instead of one-on-one, Bringar’s unparalleled coordination made the difference. There was a reason it was said that the Gullivers could overcome any foe by working together. Once all four completed their individual analyses, the enemy was stripped bare, and the brothers could utilize their superior teamwork to finish things off.

“Gaaaaaaaaahhh!!”

Upon receiving their combined attacks, the dwarven spirit warrior immediately fired off a lightning spell—the power of the spirit that dwelled inside him. The human added his flame magic to the mix, creating an explosion

of both elements in an attempt to tear the brothers away from his fellow thrall.

Smoke and dust swept the battlefield, and Basram covered his face to protect his eyes. Still, he wore a confident smile, assured of his opponents' imminent demise.

...However, it was then that he heard a voice from behind.

"It was Dvalinn and Grer who figured it out. They realized the spirit warriors would use their magic if threatened."

He spun around to see one of the prum brothers wielding an enormous spear.

"You of all people should know better than to take us at our word, Basram."

He was bloodied and beaten, but his cold, piercing eyes revealed the truth he didn't say. *Did you really think I wouldn't choose the quickest way to beat you?*

This had been their plan from the beginning. A bluff. To state that their plan was to eliminate their foes one by one, then draw out the enemy spells, causing a smoke screen in which one brother would sneak away and get the drop on Basram himself.

"Without that staff of yours, the spirit warriors are nothing but mindless beasts, isn't that right?"

Alfrik glared at the magic item in Basram's hand—the only means of controlling the dark priest's heretical creations. It took Basram half a second to get over the shock, and another half a second to raise his staff...

...But it took Alfrik far less than that to swing his spear, detaching the beastman's arm, and with it, the golden staff responsible for so much pain and misery.

"Aaaaaaaaaarghhh!!"

Basram howled. Meanwhile, the artifact's absence caused an immediate response in the spirit warriors themselves. They jerked unnaturally—only a momentary magical glitch—but Bringar were quick to capitalize upon it. Crossing their weapons to block the last few spells, Dvalinn, Berling, and Grer lunged, severing the limbs of the beastman warrior, while shattering the spirit dagger that remained lodged in the dwarven one's brain stem.

The remaining human spirit warrior attempted to fly into a mad rage, when a thrown spear shattered his skull from the back, bringing the battle to an abrupt end.

Alfrik's three brothers gathered at his side and handed him back his spear, then all four turned their murderous eyes on the dark priest.

"Kr... Rgh... My...arm..." Basram groaned. His remaining hand went into the folds of his robes, pulling out his last resort—the final spirit dagger, wrapped in a hexproof cloth.

"You tiny, insignificant wretches!"

He stabbed the blade into his stump and began to transform. This spirit dagger was not like the others. Its wild magic flowed into Basram, grotesquely enlarging one side of him, until he no longer resembled his former self.

He had turned himself into one of his own creations. This was the ultimate fate of a doctrine that abandoned intelligence and individuality.

"""What are you, stupid?"""" said the three younger siblings with identical looks of exasperation.

"A man whose last resort is to trade away his mind for power..." said Alfrik, an enlightened twinkle in his eye. "Isn't that exactly the sort of thing the gods mock us for?"

The four brothers stared down this hideous monster, then readied their cracked and battered weapons for one last symphony of death. Basram swung a magic-infused punch, which the four brothers dodged before each disposing of one of the creature's limbs. The mass of flesh pitched forward, and Alfrik drove his spear right through its heart.

The misshapen lump oozed red effluent and was silent.

"M-Master Basram?! A-all units, retreat!"

After watching it all play out, one *Apate Familia* officer raised his voice, then hurriedly retrieved the blood-soaked staff before fleeing the Amphitheatrum alongside the other spirit warriors that Mia and the others had been fighting.

"""Erm, Alfrik?"""" said the three younger Gullivers, after watching the enemy

abscond so easily with their artifact.

“...Apologies,” answered their eldest, wearing a look of guilt. “I let down my guard.”

All of them realized they were far too wounded to give chase. Their heroic victory over four Level 5s had come at a heavy price, and none of them could even stand upright a moment longer.

All Alfrik could do was watch as the remaining four spirit warriors fled to the southeast.

“I let them get away...” he muttered.

““Oh, Hegni and Hedin! This is so much fun!””

Fear and panic ruled the ranks of evil. The sole exception was here, where two crazed sisters carried out their frenzied dance.

The elven twins, the elder Dina and the younger Vena, kept up their assault in spite of the deep wounds inflicted upon their respective fair and tanned skin by their precious archnemeses.

““Just a little longer, and we’ll hold your cold, lifeless bodies in our loving embrace!””

““Grr!””

Dina twirled her stiletto daggers—intended to be a dying knight’s reprieve—while Vena commanded all-consuming hellfire, burning much of the Amphitheatrum to ash. Her flames formed an arena of death, preventing other members of *Freya Familia* from coming to the rescue. Hegni and Hedin dodged the flames and steel both, landing a short distance away.

Hegni was battered and beaten. Hedin was covered in blood. The Dis sisters had shown their true power, and chances of victory were looking slim.

“Not long now, Vena! I’ll let you have my power! Now give me yours in return!”

“Yes, Dina!”

The sisters shared deviously innocent smiles they clasped hands, sharing their magical energy. Dina began to chant.

“Black mire; red sin. We tear each other with our teeth; the slime that is our bodies mix’d!”

It was not a spell, but a curse.

“Dialv Stige!”

A crimson light wreathed the fairer-skinned of the two, which then spread to cover her sister as well. This eerie glow caused a fluctuation in the girls’ stats, almost as though they were trading blood and flesh.

“Oh, your magic always tastes so sweet, Dina! It’s going to drive me wild!”

“So is yours, my lovely Vena! Oh, it feels like your baby is in my belly, trying to burst free!”

“Oh my, Dina! How lewd!”

““Tee-hee-hee! Ah-ha-ha!””

This repulsive conversation earned a look of anger and disgust from Hedin. Ignoring him, the two sisters licked their lips, as if lapping up the excess power each had received.

Dina’s curse, *Dialv Stige*, had the effect of mixing her basic ability scores with those of whom she touched. Using it, she was able to steal half the target’s Strength and Agility. No curse came without a downside, however, and in this case, Dina was required to compensate the target with an equivalent amount of her own Defense and Magic.

It was a fearsome spell, evoking the image of a dismal mire, of sinners cutting each other piecemeal, and of their blood and bodies mixing in a crimson stream.

““Now we can start the feast!””

In the hands of the Dis Sisters, however, the spell’s drawback was no drawback at all. Dina took to the front lines, wielding her twin stilettos with speed that would put an animal person to shame, while Vena covered her back with powerful magic spells. This trading of ability scores only served to reinforce

their respective roles.

“Their curse seems stronger than when last we fought...” muttered Hegni, panting heavily from exhaustion.

“It seems we aren’t the only ones who’ve been training,” agreed Hedin, clutching his upper arm. The blood was already beginning to seep through his fingers. “No doubt those sirens have been preying on their own monstrous allies in our absence.”

With Dina focused on melee combat, and Vena concentrating on magic, the sisters’ power level approached that of two Level 6s.

“Your magic has come undone, fool.”

“And you’ve lost your glasses. You look so lame without them.”

The elves of *Freya Familia* had suffered significant damage in the battle so far. Hegni’s *Dáinsleif* had finally worn off, while Hegni’s spectacles had been blasted off his face. While also Level 5, the Dis sisters were on another level compared to Basram’s spirit warriors, and so the elven adventurers had their work cut out for them.

Thanks to the humiliation they had suffered, Hedin and Hegni had both sworn to kill the sisters personally, and there was no room in their hearts for teamwork. Besides, they were both members of *Freya Familia*; they considered themselves mortal foes and rivals for their lady’s affection. In Folkvangr, they had been seeking to kill each other, and so could hardly team up now.

“Aw, even now, Hedin and Hegni are being big, mean, grumpy-pants to each other! Isn’t it sad, Dina?”

“So sad, Vena! If they just put their differences aside, they might be able to catch up with us; at least enough to lick our toes!”

One giggled while the other guffawed. Hegni and Hedin knew the girls were taunting them, but they showed no reaction. After a short pause, they spoke without turning to look the other in the eye.

“Hegni.”

“What?”

“It sounds like Ottar won.”

The cheers of adventurers could be heard behind them from Central Park. Warlord had given everything and earned the city’s praise.

“...I know.”

Hegni cut loose his anger and disgust, and cast his gaze downward.

“Everywhere, the fires of life are burning.”

The blood of the einherjar fueled their fierce cries, and Heith’s healers risked their lives to provide support. Tsubaki’s sword, Mia’s fists—nothing was being held in reserve, and the city screamed with a desire to repay the veterans who had laid down their lives.

It would all be for naught if these two prideful, stubborn, infuriating elves could not cast aside their differences now. And so, with one short meeting of their eyes, the elves of light and dark slipped the shackles of their respective oaths.

““Hmph!!””

The two sprang forward. Their paths crossed. Hegni took Vena, and Hedin faced Dina.

Up until now, it had been the other way around: Dina and Hegni, the two melee fighters, and Hedin and Vena, the two mages. From now on, they would swap targets.

But this change in tactics only caused the corners of the evil twins’ mouths to creep up, like the opening of a carnivorous plant, as though the pair had fallen right into their trap.

““Silly Billys!””

“Did you think you could take me down with magic just because I’m weak to it?”

“Did you think you could humiliate me in close combat just because I’m bad at it?”

““Sorry, boys, but that’s not going to happen!!””

Dina, holding her stilettos, flickered, and Vena with her magic sword, flared.

Just as he reached optimal range for his spell, Hedin's eyes widened in shock. Despite the shortness of his chant, the siren's blade moved faster still, tearing the rhomphaia from his grasp.

Just as he entered cutting distance, Hegni was dumbstruck. Vena swung her magic sword while swiftly chanting a magic circle, unleashing a hailstorm of fire.

““You call that teamwork? How pathetic!””

““Grhhh...?!””

In close combat, there was nothing Hedin could do. He was by no means poor with the blade, but he lacked the punch and power of Dáinsleif.

At long range, Hegni was strapped for options. He possessed magic, but nothing with the range and casting proficiency of Hildsleif.

With the curse enhancing their specialties, the twins were able to draw both elven adventurers into their own private arenas and overwhelm them.

The attempt to strike at the girls' weaknesses had failed, and in addition, the boys had been stripped of their swords, Victim Abyss and Dizaria.

“*Dialv Dis!*”

The twins had them in check, and their destructive magic was about to end the game. Ten magic circles appeared overhead and summoned ten pillars of hellfire, trapping Hegni and Hedin in a hurricane of destruction. Even their superior evasive maneuvers could not protect them from the blast waves that came at them from every angle.

And then...

““Now you're ours!””

At that very moment Vena, Hedin, Hegni, and Dina lay on a perfectly straight line, in that order. The two men were completely surrounded. To the sisters, it was the perfect arrangement. To Hegni and Hedin, it was the worst. As they crawled to their feet, Vena began to chant, and Dina rushed forward.

“In paradise, the heretics face fire; let errors and perversions both be cleans'd;

and in a thousand tombs those sinners burn! Let the sixth garden open! Let the ninth song howl!"

The third and final spell of Vena Dis. Incineration. It annihilated anything in her line of sight that she considered heretical, and it was impossible to dodge. It was a rare spell that could burn her foes to ash while leaving her sister Dina completely unharmed.

You're a feisty one, Hedin! But it's too late now; my spells are faster than yours! Why don't the two of you just cry in our arms already?!

The range of her spell easily surpassed twenty meders, so it didn't matter how hard Hedin scowled; there was nothing he could do to reach her in time.

Vena wanted nothing more than to burn to ash the white elf who was so repulsed by her.

Dina wanted nothing more than to tear to shreds the dark elf who was so disgusted by her.

And so, having returned to their formation so that each received the target she desired, the sisters were ecstatic. Vena prepared her final magic circle, while Dina rushed forward to skewer her love in the heart.

"...?"

But just as the magic circle opened like a devil's eyelid, Vena noticed it.

Hedin was acting strangely. He stood side-on, blocking the contents of his left hand from view, like a fencer about to lunge. Did he plan to throw his weapon? But wait...he lost his rhomphaia—when did he retrieve it?

A fraction of a second passed as those questions flew through her head, and in the end, Hedin revealed the answer.

"I never thought this day would come," he said.

"....."

In his hand, he held a cursed black sword. It was not his own weapon, but Hegni's: Victim Abyss.

At the same time, Dina's eyes went wide as plates as Hegni pulled out the

Hildsleif's rhomphaia, Dizaria.

It had all been on purpose, including the very moment the two elves had their weapons flung from their grip. A mind-numbingly simple bluff that allowed Hedin and Hegni to change swords.

“Sip and slurp, you rotten sword. Victim Abyss!”

Hegni's trusty sword was a curse weapon, able to extend its reach at the cost of the wielder's stamina. Hedin was never one to hold back, and so he allowed the sword to drink of all his stamina, pouring it all into a single thrust.

The resulting blade reached fifty meders in length.

“Gh...”

The thrust, like a vacuum wave of invisible energy, piercing at first Vena's magic circle, and then her breast.

Before she even worked out what had happened, a line of blood ran down her lip. Then, the moment she realized that Hedin's and Hegni's teamwork was responsible for her demise, an explosion engulfed her.

An Ignis Fatuus. The inevitable result of a spell that had gone out of control. Seeing her sister consumed by blossoms of fire, Dina turned and screamed.

“Vena?!”

Hedin's attack had been carried out with perfect and diabolical timing—planned from the very beginning to lure Vena into using her spell, and dooming her in the process.

“Hediin!!”

The remaining elder sister screeched, and her anger drove her ever faster onward, to strike down the white elf in vengeful anger. It was then that Hegni entered her path, Dizaria raised high.

“You're after me, remember?” he said.

Furious, Dina tried to cut him down, but then, beyond him, she watched as Hedin turned and shot her a disinterested glance. He raised the black sword in his hand and began to chant.

Hedin's support. *Caurus Hildr*. A low-power, precision-strike magic that he was using to avoid hitting Hegni. Dina would have no trouble evading a spell like that.

That was Dina's split-second reasoning.

She was wrong.

"Valiant Hildr."

There was nothing remotely like restraint in Hedin's response.

"....."

Dina froze for a moment, unable to speak, before the lightning engulfed her. Hedin had chosen not a hail of magic missiles, but a single great beam of light that devastated all in its path—not just Dina, but Hegni, too.

"Aaaaaaaaaagh!!!"

She screamed. And then, amid a world of white, terror overcame her as she saw Hegni approach.

"Grgh?!"

He had not fallen. Even taking constant damage from Hedin's twisted magic, he lunged for Dina, sword drawn.

Dina could not resist it. Through the curse, she had traded away not only her Magic, but her *Defense* as well, to her ill-fated sister.

There was nothing she could do. It was all the result of Hedin's plan. A plan built on the back of Hegni's suffering. A plan that Dina, who loved her sister, could never have conceived.

This was not trust. This was not faith. This was not teamwork.

The only word for it was spite. A strategy birthed from a single vile sentiment the knights both shared:

If it was this easy to kill him, I'd have done it a long time ago.

"Rooooooooooooaggghhh!!"

A guttural roar, issued from the depths of Hegni's belly. He lacked any buff to block the pain, and only held Hedin's blade.

There was a flash of steel.

"Ugh..."

Guided by all Hegni's might, the blade cut Dina from shoulder to hip. She staggered back and fell, and Hedin's magic finally dispersed, giving way to colorless gray skies.

It was at that moment she saw it. Hegni, sword poised for a horizontal swing, no love at all in his eyes.

"Hegni," she said, "I—" *love you.*

Those final words were never spoken, interrupted by Hegni's borrowed blade. The siren's severed head flew through the air, a peaceful smile on its lips, and Hegni turned his back, refusing to dignify the death of his cursed kin with a moment more of his attention.

Instead, the head landed at the feet of Vena, who had escaped death due to her stolen defense. She picked up Dina's severed head and peered at it.

"D-Dina...?"

The light softly left her own eyes, and soon she tossed it aside.

"No! No, no, no! It's so dirty! Such a dirty thing can't possibly be her! We're both elves! Beautiful elves!"

After her outburst, Vena laughed. She went on laughing as the tears began to roll.

"Where are you, sister? Where did you go? Don't leave me!"

A vital part of her destroyed, she broke.

Then again, the Dis sisters had always been broken. It was only through each other that they ever falteringly clung to sanity.

The tears and laughter overflowed. Here she was, a deviant who had only

ever pursued her own lust for killing.

At last, her eyes fell upon Hedin.

“Ah, there you are, sister!”

Crawling on her front, she arrived at his feet and clung to his leg. Hedin looked down at her, at this twisted creature who had created a refuge inside her own brain, but he said nothing. Only his hair fell across his face.

“Break me, sister! Love me, sister! Hurry up and turn our pain and suffering into joy, so I don’t have to feel so cold!”

Soon Hedin could bear her pathetic, dirty, rotten, vile and hopeless behavior no longer, and he snapped at her.

“Shut up, you filth!”

“Eep!”

His hand tightened around her skull, and he hoisted her into the air. His coral-red eyes burned like fire, causing Vena to squeal.

“It hurts! It hurts so good!”

“You abhorrent, accursed, befouled, begrimed, defiled, depraved, fiendish, foul, greasy, grimy, loathsome, lousy, malicious, malodorous, oblivious, obnoxious, perfidious, pernicious, repulsive, revolting, sinful, spiteful, toxic, treacherous, ungodly, unholy, vicious, vile, weaseling weevil! You are evil incarnate! After all this time, you seek to be absolved of your sins?! I can hardly bear to admit we are the same race! Get out of my sight!”

His anger provoked, Hedin took his revulsion, and like a fire-breathing dragon, he belched a stream of insults at the hated elf before preparing to remove her from this world entirely.

“Strike forever, indestructible lord of lightning!”

Gazing deeply into the burning hellfire of Hedin’s eyes, Vena smiled as bitter tears rolled down her cheeks.

“Hedin. Sister. I love you!”

“Valiant Hildr!!”

Lightning erupted. Once the magical embodiment of Hedin's rage had subsided, there was nothing left of Vena.

But unlike Hegni, Hedin had been forced to bear witness to the elf's last words.

"You make me sick!!" he spat.

"A-Apate...and Alecto, too?!"

In the Amphitheatrum, the Evils cultists paled as they beheld the fates of their masters. At that moment, there was a rallying cry from a field captain atop the eastern walls.

"S-send in the reinforcements! Take down the strongholds, now!"

He could see the smoke and flames rising all across the city, but what worried him most was the shouts of adventurers he heard. The balance of power had clearly tipped in Orario's favor.

"The adventurers abandoned their posts to sally forth!" he yelled, seizing his last chance to scrape things back. "Strike at their weakened defenses, and we shall have victory yet!"

Central Park was a lost cause, as was the Amphitheatrum, but the other four strongholds were vulnerable due to the charge of Noir and the other veteran upper-class adventurers. Many of them had been Level 3 and above, and there was no doubt their maverick sacrifice left holes in the defensive line. That was precisely why Finn had been so reluctant to send them in the first place.

"All units, descend from the city walls! Chaaarge!!"

The troops entrusted to maintain the siege were highly skilled. Seeing the war about to come to a decisive end, this commander ordered those troops to leave their positions and join the fight below. However, just at that moment...

"Guh!"

"Gah!"

They were all hit by a frighteningly accurate hail of arrows. It came not from

the streets below, but from their flank—a fact that could only mean their assailant was on the walls with them. Flabbergasted, the elite Evils troops wheeled around and were shocked by what they saw—one of the gods themselves leading a charge of her bow-wielding followers, each wearing the mark of the moon and bow.

“Shoot them!” she cried.

“A-a goddess?! Gahhh!!”



The goddess moved so fast; it was only due to his Falna that the captain could even see her. His focus was split between her fast approach and the rain of arrows loosed by her followers, to which the goddess herself seemed to pay no heed. Then, with godly timing, she leaped upon him while drawing her mythril blade. Seven swift cuts to the seams of the armor he wore beneath his robes, and the follower of darkness crumpled. He watched with growing despair as the reinforcements—allies from *outside* the city—streamed over the walls, until a hard blow from one of the goddess's followers knocked him unconscious.

"Lady Artemis! We've captured the eastern walls!"

"Hold them. We must hold this path into the city. Our enemies have spotted us, and we can no longer rely on the element of surprise. Wait here until Lanta arrives."

This azure-haired beauty was Artemis, goddess of chastity. Answering her follower without looking back, she instead turned her gaze left, toward the southeastern walls. Far in the distance, an Evils cultist pointed in her direction and started making a ruckus. The goddess loosed an arrow, which sailed through the air and struck the alarm raiser, who promptly exploded.

Artemis frowned. She hadn't known that would happen.

"Still, it's a relief to finally be here in Orario," said her captain. "After marching for five days and five nights, I thought we would collapse!"

"Sorry about that, but we couldn't just abandon the people here. If Orario falls, the mortal world is done for."

Artemis continued shooting arrows even while conversing. She struck a brave and awe-inspiring form, her wise eyes constantly scanning the city for movement.

This was *Artemis Familia*. A familia without a home, who wandered the continent on a perpetual hunt. Though not officially part of Orario, they still counted upper-class adventurers among their number, and even the goddess herself was a formidable fighter to be reckoned with.

Three days prior, in their underground hideout, Valletta and Vito had said the following words:

“How will the other cities have resources to spare when they’re dealing with an unprecedented outbreak of riots all at the same time?”

“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.”

They had decided that the continent had better things to do than to send aid to Orario.

They were wrong. These brave women put Orario’s needs above their own. Though the strongest of them were only Level 2, no hunt was too dangerous with the divine leadership of their goddess at their backs.

“I can appreciate why it was important to liberate all the towns and villages along our path, but shouldn’t we be out helping other world powers like the empire?”

“We’ll leave that to the School District. Their forces far outclass ours, both in quality and quantity. Plus, they have the Knight of Knights on their side.”

“You mean that brat who helped slay the Leviathan...?”

The actions of *Artemis Familia* had been swift. The moment she heard news of the Great Conflict, Artemis had made the decision to come here, to Orario, instead of assisting elsewhere. Having scaled the massive walls with a rope, she beheld for the first time just what had become of the inner city.

“Either a return to the ancient times, or a prelude to Makhia... Is this truly this city’s destiny?”

“...Hmm? Lady Artemis?”

“Nothing. Once Lanta returns from exterminating the monsters below, we’ll move out. Rethusa, decide who’ll join the hunting party and who’ll stay here!”

“Yes, my lady!”

Artemis’s captain returned a vigorous nod. A spark-filled wind blew over them, but the goddess tried to ignore it, pulling back her bow and resuming her archery.

“Artemis, you came!” said Hermes, seeing the azure-haired goddess and her all-female band conquering the city walls.

