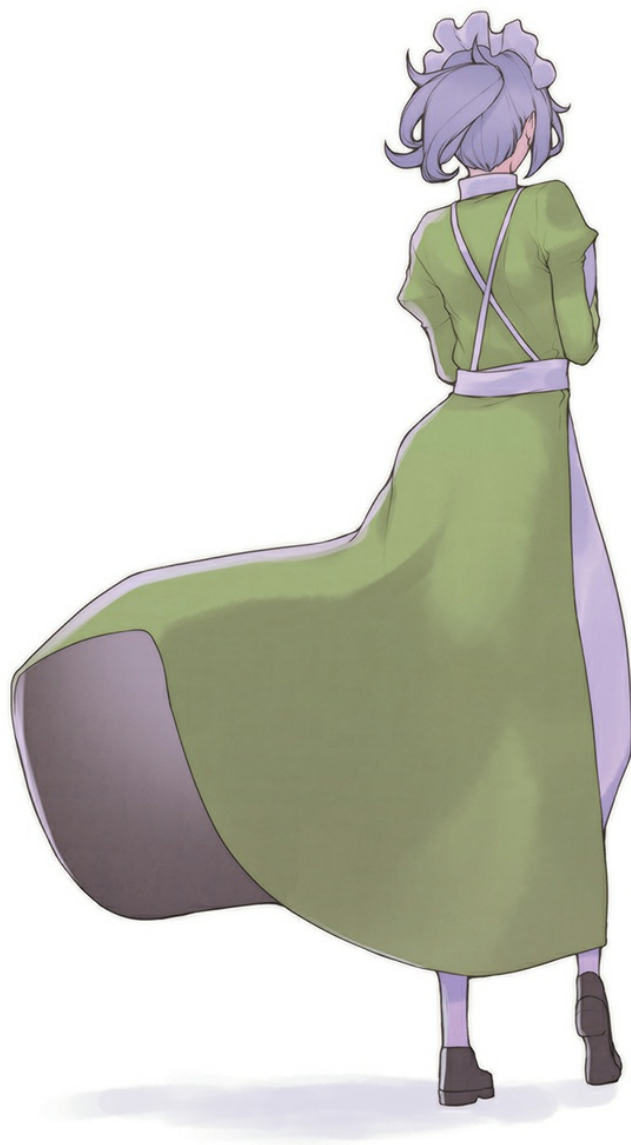




Is it **WRONG** to TRY to **PICK UP** GIRLS in a **DUNGEON?**

FUJINO OMORI  
ILLUSTRATION BY  
SUZUHITO YASUDA



Is it **WRONG**  
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18

FUJINO  
OMORI

ILLUSTRATION BY  
SUZUHITO  
YASUDA

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IN A DUNGEON?

## VOLUME 18

FUJINO OMORI

ILLUSTRATION BY SUZUHITO YASUDA



NEW YORK

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IS IT WRONG TO TRY TO PICK UP GIRLS IN A DUNGEON?, Volume 18

FUJINO OMORI

Translation by Dale DeLucia

Cover art by Suzuhito Yasuda

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DUNGEON NI DEAI WO MOTOMERU NO WA MACHIGATTEIRUDAROUKA vol.  
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# Contents

[Cover](#)

[Insert](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Double Role II](#)

[Chapter 6: Megami Tensei ~Orario Revelation~](#)

[Chapter 7: We're Getting Married Once This Battle Is Over](#)

[Monologue VI](#)

[Chapter 8: The Great Familia War](#)

[Chapter 9: Flower Language for You](#)

[Epilogue: Double Cast](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Yen Newsletter](#)

BELL CRANELL

The hero of the story, who came to Orario (dreaming of meeting a beautiful heroine in the Dungeon) on the advice of his grandfather. He belongs to *Hestia Familia* and is still getting used to his job as an adventurer.



HESTIA

A being from the heavens, she is far beyond all the inhabitants of the mortal plane. The head of Bell's *Hestia Familia*, she is absolutely head over heels in love with him!

AIZ WALLENSTEIN

Known as the Sword Princess, her combination of feminine beauty and incredible strength makes her Orario's greatest female adventurer. Bell idolizes her. Currently Level 6, she belongs to *Loki Familia*.



FREYA

The patron goddess of *Freya Familia*. Hailed as the most beautiful being even among deities, a true Goddess of Beauty.



SYR FLOVER

A waitress at The Benevolent Mistress. She established a friendly relationship with Bell after an unexpected meeting.

ASFI AL ANDROMEDA

A gifted maker of magic items. Belongs to *Hermes Familia*.



OTTAR

The captain of *Freya Familia*. The strongest adventurer in Orario. A boaz.

WELF CROZZO

A smith who fights alongside Bell as a member of his party, he forged Bell's light armor (Pyonkichi series). Belongs to *Hestia Familia*.

HARUHIME SANJOUNO

A fox person (renart) from the Far East who met Bell in Orario's Pleasure Quarter. Belongs to *Hestia Familia*.