As he watched them proceed clockwise, Hermes felt a sense of relief, knowing the days of the enemy siege were numbered. Alone, atop one of the buildings in the casino area, he turned his gaze to the streets below.

“Things are just about settled up here,” he said. “Our brave adventurers have given too much to lose now.”

It was not a prediction, but a given. The fires of rebellion were lit and already far out of control. It was only a matter of time before evil succumbed.

“The problem now is the Dungeon... I hope you can handle it, girl.”



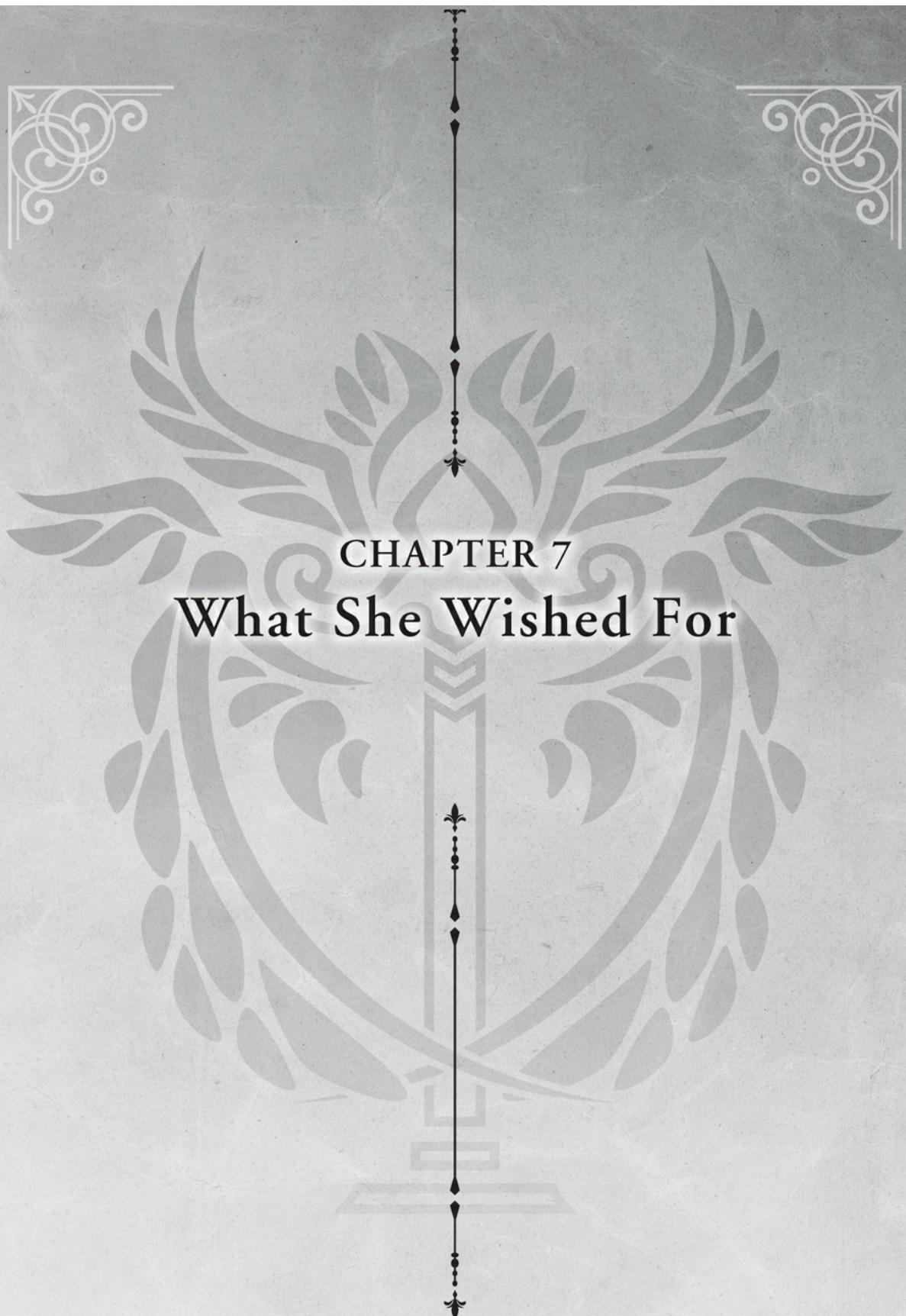
“...Well now. I certainly didn’t expect to see you down here.”

Erebus could hardly conceal his shock. The last of his followers lay beaten at his feet, trounced by the adventurers who accompanied his unexpected guest.

The dark god smiled and lifted his head, meeting her gaze.

“You sure do like surprising me, don’t you, Astrea?”

Standing before him was a goddess clad in purest white, with long, walnut hair that fell about her waist. For the second time, the goddess of justice had come to confront absolute evil in person.



Story by Eujino Omori · Illustration by Sakage
Character Design by Sazuhito Yasuda

CHAPTER 7

What She Wished For

The flames cried out. *Crumble, crack, perish.* The eighteenth floor was no home to paradise now; only a burning arena that trembled and sparked amid the dueling forces of justice and evil.

“Those adventurers with you... Followers of Hermes, I presume?”

Atop a bluff commanding a view of the entire floor, Erebus looked to each of Astrea’s escorts in turn: a male elf, a chienthrope thief, and a human girl.

“I suppose that makes sense,” said Erebus with an aura of calm. “After all, your own followers are otherwise occupied, aren’t they?”

“Yes. But Hermes was kind enough to lend me his own from outside the city. It was pressing I meet with you, you see.”

Her indigo-blue eyes were stoic and firm, like an arrow of justice. The corners of Erebus’s mouth crept up.

“And why is that, Astrea? Come to pass your judgment on me, have you?”

Erebus was alone, unbacked by any of his followers. Most had given their lives to protect their dark master from the ire of the monster Delphyne, and Astrea’s escort had swiftly dispatched those who remained. If Astrea wanted to deal with Erebus right here and now, there was no doubt she could do it.

But instead, she gently shook her head.

“That is not why I have come, Erebus. After all, if you die here, you will not return to see the light of heaven.”

“.....”

“The Dungeon will devour you, and you will be forever lost.”

Erebus shrugged. Astrea stared at him and continued talking.

“I only came to see you and be with you as the ordainer of justice, while the fate of our children plays out.”

Standing by his side, Astrea looked out over the Dungeon floor, where the black wind fought Delphyne, and the followers of justice kneeled at the feet of Silence.



“Show me,” the woman said; it was a silent scream from the lips of the most powerful beauty to ever walk the battlefield. “Show me a greater power. Show me proof I cannot deny. Show me will! Show me resolve! Show me justice! Show this evil what your light can do!”

Nobody could answer her. Lyra, Neze, Noin, Iska, Lyana, Celty, Asta, Maryu—all of them wore bitter scowls across their bleeding faces.

Even Alize could only ball her fists in frustration.

Lyu was no different.

All of *Astrea Familia* lacked the power to teach the witch her errors.

However...

oooooooooooo...

The roof of the Dungeon shook. A rumble from the surface, spanning the long distance, as if to spur the girls on.

There was no way they should have been able to hear it, and yet hear it they did.

The sound of those who fought.

Was it Warlord? Braver? Was it Andromeda? Or was it a funeral dirge for adventurers whose names would not be remembered?

Either way, it was the howl of heroes—of those who seized their future, and of those who passed it on.

Lyu felt it, too, in the very depths of her soul—and made a choice. Planting her hand on the ground, she bore her bruised and battered body to its feet.

“Leon...!” said Alize, wide-eyed with wonder.

Alfia turned to the girl, her eyes closed as ever.

“Erebus’s favorite,” she said. “Do you have an answer for me?”

Lyu looked down at the wounds on her right hand.

“...No,” she said in an almost imperceptible voice.

“What?”

“Right now...in my current state... I cannot persuade you, or even say for certain what justice is.”

Lyu spoke the truth of her heart. She didn’t lie or try to show off. Instead, she laid her weakness bare.

“I’d be lying,” she said, “if I said your tale just now—of destroying Orario to save the world—didn’t shake my faith a little.”

“Leon...” said Lyra, looking up at her.

“Even now, I’m nothing but a lost traveler on an endless journey...” Lyu went on.

Then she clenched her right hand tight.

“But there is one thing I know for sure, Alfia! With your solution, justice will never go on!”

“What...?”

“You look only to the past! Not to the future, or even the present!”

Alfia’s ultimate aim was to revive the world of antiquity. A return to the Age of Heroes from thousands of years past. She looked not to step boldly forward, but to undo the progress of history, and that was something Lyu could never accept—for one simple reason.

"You'll be casting away everything we've been given—everything we've inherited from people like Adi!"

"!"

"That's why I can never accept your way! You'll be wasting all their lives—all their deaths!"

Alfia wore a look of utter shock.

And it wasn't just her. Alize, Lyra—all of *Astrea Familia* were stunned.

Lyu's gaze was fixed firmly on the future, not the past. She did not run from the fear and despair that lay ahead, but stood to oppose it.

"All their rights...and all their wrongs! I carry all of them with me and reach for whatever lies ahead!"

Perhaps it was naive of her. Perhaps it was youth. Youth blinded her to the horrors that awaited her. Youth allowed her to dream.

Perhaps, to someone like Alfia, who had personally witnessed the brutality of the world, Lyu's thoughts were a fanciful fiction. A wish that could never be fulfilled.

But Lyu had known despair once. She had tasted loss and grief. She, too, had seen how harsh the world could be, and she had not given up. Her chin remained lifted, her eyes directed ahead. Lyu chose to keep walking despite knowing full well what she might find.

Her will was noble; her journey long. Even if she were to fall again, she would get up and keep walking. It was her righteous sense of justice that allowed her to do so.

And so, with that fire in her heart, and starlight in her eyes, she looked at Alfia and said, "That is my duty to those who came before me!"

Justice would never die. In order to pass it on, Lyu looked to tomorrow.

The torch she received would burn away the darkness. That was what she believed. That was what Lyu declared.

She would uphold her vow, both to Adi, and to those who still fought on the

surface, even now.

“.....”

Alfia was frozen. She was still trying to make sense of what she'd heard, as if the concept of something other than despair were alien to her.

Meanwhile, Lyu's words lit a fire in the other members of her familia.

“...You said it, kiddo.”

It was Neze, the animal girl, a grin on her face. Hearing those words from the lips of their newest recruit, she slapped her knees and pulled herself upright.

“Hah. That's our baby sister for ya. Such a simpleminded idiot,” said Lyra, climbing to her feet and wiping the blood from her cheek.

It was then that Alize, somehow the most energetic of all, leaped to her feet and proudly thrust out her chest.

“I think Leon's onto something here!” She beamed. “Future! Yeah, that's right! Future! Just keep saying 'Future' and it sounds all justicey! Yeah! Now that's what I call justice!”

“...Oh, I forgot. We've got an even bigger idiot on the team, and it's the eldest sister...” said Lyra with a sigh.

“But it sounds like we've got our answer,” said Lyana, the human mage, swinging her wooden staff.

“Yeah. Thanks to Lyu,” said Maryu, the healer, and the actual eldest sister. She chanted her spell and restored the other girls.

“We've got to chase after the future, no matter how bad it gets,” said Noin, the human.

“Because we're the only ones who can carry on Adi's words, and her smile,” said Iska, the Amazon. The two of them lifted each other, shoulder to shoulder, and stepped forward.

“Until the day comes when we return to stardust...” said Asta, the dwarf.

“...we'll all keep walking forward,” Celty, the elf, concluded. The two of them shared a smile that transcended race.

Alize looked around at her fellows, and with a bright, sunny, smile...

"We follow our duty! We balance the scales! Until the day the stars claim us!"

Without further prompting, the girls all looked at each other and shared a nod.

"Like comets in the sky above, we leave our starry trails on this earth where'er we go!"

Lyu and the rest of her family completed the oath.

"""This I swear, on the sword and wings of justice!"""

The ashen hair of Silence fluttered in the combined wind of the maidens' vow.

"Not the past, but the future," she muttered. "To look not to proven history, but the unknown and unwritten. Then to you girls, I must seem a specter, bound to the past...or perhaps a dusty old memento of times gone by."

To anyone paying close enough attention, it must have seemed as though the witch's lips formed a gentle smile. But the very next second, that illusion was lost amid the whirling sparks.

"Very well," she said. "This is the end...of you foolish children and your impossible dreams. I swear on my own life that I shall bury you all. There will be no salvation. There will be no mercy. All will be erased. You have brought your noise to me...and now you shall pay."

"Oh, we'll pay, all right!" chirped Alize. "And we'll take you down!"

"This is it, Alfia!" yelled Lyu. "This ends here!!"

The scarlet flames raged, and the gale wind blew. Lyra and the other girls followed. Ahead of them stood the conqueror of evil, eager to put an end to their ongoing justice.



"Future...? Dreams...?"

Wreathed in a magical light, the bell of Silence tolled, and a battle began to unfold. A short distance away, Vito watched over the girls make their promises

with a look of utter shock.

“I don’t understand. How can such cheap rhetoric empower them? How can they face the might and despair of Silence?”

It wasn’t their words that surprised him; Vito was no stranger by now to the pretty white lies of justice. But the conqueror was unassailable, and no amount of hot air could change that.

Vito knew as much firsthand. He still remembered his reaction to being stripped bare by Zald. Pure terror. Like meeting a being from another dimension. A man against whom any and all resistance was a futile endeavor.

And yet, *Astrea Familia* had found strength in those pretty white lies. They faced the witch without any fear in their hearts.

What sorcery made such things possible? What justice?

At that moment there came a hysterical laughter. Not from the man’s own lips, but those of the girl standing beside him.

“What is so funny?” he asked, turning to Kaguya.

“Oh, nothing,” the girl replied, wiping her eyes. “It’s just...I knew that girl was stupid, but not *this* stupid. Even for an elf, she’s remarkably stubborn.”

A gentle smile appeared on her lips, as though she’d found something precious she had been missing for a long time.

“Look at her, defect. Look at that idiot. Look at that elf.”

Vito followed Kaguya’s gaze to Lyu, fighting wildly with an elven sword in one hand and the weapon of her departed friend in the other. The trails of her blades shimmered like starlight.

“Isn’t it beautiful?”

Normally, Vito would have denied it reflexively, but he was so entranced that he couldn’t respond.

“Isn’t it blinding? The faith of a moron who believes in hope. Someone who strives for perfection, who admits their mistakes, and who looks ever forward.”

Failing to put in the effort would bring you nothing. Ignoring your flaws was a

mistake.

Anyone could ignorantly believe in hope. Similarly, anyone could give up on the future.

But to take steps in the direction of that hope, and to aim for that future; that was something truly special. To Kaguya, that was surely where true justice lay.

“That is what we must fight for. That is what Adi wished to pass on. That is the justice we must carry!”

At that moment, her smile was that of the gentle elder sister, looking out for her sibling in her own, clumsy way.

“Justice will go on. A lovely phrase, don’t you agree? It means even my own sordid past is worth preserving,” she said.

But Vito refused to accept it. “Those words are nothing but a comforting lie!” he yelled. “If justice is so important, then what about me?!” He sneered in a futile attempt to conceal his self-loathing. “I am the incarnation of the world’s imperfections! There is no future for me! No hope I can cling to, nor justice to pass on!”

“No justice to pass on? That’s because you never listened to one.”

“Hrk!!”

Kaguya’s sharp gaze cut the man’s rant to ribbons.

“You decided you didn’t need to; you knew what justice was. You were all alone, and nobody could ever understand you, and it just wasn’t fair. You gave yourself over to madness and cruelty, and disguised it as anger. How could you ever pass that on?”

Vito was dumbstruck, but Kaguya’s cutting words did not stop there.

“You incorrigible fool. You’re nothing but a bloodthirsty beast, hiding behind tragic tales, blind to the paradox that lays at your core. Truly defective.”

“Grrh!!”

Vito had no response. He couldn’t argue back with logic, but neither could he surrender to violence and mayhem. The word *defective*, that Vito had once

welcomed, now seemed like a curse he could not escape.

“No matter what you say, we will preserve them. The ideas we’ve been given. The justice we’ve inherited.”

Kaguya returned her trusty sword, Higanbana, to its sheath.

“We will prove to you...that there are things that will long outlive us!”

“Hrk...?!”

“They will sing our heroic tales forever! Not because of a fixation on the past, but to strive for the future!”

When she closed her eyes, she saw the girl who once stood in twilight. And she saw the nameless few who fought and died this day.

With their thoughts occupying her mind, she allowed just a sliver of her blade to peek out, preparing to cut down whatever lay in her path.

Vito couldn’t keep up. “Heroic tales? That is the hope you bring against despair? What absolute nonsense! I won’t accept it! That’s ridiculous!”

He screamed and cried like he was throwing a tantrum. It was all he could do to avoid admitting the truth and breaking down completely.

“I must kill! I must destroy! It’s the only way to make the world right again! Your ‘justice’ is nothing but fabricated lies! You’re a fool to believe it!!”

“Enough.”

Kaguya silenced him with a single word.

“I will put an end, here and now, to your ridiculous delusions. With my own tainted justice—the art of my accursed Gojouno line.”

The Far Eastern girl shifted her foot, aligning her body side-on while lowering her posture. There was no mistaking what kind of technique she was preparing.

Vito took a few steps backward in fright, before planting his feet, steeling his nerve, and launching himself at her with a mad scream.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaarghhh!!”

With no way out of his harrowing realization, the man resorted to the only

thing that would bring him solace—plunging his knife through Kaguya’s heart.

However, Kaguya’s gaze was firm.

“Begone, twisted brute. *Ill-omened flower of death.*”

She spoke her ultrashort chant, and her sword flew from its sheath.

“Iai Strike: *Five Lights!*”

All of a sudden, Vito’s world shrunk. Five crimson streaks, the same red as the spider lily, trapped him like the bars of a cage.

“Rgh...!”

Vito saw her, in five positions at once. In front, to either side, behind, and finally, above. Her impossible bladework had sealed his fate.

The arts that Kaguya so despised were a fusion of magic enhancement and pure swordplay.

Her former house, the Gojouno clan, sat in the shadows of the Imperial Court. They handled arrests and executions, but also murder, assassination, and seduction—anything the higher-ups wanted dealt with discreetly. And sometime in the early days of the Age of Gods, this clan discovered a peculiarity in their bloodline: the transmission of certain skills and spells.

Just like how elves possessed a common seed that allowed similar skills to manifest, so, too, did the pure blood of the Gojouno line permit the mass creation of assassins, all with identical abilities.

Identical skills. Identical spells. The same horrifying training regimen enforced upon all members of the clan. Bred to be replaceable, and imbued with the founder’s abilities, honed to perfection over a thousand years of history.

That clan’s highest art was this: a paired skill and spell, each bearing the name Five Lights.

The spell was an exceedingly simple one that merely conjured five magical

slashes at whatever angle the user wished. It required the caster to possess an ungodly sword skill to elevate it and achieve something greater: an inescapable coffin of blades.

Vito dodged the first slash by a hair's breadth. With the knife in his hand, he parried the second on his right. He sacrificed his left arm, allowing the third blade to slice it off, while the fourth carved a gash into his back.

“Gaaaaaaaaagh!!”

After that, his luck ran out. The fifth and final blade descended on his neck, slicing into his shoulder, and was about to reach his heart when it disappeared. For what reason he could not fathom, but the girl had dispelled her magic at the very last second.

But such mercy was not enough to save Vito's life. Perhaps it was not mercy at all. All around him, his own blood drops were hanging in the air like a flurry of cluster amaryllis—the crimson color Vito admired most, rendered only to him as a cold, inhuman gray.

“This is the end, defect. Lie there until you perish.”

Her repugnant, despicable flower. Kaguya had grown used to its sight by now, but it disgusted her nonetheless. She returned her sword to its sheath, then turned her back on the fallen Vito.

“Captain! Leon! I'm on my way!”

Her destination was, of course, her loyal friends, still locked in battle with the Silent Witch. She left, clutching the wounds she had suffered.

“...Not...yet...! This...can't be over...yet...!”

The man she left behind burned with hate; hate for the world and everything in it. He clung stubbornly to life, fighting to stem the waters of life flowing out of him.

“I need to... I need to...!”

Meanwhile, from his vantage point far away, a single god looked down on his follower in silence, his face devoid of emotion.

The fierce fighting continued. Fire and wind came at her from opposite angles, but Alfia dodged and parried every last blow like a leaf in the wind.

“Brave of you to come so close, children,” said the witch. “Do you think speed and recklessness alone will win you the day?”

“No, but what choice do we have?! Your magic can hit us at close range or far, so we might as well be where we can hit you back!”

“That’s the only chance we have of winning!” said Lyu, agreeing with her captain’s words. “A long-range battle favors nobody but you!”

The two girls’ combination attacks were nothing short of art, but the witch was unperturbed. She parted her lips, preparing to blast the pair of them off the face of the earth.

“Besides, mixing close-and long-range combat is a vital skill for any adventurer!”

It was Neze, a midrange fighter, who plugged the gaps and put a stop to the spell with her throwing daggers. For Alfia, just a small tilt of the head was required to avoid them, but it created the smallest of openings for Astrea’s finest mages to unleash their spells.

“Celt, now!”

“Yes, Miss Lyana!”

An immense fireball and stream of roaring flames created an inescapable prison of fire.

However, the witch negated it entirely.

“*Ataraxia.*”

Her barrier obliterated the two spells, leaving not even magical residue behind.

“Erk, she put her enchantment back up!” exclaimed Noin, having paused for a moment to use a healing item.

“Well, of course she would!” shouted Lyra. “She only needs to say one word

to activate it, and she can turn it off whenever she likes! Even if it's not instantaneous, she can switch between offense and defense in the blink of an eye!"

Her irritation was plain to see. Neze once more voiced her concern. "I know, but...doesn't that make her unbeatable?! She doesn't have any weaknesses at all!"

No, she has to have some, thought Alize. Otherwise, she would have wiped the floor with us by now! She's a Level 7, and we're Level 3 at best! There's no doubt about it...her power level is dropping!

Two adjacent levels were an order of magnitude apart. A Rank Up was likened to an ascension of the body and soul, one step closer to godhood. The very idea of a Level 3 facing a Level 7 was so laughable it couldn't even be called a fight under normal circumstances.

So then, circumstances were not normal.

Alize had figured it out.

"We're on the right path!" she said. "Braver's plan to wear her out is working! Leon, commence operation Hit and Run! It's not very hero-like of us, but we have to keep her busy!"

"Right, Alize!"

At her leader's command, Lyu flew into a resolute barrage of swings. She never attacked from the front, but instead from the sides, behind, and sometimes used that as a feint to go in from above.

"Taking turns to keep me on my toes, are you? I suppose you aren't likely to give me a chance to cast my spells... No matter. Against you, I hardly need them."

The strategy was sound...against any normal foe, at least. Against Alfia and her prodigious talent, it fell woefully short. Just as she covered for Alize and came in close, Alfia pressed the sword aside with her palm, while her other hand, deadly as a guillotine blade, came down upon Lyu's neck. Alize was too far away to step in, but...

“Out of the way, greenhorn!”

A lightning-fast blade repelled Alfia’s chop.

“I step out of the fight for two seconds, and this happens! I just can’t leave you alone, can I?”

“Kaguya!”

Alfia stepped back to avoid her blade, allowing the Far Eastern girl to land beside Lyu.

“I was wondering where you went off to!” Alize chirped. “I didn’t believe for one second you’d just leave us all behind and run! Honest!”

“You’re as bad at lying as the elf, Captain. Best you keep your mouth shut... and leave this old hag to me!”

Kaguya did not spare so much as a glance in her leader’s direction. With a snarl that exposed her pearly whites, she kept her wicked eyes on Alfia.

“I’ve rid us of that meddling pest,” she spat. “Now it’s time to settle the score!”

“You have an impressive fire, child,” said Alfia. “However, I should correct you, for I am merely twenty-four.”

“Whoa! You’re *actually* that young?! I thought for sure you were, like, forty or something, and it was just your Falna making you look pretty! Color me shocked!”

“Alize! I know we’re fighting her, but you don’t have to be so rude!” said Lyu.

The weary gazes of the adventurers at the center of the formation converged on the pair. “What are they doing over there...?” Lyra sighed.

“Oh, pardon my rudeness!” said Kaguya. “It’s just, all old women look the same when you’re just seventeen!”

“If you mean to provoke me,” responded Alfia, “you’ll have to try a little harder than that. Your youth is nothing to be proud of.”

Without making any sound at all, Alfia instantly closed the distance with Kaguya. The Far Eastern girl’s eyes flew wide as she beheld the terrifying speed

and power of the witch's bare hand—as formidable a blade as any first-tier equipment.

"People age faster than you could ever know."

What followed was a deadly storm. The girls couldn't believe their eyes: Not only did Alfia's hand remain completely unharmed—her bare-handed parries actually wore down the girls' blades instead.

She's still going?! thought Kaguya.

She's even faster than before! thought Alize.

She's a monster! thought Lyu.

"We grow old," said Alfia, "every time we think of what could have been. To regret our actions is to curse ourselves. Even I no longer know my heart's true age."

Her gentle looks betrayed no emotion, but her words were laced with sorrow.

"We cannot fix our past mistakes. They are what make us who we are today... Zald and I are of one mind in this regard."



Beneath the ashen clouds, the people's voices roared. These were the cries of adventurers—the city's scream itself.

Ottar gazed to the sky, taking them in, before lowering his gaze to the man before him.

"Zald..."

In Central Park, just south of Babel's gates, the defeated conqueror was lying on the ground. All around, the scars of their fight were carved into the land. Flagstones had been uprooted, revealing the bare earth beneath. By now, the sparks of war were fewer in number, and the hell this man had wrought was beginning to fade.

Ottar's right hand gripped his sword, though he no longer possessed the strength to wield it. With unsteady movements, he made his way to Zald's side.

“...You bested me, then.”

“Yes... I did.”

Zald was staring death in the face. His armor was battered and torn, and the flesh beneath was blackened with blood. It was obvious he was not in good health.

Perhaps he never had been.

“Hah. Mewling...brat...”

His face was slick with blood, and the light in his eyes was fading fast. It was clear he was trying to laugh, but most of the muscles in his face no longer worked, and all he could manage was a slight twisting of his lips.

There was no trace of the fierce, imposing figure who had blocked Ottar’s path for so many years—just a dying hero on his way out.

“Things would have been different ten years ago,” Ottar said, casting his mind back to the past. “Besting you now means very little to me.”

“Spare me your pity...” Zald grunted. “Before this war, I feasted well... Never have I felt as strong as I did today...”

The one thing Zald didn’t want to listen to was the boaz downplaying his own achievements.

“You bested me regardless,” he said. “Take pride in that...and never forget it...”

“...As you wish.”

Even on his deathbed, the warrior had more to teach. Ottar fell silent, his mind swarmed by unnecessary thoughts and feelings.

His keen nose picked out a trace of rot amid the stench of blackened blood, and it brought to mind a memory—a memory of a time prior to the Black Dragon’s onslaught—when Ottar stood with Finn on a plain of black sand. Thinking back to that time, he asked the man a question.

“Zald, do you regret slaying the Behemoth?”

“...I do not.”

A question the man denied.

"I only played my part. For the good of this world...and for my fellow man. What...is there...to regret...? If there is one thing I regret, it is...Cough! Hack!"

As he tried to speak, Zald retched horrifically, spluttering black ooze that washed away the crimson blood.

"...Sleep now, Zald," came the voice of Freya, standing silently by her warlord's side. "I may not be your god, but I shall be here for you in the end regardless."

"Heh. What spirit of fortune I should thank...to behold you in my final moments...instead of that boorish old man..."

Zald managed to crack somewhat of a smile, taking one last parting shot at his familia's god.

"...Ottar," he said.

It took Ottar a moment to realize what sounded so odd. The man had called him by name for the very first time.

"...What is it?" he asked.

"Do not...rest easy. You have far...to go. Greater heights still...await..."

"...I know."

"Good..."

With his receding gaze fixed on the ashen skies above, the old hero left his final words.

"Never stop...fighting. Never stop...growing... Leave us...all... behind..."

With that, Zald breathed his last. There was no funeral song; instead, only the hymn of war resonated in the background. However, just for a moment, it seemed to grow in intensity, as if fulfilling his wish.

A gentle smile remained on Zald's lips, even after he passed. The goddess kneeled, reached out her hand, and softly closed his eyelids.

"The final remnant of *Zeus Familia* is no more," she said. "At last."

“Yes...”

Ottar stood, half listening to his goddess's words, as a thousand years of history crumbled in his presence. He craned his neck upward, beholding the same ash-laden sky Zald saw in his final moments.

“Zald...” he said. “I will always be grateful to you.”



“Zald confirmed dead! Almost all the enhanced species have been wiped out, and the stronghold defenses are all under control!”

Adventurers called out to each other amid the rapidly evolving war zone. There seemed to be no end to the good news constantly streaming in, bringing the strongholds hope. Ottar's victory, as well as the sacrifice of the veterans, empowered them to shake off their despair and fight on in spite of their horrific losses, dealing a heavy blow to the Evils and monsters alike.

“This is the home stretch!” said Asfi, her faith returning. “The Evils won't be able to hang on much longer! But still...!”

Behind her spectacles, her eyes narrowed. Her line of sight shifted to the fleeing Evils.

“Master Zald has fallen...? This cannot be... You'll pay for this!!”

“Come back here! ...Damn!”

Falgar watched in frustration as Olivas and the other lieutenants left the battlefield, covering their retreats with whatever forces remained available to them.

If only we had the forces to pursue them, thought Asfi, biting her lip, but we've taken too many casualties already! We can barely defend the strongholds as it is! The Evils still have plenty of suicide bombers and monsters on their side. At this rate, we'll have no choice but to let their leaders escape!

At that moment, a runner from *Loki Familia* appeared from the northwest—the direction of Guild HQ.

“Perseus! A message!”

The use of a runner instead of a signal informed Asfi that the contents were more than what a brief sequence of flashing lights could convey. She stiffened in fear of what that might be.

“You’re to join up with Ankusha and assume overall command!” the envoy said.

“What?! Me?” Asfi shrieked. “What happened to Braver?!”

There were already standing orders in place for the worst-case scenario—in which Finn was assassinated or otherwise taken out of the battle—but they required the strongholds to act independently, not for anyone to take over the prum general’s spot.

The messenger hemmed and hawed awhile, struggling to find the words, before...

“...The captain has, er...*opted to take independent action*, ma’am...”

“...You’re kidding me...”

Asfi’s eyes flew wide as she realized what he intended to do.

“Morale on all fronts is dropping fast! We don’t know how long we can sustain the attack on the strongholds! Heavy casualties among the tamers, too!”

“*Apate* and *Alecto* have both taken heavy damage from *Freya Familia*! I’m getting unconfirmed reports that the Dis sisters and Master Basram have all been killed in action! The remaining spirit warriors are retreating alongside the rest of our troops!”

Despair crept into the voices of the Evils messengers. Every word out of their mouths only enraged Valletta more and more.

“Dammit, dammit, *dammit*!! Order those losers to hold the line and tell our lieutenants to get their asses back to Knossos!”

Valletta was a competent commander. She wasn’t one to let the anger get the

better of her. Suppressing the fire roaring inside her, she shifted her mind to plans of retreat.

“And don’t let Finn’s lot find out about our secret entrance!” she yelled. “Stay off Daedalus Street and use the one outside the city! Make ‘em think we’re runnin’ away!”

“B-but, ma’am, even if we regroup, we no longer have the strength to make another offensive! The day is lost!”

“No it ain’t! Listen!” cried Valletta as the ground beneath her feet shuddered. “Hear that? Erebus and Alfia are still alive down there! That means the war ain’t over yet! We just gotta make it to Knossos, regroup with that woman, and then...”

But then came a voice. A voice Valletta had never expected outside her worst nightmares.

“Spear of magic, I offer my blood! Bore within this brow.”

“...Gh?!”

Be it through some fluke of the wind, an auditory hallucination, or some uncanny sixth sense like Braver’s thumb—Valletta heard a voice that should’ve been too far to be audible.

“Hell Finegas!”

Her eyes were immediately drawn to its source—to West Main Street, where a lone prum stood atop a mountain of Evils corpses.

He slowly opened his eyes.

“...There’s no escape,” he said. “This is checkmate.”

His irises, once azure, were now a burning crimson. Blasting the cobbles at his feet, he sprinted faster than the wind, bearing his greatspear.

“F-Finn?! You bastaaaard!!”

Valletta screamed his name and leaped from the trading house edifice, leaving her flustered underlings to follow. Springing from rooftop to rooftop, she traveled from the southwestern district toward the southeast, hoping to escape the prum’s wrath.

She had made a snap decision. She was fast on her feet. But the prum was even faster.

“Gaaaaaaaagh!!”

A scream echoed through the streets. It belonged to one of the cultist pawns Valletta had sent to die in her stead. She had left them to harass Finn like a swarm of wild hornets, and they had succeeded in their task for only a few seconds before he took them apart and resumed his pursuit.

Finn lopped off hands, skewered hearts, let lips run red with blood. Heads flew, bathing the streets in crimson rain, before landing far away. But these people had toyed with human life, and their fates meant nothing to him. Instead, he fixed his scarlet eyes on Valletta.

It was difficult to keep him in sight because of his sheer speed. Finn was like a vicious hound, refusing to give up the chase until one of them was dead.

“I’ve left command of our armies to Asfi and Shakti,” he muttered, eyes fixed unerringly on his target’s back. “There’s only one man uninjured enough to go after you, and that’s me. What’s the matter, Valletta? Never expected the king to come after you alone? If so, you only have yourself to blame.”

A lone cultist hurtled down at him from above, but one swing of Finn’s greatspear caused the unfortunate man to light up the sky in a premature explosion. His bloody remains splattered the walls as Finn locked eyes once more with the enemy general.

“You don’t know how long I’ve waited to do this, Valletta.”

Without even a moment’s pause, Finn resumed his pursuit.

“Where’s your guard, Finn?!” screamed Valletta over her shoulder. “You think I can’t handle one sneaky little prum?!” Still, she seemed to be avoiding challenging Finn one-on-one. “Once I regroup up with *Apate* and *Alecto*, you’re dead meat! We’ll kick the shit out of you!”

Apate Familia and *Alecto Familia* had been charged with conquering the Amphitheatrum in the east of the city, and right now they were heading south through district three—just a stone’s throw from where Valletta was in district four. Even if the Dis sisters and Basram were no more, the surviving forces included four spirit warriors, and the means of controlling them—Basram’s staff. These Level 5 soldiers would be more than enough to handle Finn.

“And don’t think I don’t know all about that spell of yours!” she sneered. “It raises your stats, but at the cost of your sanity! You’re just a berserker incapable of rational thought!”

Hell Finegas was a mind-altering enchantment. It granted the user a buff comparable to a level increase, but also imbued them with a lust for battle. Under its effects, Finn was unable to make coolheaded decisions, let alone command an army. In a straight-up fight, its potency was unmatched, but it rendered Finn far more vulnerable to traps and tricks.

“You’re a fool to come at me alone, Finn! And soon you’ll pay the price!”

With a swing of her arm, Valletta tossed a flash bomb. Upon seeing that signal, the survivors of *Apate Familia* immediately changed course. Though not as distinguished as the Dis Sisters, the other followers of Apate were a cut above the Evils’ rank and file. Their acting leader immediately took Basram’s staff in hand and struck its base against the rooftops, causing the four spirit warriors to charge like savage beasts.

Valletta grinned a malicious grin. In just sixty seconds, Finn would be nothing but a bloody puddle on the pavement. However, Finn seemed completely unperturbed.

“Sorry to disappoint, Valletta,” he said, “but it’s not going to be that easy.”

The four spirit warriors came straight at him. Finn landed upon the roof of a large brothel. As soon as he did, sixteen of *Alecto Familia*’s soldiers leaped out of hiding, their spells already charged.

The trap was sprung. But with the cold flames of brutality brewing within him, the man people called a hero unleashed his ferocity.

It was a massacre.

“.....”

The distant sounds of his greatspear going to work sent a chill down Valletta’s spine.

Finn sliced the first of the spirit warriors in half almost immediately. A thrust skewered the second in the neck. The carnage was enough to give even those mindless beasts pause, but even that was short-lived before the third of them fell prey to the raging tip of Finn’s weapon.

The remnants of *Alecto Familia* trembled with fright. The spirit warriors had been weakened in their battle with *Freya Familia*, but they still should have made for formidable foes. The fourteen mages of the ambush squad immediately fired off their prepared spells and magic swords.

In response, Finn gripped the still-moving body of the third spirit warrior and used it as a human shield.

The very last thought that passed through the minds of the mages as their target disappeared into the flames, was how on earth had a mad berserker had been able to think up such a maneuver. The very next second, a throwing knife came speeding out of the inferno, skewering the Evils captain in the face. It crackled with dark lightning, betraying its true identity—the spirit dagger that had been lodged into the experiment’s spine and gave it its powers.

With their leader’s death, his men were overcome by confusion and chaos. It was then that a voice issued forth from the flames.

“Don’t run away. Let’s end it here.”

Then the small spearman leaped forward, slaughtering the remaining mages in the blink of an eye. Without their captain, they struggled to defend themselves, much less fight back. What was supposed to be the hunting of a mindless beast very quickly became the exact opposite, and the mad sycophants of Alecto and Apate were forced to pay the price for their vile crimes.

The last spirit warrior roared and leaped at Finn, but they were no match for the prum captain and his magical enhancements. Watching the fight made it quite clear that Finn's spell had not dampened his tactical acumen to anywhere near the extent that Valletta had hoped.

"Wha—?!"

Valletta was at a loss for words. After breaking through the melee fighters, Finn moved on to the supporting mages. By disturbing their ranks, he was able to push through the blockade.

"H-he's wiped out both Apate's and Alecto's forces!" cried a subordinate. "Braver's coming this way, ma'am!"

"He defeated our ambush?" snarled Valletta. "How?! That shouldn't be possible!"

Finn was meant to be nothing more than a savage beast, incapable of rational thought, let alone predicting a surprise attack. Up on the brothel roof, now a hill of blood, Braver stood and swung his spear.

"As it turns out," he said, "I can break through the madness if I'm angry enough. I do confess that I didn't know that before. And wouldn't you know it... I'm quite angry."

Finn's mind was sharp, his decisions swift. Like a flame so hot it burned clear and blue, his rage was more defined than it had ever been.

"I had to watch my mentors die," he said. "I know this won't bring them back, but...won't you help me grieve?"

Blood was splattered across his cheeks like an unholy specter, Finn took one step across the battlefield.

"I want to bathe you in your own blood."

His voice quivered like fire.

"I want to make you buy back each and every life you've taken...with your own suffering."

The hero became an avatar of rage and shot forward.

“S-somebody stop him!” Valletta cried. “Hold him off so I can get away!!”

Her soldiers let out terrified squeals as they ran to engage, but each of them ended up splattered against the cobbles like the ones who preceded them.

“That look... That look in his eyes! There’s no doubt about it...he’s still sane! He’s lost it and kept his sanity at the same time!”

Pale with fear, Valletta had no choice but to accept the truth.

Using his magic, Finn’s as strong as a Level 6! He’s the most powerful man in the city, alongside Ottar! My only edge was that he couldn’t make rational decisions! Once that’s out the window, I’m toast!

Valletta’s worst fears had become the honest truth. As she fled toward the center of the southwest district, Finn’s golden spear, soaked in blood, bore down on her.

“H-he can’t be stopped! He’s just one man, but... Gaaaagh!!”

The last of Valletta’s troops fell to Finn’s attacks. All that was left was the toxic spider herself.

“Don’t try to squirm your way out of this one.”

“S-stay away from me! Stay awaaaaay!!”

She let out a scream, fighting to be as far as possible from the lone prum. But Finn was completely cold to her humiliating flight. With one hand, he raised his spear like a javelin.

“...Rot in hell, Valletta.”

He threw.

The spear spiraled through the air at an ungodly speed, whistling toward the enemy commander.

“Hrgh... Grgh!!”

Time ground to a halt as pain shot through her body. The impact lifted her off

her feet and into the air.

Valletta shifted her gaze down and to the side. There, sticking out of her shoulder, was the tip of Finn's spear, coated in her own blood.

"Gaaaaaaaaagh!"

The weapon remained lodged in her flesh, dragging her down into the snarl of streets below.

"I missed," cursed Finn. "I only hit her shoulder. And now she's fallen into..."

Daedalus Street.

A labyrinthine maze of alleyways and passages. The city's second Dungeon. No amount of familiarity could help even a resident of Orario make sense of its enigmatic twists and turns. Some said that anyone who ventured in too deep would never come back out.

Finn narrowed his crimson eyes.

"I should hunt her down...end her life with my own two hands...but..."

He shook his head. It was like his boundless rage and the mind of Braver were warring inside his brain.

"I can't risk getting lost when there's so much going on. As much as it pains me to let her go..."

Valletta was a slippery one. Even wounded, there was no telling how far into Daedalus Street she could make it. It would take Finn time, not just to track her down, but to make his way back. And time was one thing he didn't have right now. The longer he was absent from the board, the more Finn risked letting other enemy pieces give him the slip.

"It's not good enough to win the battle... We need to win the war. Not just for those of us who live, but for those who've died."

Muttering to himself, Finn closed his eyes.

"...At times like this, I wish I really were a mindless beast."

Consigning his sorrow to those words, he opened his eyes again. Now they were calm and blue, and filled with reason once more.

“We’ll call it quits here, Valletta. Both of us have lost too much.”

Turning his back on Daedalus Street, Finn departed to rendezvous with nearby troops and mop up the stragglers. The sight of him mowing down enemy forces by himself raised the spirits of adventurers across the whole battlefield. He may have allowed Valletta to escape, but Finn was dead set on making sure the remaining Evils understood the price of their sins, and that they were prepared to pay them back in full.

With Valletta gone, there were none left among the Evils capable of matching Finn at the game of war. And so, the hero set dedicated himself to securing a complete strategic victory.

We’ve taken out more than half of the Evils’ lieutenants. It’s safe to say the battle aboveground is drawing to a close now.

In the casino neighborhood, Finn rejoined his army and went over the messengers’ reports. The cries of adventurers filled the air. They seemed like they would burst into song at any moment. From the top of the building, Finn surveyed the whole city.

All that’s left is the Dungeon. Since she wasn’t up here, I’m guessing Alfia really is down below, just as I predicted.

The Dungeon monster, and Hera’s finest. The task Riveria’s group faced was harsher yet than anything in the city streets.

However, if by some fluke their battle was still raging...

“...Then her time should be running out right about now.”

Finn’s eyes were drawn to the ground beneath his feet, where unfathomable depths below, his allies fought.



Blades swung endlessly, creating an unremitting cacophony of sound.

“Gah!”

Hit by the witch’s magic, Lyu was sent flying.

“Leon!!” cried Alize, calling after her.

There was nobody left to assuage her fears. Kaguya, Lyra, Neze—all the other girls had fallen to her might. Lyu looked up and saw a flutter of ashen hair.

“This is the end,” came Alfia’s voice.

She was so close there was no hope to either dodge or block her spell. Lyu watched in terror as the witch raised her arm.

“*Gospel.*”

But just then, right after speaking her ultrashort chant, Alfia became mysteriously still.

“Huh...? It didn’t work...?”

Lyu was astonished to find herself still living. She immediately leaped back to a safe distance, then shot Alfia a puzzled look.

Why hadn’t the witch’s spell obliterated her? It wasn’t long before Lyu received her answer.

“...*Hack!*”

Alfia’s hand flew to her mouth, just as a flood of crimson erupted from her throat.

“What?!”

Lyu and the other girls had no idea what was happening. It was like the witch was suffering a fit of some kind.

“She’s...coughing up blood?!”

“But we didn’t do anything!”

Lyu and Kaguya watched in shock as Alfia continued to choke. Her blood spilled forth, staining her dress and the crystals at her feet. Before long, she was standing in a scarlet puddle.

“...It’s true, then. What Finn said...”

It was Lyra who spoke up first, still awestruck at what she was seeing.

“I didn’t believe him at first. I mean, these two are so friggin’ powerful,

there's no way...but he was right."

The doors of memory were flung wide, and the girl's minds each played host to a scene of the past.

It was Lyu who instinctively described the scene.

"The weakness of Alfia, Silence..."



"A weakness? Zald and Alfia have one?"

They met on the eve of the decisive showdown, just a few short hours before total war began. *Loki Familia* had some vital information to share with the girls of *Astrea Familia*.

"Yes," Finn had said. "There's a small chance you might end up fighting one of them. I'm telling you this just in case."

Finn had already included this information in the battle plans sent to each of the familias, but at the eleventh hour, he had decided to call *Astrea*'s girls to the Guild Headquarters war room.

"A weakness, huh? Something that'll let us take 'em down in seconds, like a monster's magic stone? No chance."

Lyra scanned the faces of *Loki Familia*'s three leaders, clasping her hands behind her head.

"Some tiny advantage, I bet. A of good that'll do when we're talkin' about two Level Seven's who'll flatten us with one hit," she said.

Riveria answered Lyra's flippant attitude with neither anger nor blame. She only stated the facts.

"That is true," she said. "It will not trivialize your task. However, we believe that if you plan appropriately, victory can nonetheless be yours."

"...Against those two?" exclaimed Lyra in astonishment. "...You're pullin' our legs, right?"

It was Gareth who answered. “This weakness existed back when the Zeus and Hera familias were still around. In all likelihood, they have not been able to cure it.”