HERMES

The patron god of *Hermes Familia*. A charming god who is quick on his feet and is careful to maintain neutrality among the various factions. Is he keeping tabs on Bell for someone...?

CHLOE LOLO

A catgirl waitress at The Benevolent Mistress who talks and acts like a goddess. Chases after Bell.

MIA GRAND

The owner of a tavern called The Benevolent Mistress. Relatively tall, despite being a dwarf. Strong enough to send adventurers running away in tears.

ALFRIK GULLIVER

An adventurer who managed to reach Level 5 despite being a prum. Has three younger brothers named Dvalin, Berling, and Grer.

HEDIN SELRAND

An intelligent magic swordsman who has put his faith in Freya. His alias is Hildsleif.

HEITH VELVET

A skilled healer in *Freya Familia*. She apparently often complains about Ottar.

LILLILUKA ERDE

A girl belonging to a race of pygmy humans known as prums, she plays the role of supporter in Bell's party. A member of *Hestia Familia*, she's much more powerful than she looks.

MIKOTO YAMATO

A girl from the Far East. She feels indebted to Bell after receiving his forgiveness. Belongs to *Hestia Familia*.

EINA TULLE

A Dungeon adviser and a receptionist for the Guild, the organization in charge of regulating the Dungeon. She has bought armor for Bell in the past, and she looks after him both officially and personally.

AHNYA FROMEL

One of Lyu's and Syr's coworkers at The Benevolent Mistress, she's something of a foolish catgirl.

RUNOA FAUST

A human waitress at The Benevolent Mistress. Although she seems to be a commonsense type, she has a troubled side.

ALLEN FROMEL

A cat person who belongs to *Freya Familia*. A Level 6 first-tier adventurer known as the fastest in Orario.

HEGNI RAGNAR

A dark elf and Hedin's old foe. His alias is Däinsleif.

HÖRN

The goddess's attendant who has sworn loyalty to Freya. Known as Nameless, she has no alias.



CHARACTER & STORY

The Labyrinth City Orario——A large metropolis that sits over an expansive network of underground tunnels and caverns known as the “Dungeon.” Bell Cranell came here to pursue his dream of becoming an adventurer. After meeting the goddess Hestia, he joined her familia and began to spend his days in the Dungeon, hoping to win the respect of his idol, the Sword Princess Aiz Wallenstein. Not long after, the supporter Lilly, the smith Welf, the Far Easterner Mikoto, and the renart Haruhime have joined *Hestia Familia* alongside him.

Goddess Freya charmed the entire city to have Bell for herself, but thanks to Bell's unyielding spirit, Asfi and Lyu (who escaped being charmed), and Hestia's authority, she failed to force Bell into her familia. With many different intentions all intertwining, a war game begins to settle the fates of Bell Cranell and *Freya Familia*...



## DOUBLE ROLE II



## DOUBLE ROLE II

The last place I always end up at is a field of flowers.

When I was in the heavens, I was somewhat restricted.

A goddess of beauty is special even among gods and goddesses.

Our power is both a sweet nectar and a deadly poison.

A charm that entrances even deities is absolute, capable of twisting even divine truth. Other deities, especially chief gods, both feared and desired goddesses of beauty. It wasn't uncommon to hear of gods who tried to bring a goddess of beauty to heel only to become puppets themselves.

Because of that, there were only two options.

Either completely destroy us or pamper us like princesses.

Most opted for the latter. As a safety precaution, a virgin goddess might also be kept around. These arrangements were made to make sure the goddesses of beauty behaved, like when Artemis was paired with Aphrodite. There came to be an unspoken understanding that the guardians of the realm could use their powers without limitation if it would prevent aggression and domination in the heavens.

So I was restricted by having a guard watching over me—would be the logical assumption.

But my charm could even break the defenses of virginal goddesses.

I was special even among goddesses of beauty.

Regardless of what I wanted, I became worshipped and feared. Chances were the only deities in all of the heavens who could truly resist my power were the three great vestal goddesses of Olympus.

Because of that, I was *very carefully* managed.

On the surface, I lived in a paradise and wanted for nothing. In truth, it was a



gilded cage meant to hold me for all eternity.

In my grand temple, peerless in heaven, the countless subordinate deities and spirits protecting my supposed paradise were just more shackles to chain me. The most awful part was that Odin carefully took all of my interests and tastes into consideration when designing the temple. He specifically chose those whom Freya couldn't abandon, turning their pure and untarnished love into more chains that could tie me down. Meanwhile, Odin himself skulked around at a distance where my charm couldn't reach him while still staying just close enough for his spear to find and kill me if anything ever happened. It was just the sort of thing that loathsome old god would think of.

But I didn't resent my lack of freedom.

I had countless complaints, but I was pampered as a goddess of beauty and love.

I was blessed, beloved by everyone and everything. It would be absurd to pretend I was somehow unfortunate. After all, resignation and detachment had long been my companions, even before I was placed in my prison.

Ultimately, I was really just playing with dolls.

No one opposed me. Nobody could.

Everyone, from the strongest gods of war to the most villainous gods of evil, was desperate for my love. They would do anything for it.

Meanwhile, any being I might desire would gladly offer up their love to me.

And that love was the most hollow thing in all the realms.

There might be no one who could understand.

There might be no one who could sympathize.

What a twisted contradiction it was. Even though I was near mad in my search for love, every being offered it to me unconditionally.

Beauty and love transformed even an abyss of dark desire into a pure, unblemished plain.

And all regardless of my charm.

I was doomed to live with this hollowness forever.

The truth was that as a goddess of beauty and love, I would find it impossible to ever escape my fate.

I realized that I was nothing more than a slave to love.

No matter how free-spirited I fancied myself, no matter how ruthless a witch I pretended to be, I would never break free from the yoke of a goddess.

When was the last time I donned a heartfelt smile instead of a mask that entranced anyone who gazed upon it?

I couldn't even remember anymore.

Love is a convenient thing.

It allows you to attain anything. There is nothing that cannot be obtained with it.

Love is a wonderful thing.

It can bring joy. And in the process, it can bring jealousy.

Love is a pretty thing.

It must be beautiful. Without beauty, it cannot be called love.

Calculation isn't love. If it is even the least bit unsightly, it won't be perceived as love.

Or else it would be impossible to laugh off vulgar lust or rebuke simple narcissism.

Love must be sacred. Everyone has their dream of love. There is nothing more beautiful than love, nothing more noble.

If I wasn't beautiful, would I be able to forget love, I wonder?

If I cast off my beauty, could I be freed from this yoke?

That's when I decided to sully myself. I wanted to be corrupted.

I surrounded myself with gods and goddesses in my gilded cage, debasing myself with every sort of pleasure and sampling every kind of debauchery imaginable.

The infamous city of depravity couldn't begin to compare. The pinnacle of degeneracy in the heavenly realm was undoubtedly the grand temple where I was imprisoned. I sank into a sea of lust and carnal passion for centuries, millennia.

Despite being a deity, I felt a deep weariness consume me.

And at some point, the realization hit me. Eyes still watched me from every angle. The passionate, love-filled gazes focused only on me. Nothing had changed.

They were still the same!

No matter how much I tried to corrupt myself, no matter how long I spent degrading myself, not one of them would look away from me!

The yoke was still firmly locked on my shoulders.

I screamed. For the first time, I cast aside any thought for appearance and ran from the temple. Over mountains, through valleys, across seas, and into the stars. Wearing one of my hundred faces, borrowed from my daughter, I evaded my pursuers and wandered the infinite heavens.

And my wandering feet took me to a boundless field of flowers.

It was here that the line between sky and ground disappeared, and in the sea of beautiful red flowers, I kneeled and collapsed.

I couldn't cry.

But tears still continued to fall from my eyes.

Ah, I was so consumed by resignation and detachment that any powerful emotions had long since dried up, like a parched desert. So even though it should not have saddened me, I covered my face with my hands like a slip of a girl. The unceasing rain became gold that fell on the red flowers and soaked the ground.

I can't find it.

I can't find it.

I didn't know what I was even searching for. But I was surely yearning for

something—something that would free me from the yoke of being a goddess of beauty.

The hollow tears unaccompanied by any sadness continued for a thousand, two thousand, three thousand nights. And when the flower petals scattered, the stems snapped, and the spring of gold threatened to swallow me whole, she appeared.

Idun, a goddess from my homeland, was almost as charming as a true goddess of beauty. This innocent and righteous goddess declared she had come to give me a talking-to, because she couldn't bear to continue watching the vulgar life I chose to lead. After detailing how sweaty she had gotten searching long and hard for me, she began to passionately talk about youth, the thing that she presided over.

It was her belief that relations between men and women should be pure. They needed to share in both the good and the bad. She went on to argue that no matter how many years passed, our souls were still youthful. And apparently I needed to get some fresh air and buck up.

I thought about killing her. I stood up and circled behind her as she continued blathering, and just as I was about to slip my hands around her slender neck—  
*“So let's search for your Odr together.”*

—Odr?

I stopped moving.

She smiled and continued, not realizing how narrowly she had avoided death.

She said that there was surely an Odr who could complete me somewhere, so I should go ahead and enjoy a vibrant springtime of youth with whoever that may be. Evidently, they were supposed to free me from my bondage.

Hearing that, I sneered.

I told her there was no way someone like that existed.

But I decided to believe Idun's tall tale.

After all, I couldn't prove that person didn't exist.

Once I returned to my temple, after causing a massive uproar, I became a



collector.

In my search for the one who would be only mine, I gathered every sort of beautiful being, paying special attention to the souls of the mortal children. And once things calmed down, I slipped out again and again to wander.

I embarked on these trips to find my Odr. Whenever the urge struck me, I would mask myself with my daughter's face and crisscross the heavens aimlessly.

I escaped countless times, evading the inevitable pursuers, but the longer I failed to find my Odr, the more my disappointments grew. Loath to let the poison of boredom consume me, I sought stimulation, sometimes dealing with the deities who swarmed around me while I continued to wander. That was probably the time I happened to run into Hestia while not in disguise.