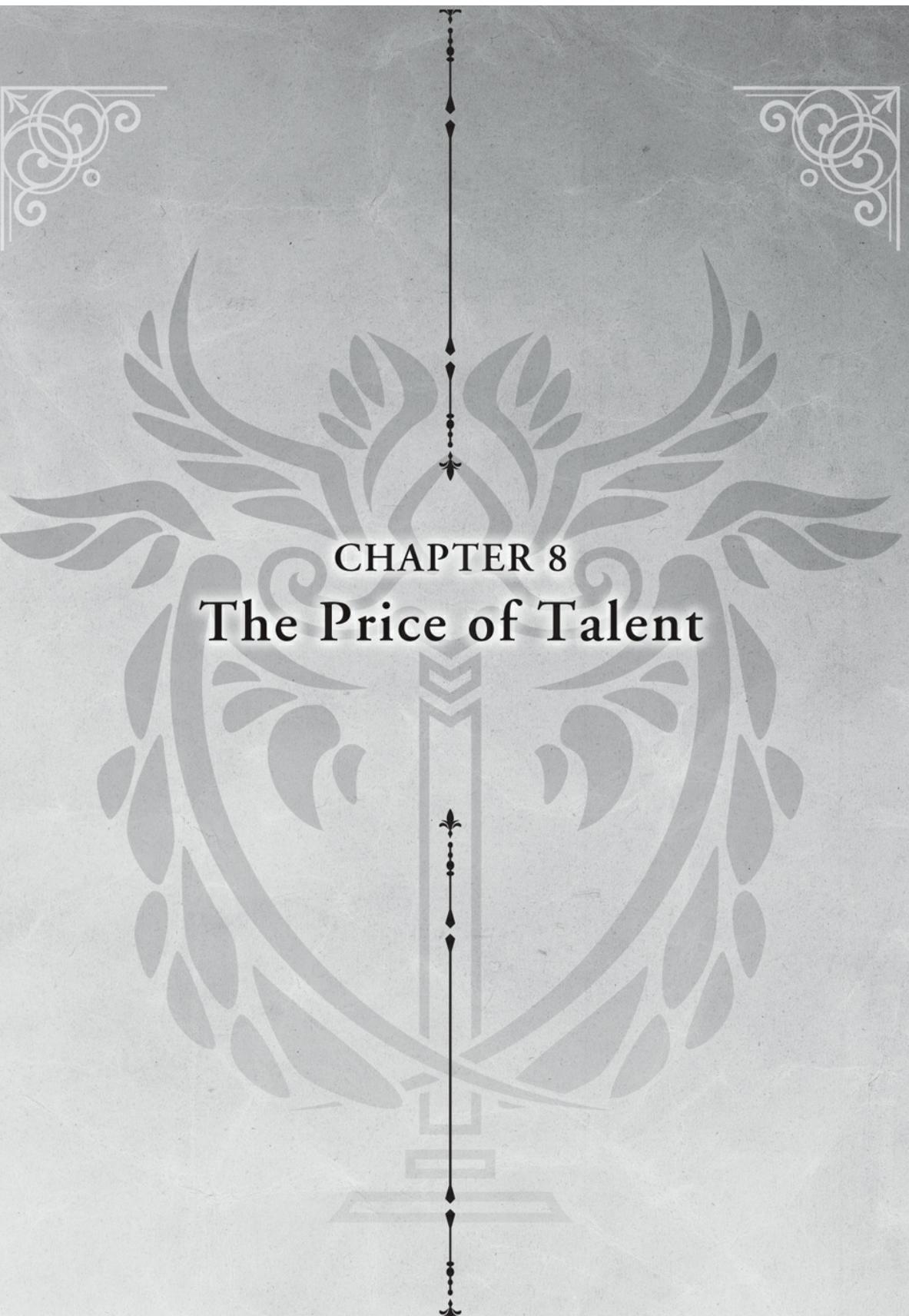
“...We fought her, once,” said Kaguya. “And we didn’t see any sign of a supposed weakness. Nothing at all...”

“There is one,” Riveria reiterated. “What’s more, it’s the reason Alfia is still *only* Level Seven despite all her talent.”

Jaws hung open at Riveria’s brazen remark. Even Alize was too stunned to say anything. It was Lyu, standing next to her, who spoke on her behalf.

“And what is that weakness?” she asked, a hint of tension in her voice.

Riveria closed her eyes. “The one thing that held her back from perfection: an incurable illness.”



CHAPTER 8

The Price of Talent

ASTREA RECORD

The War of Good and Evil

Story by Eujino Omori · Illustration by Sakage
Character Design by Sazuhito Yasuda



CHAPTER 8

The Price of Talent

“An incurable illness?”

In the war room of Guild HQ, Lyu repeated Riveria’s words with a sense of shock.

Finn took over the explanation. “Yes,” he said. “According to our sources, Alfia has had it since birth. Even receiving a Falna didn’t cure her of it—instead, it manifested as a negative Skill.”

The Skills and spells granted by Blessings were usually beneficial, but not always. They were a reflection of that person’s inner truths, and so sometimes they were all downside without any merit.

Alfia was one such example. Finn had learned as much, back in the glory days of Zeus and Hera.

“You could call it the price she pays for her exceptional abilities.”

“It is the one rule that even Alfia must follow,” said Riveria. “Something that no magic or item can overturn.”

Everyone in the room was shocked, save for Lyu. After scanning the surprised faces of the team, Gareth moved on to the next point.

“As for Zald,” he said. “While Alfia’s weakness is inborn, his is acquired. A pestilent rot slowly consumes him.”

“Acquired? Rot? What do you mean by that?” asked Kaguya.

The dwarf’s gaze became unfocused, as if he were looking far into the past.

“It happened when we slew the Behemoth,” he said. “In the battle, Zald was afflicted by the beast’s poison.”

““!!””

Alize and Lyu were both surprised to hear talk of that old battle come up.

“This is top-secret information, but Zald possesses a Rare Skill called Deus Ambrosia.”

Any records the Guild kept on its familias and the adventurers within them were considered strictly confidential. Some were so afraid of having information leaked that they secretly avoided reporting to the Guild at all. However, Zeus and Hera shared a special relationship with Ouranos, the founder of the city. They had delved deeper into the Dungeon than anyone else, mapped out each of its floors, discovered how to unlock Advanced Abilities, and studied the best way to develop Statuses. It was safe to say that, without them, Orario would not be what it was today. The city’s history was their history.

Hidden somewhere in those thousand years of recorded history were Zald’s and Alfia’s secrets. After their familias crumbled, Finn had gone to the Guild to request it.

The Guild, with Ouranos’s blessing, agreed, thus pinning their hopes on a new generation of hero.

Reading those reports for the first time blew Finn’s mind. The Abilities those adventurers possessed were off the charts.

And Zald’s was the most unbelievable of them all.

“Have you ever wondered why they call him Glutton? It’s because his Skill is activated by eating. Animals, people, even monsters. And when it does, it boosts his stats.”

“Wha—?!” exclaimed Lyra. “He gets stronger just by eatin’?! That’s basically cheating!”

“Of course, many things only offer a minuscule increase,” explained Gareth. “It depends on what he eats. The stronger it is, the greater the effect. I’ve heard he eats anything from materials gathered in the Dungeon to the bodies of his fallen allies. But what he ate most of all was monsters.”

“So you mean...” Lyu trembled, realizing where this was going.

Gareth closed his eyes. “Yes. Zald ate the Behemoth, too. In order to win, he

bit straight into its flesh. That granted him the power to deal the killing blow, but Behemoth's deadly poison struck back like a curse, devouring him slowly to this very day."

Astrea Familia was at a loss for words, hearing for the first time how the Behemoth was really slain.

To bite into the flesh of any monster was a vile, repugnant act for most people. It was unthinkable to try that with an incarnation of death like the Behemoth. What must have passed through Zald's mind when he did it? Was it a necessary step to take down a powerful foe? Or an act of bravery to protect those dear to him?

At last, the girls understood what Gareth had meant when he described Zald's weakness as "acquired."

"He, too, was fighting his own torment. One that we couldn't possibly understand."

"That's awful..." muttered Lyu, imagining the price Zald paid for his heroic act. Though he was their foe, she couldn't help but feel a little sympathetic.

Lyra grimaced. "In the end, the Behemoth had the last laugh... Ironic, ain't it?"

"Both Glutton and Silence played important parts in the slaying of the Leviathan and the Behemoth," explained Riveria. "But due to their actions, Zald was forced to retire from frontline combat, while Alfia's condition dramatically worsened."

"So then, the weakness you wanted to tell us about..." Alize ventured.

"Yes," answered Finn. "They can only fight for so long. If the battle drags on, their curses take their toll. Perhaps Ottar can get away with ignoring this, but for anyone else, it's the only way to even have a chance against them."

After a short pause, Lyra piped up. "Even if they did have these tickin' time bombs strapped to them back in the day—and I'm not sayin' I totally believe it, either..." she said. "But who's to say they still have those conditions? I mean, they weren't shy about marching straight into the city, and they sure aren't actin' like their days are numbered. Maybe they found some way to cure themselves while they were away all those years doin' gods know what."

The coolheaded brain of the party was never one to indulge in optimistic thinking. *Plan for the worst, hope for the best* was her mantra. Sensing somewhat of an affinity with his own personality, Finn grinned and explained to her the basis of his theory.

“You’re right, Style,” he said, “but I have reason to suggest that’s not the case.”

“How’s that?”

“On the night of the Great Conflict, Zald and Alfia could have easily struck a decisive blow, but they chose not to. What if that wasn’t caution on their part, but simply necessity, imposed by their respective conditions?”

Alize’s face lit up with understanding.

“Oh! You mean, they wanted to finish us off but couldn’t? Like, they needed to rest after the battle?”

“That would explain why it took some time before we saw those two again...” added Kaguya.

Finn nodded. “But that’s not all. Even before the Great Conflict began, we realized the Evils were up to something.”

The way Finn spoke suggested that of his two points, what he was about to say was what had convinced him his hunch was right. With confidence in his voice, he spilled what he knew of the Evils’ plans.

This was what Astrea, Freya, and Loki had convened to discuss only two days before the Great Conflict began, and what *Hermes Familia* had discovered eight days before that.

It was Gareth who picked up the remainder of Finn’s tale. “We know they conducted raids on magic-stone factories in order to acquire the detonators for their suicide bombs. However, there were two other points of activity that didn’t make much sense at the time...”

“The first were the actions of unblessed followers in Dedyne,” Riveria explained. “And the second was the theft of holy tree branches.”

“Dedyne...home of the Black Desert, where the battle with the Behemoth was fought...”

The eighteenth floor still burned. Atop a cliff, Astrea was discussing with Erebus the very same topic her children were.

“The land lies barren as a result of the King of Beasts’ toxic flesh,” she said, “but it is said that somewhere in the desert, a single species of plant thrives.”

Astrea didn’t even need to say the rest for Erebus to admit it. “Quite perceptive,” he said. “Yes, we sent our followers there to harvest that plant and make from it a tonic to keep Zald’s illness in check.”

“And the elven tree branches...”

“A partial remedy for Alfia’s condition. The ample magic power those branches contain is perfect for easing her symptoms.”

All of it had been in pursuit of these two items, so the conquerors could fight at full power for as long as possible.

Meanwhile, aboveground, Hermes muttered to himself.

“That’s why we never saw the bigger picture,” he mused. “The detonators, the activity in Dedyne, and the holy tree branches—they were all for different purposes.”

It was *Hermes Familia* who first learned of the goings-on elsewhere on the continent, but they only realized their significance on the night of the Great Conflict, with the arrival of Zald and Alfia.

They had informed Finn at once—that the enemy’s trump cards were limited-use.

That information was what had allowed Finn to stay hopeful, even when the conquerors’ might seemed overwhelming.

“All along, the Evils were funneling resources into their three secret weapons: the suicide bombs, Zald, and Alfia,” said Hermes, grasping at the singular line that led to victory. “But now that we know that, it’s proof enough that Glutton and Silence still possess their weaknesses.”



“Cough! Cough! Hack!!”

No matter how much Alfia choked, the blood kept coming, staining her sickly pale skin in sticky crimson.

Kaguya blanched at the sight. “Just how much blood have you lost?”

Lyu couldn’t help but ask. “And how much pain have you lived through your whole life?”

“How can I possibly answer that?” Alfia replied, after her fits had finally subsided. “This is all I have known from the moment I was born. If I asked you to describe the blood that flows through your veins, what would you say?”

With a slender arm, she wiped the blood from her lips.

“Alas, this detestable sickness has taken everything from me—even my own twin. If not for this, could I have slain the Black Dragon?”

This was her regret. Her curse. Her twin sister was the price she paid for her power—power that still fell short of fulfilling her goals.

“Could I have escaped this odious noise? Could I have escaped your scornful and piteous glares?”

Neze, Noin, Lyana, Maryu, Iska, Asta, Celty. Their eyes were all focused on her, causing Alfia to twist her lips in rage.

The witch spoke the truth—if not for her illness, she would have obliterated *Astrea Familia*. Perseus’s accessory, *Alfia Belador*, and Riveria’s spell, *Veil Breath*, had allowed the girls to survive Alfia’s opening gambit long enough for her ailment to kick in and decide the fate of the battle.

Since the fight began, Alfia’s condition had been steadily deteriorating. It was as if someone had been casting anti-Status Magic on her every second.

Alize had realized it first, when she noticed the witch’s power level was dropping.

The name of her Skill, the manifestation of her illness, was Gif Blessing. It induced a perpetual Limit Off state, but at great cost. In battle, or whenever she

suffered her fits, she was hit with many simultaneous status conditions, including poison, paralysis, and immobilizing sickness. Plus, for as long as it was active, her stats, stamina, and Mind all continuously decreased. It was the price of her monstrous talent, unmatched by even the most costly of curse spells.

No matter how hard she tried to mitigate it with technique, tactics, or going all out, Alfia at present possessed no greater combat ability than a Level 5. Perhaps even only a Level 4.

As she was now, even *Astrea Familia*'s victory began to sound possible. That was because any adventurer party was capable of overcoming a one-level gap through teamwork—it was the basic theory behind fighting a floor boss.

It wasn't only that Alfia *could* flatten her foes in an instant—she needed to. If the battle was allowed to drag on, she was doomed.

"Gh...! Alfia, we...!"

Lyu stepped forward and yelled at her but wasn't able to find the words to go on. Before she could think of them, Lyra butted in.

"Let's cut to the chase," she said, casting the witch a deadly glare. "We both know you're boned, so why not give up and come quietly, eh?"

"It's painfully obvious you cannot keep up the fight any longer," Kaguya agreed, directing a look at Alfia that one might give a decomposing corpse. "As much as it vexes me to give up on my revenge, I will not bring my sword down on such a pitiful sight."

"Alfia," said Alize with sincerity in her voice. "It's best you surrender. We might not be able to overlook the things you've done...but I understand why you did them; I really do."

There wasn't long left. From the very beginning, Alfia had been paying with her life just to be here, and now it wasn't even certain she'd survive to see it through. Alize's gaze held a fierce condemnation for Alfia's evil acts, but there was still a trace of respect.

"Surrender... Surrender, you say..."

Her words played on Alfia's lips. Feeling the battle was reaching its inevitable

conclusion, the girls began to lower their weapons.

And then...

“When will you vermin stop disappointing me?!”

She unleashed a wave of magical energy and rage.

“Gah?!”

“Do not make the mistake of taking pity on me, whelps. It does not matter how far my sickness progresses, it will never stop me burying every last one of you!”

The sound blast hit Lyu and her allies all at once. Alfia straightened her back, tall and proud once more, determined to live up to her name.

“And what does it change, in any case? Even if I am destined to die, Orario is finished! Killing me changes nothing! Behold, the monster rages yet!”

Alfia swept her arm, and as if on cue, the girls heard Delphyne’s terrifying roar.

“Roaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaar!!”

Lyu looked in its direction and grunted. “Grh...!”

“Th-the monster!” cried Celty.

“It’s regenerating!” said Kaguya. “It’s somehow even uglier than before! At this rate, it’ll break through *Loki Familia*!”

Delphyne began to take up even more of the cavernous space. Its jaw split into many shapes, odd protuberances grew across its length, and it spread a pair of toxic, purple, butterfly-like wings.

At last, it managed to shake free of Aiz’s wind and Riveria’s barrage of spells, and its roar alone was enough to shake the entire floor.

“I’ll end you all here and allow that beast to reach the surface! I will shatter the Dungeon gate!”

Alfia’s prediction was close to becoming reality. If Lyu and the other girls fell here, and if Aiz, Riveria, and Gareth couldn’t stop Delphyne, the evil dragon’s breath would burn a hole through the ground itself, drawing the curtain on the

Age of Gods and ushering in a new Age of Heroes, just as the conquerors had planned.

“I have made my pact! Traded my soul to the god of the underworld. I cannot bend my knee to justice now! I must see this ruinous path to its end!”

Her will shone brightly, even if it was an evil one. Alfia was not ready to give up on all she had worked for. The sands in her hourglass continued to fall, and until the very last grain stopped, the witch would follow her chosen road.

“Godsdammit, woman!” snarled Lyra.

“Why would you go that far?!” growled Lyu.

“What I seek is the past!” she proclaimed. “A return to the Age of Heroes! So long as you look to the future, we can never coexist!”

The girls gave her bitter looks, but her answer remained unchanged. Then the force of her next spell flung them all backward.

“.....”

Alize was silent, arm raised to protect her face. She lowered it, then stood at ease.

“How can I stop you, then?” she asked, her face a mask of pure sorrow. With nothing but regret for her own powerlessness, she raised her sword and pointed it at Alfia—the one sinner she could not save.

“There is only one way,” replied the witch.



“Become a hero.”

““““!!“““

The eyes of Alize, Lyu, Kaguya, and Lyra all flew wide open. On Alfia’s lips was a smile. Her eyes were open for the first time: one green, the other gray.

“Become a hero, and strike me down!” she said. “If you want to see the future, then show me you have what it takes to protect it!”

Neze, Noin, Lyana, Maryu, Iska, Asta, and Celty all clenched their fists.

“Show me this justice you so staunchly believe in! Show me it surpasses my evil!”

The witch made her principles known. There was no meaning in intent without the power to see it through. There was no value in power without a strong will to guide it. Only a noble soul, possessing both, would be capable of stopping evil.

In spite of the despair she had endured, Alfia was still a hero, and she presented her challenge to the unhatched eggs of justice who stood before her.

Lyu was stunned. It was Alize, standing beside her, who spoke first.

“Alfia...” she said, closing her eyes. And then, “Grab your weapons, girls. We’re doing this.”

“Alize...”

Lyra watched as her captain readied Crimson Order. She spoke her leader’s name, then nodded.

“Just you watch,” said Alize, pointing her sword between the witch’s bicolor glare. “We’ll show you! We’ll show you that justice goes on and carries the light of the past forward! We’ll take the hope we’re building and shove it in an old hero’s face!”

“...I know.”

Kaguya drew her katana. Neze readied her twin blades. Noin had her one-

handed sword. Lyana, her wand. Celty, her rod. Maryu, her mace. Asta, her ax. Iska, her fists.

Lyu took up her wooden sword in one hand, and the blade of her fallen friend in the other.

“Adi...” she muttered. “Give me strength. Give me justice! Let me overcome the hero who stands in my path!”

The girl’s legacy filled Lyu’s heart and became her courage for the fight ahead.

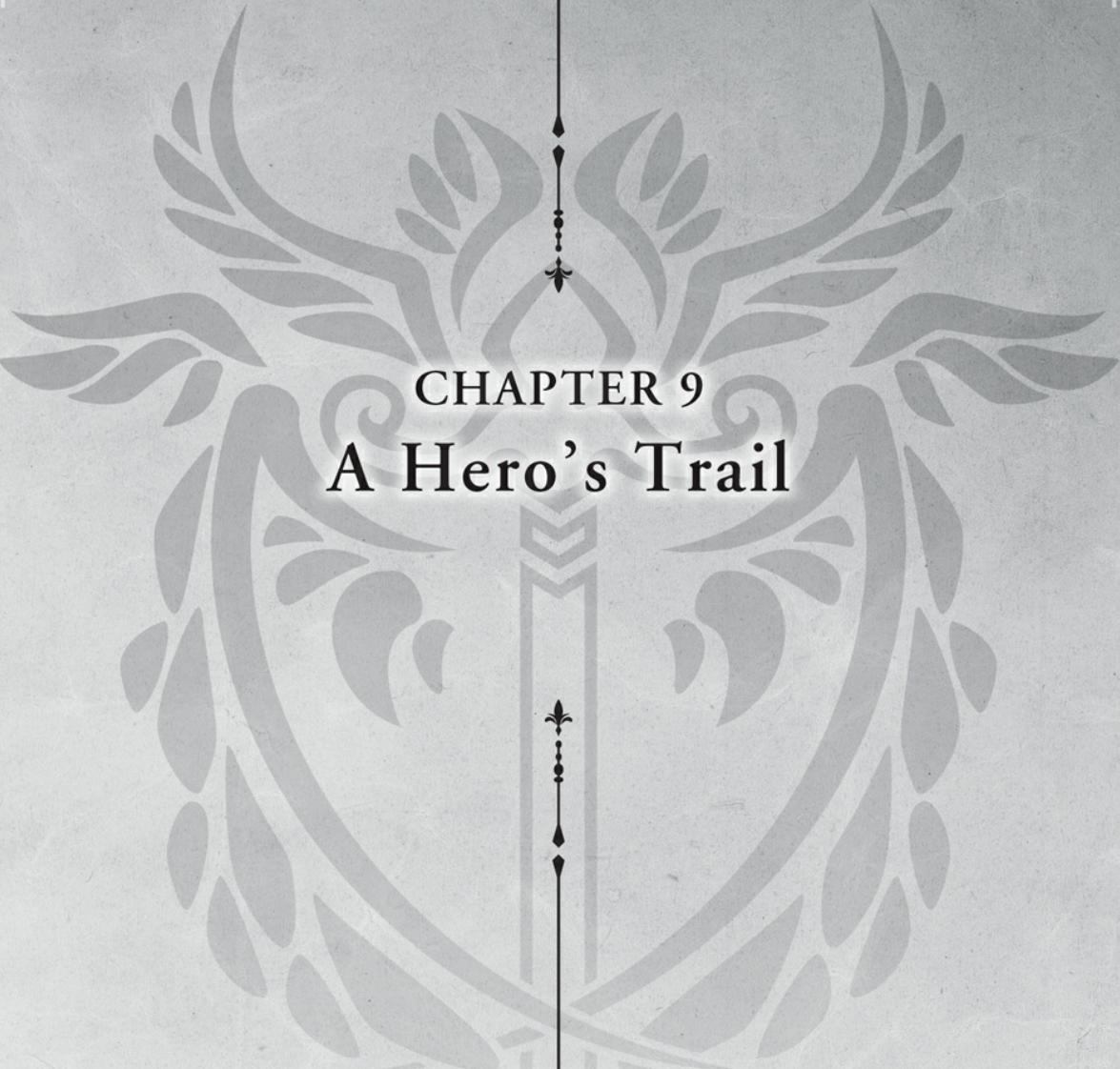
“You’re going down, Alfia! This we swear, on the sword and wings of justice!!”