When I met Idun again and she nonchalantly asked me if I had found my Odr yet, that was the second time I came very close to strangling her, but I did learn something new.

There was one thing and one thing only that goddesses of beauty like myself couldn't attain.

Something we couldn't attain because we were more beautiful than anyone. Something we couldn't have because of the existence of love. I began to wonder what the other goddesses of beauty felt about this, but I quickly put that out of my mind. It was obviously pointless.

My peers were assuredly not troubled like I was. They had no doubt that they were absolute queens and indulged in their blessings and offerings as if it were only natural. Given their unshakable confidence in their own superiority, they never spared a thought for how others felt.

I envied prideful Ishtar. I was jealous of foolish Aphrodite.

Even if they experienced “ ”, they would either sneer at it or be able to turn it into just a painful old memory.

An eternity later, I finished my search of the heavens. My Odr wasn't in the heavenly sea.

The next logical place to go was the mortal realm. That was around the time in the age of gods when more and more deities began to descend from the heavens, so I joined in as well.

On the surface, it was to deal with the boredom of the heavenly realm, out of an excitement for the possibilities to be found in an imperfect world. I clung to the hope of a miraculous new experience—of meeting my Odr. But I discovered that the mortal realm is far smaller than the heavens above, and I soon found its limits. My prayer quickly turned into despair.

Once I finished my search, all that remained was to wait for time to pass.

By then, I had already formed my familia, and I was tired. Wearing a regal smile in front of all those cute children, I thought it would have been better to be consumed by boredom and sleep for all eternity.

One day, I slipped away from my watchful followers and by coincidence wound up in a place that resembled my homeland in the heavens—a field of red flowers bathed in the dusk light.

In the middle of that field, I slumped down, and my tears flowed. This time there was grief as well. My yoke laughed in my ears as I desperately held back the pangs of despair.

Those were the first and probably the last tears I ever spilled in the mortal realm.

...Ah, no.

Because Syr cried in front of you, too.

CHAPTER 6  
MEGAMI TENSEI ~ORARIO REVELATION~



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## CHAPTER 6

### MEGAMI TENSEI ORARIO REVELATION

My hair has grown.

At some point, it grew past my shoulders, long enough to reach my back.

Taking a handful of it, I spot a strand of gold peeking out of the field of faint green.

*She* was the one who always dyed my hair to hide my identity. And she was the one who always cut it, too. The gentle gaze that looked at me from the mirror is so far away now. I can't quite remember how that faint smile of hers looked.

The girl who cut my hair for me is gone. I rejected her, and then she left. Now that I think about it, that was probably what she wanted.

What went through her head when she brushed my hair? How did she feel when she called it pretty? Was all that time we spent together a lie?

I can't begin to count how many times that question, that anger, that sadness crossed my mind, only to disappear.

She said that everything I saw in those eyes was just role-playing. She was quite clear that all the time she had spent at the tavern had been nothing more than a game.

There are a lot of things I don't know. And even more feelings that have been hurt.

Should I scream and yell about being betrayed? Cry about being lied to? Or would it be easier to just demand some recompense for my innocent feelings?

The whole time I was trapped underground, I couldn't stop thinking about all of that.

But then it dawned on me.



Nothing had changed about her.

She was always selfish. She always said how precious we were, but she would never talk about herself and was full of secrets. She would just giggle and play it off and slip away. She was always like the wind, free-spirited and unbridled.

This is no different.

She made a convenient declaration and one-sidedly ended our relationship. Even though I still don't understand anything and don't know what to believe.

That's right...

I can't accept this situation unless I have a proper talk with her.

In which case...

I can be forgiven for telling her that isn't my problem and chasing after her. It doesn't matter whether she says everything up until now was just a game or a bunch of lies. Because I haven't gotten a chance to let out everything in my heart.

If you're going to cast aside your life as the girl I know and proclaim you're the egotistical queen, then I can do as I please, too. This time, I'll let the gale grow into a violent storm.

"...I brought it like you asked. Picked it up after that battle."

We're standing in front of the gate, outside the city walls.

I notice the broken fragment of wood.

With a grateful nod, I take it from one of the city's most notable figures who came all this way for me, and then slowly look up at the sky. We stand on the boundary between night and day before the sun has begun to rise. The gleaming stars are still visible in the sky. I would no longer avert my eyes from those countless pinpricks of light.

"Lord Hermes said to take this... *She* is apparently in Zolingam, far to the east."

I thank my friend for the message from her patron and nod.

With her help, I have made all the preparations for my departure. The only

thing left to do is bid farewell to this city for a while. I turn my back to the city walls, gazing out toward the uninterrupted horizon.

For that white-haired boy. For that girl with blue-gray hair. And for the me who hid her blond hair for so long.

I'll be performing one final purification.

Still peering up at the twinkling stars, I turn my back to the city and whisper into the wind.

"Wait for me, Syr. I won't be satisfied until I give you a good slap."



A war game like never before was being—

The news immediately spread all through Orario.

While the residents of Orario were still struggling to sort through their memories after the goddess of beauty had charmed the entire city, the rapidly developing events sparked widespread panic and confusion.

*Freya Familia* versus a coalition of familias.

No one had any way of knowing whether this unprecedented arrangement had been decided by the Guild and the general consensus of all the deities, or if Freya herself had proposed it. Either way, it was sure to become the biggest war game in Orario's history. Even the city's massive walls couldn't contain the news of an impending familia war, and when word got out, it stunned the outside world.

"What's going on?!" was a common refrain.

"Just desserts," sneered those who were outraged that their minds had been toyed with.

"It's not enough!" could even be heard on some lips.

But the most frequent response was "What's going to happen next?"

Shockingly, the merchants were not trying to take advantage of the situation to make a profit for once. Even they were worried about the fate of the city.

And the deities felt no different.

Their usual playful attitude had all but evaporated, and many had started seriously thinking about their future course. More than a few struggled to control their hotheaded followers—adventurers who were chomping at the bit to join the upcoming battle.

Naturally, no one raised their voice urging people to forgive *Freya Familia's* crimes. Even if they were dumbfounded by the idea that everything would be settled with a war game, all the grudges and resentment stretching back to the destruction of the pleasure quarter and countless other high-handed, unilateral actions had finally exploded.

That's right.

In this moment, Freya was all alone, completely without support.

If nothing else, there weren't any publicly claiming to be her ally.

—At the same time, there were not many reckless enough to challenge the goddess of beauty's fearsome host.

“What are you saying?!”

Hestia's shout echoed against the room's massive vaulted ceiling.

Denatus was being held on the thirtieth floor of Babel, in the center of the city.

“Why aren't you joining the war game, Loki?!”

**BAM!**

Hestia's hands slammed down on the round table.

Sitting diagonally across from her, Loki pursed her lips.

“...I just can't. That's how it's gotta be.”

“What do you mean by that?!”

An uproar filled the room as Hestia shouted.

The goal of the current Denatus was to discuss the rules and structure of the upcoming war game and confirm who would be joining the coalition led by

*Hestia Familia.*

It went without saying that *Loki Familia* was the top choice when it came to contesting *Freya Familia*. But they were not participating.

A shudder ran through the massive number of deities who had shown up at this Denatus.

“You’re everyone’s first pick to kick the tar out of Freya! And you’re chickening out at a time like this?! Aren’t you ashamed?!”

“You’re the one who got all cocky saying you’d accept the war game...”

“Because I was sure that you’d be first to join the coalition since you’re such a hothead! I was counting on Wallen-what’s-her-face! Otherwise, I wouldn’t have tried to fight those monsters head-on!”

“Doesn’t it embarrass you to rely on the strength of someone you hate so much...?”

Loki could hardly believe how much the little goddess was expecting everyone else to solve her problems. But Hestia had her reasons to not be overly concerned with appearances at the moment.

Leaning forward, she shouted, threatening to spray Loki with spittle.

“Look around you! Declaring that you won’t be joining will make everyone else get cold feet!”

All of the deities were closely watching how everyone else reacted, and all of them had suddenly distanced themselves from Hestia, both metaphorically and literally. They had scooted their chairs about five paces back from the table and had superficial, nervous smiles on their faces.

*If Loki Familia isn’t joining, then who’s going to hold off those monsters?*

It was clear they were all thinking the same thing.

When prospects looked grim, most prioritized protecting themselves. That was as true of gods as it was mortals.

“Then I guess I’ll come out and say it...” Loki responded wearily after taking a look around. “If we join the fray, then this is just gonna become a tumble



'tween me and Freya.”

“Wha...?!”

“On paper at least, this is supposed to settle your beef with Freya. If we swoop in, then you’re gonna end up bein’ an afterthought...You’d be in the fight in name only.”

Instead of *Freya Familia* versus *Hestia Familia* and their allies, it would become *Freya Familia* versus *Loki Familia* and some tagalongs.

Hestia couldn’t argue it because she knew it was true.

Considering Freya had staked all of her wealth, honor, and pride on this fight, it would be pathetic and dishonorable of Hestia to let someone else fight for her.

Of course, she couldn’t care less about how it came across, because the enemy was so impossibly strong, and Bell’s chastity was on the line.

“Th-then at least you could have some of your kids participate...!”

“That was already ruled out—by the Guild.”

Freya might have proposed this war game herself, but at this rate it would just be a public execution.

That would not do any favors for their reputation in other countries, so if it was going to be called a war game, there would have to be at least some semblance of fairness—that was the Guild’s stance on the matter.

“Wasn’t it even more unfair that time with Apollo?!”

“That was only because you screwed the pooch and didn’t prepare right.”

In the end, Hestia could only clutch at her head.

It was already a massively unprecedented clash of familias. There was no prior example to refer to, so it wasn’t all that strange, but...

“ ... ”

Hestia glanced at the empty spot directly across from her at the table.

That was the seat of the queen who she would be challenging.

Freya wasn't taking part in this Denatus.