Alfia smiled.

“Come, then.”

She narrowed her eyes at the dazzling light of justice before her. The next moment, she roared with ferocious spirit.

“I’ll show you what a true hero is made of, insolent children!!”



CHAPTER 9
A Hero's Trail

ASTREA RECORD
The War of Good and Evil

Story by Eujino Omori · Illustration by Sakage
Character Design by Sazuhito Yasuda



CHAPTER 9

A Hero's Trail

She was a hero.

Even now, crippled by disease, standing at death's door, with the very last of her life melting away like a snowflake, Alfia was a hero.

“Haaaaaaargh!!”

“*Luminous Wind!!*”

She danced between the blades of justice, nullified the flames that bore down on her like a hammer, and with a sweep of her arm unleashed the gospel that swept everything away.

She was a hero. In power, in strength, in appearance. Though she walked the path of evil, she was a hero nonetheless—perhaps the worthiest of the title by far.

“Mages!” screamed Lyra. “Keep peltin’ her with spells! Don’t let up!”

“Keep fighting!” shouted Kaguya. “Don’t give up, and don’t run!”

Their faces were stained in blood, but none of them took their eyes off the witch for a moment.

“Answer that monster with everything we have!!”

The disciples of justice raised a rallying cry in response to Kaguya’s words.

“I can’t show my back! Not to her!”

Clad in a verdant light and gripping her two swords, one elf ran forward, her mind attuned to nothing but the blood-spluttering hero before her.

“We have to surpass her! It’s the only way!”

Everything accelerated. Swords, shields, staffs. Flashes, slashes, bursts, and roars. Even their minds. The disciples of justice devoted everything they had to

the pursuit of more and more power.

“Alga! Alga! Alga!!”

Each time she spoke the word of power, more and more of Alize’s energy was drawn from her body and into her magic. The fires around her grew and roared, and at last, they collided with the sound of the witch.

“Alvarna!”

“Gospel!”

Their blazing movements were like a shower of meteors. The shooting stars of justice left glowing paths in their wake, combining their radiant light to extinguish evil.

“Alize... Girls...”

The gods watched from atop their cliff. Beside Astrea, the primordial darkness donned a smile.

“A battle of good and evil—their *last* battle, at that. Yes, *this* is what I wanted to see!”

Erebus shivered and spread his arms.

“This is *your* story, connecting the past to the present, and stretching on into the future!!”

Beneath his and Astrea’s watchful gazes, the black star of evil faced off against the myriad comets of justice.

Until...

“*O cursed root of my blessing, O maledict birth. O sin of mine, my twinn’d half’s demise...*”

The witch began a third incantation.

“That’s not her usual spell! It’s a new one!”

“Wait, this is...”

“It’s an ultra-long chant!”

It was not her wave of sound, focused on speed. Nor was it her magic-nullifying enchantment. Lyana, Maryu, and Celty, being the mages of the group, were the first to realize that fact. The witch had been concealing a third ability this entire time and was just now invoking it.

“Grh! Stop her! Don’t let her finish!!” yelled Kaguya. She could feel in her bones that whatever Alfia was planning, it would surely end the battle in one fell instant.

Lyu and the rest of her familia charged the witch, like bees swarming a scent they can’t ignore.

Many times their blades rang out; a vortex of strikes that birthed gouts of flames and gusts of wind, creating an inescapable realm of justice. However, the song of evil went on unhindered.

“There is no ablution, purification, or solace. Heaven’s bell begets my sin.”

Alfia’s sonorous voice continued its ode to demise.

“She’s dodging all our blows! She’s even fighting back!

“Concurrent Casting! We can’t stop her!

It was a peculiar stance. With both arms hanging limply by her waist, she weaved to and fro like a weeping willow, evading every last swing the girls took at her. Alize and Lyu were shocked to see that none of their attacks were connecting at all; the witch paid no heed to their consternation and struck the two girls in their plate armor with a sweep of her chopping hand.

Even Riveria and Gareth were distracted, their eyes drawn away from Delphyne and toward the melody of battle unfolding at the other end of the floor.

“This incantation... This flood of magic! There’s no mistake; it’s Alfia’s final spell!!”

“You mean the one she used to finish off the Leviathan?! Is she crazy? She’ll destroy us—and the whole floor, too!”

They were the only two beings present who had witnessed that spell before, at the conclusion of one of the Three Great Quests. More than anyone else, they feared what was about to be unleashed.

“Why, Alfia? Why do you seek destruction? If you have so much power, then can’t you find another way?”

But Alfia ignored the high elf’s pleas.

“O bugle of the gods. O harp of spirits passed, O melody of light; all traces of my unpardonable act.”

Discarding her silence, the witch drew deeply and allowed everything within her to become her strength.

“O wretched life of mine; the god’s most blessed craft, hearken now my hate!”

She laid her heart bare, using the key of hate to unlock the belfry of her sin.

“Here is my confession! The price of my sin, I pay in full!”

Her chant reached a crescendo as it approached its conclusion. The eyes of every girl in *Astrea Familia* beheld the same blinding light. A powerful, all-consuming...gray. Not the white that she could never attain, but a cruel reminder of the sin that tainted her very soul.

Then Alfia raised one arm and pointed up, and a magic circle appeared above her head, above which spawned a large gray object in the rough shape of a church bell.

“Hear the howl of the holy belfry!”

Everything shook. It sounded nothing like it should. It was a noise with no future—an awesome, magnificent sound that heralded the end of days.

Lyu felt trapped in time.

Alize felt frozen in ice.

Kaguya was awestruck.

Riveria and Gareth looked on in horror. The black winds calmed, and even Delphyne was hesitant.

There was no stopping her now. The ash-gray bell that hung above her shone

with searing light, then cracked, and burst open, releasing a howl of destruction that swept the land.

“*Genos Angelus.*”

It was the epitome of ruin. It snuffed out all the flames, quenching light from the floor in an instant. It shattered the land, extinguished fires, and broke the trees.

Pure destruction. That’s what was coming for them. The waves it left in its wake were enough to strip the adventurers of their gear and cause blood to seep from their eardrums. Moments later, the true blast bore down on them like a god-slaying hammer.

It was the cry of a Level 7 who wanted everything to perish.

The effect range was over one hundred meders. It couldn’t be dodged. It couldn’t be blocked. This would spell the end of *Astrea Familia*.

But just then...

“Finally, my time to shine!”

One of the girls started running straight at her.

“Raaaaaaaaahhh!”

Before anybody could stop her, Lyra pulled the shield off her back and threw herself at the oncoming sound, curling herself up to fit fully behind it. Immediately upon impact, the shield shattered into a million pieces, but not without first neutralizing the effect of Alfia’s spell.

“Wha—?!”

Kaguya, Riveria, and even Alfia couldn’t believe their eyes. It was the witch herself who first realized what had just happened.

“That was my *Silentium Eden*! But how?!”

Only one among them possessed the knowledge to answer her. After flying

halfway across the battlefield and rolling painfully across the ground, Lyra shot her a smile.

“What’re you complainin’ about?” she sneered. “*You’re the one who gave it to me.*”

It had happened just a few short hours prior, after Kaguya had split off to fight Vito. In order to make up for the girl’s absence, Lyra had moved up to the front lines...*or so she had made it seem.* In truth, she had been aiming for a specific moment.

“*Raaaahhh!!*”

“*A shield bash? Are you playing dwarf, prum?*”

At that time, it was this very same shield that Lyra had used to attack Alfia. And so the shield had come into contact with the witch’s magical barrier!

“You mean, back then...?!”

“Perseus worked together with that Cyclops to make it happen. This shield can steal any magic spell... Well, it could until it broke.”

Finn had already informed Lyra about Alfia’s spell far in advance. As the witch seethed, the prum calmly explained how she had performed her trick.

“Hermes gave us the design. It’s based on one of Zeus’s old shields. What did he call it again...?”

Lyra paused for a moment, then grinned.

“Oh yeah. Aegis—that was it.”

“Hrh...?!”

That was the name of a legendary artifact passed down by *Zeus Familia*. A shield that could ward off any calamity and could even reflect a petrifying gaze back at its wielder. There wasn’t a single member of *Hera Familia* who didn’t fear its awesome might.

“Alize! Leon! Now’s your chance,” she cried. “Beat her to a sorry pulp!”

Right after Alfia’s ultimate spell was blocked and the magical aura around her died down, the witch began spluttering blood. It was then, in her moment of

weakness, that the two girls rushed in to finish her off.

Two swords of justice, and one of order, each draped in their own bearer's magical enchantments.

The light of stardust and petals of crimson. Lyu and Alize ran like the wind, like the roaring flames, into the opening that Alfia had finally conceded.

Ultra-close range...

Alfia already knew.

There's no avoiding it!

She already knew where those blades of justice would fall.

"Luminous Wind!"

"Arveria!"

A blazing gale swept the land. The pair's combined attack was accompanied by a barrage of magic that seared the Level 7's flesh.

The attack resulted in a flash of fire and starlight, compounding its devastation. Sparks flew from the point of impact, showering the floor in shooting stars, and everything disappeared in a huge cloud of dust.

The floor of the Dungeon shook, and the girls of *Astrea Familia* had to hit the deck to avoid being blown away. The rumbling continued for some time, even after the wind had completely died down. The sheer force dislodged several crystals from the ceiling, which fell and shattered nearby.

Soon the earthquake stopped, time began flowing again, and the cloud of dust began to settle, revealing Lyu, bent down on one knee, and Alize, using her sword as a crutch.

"Did we...get her?" asked Neze, still uncertain whether to be hopeful.

"If not, then we're really screwed..." muttered Lyra, watching the dust cloud closely for any signs of movement.

It was Kaguya who spoke next.

“There’s no need to worry,” she said, glaring across the battlefield. Where her gaze fell, the witch slowly fell to the ground.

“Ghah...! Hrg...”

Alfia was sliced, burned, beaten, and spluttering blood. Death was coming, and it was only a matter of time before it arrived. She kneeled, both hands on the ground, her dress tattered and torn, defeated just short of attaining her goal.

“Haah... haah...!” Lyu panted, slowly staggering to her feet. “Alfia...!”

“We’ve won,” said Alize, drenched in sweat from head to toe.

“Cough! Cough! ...Hrgh...hgh...hgh...”

Alfia’s blood spilled from her lips, onto a floor almost as torn as she was. After a short moment, a smile, fleeting and almost imperceptible, appeared on her lips.

“...Yes,” she said. “You’ve won.”

She rose to her feet, as though her body weighed nothing at all. Almost like the soul had already left her.

“What truly...noisy brats,” she said. “You did.....you did well, to defeat evil...”

As the dancing sparks illuminated her fragile form, the ashen witch bestowed her blessing upon the travelers who had bested her.

“Alfia...”

Lyu didn’t dare move a muscle. What she and her friends had achieved was nothing less than impossible. Alfia was an unbeatable foe, and yet with enough determination and tenacity, they had beaten her. It had taken all their wisdom and knowledge. Their pride and bravery. Strong will and determination. But it was done.

Though the Great Conflict had left them mired in despair, they had risen above it.

That was the only reason they were still alive now. That simple, stubborn purity of will had allowed justice to go on.

“I have...one last thing to say...” said the witch, like a blasted tree about to crumble in the wind. “...Do not...forget this. Do not...forget my fate. This...is what awaits you all in the end...when the Black Dragon comes.”

“Rgh...”

“That is how fragile...and fickle a thing...justice truly is.”

The former hero left her final warning.

Here was a woman who had fought to save the world, who had gazed upon despair and been forever changed by it. The polite trappings of justice were not enough to sway her mind.

“However...”

As the girls all stood there in shock, Alfia mustered a smile.

“Even if all returns to ash, the path you girls have walked will not be in vain.”

“““!!”””

“If justice can indeed be passed on, then find hope...”

“Alfia...” muttered Lyu.

“Gather it all together...and raise the final hero...”

She was still smiling. Her bicolored eyes were distant, as though she could see where she was headed next.

She imparted her wishes to the elven girl’s heart. Engraved them on the inside of a shell of despair that would surely one day be opened.

“...Got it,” said Alize. “We’ll remember you...and what you just told us.”

Alfia gave a gentle smile and closed her eyes.

Then she turned her back on the girls and started walking, leaving a trail of bloody footprints across the shattered earth.

“Alfia! Where are you going?!” Lyu called out after her, but the woman didn’t respond. Not before she reached the edge of a deep, dark pit—the tunnel to

the lower depths that Delphyne had wrought with fire. The molten rock walls were fluid and smooth, and even now gouts of flames spewed forth from it, as though it were an abyss terminating in the very pits of hell itself.

"I always wished to be consigned to ash," the witch explained, "just as she was."

She peered over the edge, toward the pit's invisible bottom.

"Farewell, followers of justice. Farewell, Orario."

Lyu finally snapped out of her stupor as she realized what the witch was planning. She began sprinting, but it was clear she would not make it in time.

Alfia turned back and offered the girls a smile.

"The future...is in your hands now."

With that, she tipped herself from the precipice. In a matter of moments, she was swallowed by the flames, incinerating her hair, her clothes, and even her flesh.

And then she was gone, removed from this world by the judgmental fires of hell. Lyu kneeled at the edge of the pit, the sight of Alfia's death forever burned into her eyes.

And in her memory still rang the words she swore she heard, right at the very end.

"Ah, Metelia, my beloved sister..."

"At last, at last, I can be with you once more..."



"Alfia's gone..."

From a distant point, evil watched over the witch's demise.

"...Thank you," said Erebus, his voice swallowed by the raging fires. "I owe you a great debt."

"Erebus," said Astrea. "Your mightiest followers are no more. Your plan is finished."

The dark god regained his smile.

"Really, Astrea? I think you're forgetting someone, don't you?"

As if on cue, a ferocious roar shook the cavern. Astrea's adventurer escort paled as they turned to look at Delphyne, still going strong.

"Yours and Loki's children are growing weak. Even if they find the will to go on, there is nothing more that they can do."

"....."

"And don't expect any reinforcements from above," Erebus went on. "Even if Zald is dead, he won't have gone down without a fight."

Erebus swept his arms like an opera dancer, indicating first the fallen girls of *Astrea Familia*, and then the distant forms of Riveria and Gareth, still locked in battle with the monster. In fact, it was a wonder the latter two were still standing.

The only one still burning with hatred and determination was Aiz, but even her wind was beginning to die down. It was only a matter of time before the battle swung in Delphyne's favor.

"The one in check here is you, my dear Astrea. The mortal world is on the brink of destruction."

The dark god grinned and gave the goddess a sideways glance, but she wasn't looking at him. Her eyes were fixed on her children, who carried the light of justice with them.

"You're wrong, Erebus. I came down here precisely to prevent that."

Her indigo eyes twinkled like shooting stars, and Astrea immediately turned to leave. Her escort hurried to catch up with her, leaving Erebus to stare after her

blankly.

“Oh, Astrea.” He shrugged. “You never do give up, do you? Not until the very end...”

He gave a genuine smile.

“You’re a fine woman, you know that?”



“Is everyone still good to go? The fight’s not over yet!”

Alize’s voice sounded downright unsympathetic after all the girls had just been through, like the crack of a whip spurring them all on to face their next battle.

“Lady Riveria has been fighting that monster with only Gareth and Aiz to help,” agreed Lyu. “We must join her!”

Lyu was raring to go once more, emboldened by her victory, and ready to fulfill Alfia’s dying wish.

“I get it, I really do, but...” whined Lyra. “We’re on death’s doorstep here! That beastie’s as powerful as a floor boss! How’re we meant to go up against it like this?!”

Lyra looked down at her hands. They wouldn’t stop shaking. It was obvious Alize and Lyu were only putting on brave faces.

None of the others were faring any better, either. Up front, Asta and Noin, in the center, Neze and Iska, and bringing up the rear, Lyana and Celty. These vibrant young girls were in a pitiful state, and their stamina and Mind had both reached rock bottom. There were eleven of them and not a single one had energy to spare.

“I’m at my limit, too!” Maryu lamented. “Alize, as a healer, I can’t allow us to fight any longer!”

As a result of her role, Maryu was always the one who kept tabs on the party’s health levels, and she never allowed her Mind to run dry. Yet right now,

even she couldn't muster much more than a feeble green glow.

Alfia had been so overwhelmingly powerful in spite of her handicap that *Astrea Familia* was forced to give everything they had to fight her. Now that it was over, there was nothing left. Alize and Lyu both made grim faces.

"We brought so many items with us, and we've used them all up..." muttered Kaguya. "Besides, even if we *were* at full strength, would we even be able to defeat that thing...?"

At that moment, the whole troop heard a familiar voice.

"Lift your heads, my children. You must not turn to fear and despair."

"Lady Astrea?!" exclaimed Alize with surprise.

"Why are you here...and how?!" asked Lyu. "I thought deities were forbidden from entering the Dungeon!"

Her long walnut locks bunched on her shoulder as the goddess tipped her head and gave a coquettish smile.

"They are," she said. "So don't tell anybody, or else I'll be in big trouble!"

"T-trouble's not the word for it...!"

Lyu wasn't sure where to begin, but before she could speak, Astrea shifted to a more serious expression.

"I brought enough elixirs for each of you," she said. "Please use them."

She presented a bag filled with eleven small bottles. The girls took one look and went wide-eyed.

"L-Lady Astrea, I love you!!"

"I love you too, Neze, as I do all of you girls."

Astrea looked to each of them in turn.

"So please, win this fight, and come back to me alive."

Astrea had braved the dangers of the Dungeon to see her children and share her blessing. It was enough to inspire all of them to live up to their goddess's words. However, Lyra couldn't find it in her to be convinced.

“...Lady Astrea, I’m really happy you came down here to see us. Really, I am. It’s just...we can’t. Kaguya’s right. That monster’s way too strong!”

“.....”

“If only we had somethin’ to give us the edge...”

Lyra watched Delphyne raging in the distance as sweat dribbled down her brow. The god-slayer was a complete enigma. It was as mighty as some of the strongest floor bosses ever encountered, and in terms of level it was at least 6 or 7.

Alfia had been handicapped by her illness. It was a miracle that *Astrea Familia* had been able to beat her, but they had done so by seizing that slim chance of victory. However, Delphyne was completely different. With its constant regenerative capabilities, it was not unreasonable to say it outclassed the witch herself. To go in without a plan was tantamount to suicide. That was what Lyra was saying.

Lyu and the other girls looked to her in reluctant sympathy. None of them could think of a word to say in response, until...

“What are you talking about, Lyra? We *do* have something!”

“““What?”””

That cheerful, tone-deaf voice could only belong to one person. Lyu, Lyra, and Kaguya all looked to their fiery-haired leader in shock.

“Our goddess is here!” she said with a smile. “Doesn’t that tell you something?”

A deity could offer more than just potions. As Alize’s face lit up, Astrea gave her a soft smile.



At last, a groan came forth from the center of the black wind.

“Haah...haah...! Hrh...hrh...!!”

Aiz panted heavily, taking no notice of the sweat pouring off her. The wind

had only just begun to groan, but the girl's muscles and bones had been complaining for a long time already. She was incapable of withstanding the unrestrained might of *Airiel* for prolonged amounts of time, and her arms and legs were feeling the burn.

Her body was covered in open gashes, her muscles were torn, and her bones felt like they had been ground to dust. Her little finger was bent at an impossible angle from swinging her blade. She wrenched the finger back into place and gripped her sword once more.

“Nizelle!”

At Aiz's word, her festering hatred poured forth. It gorged itself on her magical energy, turning her groans into screams and restoring the black wind that shrouded her. She couldn't feel a thing anymore, but that was just how she liked it. Her hate was never-ending; as long as she used it as fuel, the flames of battle would never die out.

Aiz launched herself once more at Delphyne, without realizing or caring how closely death crept.

“Riveria!” yelled Gareth. “Use your magic and take care of its wings! Burn them, freeze them, whatever works! Once it stops moving, I'll attack!”

The old dwarf's fingers tightened around the hilt of his ax. But Riveria's face went pale.

“Gareth?! What do you mean?! ”

“I'll hack my way to its magic stone, even if it kills me! I don't know where it is, but if I keep slicing, I'll have to get there eventually!”

“Are you drunk, fool?! Even Aiz can't overcome that creature's regeneration! All you'll do is get yourself killed!”

“Then what do you suggest?! The girl is in danger! If we waste any more time, we'll all be doomed!”

“Grh...!”

Their argument tipped the scales this way and that, but Delphyne was ready to sweep them aside without waiting for them to come to a decision. There

wasn't enough time to come up with an optimal plan, and so Riveria was forced to make a difficult decision.

"Aiz...Gareth... I...!"

But at that moment, a chain of magical blasts, stardust, flames, and lightning struck the beast head-on.

"*Graaaaaaaahhh?!*"

"Magical bombardment?!"

"It can't be! It's...!"

Gareth and Riveria were stunned. Then the dwarf recognized several figures, running like the wind to assist in Aiz's fight.

"*Astrea Familia!*" he yelled.

"Hrh...what...?"

Aiz paused and looked up in confusion, seeing the multicolored missiles striking her foe out of nowhere.

"You must have taken leave of your senses," someone said, "to take on a beast this size by yourself."

"...!"

"Let's join forces. Will you help?"

When Aiz saw who it was, her eyes widened. Standing there before her, her cloak and golden hair fluttering in the wind, was Lyu, a wooden sword in her hand.

"Join forces...? Never! That monster's mine! Stay out of my way!"

Once she understood what the elf was saying, Aiz screamed. Lyu silently approached the girl and...

"Ow!"

...conked her on the head.

“Listen to me,” she said sternly.

“That hurt...”

“You need to calm down. Do you have any idea how difficult you’re making life for Lady Riveria?”

Lyu looked down at the girl, a full head shorter than her, and sighed. But it was a sigh that was aimed, at least in part, toward herself.

“I wonder if that’s what I looked like, back when we fought. It’s embarrassing.”

“Huh? What are you talking about?”

“...Nothing,” she said, abandoning that line of thought and peering into Aiz’s golden eyes. “Just listen to me. We can only beat this monster by working together.”

“No! Let me do it! I want to do it!”

At that moment, a second voice came to Lyu’s rescue.

“You can’t just say *gimme, gimme*, Sword Princess! Or maybe I should just call you ‘Shorty’ from now on!”

“Shorty?!”

Alize leveled a finger at Aiz’s shocked expression.

“You might end up hurting yourself so bad, you’ll never be able to eat a Jyaga Maru Kun ever again!” she declared.

“B-but I like Jyaga Maru Kun!”

“And besides,” Alize went on, in a less frivolous tone that sounded more like the voice of a gentle big sister, “you’ll make everyone who cares about you sad. Only monsters make people cry! You don’t want to be a monster, do you?”

“...!”