She had declared that she would accept whatever contest, under any rules, no matter how disadvantageous.

Giving up her right to reside on the highest floor of Babel, she had returned to the throne in her home, eerily silent, awaiting the city's decision. Staking everything she had amassed to have her war, Freya remained a queen still.

"The Guild won't allow a war that shatters the balance of Orario. Them's the orders that pain in the ass gave, unfortunately, so we're gonna have to sit this one—"

"—That's just a convenient excuse. The truth is Freya has some leverage on you, right?"

"—Ngh!"

Loki panicked in the most obvious way possible.

Hestia's eyes flared.

"I knew it! The moment I heard you of all people obediently going along with what the Guild said, I knew something was fishy!"

"Wh-wh-what are you goin' on about?! It's not like I'm bein' extorted over a robe of falcon feathers I borrowed and never returned. Nothing like that ever happened!"

"That's the bit you're supposed to keep quiet, you hoodlum goddess!"

Hestia leaped to her feet, knocking her chair down as Loki hemmed and hawed while Hephaistos, Miach, Takemikazuchi and the others who were watching let out heavy sighs.

Finally, Loki let out a long sigh of her own and sat back down.

"...If we could fight, we would. That dumbass earned it for real this time. I won't be satisfied till I personally let her have it."

"Then—"

"But there's a reason I can't this time."

Loki herself looked deeply unsatisfied, and her face was strained as she said it.

Her divine will was unshakable. Or rather, there was some reason twisting her divine will and forcing her to pay back what she owed Freya. And she had no intention of elaborating.

Hestia couldn't do anything other than accept things as they stood.

As a fellow deity, she knew that there was nothing that could change Loki's decision now.

"...Okay. I won't ask you to join the fight itself. But can you at least let Wallen-what's-her-face help us?"

Hestia desperately tried to negotiate a concession. Even if Loki refused to join the coming battle, Hestia didn't want to walk away with nothing.

"Bell and what's-her-face are...ummm, a good match when it comes to fighting style. So can we at least get her help until the war game starts?"

Hestia carefully picked her words to keep the deities around the table from learning the nature of Bell's rare skill.

As she knew the source of Liaris Freese's power, she was painfully aware how much Bell grew whenever he trained or fought with Aiz. Their training sessions before the war game with Apollo had boosted his growth dramatically and been a big part of how they managed to pull off their upset.

Loki stared back at Hestia...and then weakly shook her head.

"No can do."

"Wh...?! Wh-why?!"

"Aiz can't make a move." Loki leaned back into her seat and looked up at the ceiling. "That girl is tied down by oaths more than anyone."



An enormous field shrouded in morning fog.

A wintery cold in the early autumn morning. There was no sunlight.

Aiz was alone, standing face-to-face with a boaz man.

"This is my goddess's message."

“...”

“She is demanding what she is owed.”

“...”

“The price you must pay is *silence*.”

“Gh...”

Aiz’s shut lips trembled.

“You are not to involve yourself in Bell Cranell’s affairs at all.”

“...!”

“The time limit is until the war game is finished. Considering what happened here, this should be fair compensation.”

“But that’s...”

“Are you going to say you cannot accept it?”

“...”

“It is nothing more than a verbal promise. If you say that you will break the contract, then you may do so.”

“...I can?”

“If you do, all that will happen is your sword will rot away.”

“!!!”

“How could a sword that cannot even keep its word still keep its edge?”

Ottar had nothing to add as they stood in the sea of green. The boaz warrior turned his back to Aiz and disappeared into the fog.

Aiz was left alone in Folkvangr, her lips pursed as she peered up at the sky.

“...Bell...”

*I’m sorry.*

That was all she managed to get out.





“What is this about, Royman?”

The prum’s voice was filled with reproach.

His disapproving gaze caused a bead of sweat to appear on Guild head Royman Mardeel’s brow, but he still resolutely returned the stare.

“Exactly what you were notified of. The Guild cannot grant *Loki Familia* approval to join the war game.”

The prum and elf stared at each other over the table between them.

Finn and Royman were having a secret meeting inside a small café that sat on a side street off the main thoroughfare.

“Can you give us a reason as to why we should accept that judgment?”

“As if it needs explaining. *Loki Familia* and *Freya Familia* are the two strongest forces in Orario, the twin peaks of the city. Just like Zeus and Hera before, they must continue standing atop Orario while maintaining a perfect balance!”

Royman’s intent was obvious as he raised his voice.

*“Loki and Freya cannot be allowed to clash and destroy each other in the war game!”*

He was trying to contain the war that was brewing.

And he was trying to do whatever it took—likely on his own initiative—even if that meant being detested and scorned by everyone for it.

He pressed a hand to his flabby belly and was rubbing it hard. His face was pale. There were surely many inside the Guild who were against his decision, and it almost sounded like he was groaning from stomach pain.