As the girl’s exhaustion set in, the hate and anger swirling around inside her finally began to fade. At the mention of her fellow familia members, the light returned to her eyes, and she turned to look down toward the Dungeon floor.

There, she saw Riveria and Gareth, fighting to protect her.

Alize's words struck a chord somewhere deep within her heart, and Aiz found herself slowly coming to her senses.

"It's okay," Alize said. "We're all at our strongest when we fight together! If we join forces, that big, bad monster's going down! *Wink!* ☆"

Alize beamed like the sun.

"So put away that nasty wind, okay? You don't need it with all of us here."

"...Okay."

At last, her words seemed to get through to the girl. The black wind faded away and reason returned to her eyes.

"That's our leader for you," said Lyu to herself. "Nobody can compete with her when it comes to dealing with children."

Then her expression turned grave as Delphyne's furious roar shook the Dungeon.

"Looks like it's finished regenerating..." said Alize. "Here it comes, everybody! We three need to keep it busy while our allies set up!"

"Got it!" replied Lyu.

Alize looked between them, frowning. "But what are we meant to do?" she asked. "I slashed and slashed, but nothing seemed to work..."

Nobody knew more about the creature's terrifying capabilities than the one who had been fighting it head-on. She glanced down at her sword, Desperate, and at the cracks running along its length. But just then, Alize puffed out her chest so hard it looked like she was about to topple over backward.

"Don't you worry about that!" She grinned. "As of a few moments ago, we pure, pretty, and perfect girls are now pure, pretty, and perfect *Level 4* girls! Heh-hem!"

"What's that?! Every member of the familia ranked up at once?!"

Riveria struggled to process what she was seeing, when all of a sudden came the voice of none other than Astrea herself.

"That's right," she said. "I updated their Status a moment ago. Their earlier victory earned them plenty of excelia."

"Wait," said Gareth. "One shocking turn of events is quite enough for one day, I fear. I was just coming to terms with Alfia's defeat, and now this?! Perhaps I'm getting too old..."

"You're not alone," Kaguya said. "I'm having trouble processing it myself..."

The reckless behavior of their patron goddess was enough to put exasperated smiles on all the girls of *Astrea Familia*. Among them, Lyra alone wore a fearless grin that much resembled that of Braver.

"But just think how much stronger we are now," she said. "That's eleven levels worth of improvement—we gotta be able to do somethin' with that, right?"

Unless we concentrate our attacks, we'll never cut a path to its magic stone!

That was what Gareth had said when first confronted with the beast's regeneration. The creature's unique skill was healing, not defense or evasion, and so with enough firepower, it was possible to overcome the rate of regeneration and expose the core. With that, it wouldn't matter what level the monster was—one attack would end it.

For the new-and-improved *Astrea Familia*, such a feat should be possible.

"To think there was enough excelia to rank up all eleven of them!" exclaimed Riveria. "Alfia really was something else!"

"Indeed," said Gareth, "but this does give us a chance...!"

Excelia from a target was divided among its recipients according to their contribution. The received value could therefore fall below the amount required for a great feat. The fact that this didn't happen, despite the eleven-way split, only went to show how formidable a figure Alfia really was.

Lyra felt the new weight of her weapons in her hands. Overflowing with an innate sense of power, she turned to Gareth and Riveria and explained her plan.

“Might take us a while to get used to our new strength,” she said, “but now that the gang’s all here again, how’s about we have a real raid battle, like we were always meant to? Give us a buff, Nine Hell.”

“Shields in the front, mages in the back,” said Kaguya. “And my sword will be wherever it can do the most damage. After this, it’ll finally be over.”

Riveria and Gareth both nodded. In bitter spite of their wounds, they summoned the last of their strength.

“Alize! Riveria’s magic is here! And all the others, too!”

The jade light of *Veil Breath* enveloped the trio as Lyu deftly evaded a fireball and turned to look behind her. There, Gareth, Riveria, Lyra, Kaguya, and the rest of *Astrea Familia* clanged their swords, raised their shields, and readied their staffs.

“Right!” Alize chirped back. “Then let’s finish what we came here to do! It’s been a long time coming!”

Alize leaped toward the dragon, and the other adventurers followed. Only one figure stood back, watching over the fight.

“Erebus...” Astrea muttered. “These girls are about to draw the curtain on the battle you started.”

The searing air, filled with sparks, carried her words to the top of the bluff where Erebus stood, but the dark god did not answer. He simply narrowed his gaze, watching events play out with neither fury nor spite. In the void of his silence, one sound triumphed.

“I will not lose here,” Lyu yelled. “I must carry her justice into the future!”

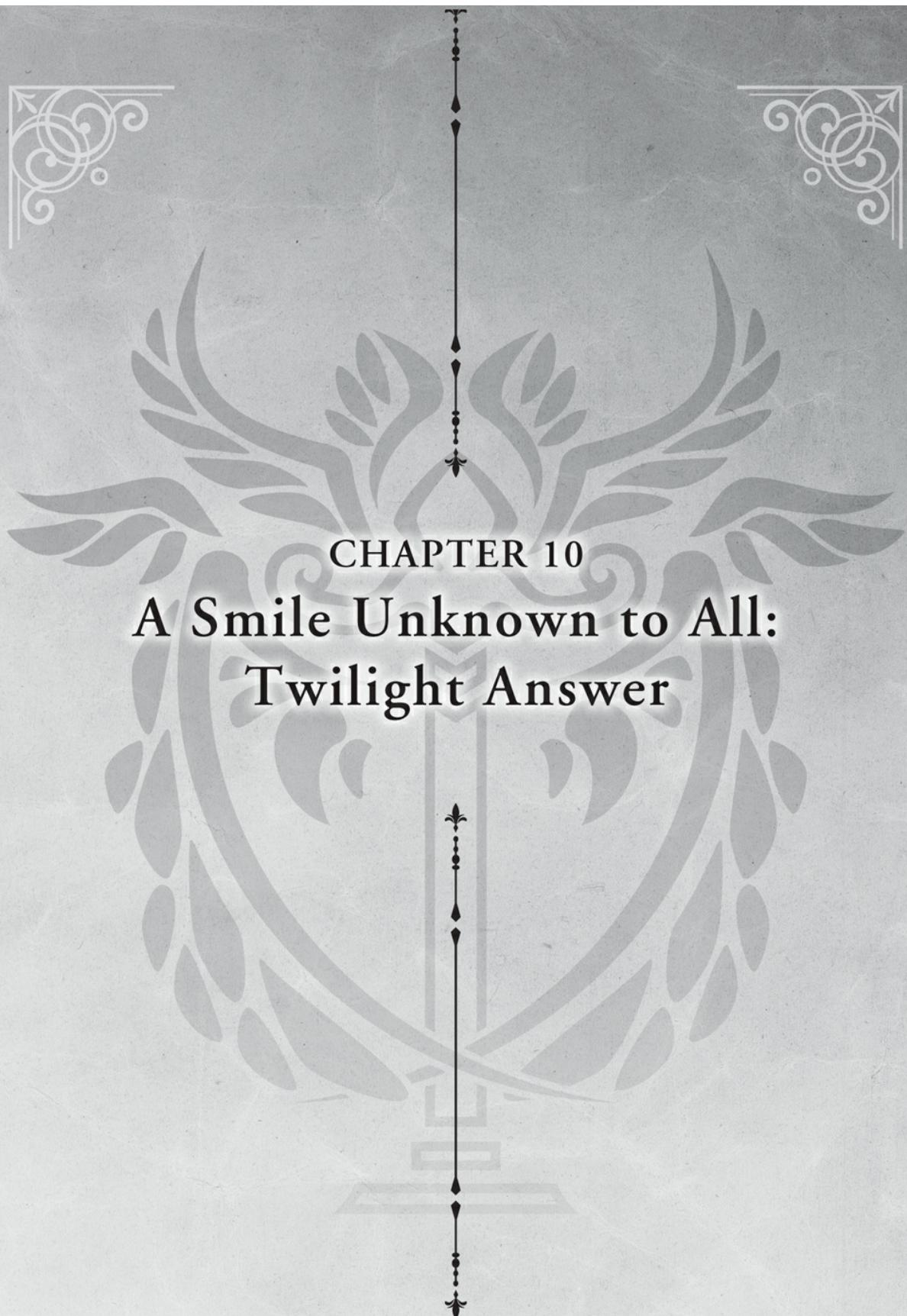
And so the fate of this battle was already set in stone.

With her detection magic, Lyana swiftly deduced the location of Delphyne’s magic stone. Then eight fighters in all—Lyu, Alize, Kaguya, and Lyra among them—got up close and personal in an attempt to overwhelm the beast.

The two greatshields of Gareth and Asta protected the back ranks, where Maryu treated the party's wounds before they grew too serious. At the very rear stood Riveria, the main target of the party's defense and support.

Free of distractions or interruptions at last, she recited the words of her ultra-long incantation: a spell powerful enough to hit across floors, and the reason for her inclusion on the monster-slaying unit. At last, she unleashed it, and it joined Celty's and the other mages' spells, dealing a fearsome barrage of blows to the dragon that destroyed its wings, its armor-like scales, and tore a path to the core.

Then the wind sang once more. Aiz, her silver sword wrapped in a tornado, combined all her magic and skills into one devastating swing that shattered the purple orb into a million pieces.



ASTREA RECORD
The War of Good and Evil

Story by Eujino Omori · Illustration by Sakage
Character Design by Sazuhito Yasuda



CHAPTER 10

A Smile Unknown to All: Twilight Answer

The monster was no more. Its final cry seemed to equal a mother's grief and rocked the Dungeon floor. Then its huge body began to dissolve before exploding in a shower of ash. Black sand, painted crimson by the flames, fluttered in the air like snow, painting the eighteenth floor in ephemeral colors.

"...Did we win?"

It was Neze, battered and broken, who spoke first. She seemed ready to collapse at any moment.

"Yes...we did," answered Lyu.

"Victory is ours," added Kaguya.

The ash gently settled on the floor, leaving no doubt that Delphyne was well and truly gone. *Astrea Familia* paused, uncertain if they should believe it, before finally erupting into cheers.

"*We did it!!*"

"Well done, everyone!" cried Celty, running over to celebrate with her allies on the front ranks.

Lyana let out a deep sigh. "It was touch and go for a while there..." she muttered.

"Is everyone okay?" asked Maryu, checking up on her collapsed friends.

Iska fell flat on her back, utterly exhausted. "I just want a baaath!" she groaned.

Everyone rejoiced. Some even had tears in their eyes. *Astrea* watched from a distance, smiling at the sight of her triumphant children.

Meanwhile, Aiz was standing alone, her armor in tatters, when Riveria

approached her.

“Aiz,” she said.

“...Riveria.”

The high elf was just as beat-up as she was, and her robes were torn in several places. Aiz looked up at her guiltily, until...

“Ow!”

Without another word, Riveria brought her fist down on the girl’s head. And she didn’t stop there.

“Oof! Bah! Ouch!”

Again and again, her delicate fingers produced the most unbelievable of sounds against the young Aiz’s head. Blue flames seemed to spark in her jade-green eyes, and Lyu and Celty trembled in fear at the apparent madness of their elven queen.

At last, Gareth stepped in. “Now, now, Riveria, that’s quite enough,” he said. “I think if Aiz is going to learn her lesson, you need to speak to her, no? Besides, all this beating is going to stunt her growth!”

At last, the furious elf loosened her fists.

“Owww...”

Aiz clutched her head with both hands, tears forming in her eyes. Riveria huffed with exertion, then finally reached out her arms. Thinking she was in for more punishment, Aiz flinched, but the next thing she felt were Riveria’s warm arms around her shoulders, and the elf’s soft cheek against her own.

“R-Riveria...?”

“You idiot, Aiz. Never do something so stupid ever again.”

“...Okay, Riveria... I’m sorry.”

At Riveria’s motherly words, Aiz softly closed her eyes, her head buried in the high elf’s stomach. She awkwardly raised her arms and wrapped them as far as she could around Riveria’s waist.

The heartwarming scene put a smile on Gareth’s face. A little distance away,

Lyu was also watching, when Alize walked over.

“All’s well that ends well, right, Leon?”

“Yes... It’s finally over.”

Then all of a sudden, Alize seemed to trip and clung to Lyu’s side.

“A-Alize?!”

“I’m tired, Leon... Can you give me a piggyback?”

“I don’t think I can, Alize. I’m worn out, too...”

Her cheeks reddened, and the elf girl mustered a smile. Alize was smiling, too, her eyes closed like she was asleep.

“Hey, Leon,” she said. “Let’s go visit Adi’s grave after this.”

“...Yeah.”

“Let’s go see Leah, and all the adventurers who gave their lives for us.”

“...Yeah.”

Leon tried to stop her smile from turning into a frown, but a single droplet still ran from her sky-blue eyes and stained her cheek. Alize’s slender arms tightened around her shoulder.

“...That’s it, then.”

Evil stood watching justice from afar.

There was no smile on his lips, but no anger or sadness, either. It was as if he simply accepted the way things were. Like he had reached the end of a truly moving play and was still basking in the afterglow.

At that moment, a second god appeared.

“Yes, Erebus. This is the end.”

The dark god turned to see Astrea, clad in her pure-white robes.

“Good has triumphed, and evil has fallen,” she said.

From behind her came her eleven followers, while Gareth, Riveria, and Aiz

appeared on the opposite side, trapping Erebus. *Loki Familia*, *Astrea Familia*, and the escort from *Hermes Familia*. All eyes were focused on the lone enemy king, stripped of his last line of defense.

“Excellent work,” he said, grinning. “I played the part of evil to the best of my ability, but in the end, your justice and persistence won the day.”

There were no more tricks up his sleeve. No more means to alter the board. Yet even now, the cornered god hardly seemed to care about his predicament.

“I’ll admit it,” he said. “You win. Nobody likes a sore loser.”

Contrary to his words, it didn’t feel like Erebus recognized his loss at all. He stood calmly, one hand on his waist, under the scornful gazes of Lyra and Kaguya.

“You’re talkin’ real tough for someone who’s about to be mincemeat,” said the former.

“I do hope you’re not expecting us to just forget about all this and let you go after everything you’ve done?” added the latter.

“Oh, good heavens, no. But what kind of evil would I be if I pleaded for mercy now?”

The girls seemed about to lose it, but Erebus only smiled back.

“Go ahead,” he said. “Hate me. For what greater joy is there for evil than to be reviled and hated?”

““Grh...!””

Lyra and Kaguya scowled with fury, and some of the other girls stepped forward, but *Loki Familia* bade them stay.

“We are but mortals,” said the high elf. “It is not for us to judge your actions... We’ll leave that to your fellow gods.”

“Your evil deeds end here, menace,” added the dwarf. “Have you any last words?”

Erebus looked blank for a moment, then answered.

“I do have a request, if you’d be so kind.”

“What is it?” snorted Gareth.

“I wish for *you* to send me back, Astrea. It is only right that evil should meet its end at the hands of justice.”

Astrea stared back at him but said nothing.

“And as for where it should be done,” Erebus went on. “I’m thinking somewhere high up, surrounded by the endless sky. Somewhere quiet, where the two of us can be alone, without these meddling mortals around to disturb us.”

Astrea’s followers were not amused by the brazen demands of their captured prey. “Y-you’re joking!” Lyra exclaimed.

“Are we sure we don’t want to take a swing at him?” said Kaguya, balling her fist.

“Wow! I’m amazed!” said Alize. “I knew he was arrogant, but this is ridiculous! This is beyond evil at this point; gods are a different breed!”

“Please stay quiet,” Lyu cautioned. “You’re not making it any better.”

“Oh, and one more thing,” said Erebus.

“What now?” tutted Riveria with spite.

Erebus turned and looked out off the cliff.

“Let my lovely follower go,” he said. “You don’t have to help him; just leave him.”

“!”

“Maybe the monsters will get him, maybe not. Either way, you’ll have done your part. So, just let him go.”

The girls were aghast. They wondered if the god might still be plotting something, and didn’t agree to his request right away. But far away on the ground, Vito looked up at his dark master.

“...E-Erebus...?”

Cut to ribbons by Kaguya and left to die, there was no way he was escaping the dungeon without a miracle. Erebus stared at him, then turned to face

Astrea once more.

“He’s only one guy,” the dark god insisted. “What’s the worst that could happen? Then again, if you’re burning for revenge, I understand.”

“...Fine. We shall grant your request,” said Astrea.

“Oh, how benevolent. I knew you’d see it my way.”

With that, Erebus walked off past Astrea.

“Let’s be off then,” he said. “Evil to the very end.”

The adventurers turned and glared at him, but, restraining their various emotions, they calmly escorted him toward the surface. *Hermes Familia* surrounded him, while Riveria, Gareth, and Aiz followed.

Only *Astrea Familia* hung back. After a short while, Lyra kicked a stone in anger.

“Godsdammit!” she swore. “That guy pisses me off!”

“I don’t think I’ll ever find it in myself to forgive him, no matter what Lady Astrea says,” agreed Kaguya. “Every time I look at him, I think of all those he’s taken from us.”

The other girls clenched their fists or stared at the ground, silently echoing her words.

“Perhaps this is what it means,” said Lyu, “to fight evil instead of joining it.”

The elf girl found it hard to breathe. To her, this was more than a simple triumph. Victory had come with its own difficulties.

“.....”

Only Alize stood silent as the god left, as if searching for a truth that as yet eluded the others. Astrea, too, said nothing, and only cast her eyes downward.



Delphyne and Alfia were no more, and Erebus had been taken into custody.

Once this news spread to the surface, Orario’s protectors let out a cheer that

rippled through every part of the city. Adventurers celebrated, while gods breathed a sigh of relief. Any remaining Evils had either fled the city or gone into hiding underground, and there were not enough of them to stage a meaningful counterattack. The rumbling from below had ceased, too, signaling an end to the worst of the fighting.

The dark, ashy clouds finally cleared above Orario, bathing the city of heroes in the light of sunset.

The rejoicing continued. By nightfall, the civilians had been let out of their strongholds, and they took to the streets in celebration. Strangers hugged one another, and everyone praised the adventurers who had fought so hard on their behalf that their weapons and armor were almost broken.

The adventurers shed tears for those they'd lost; their brave comrades, and the nameless heroes who had come before and given their lives.

Eventually, joy turned to rage, and people flocked the base of Babel to bear witness to their foe's execution. Central Park was teeming with so many people that not everyone could fit there, and some had to climb atop buildings to get a good view.

Atop the tower stood two gods: one of justice, and one of evil.

"It's the first time I've come up here, you know," said Erebus, scratching behind his earlobe. "Just look at that view. There can't be a better one in the whole city, am I right?"

The night wind ruffled his jet-black hair. Even from his position at the center of Babel's rooftop, he could see much of the lamplit city beneath. Beneath those lamps stood the people of this fine city, eagerly awaiting his death.

"...I suppose I do have one, tiny complaint," he said at last, returning his gaze to the *two* figures ahead of him. "Hermes, my old friend. Why are you here? Come to make sure I don't weasel my way out of this?"

"Something like that," the messenger god replied. "Sorry I couldn't leave you two alone, but hey, pretend I'm not here, and you got exactly what you asked

for."

Under his watchful gaze, Erebus shrugged. Then Astrea silently approached him.

"It's just the three of us now," she said. "Everyone else is down there watching us."

In one hand, she held a silver straight sword modeled after a set of scales—a weapon that looked extremely out of place in the hands of one so benevolent as she.

"The blade of justice," said Erebus. "Of judgment. Why, it's almost as beautiful as you are."

Then he spread his arms wide.

"Do it," he said. "Make it quick. Don't think you get to torment me just because I'm evil. Even I feel pain...and I wouldn't be caught dead screaming like a woman."

He grinned. To the very end, he seemed to regard justice with a sense of smug superiority.

But Astrea did not frown in anger, nor did she offer any judgmental words. She only regarded him for a moment, then spoke.

"First," she said, "I have something to ask you."

"Ohh, you do like to keep me on the edge, don't you? What could you possibly want to ask of someone as evil as me?"

Erebus received his answer soon enough.

"What is justice?"

"....."

That was the moment the dark god's smile vanished. His eyes flew wide, and he stared at Astrea with pure, unmitigated shock.

“Astrea! What are you...?”

Hermes was just as surprised. But Astrea went on.

“You kept asking us that question, didn’t you? What is justice? How far does it go? And if we know, then we should prove it to you.”

Ever since the day he first appeared before Lyu in the form of Eren, Erebus had been demanding to know the true form of justice. Even after his grand reveal, he still came to Lyu, seeking her answer. He’d asked Lyra, Kaguya, and even Astrea herself about this concept, which lay at the far opposite end of the spectrum of morality.

“It’s almost as if,” said Astrea, “you were guiding us. At least, that’s how I saw it.”

“.....”

“And now your work is done.”

Erebus remained silent and expressionless as Astrea spoke.

“Because you have your answer. You’ve seen them fight. You’ve seen them rise.”

At last, Erebus gave a twisted grin.

“I haven’t the faintest idea what you’re talking about, Astrea.”

“Oh, no, Erebus. You’re not talking your way out of this one, I’m afraid.”

Astrea smiled sweetly.

“We can always do this down there, in front of all those people, if you prefer?”

“...Are you really a goddess of justice?” Erebus sighed. “Because right now, you seem more like a hunter, like that Artemis.”

Astrea’s threats caused Erebus to wear a frown for the first time.

“That’s rude to her,” Astrea said, still smiling. “She’s far more innocent and pure than I am.”

“I think you’re both probably equally bad,” said Hermes, off to one side.

A bead of sweat worked its way down Erebus's temple, and he let out a resigned sigh. "I should have known you wouldn't let me keep my dignity."

Compared to the smile of evil, this one was altogether different.

"I am glad you feel that way," said Astrea. "Consider it punishment for all the trouble you've caused."

"...I should have asked someone else," said Erebus, looking into her sweet yet mischievous smile.

Her eyes were the same shade as the starlit sky above. Erebus lifted his head and braced his eyelids against the wind, awaiting the moment he would pay the price for his sins.

"Hrgh... Hrgh... Hrgh...!"

One man huffed and puffed his way up the seemingly endless stairs. His wounds only partially healed, Vito trained his eyes on the top of Babel.

"Grh... My...master... Erebus!"

Having escaped the Dungeon using his hidden passage, Vito emerged on the streets of Orario, careful to escape detection by its jubilant adventurers. He sneakily made his way to the tower before slipping inside.

He had failed to stem the bleeding completely, and the arm that Kaguya had sliced off was still missing, but Vito pushed himself on to be by his dark master's side. However, it was not to save him from the blade of justice.

"What are you doing...? What were you thinking...?"

Down on the eighteenth floor, when the two had locked eyes at the very end, Vito had seen something. A look in his dark god's eyes, saying, *Live*.

He needed to ask Erebus what it meant. Was he not evil? Was his cruel and callous nature not precisely what had charmed Vito in the first place, and driven him to sacrifice so much when he refused to serve anyone else?

Vito had to know what it meant. Though his body felt like lead, he dragged himself on, hurling himself up the countless steps, until at last, he reached the

rooftop and saw his master standing beneath the starry sky.

“!!”



“Tell me, Erebus. As the goddess of justice, I would like to hear what you think justice is.”

Seconds passed. The wind blew. Beneath a sea of stars, Erebus opened his eyes.

“...You told me there was no such thing as absolute justice.”

“Yes, I did.”

“I don’t think that’s right, Astrea. In fact, I think I see it now.”

Erebus looked her straight in the eye.

“Now that I have stood for evil, I think I finally understand.”

By living on one face of the coin, he understood its reverse. By standing at one extreme, he had managed to see the other side.

“Understand what?” Astrea asked.

“Justice,” said Erebus, “is a dream.”

Everyone listening was struck silent. Astrea, Hermes, and Vito, watching from the shadows.

“Our children come up with the funniest ideas. Take the Trolley Problem, for instance.”

Erebus began speaking of the decision he had once presented to Lyu.

“If you don’t pull the switch, you’re letting five people die. If you do, you’re killing one. A simple choice that they believe forms the basis of all morality, ethics, and justice.”

“.....”

“But I don’t think they’re right. I don’t think that’s what justice is at all,” he went on. “Justice is not simply to choose. It is to take.”

“To take?”

“Yes. To see beyond two choices. To produce a third. To birth a million answers, and pluck from them a single one.”

The dark god nodded.

“Justice is to ignore the rules, to defy norms. To make the impossible possible. Sweep the scales aside. Whatever works.”

“Erebus...”

Hermes spoke his old friend’s name with a surprised yet sorrowful tone.

“That is what mortals call justice...and what we call heroism.”

That was Erebus’s answer.

Dreams and ideals lay far beyond the reach of even the most ambitious mortal, farther still than the gods themselves. Yet despite this, they still believed in them.

This was the true form of justice. Anyone could claim that dreams were just fantasy. Anyone could say they didn’t help address the true injustices in the world. Anyone could ask, *If it isn’t possible, then why even try?*

And yet the world needed dreams. Everyone knew this, and everyone knew what to call those who achieved them.

“And that was your true goal, all along?” asked Astrea,

“Heh, so you already figured it out, huh?”

“Yes. After our discussion on justice, I could hardly fail to notice.”

Erebus gave a weak smile. This whole farce had been in vain.

Then Hermes spoke, trying not to let his emotions get the better of him.

“Erebus,” he said. “We may not have gotten along too well up in heaven, but I knew one thing for certain: even as the god of the underworld, you never liked seeing mortals die.”

Erebus turned his head to look at the battered and scarred city below.

“I wanted an answer,” he said. “A sign to show this world which way to go.”

“Erebus...”

“I wanted to see the light of our children, of a people who keep on chasing their dreams, no matter what hardships await. I wanted to see the heroes this world needs.”

That was the dark god’s true desire. That was the only thing he wanted.

“And that is why you chose evil,” Astrea said. “You led the darkness in an attempt to birth a future hero. You recruited Zald and Alfia to put Orario through a trial.”

Together, they had deceived thousands, sacrificed their allies, and in the end, themselves. Erebus had cast aside his compassion and put Orario through a gauntlet. This had been the goal all along, from the onset of the Great Conflict, right up until the final showdown.

“Was there no other way, Erebus?”

“I’m afraid not, Hermes. You know that as well as I. Zeus and Hera are gone, and in spite of the covenant, the promised time fast approaches. Time will not wait for us. The hands of the clock keep on moving.”

What he spoke of, only the gods knew. And so only they could truly sympathize. Hermes voiced no objection, but looked down at the ground.

“Perhaps Leon didn’t find her answer in the end. Perhaps none of them did. But that’s okay. It’s still okay.”

“.....”

“Because I believe the light of hope awaits them, at the end of their journey. And once they find it...I have no doubt they’ll pass it on.”

Erebus's voice sounded gentle and kind, a far cry from his primordial darkness. It sounded like the soft swaying of wheat stalks in the twilight glow of evening.

"You were right, Astrea. I've caused a lot of trouble. In the end, that's all I wanted."

He shot them one last mischievous smile.

"...You sent countless lives up to heaven. You selected your champions and presented them with trials. You transformed good and evil into a foundation for this city's future."

Astrea calmly listed off the god's crimes.

"That was your will," she said at last. "That was your justice."

Erebus only grinned.

"That wasn't justice," he said. "Like I said, justice is a dream. This was nothing more than the whims of a capricious god. There's a name for that, and it's *evil*."

The dark god had claimed so many lives, and he wasn't about to let Astrea have her way. What he had accomplished was neither proud nor noble—it was despicable. All his sins were his own. All the people's hate was his to bear. There was no whitewashing the things that he had done.

Erebus was intent on being branded as evil to the very end.

"Is that so? Then, as the goddess of justice, allow me to pass my verdict."

Astrea took up her sword of judgment, and without compassion or mercy, laid the dark god's heart bare.

"You," she said, "are a necessary evil, not absolute evil."

"You are a stepping stone that will raise our children toward heights they might never reach. You are the shadows that work alone, reviled by all. Our children may never understand you, the other gods may mock you...but I will

never forget your sins.”

The goddess’s voice was solemn as she enumerated the dark god’s offenses.

“...You’re ruthless, you are,” said Erebus with a grin. “I wanted to go out like a badass, and here you are making me sound like a fool.”

“I’m afraid I must have missed the part where that was my problem.”

“Heh. Yeah... You got that right, at least.”

Erebus couldn’t help but laugh, seeing the sweet smile on Astrea’s lips.

“I’ll say it again: You’re a fine woman, Astrea. I wouldn’t mind waking up next to a goddess like you.”

“Well, I would, Erebus. You’re far too contrary for my tastes.”

“Ha-ha... Damn, you’re really gonna do me dirty like that, huh?”

Then Erebus turned to the other god present.

“...Hermes,” he sang. “This is why I asked Astrea to bring me up here. Don’t go blabbing to others about what you saw here, all right? This is for the three gods...and one human.”

He turned again. To the top of the stairs, where his sole follower stood.

“!!”

Vito reeled with surprise. He had heard the god’s whole confession, believing they were all unaware of his presence.

But Hermes didn’t even look in Vito’s direction.

“All right,” the god of boundaries said. “I promise. After today, I’ll forget everything I saw and heard here. It will be unwritten, absent from both our *Oratoria* and that of our children.”

“Thank you...my friend.”

The two gods exchanged no more words than that, as though none were needed between two so closely knit as they. With no more regrets weighing on his mind, Erebus turned to Astrea.

“End it, Astrea. For real, this time.”

He lifted his arms gently, welcoming her sword in his breast. Astrea closed her eyes. Not to doubt or reconsider what she must do, but merely to grant a moment of calm.

“Just tell me one last thing,” she said, looking back into his eyes. There was no good and evil now—just one god speaking to another.

“Do you love this world?”

A shooting star raced across the sky. The night wind whistled. Erebus watched it all, as the breath of the world rustled his jet-black hair. Then he turned his back on it all, and smiled.

“Of course I do, Astrea.”



“I love all our children.”

It was a smile unknown to all, beside the three who shared the rooftop with him.

“.....”

Astrea cast her eyes downward. When she looked up again, it was with the determination necessary to carry out her duty.

“Erebus, you will face judgment for your crimes.”

There was no last will, no sore words, no apology.

Right up until the blade fell, there was only the smile of one committed to evil.



On that day, another god was sent back to heaven. The whole city watched a golden pillar of light pierce the firmament and rejoiced. The evil god who spread death, struck fear into the populace, and garnered so much ire was gone.

They would praise the blade that struck him down and ended the reign of absolute evil.

But the goddess would never forget his necessity.

He never asked for pity.

He never asked for praise.

What he did was evil. The dark god had said as much himself.

Just as there were countless forms of justice, so, too, was his evil only one of countless many.

“Hrgh...hrgh...hrgh...! Erebus...you tricked me!”

The man’s screams bounced off the walls of the subterranean waterway.

“Absolute evil? Hah! Dreams? Hah! You knew of my defect and still you seduced me! Oh, how cruel! How barbaric!!”

He huffed and huffed, trembling with indignation. He ran, hair disheveled, through the muck before suddenly coming to a stop.

"Heh... Heh-heh-heh-heh! This isn't over. Oh, not by a long shot! I swear on my hatred of the gods themselves that I shall see this world remade!"

He was crying. But as he cried, he laughed. He knew not why he cried, or even that he cried. He simply gave himself over to the ruinous urges seeking to control him.

“You’ll pay... You’ll pay... You’ll pay for this, Finn!!”

In the dark depths of a labyrinth of stone, Valletta cursed her defeat.

“I’ll never forget this pain...this humiliation! I’ll get you, Finn! Just you wait!!”

Valletta clutched her wounded shoulder, eyes wide like a wild beast. Her blood-soaked hand trembled with anger, feeling the brand left by her detested foe.

“Just you watch!!”

Only the walls of the man-made labyrinth heard her vengeful scream.

Evil persisted. It slunk back to the shadows, spread its roots, and prepared for the day it might once rise again.

Justice, too, went on, its dreams still far out of reach.

“Nonetheless...”

Astrea stood at Babel's peak, looking out over the city. She focused on the lights dotting the streets and protecting every window. The lights of a people who had overcome their trials and protected their city.

“Keep searching,” she said. “Keep asking. Keep wanting. Keep on looking for real justice—one you can pass on to others.”

Braver and his comrades were there.

Warlord and his fellows stood strong.

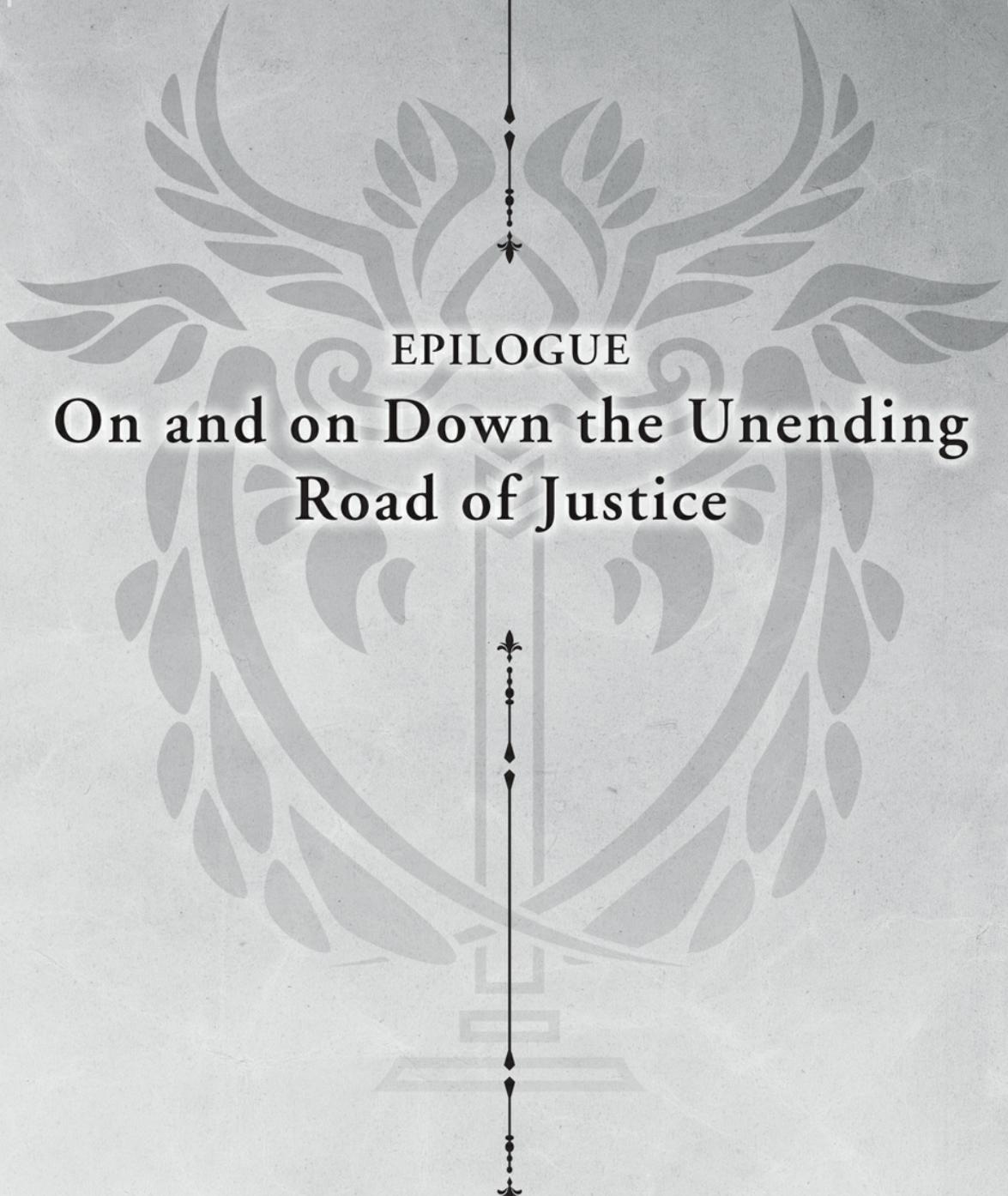
And the followers of justice gazed at the stars above.

“I pray,” said Astrea, “That at the end of it all, the final hero will be born.”

Hope. Sadness. Order. Justice...and dreams.

The goddess thought of the future and swore a solemn vow.

“We will always watch over you,” she said.



EPILOGUE

On and on Down the Unending Road of Justice

ASTREA RECORD
The War of Good and Evil

Story by Eujino Omori · Illustration by Sakage
Character Design by Sazuhito Yasuda



EPILOGUE

On and on Down the Unending Road of Justice

Beneath the clear blue sky were dozens and dozens of flowers, all lined up in neat rows. But this was not a field—cultivated or natural. It was a graveyard, and every stalk was an offering.

“...There we go. Thanks, Bell. Sorry for making you come with me.”

It was the First Graveyard, also known as Adventurers Graveyard, a collection of graves in the southeast of Orario. After placing a single flower at the base of a white grave marker, Hermes slowly rose to his feet.

“No, it’s okay,” said Bell. There was no embarrassment or consternation in his voice. He shook his head solemnly.

He was praying for the souls of the deceased. Though he knew not the faces of anyone sleeping there, he stood in their shoes as an adventurer of Orario, and felt obliged to pay his respects.

Upon the grave before him was carved the name LYDIS CAVERNA. It was not a name with which Bell was familiar, but the smile on Hermes’s face was one he had never seen before, and somehow he understood.

“Lord Hermes,” he said. “Was everything you just told me true? I can hardly believe such a fierce battle happened here only seven years ago.”

On the way to the graveyard, Bell had heard Hermes’s experiences during the war of good and evil. Even if there was more to the tale, what little he had heard had stunned and filled him with marvel.

“Yes,” Hermes replied. “That’s why they also call it the Seven Days of Death. No other time in Orario’s history has seen the loss of so many lives.”

Hermes started walking, simply reaffirming the truth of what he had said. He

didn't seek pity or sympathy from someone like Bell. It was a weight only the few who had been there could bear.

The word *adventurer* had never felt so heavy before. But Bell felt like he better understood the foundations the city was built upon.

That's why Orario is so quiet today, he thought.

As he followed Hermes out of the graveyard, he couldn't help but glance around. He and the god were not the only two here to pay their respects. Many of the graves had visitors. Adventurers, gods, and ordinary residents of the city. Blacksmiths, merchants, Guild employees, prostitutes, and travelers.

All came together, without regard for race or class, each carrying with them a bouquet of flowers, and all of them alike in their silence and the prayers they kept to themselves.

Today, the city was mourning what it had lost in the fight against evil.

Suddenly, Bell spotted a familiar face and stopped.

"Oh, Bogan?" he called out.

"Bell!" the man replied. It was the merchant Bell had been helping before he came here with Hermes.

He had said he had something to do, and vanished. It seemed he had gone to get changed, as he was now wearing an armored breastplate.

"That's...an adventurer's armor, isn't it?"

"...That it is."

Bell didn't like to brag, but he was technically an upper-class adventurer, somehow, and so could tell the armor was of quality make. Out of reach for most lower-class adventurers, and certainly not something civilians ordinarily owned. It seemed to show traces of heavy use.

"Wait," said Bell, shocked. "Does this mean...you used to be an adventurer, Bogan?"

"Ha-ha. Nah, that ain't it."

The man laughed and placed his hand on the breastplate.

“Ya see, the thing about this armor is...I stole it.”

“Huh?”

“Then, uh, some stuff happened, I saw the error of my ways, and I gave it back. After that, I saved some money together and eventually bought it good and proper.”

Bell wasn’t sure what to make of this claim. The knowledge that one of his and Hestia’s close acquaintances was a robber was hard enough to take in, but the man’s subsequent actions seemed to make little sense.

Seeing his confusion, Bogan gave a wry smile, which then became a sad, somewhat lonely look.

“I did some bad things, a long time ago, and my crimes eventually caught up to me. But I was forgiven. Someone stood up for me and showed me justice.”

The man stared at the grave in front of him. Written on it was a girl’s name.

Bell thought it must have belonged to a kind girl, full of justice and smiles. Nothing else would explain the look on the man’s face at that very moment.

“I washed my hands of all that nasty business,” Bogan went on, “and I turned my life around. It wasn’t easy, but I had to pay that kid back somehow.”

The man smiled. He looked back at the grave, then up at the sky. It was a smile that Bell had never seen him make before; a mischievous smile, like that of some street thug, except one that had been touched by the grace of justice.

Bell looked once more at the grave. It was evidently a popular one, given how many flowers lay at its base that must have come from acquaintances, friends, and family. Bogan added a single white flower to the mix.

“We’ll have that Jyaga Maru Kun some other time,” he said, still smiling. “Right, then, Bell. Be seeing you. Make sure you grow up big and strong, and don’t disappoint all these people who came before you.”

“Yes, I will.”

Bell watched Bogan leave with a wave and a smile. Something occurred to Bell as he looked at that smile.

He didn't know any of the people who slept beneath the soil. But they had touched him nonetheless and given him something to carry on.

Just then, he heard a muttering from behind him.

"A heroic tale... The perseverance of justice..."

Bell turned to see Hermes, lost in thought with a curious look on his face. Bell tilted his head in confusion, whereupon the god said, "Oh, it's nothing," and quickly changed the topic.

"I'd better finish the story I was telling," he said. "We didn't only lose things during that battle—we gained things, too. And now those things are in your hands."

"They are...? What are you talking about?"

"Lots of adventurers grew to new heights," Hermes explained, walking off. Bell quickly followed him. "Braver, Nine Hell, and Elgarm all reached Level 6. Little Aiz also became Level 4 around that time, I believe."

"...!"

"I already talked about Warlord, but that was when the other top dogs of *Freya Familia* became Level 6 as well."

Every few steps, Hermes would pull a flower from the bouquet in his arms and leave it at the side of a nearby grave, even if the recipient was not of his familia.

All the while, he spoke of the events of seven years ago, and how important they were in making Orario the city it was today.

"There's no doubt in my mind," he said. "That war is what pushed us to the next stage."

"And Lyu's familia...?"

"That's right. They departed to heaven shortly after that. But I believe it was their actions that brought an end to the Age of Darkness."

There weren't many flowers left now. Hermes left one at each of three graves belonging to *Loki Familia* adventurers, then spoke.

“Alfia’s actions were not in vain after all,” he said.

“Hmm? Alfia?”

“Never mind, Bell. Come, the next grave is the last one.”

With that, Hermes set off walking in a different direction. Almost immediately, Bell sensed something odd, for the god swiftly left the beaten path and headed into a copse of broad-leaved trees. Bell looked back and forth between Hermes and the First Graveyard, and he hurried to keep pace.

Before long, he arrived at a trio of graves.

“Erm...who do these belong to?” Bell asked. “And what are they doing all the way out here?”

Hermes had carved a path through the trees to reach them, and it seemed that under normal circumstances, nobody would even know they were there, let alone come to tend them. They had proper headstones, but that was about it. They were simply made, and were clearly rarely maintained, for they were covered in moss.

“They’re awfully far from the other graves,” said Bell. “And it doesn’t look like anyone’s taken care of them.”

“...Well, I hardly think they could be buried alongside everyone else,” the god said with a hint of irritation and irony in his voice.

“Huh?”

Bell tilted his head once more, noticing that Hermes’s expression was serious. It looked like he was about to ask Bell something very important.

“Bell,” he said. “I feel it was fate, meeting you today. Could I ask you to lay these two flowers for me?”

“M-me?”

“Yeah. I know you didn’t know them, but please, pray for them.”

“...Okay.”

Bell had never seen the god so serious. He didn’t know why, but he also didn’t ask. He simply took the flowers, as instructed. The color of their petals was the

same as his hair.

“Rest in peace.”

He kneeled, closed his eyes, and prayed in the dappled sunlight. That was all. The song of the birds, and the rustling of the leaves gave way to a soothing silence.

“...I’ve finished,” he said at last, standing up.

“Thank you. Sorry for making you come along,” Hermes said with a smile.

Bell still didn’t really understand what he’d done. “It’s no problem,” he said, “but...what about that last one?”

“Oh, that belongs to a god everyone hates,” Hermes explained. “Now that Astrea’s not around anymore, I’m the only one who comes to visit it.”

“W-were they really that bad...?”

“Well, I can’t say I blame them. Besides, a god’s grave doesn’t even really mean anything, does it?”

He seemed to direct this last comment at the grave itself. He sighed, gave a theatrical shrug, and placed the final flower at its base.

“But I suppose I can do this much, at least, while I’m fortunate enough to still walk the mortal realm.”

“Were they...someone important to you?”

“Oh, no. They were a bit of an ass, to be honest. Always trying to show off and do things their own way.”

The tone of his voice changed. Hermes stood up straight and gave a slight smile.

“But they were still...a friend.”

Bell’s eyes widened, and the pair’s long task finally drew to a close. Through the trees, Bell could make out the blue sky above. It was such a beautiful day that the tragedy of seven years past was difficult to imagine.

But Bell would not forget all he saw today, nor about the war of good and evil he had heard from Hermes’s lips.

For a while, the glade remained steeped in silence, but soon enough, the wind picked up once more, like the hands of a stopped clock resuming their onward march. Hermes ran his finger along the brim of his hat and looked up at the sky.

“Now, then,” he said. “I have something important to take care of, if you’ll excuse me.”

“Hmm? Something important?”

“Yes. I have to go deliver a letter to a goddess.”

Seeing Bell’s blank stare, Hermes closed one eye.

“Don’t you remember what I said? Before I met you today, I ran into Lyu.”

“Oh...”

The wind blew. The soft sound of a gentle gale crossing the sky.



To my dear goddess.

I still haven’t found my justice. I keep on wandering to this day.

In fact, I don’t even think I wander. When I lost myself to vengeance, I lost my right to fight for justice.