The whole reason they had chosen this back-alley café for their meeting place was to avoid being seen by others, a concern that was primarily Royman’s. If rumors spread that Braver had walked into the Guild Headquarters to argue the decision, Royman’s authority would plummet. That would invite criticism from adventurers and Guild workers alike, causing public opinion to grow even more hostile. Finn judged it would just be a waste of time if Royman collapsed from the compounding stress, so he had decided to meet at this establishment he learned about from an elf in *Loki Familia*.

It was obvious to see that this was a last resort for Royman. But Finn didn't care about that.

The elf's dangerous, sharp glare was completely at odds with his usual warm demeanor. One look was all it took to see how badly this decision sat with him.

"What is the point of a war game? What is the point of setting rules? The whole reason you created this system that takes private conflicts and turns them into duels—a *game*—was to avoid the damage and injuries you're so worried about now. Am I wrong?"

"Try saying that again! Who can trust an adventurer's word!" Royman fiercely rejected Finn's argument. On that alone, he refused to cede any ground. "We trusted your words, but how often has there been a war game with no deaths? Not even half the time!"

Even with all the prohibitions on killing members of opposing familias, people were still going to die.

That was the Guild's primary concern.

Even if it was supposed to be a proxy battle between deities, the ones actually fighting were hotheaded adventurers. And when the opponent was a familia that was considered a bitter enemy, that only made matters worse. In the fevered pitch of battle, things like rules often went out the window.

But as far as Finn was concerned, that worry was too little too late. The Guild had long ago averted its eyes to the costs of war games. If anything, it even encouraged war games as conflict resolution.

The main reason was because it was better than letting fights spill out into the streets, and there was a general admission that without using a game format to decide a clear winner and loser, quarrels between deities would never end.

But there was no denying that a crucial factor was the expectation that pitting familias against each other would push more adventurers to achieve great feats and drive them to level up. War games were essentially trials that could provide returns far greater than whatever sacrifices were incurred.

The war game between *Hestia Familia* and *Apollo Familia* was a good example. Against all expectations, Hestia's side had refused to become fodder

and managed to wrest a victory from the jaws of defeat. Bell in particular earned the title of Super Rookie for his performance and took his place among the up-and-coming adventurers. Some even whispered about his potential to become a new hero.

Royman would adamantly assert that Orario was different from the Amazon holy land, where a struggle to the death continued all year round, but if Orario was to be the city of heroes, it was only natural that those who strove to be heroes would clash.

“Even I know it, Finn! This war game is going to be the largest one yet! The intensity will overshadow all the ones that have come before it. There will be no room for extraneous thoughts, and all self-control will fall by the wayside! First-tier adventurers won’t be any exception! That’s what it means to start a war with *Freya Familia*!”

This was especially true because of the root of the current uproar engulfing the city. Everyone in Orario had been placed under the influence of an irresistible charm that had tampered with their memories. This violation had countless people braying for blood.

“I acknowledge Goddess Freya did something unforgivable! But that is all the more reason why! Too many people are thralls to their rage, and it will be impossible to stop them once things go out of control! Like Vanargand!”

The moment Hestia had burned away the shackles of Freya’s charm, Bete the werewolf had immediately rushed out to raise *Freya Familia*’s severed heads on pikes. Even after the Guild ordered everyone to stand down, he wouldn’t have stopped if Finn and the rest of his familia hadn’t forcibly held him back.

“Just this once, we absolutely cannot risk it! We can’t afford to lose any first-tier adventurers, let alone Ottar or one of the elites in *Loki Familia*! Not before the Black Dragon is slain!”

The last of the Three Great Quests, slaying the Black Dragon—that was the Labyrinth City’s highest task and its obligation.

If *Loki Familia* and *Freya Familia* ended up wiping each other out, the mortal realm’s dearest wish would grow distant, or hope could even die out entirely.

Royman was more concerned about that than anyone.

“If we don’t join, *Hestia Familia* and their coalition have absolutely no chance of winning.”

Finn’s eyes narrowed sharply as he listened to Royman’s argument. The elf closed his mouth for a moment.

“...What of it? Goddess Freya’s demand is to simply transfer Bell Cranell to her familia. Nothing more. A trivial bit of paperwork.” Royman groaned. “If *Hestia Familia* loses, it won’t reduce the city’s strength in any way!”

For the first time in a long, long time, Finn almost audibly scoffed.

*The Guild’s—no Royman’s bad habit—is showing.*

This was an unreasonableness that came from focusing on the big picture too much.

Royman was by no means the useless Guild pig many believed him to be. But he often prioritized the supposed greater good to the point that he failed to take people’s emotions or morals into account.

And now he was doing it again.

To avoid hurting the powerful force that was *Freya Familia*, he would prevent *Loki Familia* from intervening and abandon *Hestia Familia*.

Even after his mind had been completely violated, Royman still sided with *Freya Familia*. Despite the fear that he could be charmed again in the future just as easily, he controlled his emotions with an iron will and focused on fulfilling the Labyrinth City’s duty, the achievement of the mortal realm’s greatest wish.

For a statesman, that was probably the correct choice, and perhaps it truly was the wisest decision when the fate of the mortal realm hung in the balance. But at the same time, it was not a justification that the masses would accept.