How can I claim to be searching for it now? I have stopped. Stopped traveling. Stopped growing. Turned my back on everything I’ve learned—everything I saw seven years ago, and everything Adi and Alfia taught me.

...But perhaps this is just another step along the road of justice. Perhaps, one day, I will be able to move on, and search for my answer once more, and if that day comes...

...then I will come and see you.

This I swear, on the sword and wings of justice,

and on the wishes I carry with me.

Lyu thought back over the letter she'd left in Hermes's care and slowly opened her eyes.

She was still standing before the grave of her friends. A mass grave without any bodies—only the broken weapons that Lyu once fought alongside.

Floor eighteen: Under Resort.

The place her friends had once wished to be buried. Lyu had come here to relive the experiences of seven years ago, in the war of good and evil.

A smile appeared on her lips. "Alize," she said. "All of you. One day...I think I'd like to start my journey again."

There were still regrets. There were still sins she had to atone for. But Lyu made her intent clear to her friends nonetheless.

"Until then, Adi. I'll watch over the justice you passed on to this city."

Perhaps her meager wish was not enough to reach the shooting stars above. It was proof she was not ready to move on just yet.

But the elf knew one thing for sure: Wherever she went from here, it would only take her further on her journey. That was what allowed her to face her friends with pride in her heart and an oath on her lips.

"I'll be thinking of the future you all dreamed of."



Be troubled.

For that is how you grow.

Journey alongside your worries and fears.

And at the end of it all, I will await your answer...

...in the astral record, written into the stars above.

ALIZE LOVELL

BELONGS TO	<i>Astrea Familia</i>	RACE	Human
JOB	Adventurer	JOB	Thirty-third floor
WEAPONS	One-Handed Sword	CURRENT FUNDS	6,000 valis

STATUS

Lv. 4

STRENGTH	H128	DEFENSE	H177	DEXTERITY	I77	AGILITY	H114
MAGIC	H153	IMMUNITY	I	CONFLAGRATE	I		

MAGIC

AGALLIS ARVESYNCE

- Enchantment.
- Fire Attribute.
- Chant: "Alga"

SKILL

BATREA ACRAS

- Heightens the effects of skills when in close combat.
- Heightens the effects of spells when cast.

RUBRUD BECKIA

- During combat, raises Strength.
- In a crisis, raises Defense and Dexterity.
- When fighting a powerful foe, raises Agility and Magic.
- When all three conditions are met, slightly raises Strength, Agility, and Magic as time goes on.

EQUIPMENT

CRIMSON ORDER

- One-handed sword, crafted from mythril and the petals of the Obiaflare flower.
- Forged by Golbniu Familia for 45,000,000 valis.
- A second-class piece of equipment, which boasts impressive quality by the standard of one-handed swords. Contains an effect that boosts fire-attribute magic.
- The weapon and pride of a girl devoted to order.

HEAT DRESS OF CRIMSON FLOWERS

- Battle clothes custom-made for Alize on the eve of the final showdown.
- Designed with a focus on defense and mobility, enhanced with accessories to provide protection against status effects and magic. Its abilities make it a first-class piece of equipment, alongside Lyu's Stella Dress of Stardom.

Afterword

When I was writing the script for the *Astrea Record* event, I read a lot of books and literature. Some of them were quite tricky, and I can't say I understood more than half of them, but I'm still quite sure that the question of justice and evil will never come to a satisfactory conclusion.

No matter how the world changes, humans will always be humans, born at different times, in different places. I don't want to say it's impossible, but I find it highly unlikely that anyone but a god could ever succeed in finding common ground between all of humanity.

I can't really believe I just wrote something so sanctimonious, but in any case, I wanted to see what sort of conclusion our gods, and of course Lyu and her friends, would draw were this question to be posed in the world of *Danmachi*.

Perhaps there are those of you who share my thoughts, in which case, I wish both of us the best of luck. Perhaps there are those of you who don't, in which case I would very much like to hear your thoughts and conclusions.

Searching for justice, finding your own justice—these are not easy tasks. I'm not even sure if it's what we should be doing. But that, to me, only makes it more important that we all think about what justice means to us, and I only have the highest respect for those who do.

Now I'm starting to embarrass myself with all this preaching, but I think I'm allowed to treat myself, at least on this page, as a reward for getting all the way to the end.

I would now like to move on to my acknowledgments. First, my lovely editor, Usami. It is wholly due to your tireless efforts that we were able to publish all three of these volumes in successive months. To Kakage, thank you so much for

breathing a new form of life into Alize and the girls. As a mere writer, I can't imagine what an illustrator must go through to keep to such a tight schedule, and I'm so happy I was able to work on this with you. I also extend my warmest gratitude to everyone at WFS for putting up with such a poor excuse for an author as me.

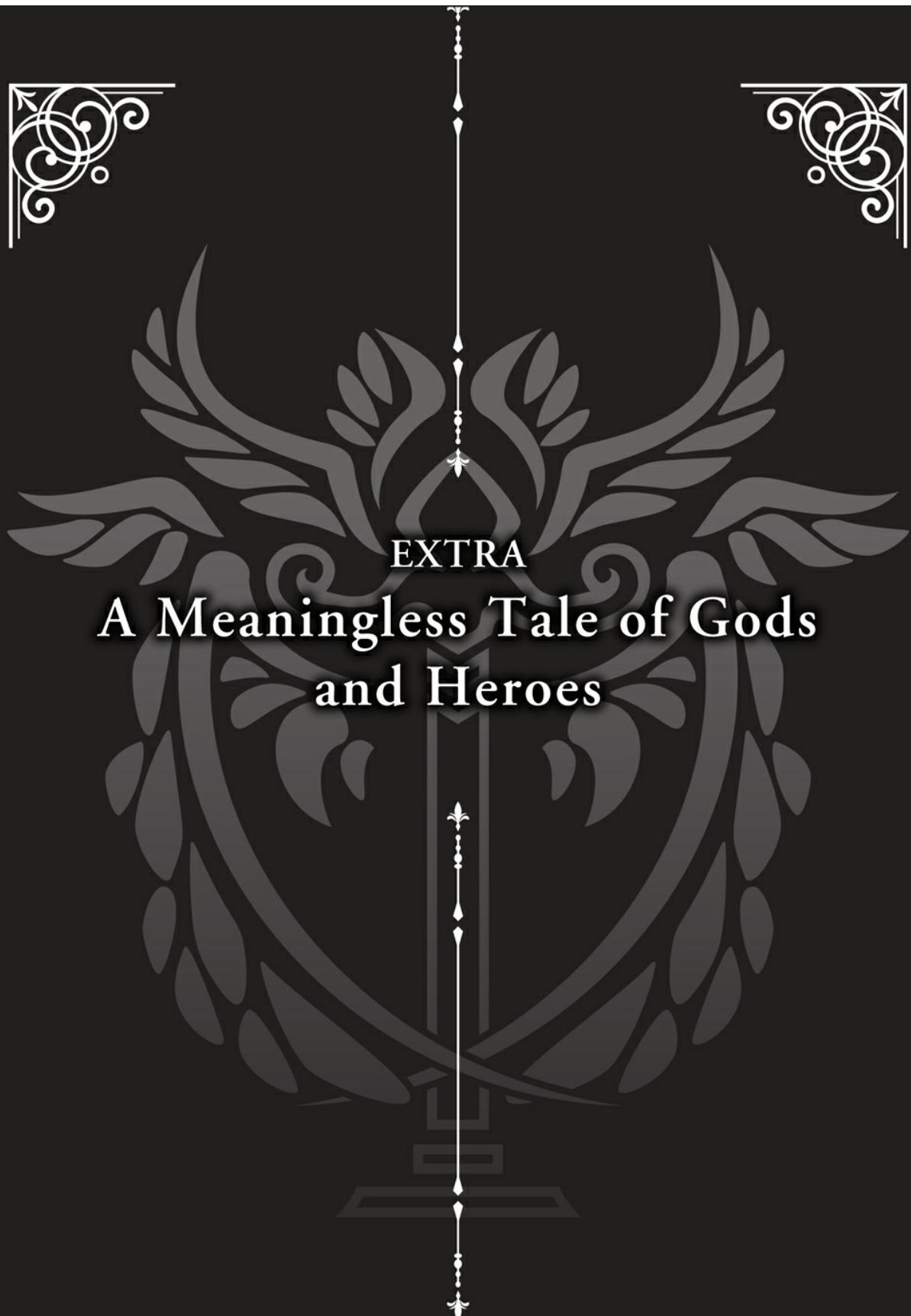
And finally, to you, the readers, thank you very much for picking up this series.

Justice will go on. Dreams will persevere. Heroes and gods, too.

What will this tale pass on to the *familia* myth as a whole?

I do hope you will stick around to find out.

—Fujino Omori



EXTRA
A Meaningless Tale of Gods
and Heroes

ASTREA RECORD
The War of Good and Evil

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



EXTRA

A Meaningless Tale of Gods and Heroes

A god's voice broke the silence.

"Are you two sure about this?"

The faint glow of evening filtered through the stained glass window, casting an orange light across shattered flagstones and splintered pews. The name of the church had long since been forgotten, and now the only ones present there were a god and two adventurers.

"You really want to help me with my stupid little plan?"

Erebus seemed amiable enough at the moment. The wicked charisma of absolute evil was nowhere to be seen.

The three were completely alone. Passersby rarely frequented this corner of the Labyrinth City, but that wasn't why the god had shed his mask and presented himself as he truly was.

Opposite him stood a man and woman.

"'Tis a little late to ask now," said the ashen-haired one, opening her heterochromatic eyes and casting Erebus an accusatory glare. "Was it not you who sought us out and dragged us from our seclusion when we were content to wait for death?"

"Yes," said the man clad in a large set of plate armor, a smile upon his diabolical features. "What was it you who told us? If we're to die either way, then why not allow the future to be built upon our backs? I must say, you surprised us both. But as I recall, we already gave our answers back then."

Erebus gave a theatrical shrug. His two partners in crime—Zald and Alfia—were so brazen in the way they spoke to a divine being like himself, that he couldn't help but smile.

"Just want to be sure," he said. "This is your last chance to back out."

Erebus turned up his palm, as though offering a contract to sign in blood.

"Whatever happens from here on out, the two of you will be remembered as villains. Villains who betrayed humankind and slaughtered hundreds, thousands. You'll go down forever in history, and not in a good way."

It was the truth. A plan was being forged that would in ten days raise up evil and knock down justice, and end in a terrible war of good and evil.

Lines of right and wrong would be drawn, and the names of all present would forever be uttered in the same breath as history's greatest monsters.

"Are you both really sure that's what you want?"

Alfia and Zald returned only bored and fearless expressions.

"How many times would you have us say it, Erebus? We made up our minds long ago, and it was not done with such little deliberation that we would change our answer now."

"History can remember me however it likes, but I will die content."

Like a wicked witch, Alfia was undaunted by the sins that lay ahead of her.

Like a soldier, Zald dismissed the assumed guilt of his future actions with a scoff.

Bathed in the light of evening, these two conquerors seemed far too genial for the name. Erebus softened his gaze and smiled back.

Truly, they were both heroes. Even a god could see that.

"My god taught me that anything can be a treasure if you set your mind to it. A sword, a woman, or even life itself. Not that he ever inspired great confidence."

At Zald's lighthearted jab, Alfia suddenly grew intensely displeased.

"Must you really remind me of that lecherous old man?" she spat. "How many times did his wandering hand approach my breasts? It irritates me to this day that your god is ever spoken in the same breath as my own."

Never one to let a juicy morsel slip, Erebus chimed in.

“Oh?” he said, his voice taking on a sultry tone. “Don’t stop there, dear Alfia, you must tell me more. Whatever came of this god’s philandering?”

“My spells taught him a lesson before he could lay one finger on me,” she answered, in a tone devoid of mercy.

“Zeus, you’re lucky you didn’t get sent back to heaven...”

“And then I told Hera about it.”

“Zeus, you’re lucky you’re alive...”

Erebus gave an awkward smile. He turned his empty eyes toward the cracked ceiling and beheld the sky beyond. After a few beats of silence, Zald chuckled.

“Ha-ha-ha... But, are you sure you have no regrets, Alfia?” he asked. “Didn’t you want to see the child?”

At this, Erebus’s ears suddenly pricked up.

“Hmm?” he asked. “I didn’t know you had a child, Alfia. You’re looking remarkably stunning for a woman who’s given birth.”

“It is not mine,” replied Alfia, shaking her head. “The child belongs to my younger sister.”

Then she lifted her head and squinted through the cracked glass toward the sunset outside.

“The blood of a child of Hera runs in his veins...as does the blood of one of Zeus’s.”

“Huh. You mean, the kid’s dad is from *Zeus Familia*?”

Erebus’s curiosity was piqued, and he narrowed his eyes, trying to ascertain how this would tip the world’s scales. It was Zald, after a moment of awkward hesitation, who elucidated.

“...Yes,” he admitted. “One of the lowliest humans in our ranks, in fact. So weak that even that boar and the hero child could best him.”

Zald could barely stand being associated with such an embarrassment. Just thinking about it gave him chills.

“It happened after our group was wiped out by the Black Dragon under

Maxim's leadership. I still remember how furious I was when I heard. One of our own, knocking up a Hera girl?"

Zald suddenly looked so guilty that he was ready to die on the spot. He couldn't even maintain eye contact with Alfia, who simply stood there, exuding malevolence.

"I mean, we speak of Hera's women! Do you understand?! Even after the Black Dragon rendered her familia as desolate as ours, it was suicide to violate their purity!"

Erebus smiled. "A curious stance for the follower of a philanderer to take."

"...Zeus may have been my patron, but I do not share in his madness!"

The perverse pursuits of Zeus were known to everyone, both in heaven and the world below. Zald was one of the few men of good conscience in the god's familia, and it was panic—mainly for his own safety—that drove him to cover his former fellow's transgressions. Even without words, the queen's ice-cold silence spoke volumes, and her feelings toward the uncouth ruffian who had bedded her younger sister could not have been clearer.

After thinking about it for half a second, Alfia raised her hand for a chop, causing Zald to brace both his arms. "No, Alfia! Please!" he yelled.

Her wrath surpassed that of all the world's protective aunts and uncles combined. Erebus gave a soft chuckle.

"I can just imagine what things were like between your two familias," he said. "So, where is that child now? With Hera?"

"...No," replied Alfia, after briefly taking out her anger on Zald. "My sister entrusted him to Zeus. I was told they are living a peaceful life in the mountains."

"Hmm. I see what Zald is asking now," said Erebus. "This child is your only surviving relative—and a memento of your sister, at that. And you sure you don't want to see him? Is your sister the only one you cared about?"

"...I did not interfere with her decision," Alfia admitted, after a short pause. "I raised no objection when my dying sister chose to leave him with Zeus."

Whatever emotions she felt, she didn't speak of them. She stated only facts.

"I chose to prolong my own life instead of caring for my nephew... I don't deserve to see him."

Her final words sounded more like a confession. As Alfia stood still in the light of the setting sun, Zald opened his mouth to speak.

"Alfia," he said. "I won't claim that blood ties are all-important. And I won't say that you have the right to call yourself his family. But if any small part of you feels for the boy, then..."

"It doesn't, Zald. Forget what I said."

The ashen hair swept her shoulders as Alfia shook her head, denying Zald's words. A smile formed on her lips.

"Whether I have the right is irrelevant."

With that, she rendered her tale meaningless.

"Besides, I don't think I could handle being called Auntie," she said.

Zald gave her an extremely odd look, like his eyes were bulging out of his sockets. Erebus was much the same. Then the two of them snorted loudly before bursting into howling laughter.

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha! Well, that explains it! I can't blame you for that!" roared Zald.

"Agreed," said Erebus, trying to choke back his giggles. "We have no right to comment on such a delicate topic for women."

That peaceful, pointless noise filled the chapel. After he had finally had enough, Erebus straightened his back, cleared his throat, and spoke.

"Alfia," he said. "I wish to ask you something. Your twin sister must have been likewise beautiful, but was she also as difficult, neurotic, and violent as you?"

"My sister was weaker in every way. She couldn't even go for a walk by herself."

The witch closed her eyes, casting her mind back to the past.

"Plus, she was the most dull-witted girl this world has ever seen, and indeed

may ever see."

"Harsh," said Zald.

"But true. For you see, while we were in the womb, I stole her gifts for myself."

At that moment, the witch seemed truly saddened.

"Within me lies the potential that was meant for the two of us. That is my crime, and it is only natural that I should be reviled and feared for it."

The woman's self-deprecating words tore at the walls of her heart. But the one she longed to speak to most was no longer there. Instead, only the hallowed walls of the church heard her confession.

After a long silence, Alfia opened her eyes.

"That woman was everything left over after making me," she said. "All that remained...was kindness."

That was her sister's one redeeming trait.

"It was curious, but people loved her even though she could do nothing. Even Hera did everything she could to prolong her life. She was an ordinary girl in every sense...save that whatever kindness she received she would always repay."

Alfia's words sounded like the melodies sung by spirits in heaven. Erebus couldn't bring himself to speak and interrupt them. At this moment, the witch sounded kinder and gentler than ever before.

"Metelia," she said, "was the purest, kindest soul I've ever known... That is why I loved her."

The smile that accompanied those words was the most beautiful thing Erebus had seen. "I see," he said with a smile of his own, then he turned to Zald.

"And what of the father?" he asked him.

"Nothing to say," the man replied, suddenly looking sour. "At least nothing that brings me pride. A mere supporter who ran at the first sign of trouble, and who joined our god in peeking in on the women's baths..."

Zald was despondent, mortified he had to follow up Alfia's moving and personal tale with reports of degenerate behavior.

"...But I suppose you're right. Perhaps I should have seen the child, too. I suppose...if he is that idiot's son, then in the end, he is family."

Zald broke into a smile as he recalled the mischievous grin of his junior, the source of so many headaches back in the day.

Erebus gave the pair a fond look, then opened his mouth to speak.

"Ah, I haven't asked you the most important thing yet," he said. "Zald, Alfia. What do you hope to gain from this battle?"

The heroes answered immediately, as though their answer were written in stone.

""A future,"" they both replied.

"For our descendants to devour us and surpass the Black Dragon."

That was the warrior's dream. From a loser's heart, a winner would be born and lead the world into a new Age of Heroes.

"For this world to know hope, and for my sister's child to not have to fight."

That was the witch's wish. Lasting peace that would give birth to a world for a memento to live on in happiness.

"And what if...?" the god went on, picking at the fickle strands of destiny. "What if that child comes to this land, guided by the blood of his parents? What if he is called to battle, and the fate of the world hangs in the balance?"

With a smile on his lips, Erebus asked, though he already knew the answer.

"Do you really have to ask, Erebus?"

"Yes. The answer to that is obvious..."

Alfia and Zald spoke as one.

““We wish there to be strong heroes to protect him.””

It was only one possible future. Perhaps, at some point, a single white rabbit would pass through the gates of Orario, where countless setbacks and difficulties awaited.

“May he be baptized in the fires of fellow heroes and strive ever higher.”

Perhaps he would be shattered and built back up by those around him. By a warlord, a hero, or elven royalty. By warriors, a chariot, or a sword princess, or a gale wind.

Perhaps the young heroes in whom Zald and Alfia placed their trust would become a test for that child to pass.

“May he succeed in his trials and become a hero himself.”

Perhaps he would inherit their dreams and carry them upon his own back.

And perhaps, though he never knew their faces, Zald’s and Alfia’s wish would become his own. Just as justice endured and went on. A tale of heroes.

“If he turns out anything like his father, his quick feet should come to the aid of many an adventurer.”

“And if he turns out anything like his mother, his kind deeds should dry the eyes of many a friend.”

Sharing thoughts of the boy’s parents, Zald and Alfia placed their faith in the bonds of blood and trust. Nobody believed more in that child’s future than they.

That was love. Whatever anybody else said, it was their love.

“I see...”

After lending a serious ear to their words, Erebus grinned.

“Love is a terrible thing. For you to wish hardship on a boy you barely know... I’m starting to feel sorry for him.”

“We are the children of Zeus and Hera,” said Alfia. “We are capable of much worse.”

“Yes,” Zald agreed. “The boy should count himself lucky our familias are no more.”

The two of them wore defiant grins, showing no shame at all for their cruel words.

“Oh, dear. Whatever am I going to do with you two?”

Erebus shrugged and gave a wry smile that nonetheless bared the emotions laying at the bottom of his divine heart.

“Erebus,” said Alfia. “Do not test us any further. We have no regrets and will carry out our duties to the bitter end.”

“Many will perish at our hands, but if a future can be built upon our deeds, then it will all be worth it.”

The smiles were gone from their faces now. All that remained was to shoulder the weight of their sin, without eagerness or regret, and uphold their oath to the world.

“There is no other way,” said Zald. “This is the ultimate test. I will give what little of my life remains to see it through.”

If Orario could not reach their future, if the city of heroes succumbed to the might of the conquerors, then Erebus, Zald, and Alfia were fully prepared to topple Babel and send the world back to ancient times. It was the only way humankind could carry on.

They knew and accepted the price they would have to pay to assume the mantle of evil. But at the same time, they believed it would not come to that.

“Yes,” said Alfia. “Let us bring despair and forge a keystone of hope. We have lived long lives. This will be our final duty.”

They knew that the city contained unrealized potential. Something that could strike down the cannibalistic fiends they would become.

And in a corner of that very city, in an abandoned church, the warrior and the witch gave their vows.

"We leave all that we are to the heroes who come after us," said Alfia.

Erebus closed his eyes. Of his own regrets, he spoke only to himself, only now indulging in the rightful confidence of divinity.

Ah, how bright they shine.

These are the heroes who should be sung about in unending tales.

And yet here I am, dragging their names through the mud.

Look how bright they shine in spite of that.

If they're going to be so gung-ho about it, then I should be the same.

Sorry, Vito. I know you're not going to like this.

You won't understand my love. You'll curse my lies and never learn to love this world.

But I have a dream. A dream I must accomplish.

I know you think that word's silly now, but I hope it one day inspires you to love something.

I will join these two and search for justice. For heroes.

Because I believe that Orario, and the whole world, will reach its dreams one day.

I love you, Vito.

I love all my children.

I love this world, so small yet so, so vast.

"...Very well. Then, in my name, I declare..."

When he opened his eyes, no longer was there a god who loved the world. Only pure evil. A being of chaos, who sought nothing more than to spread his word and harry the agents of order.

“From this day forth, we work together. We are necessary. We are absolute. And we will go down in history as symbols of sin itself!”

The warrior narrowed his eyes and nodded.

The witch closed her eyes and smiled.

“Even so, I alone will sing of the great deeds you are about to perform!”

The god signed an unbreakable covenant with the world’s mighty heroes.

He wrote a footnote of history that would never be read by mortal eyes.

He turned, pushed open the church doors, and bathed in the light of the outside world. There, he looked back at his two accomplices.

“Let’s go,” he said. “To give birth to a new generation of heroes.”

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