And Finn, Bete, and the rest of *Loki Familia* wouldn’t accept it, either.

“This is a farce, Royman.”

“It *has* to be a farce, Finn.”

The two stared at each other. Even though Finn’s eyes were filled with an

emotion verging on bloodlust, Royman didn't look away. His resolve was clear in the way he carried himself.

"...The format and rules of the war game are being decided at Denatus. They will be fair, so that both sides have a chance to win. I do not wish to see Hestia's side lose."

"How many people do you think will believe that when they see everything you are doing? At the very least, our familia members won't. And I don't feel inclined to convince them, either."

Royman was clearly doing his best to stay calm as he spoke, but Finn had immediately laid into him with those provocative words. The elf grew red with anger, and then...he let out a heavy sigh.

His face suddenly looked like that of an exhausted old man as he pulled something out of his jacket.

"Finn. Look at this."

"?"

He placed a chunk of ice on the table.

It was smaller than a dagger. Looking closer, it wasn't a simple shard of ice, but a shortsword missing its blade that had been coated in frost.

Finn looked at it dubiously.

"What is this...?"

"Something brought back from Thalia's Ice Garden."

"I"

Finn's eyes widened. He examined Royman's face before turning his attention to the ice again.

"...Someone other than *her* managed to do it?"

"This is nothing more than a minor relic."

"...Where is it?" Finn's voice dropped to a whisper.

"The gulf between the sixtieth and sixty-first floors. For now, that is all I can



tell you.”

After several seconds’ hesitation...

“...And the key?”

“Undiscovered, as of now. At the very least, Zeus and Hera couldn’t find it.”

Silence filled the café for a moment. For a brief moment, it almost felt like the world had frozen over.

But Royman wasted no time making his offer.

“If you promise not to join the war game, the Guild will share all the information it has on the Ice Garden with you.”

“!!!”

“The location, how to reach it—everything. It will be possible for you to challenge it.”

This was the second time Finn had been caught by surprise today.

While the prum was still reeling, Royman continued, a supremely bitter look on his face.

“Even Zeus and Hera only managed to bring this little trinket back to the surface. But...if it’s *Loki Familia* and that famous tomboy of yours, then you might just be able to find the key.”

Royman’s words almost didn’t register as Finn’s thoughts raced. Shaking off the lingering shock, Finn desperately wanted to gather more information, but rather than probing Royman to find out what he was after, Finn simply had to ask...

“Why are you revealing this now?”

“Don’t make me spell it out, you stubborn fool!” Royman’s eyes flared again. “I never intended to share this! Not until you and *Freya Familia* joined forces! Like Zeus and Hera!!! If the report is right, the area where the Ice Garden lies is impossibly dangerous! But you are always at each other’s throats, as if you have no intention of ever working together! What’s worse is that you are trying to cross blades with them this very moment!”

*BAM!*

Royman slammed the table as he leaped to his feet, shouting in a spittle-flecked rage.

“If you are going to kill each other anyway...!!! If it means avoiding that, then sharing this information is the lesser evil.”

Royman shuddered as he slumped back down into his chair.

That was the deal he was offering in what was, for him, a heartbreaking compromise. An unimaginably dangerous location that he hadn't intended to allow anyone to challenge until the two greatest familias were willing to cooperate. In exchange for *Loki Familia* staying out of the war game, he would give them permission to challenge it alone.

“...”

For the first time, the Guild chief silenced Finn. Royman had landed a clean hit on him. Because what he had dangled was something that his familia couldn't possibly ignore. At the very least, Riveria wouldn't stay silent. If she found out about it, she would keep the familia out of the war game even if it meant fighting Bete and the others.

“Finn...you have to slay the Black Dragon.”

“...”

“There won't be another generation like yours. We'll never see anyone with the potential to become heroes ever again.”

“...”

“That is how difficult and weighty the Three Great Quests are.”

The 150-year-old elf slowly, carefully chose his words.

“In the coming battle to slay the Black Dragon, you will surely command our forces...How long will you continue to pretend you are just some adventurer?”

There was a desperate plea nestled within that admonishment.

A deep silence fell over them.

“...I told you all there is to say! Don't join the war game, Finn! Just don't!”

Regaining his usual tone, Royman stood up.

With that final push, he hurriedly left the café.

“...Haaaah...”

Finn exhaled the breath he had been unconsciously holding.

After picking up the frozen relic left on the table, he held it up to the ceiling and studied it.

Leaning back in the chair, he tilted his head and asked, “Is this all part of Goddess Freya’s plan, Hedin?”

“Do not casually speak my name, prum.”

The answer was cold and bitter.

Deeper in the café, a handsome elf who looked nothing like Royman sat behind a partition. Hedin Selrand’s long blond hair flowed down his back as he held a book in one hand.

This was one of *Freya Familia*’s core leaders and a Level 6, first-tier adventurer.

“I didn’t know you were a regular here.”

“It should be obvious from the name this is an elf establishment. And I’m sure it was Thousand who recommended it to you.”

The café was called Wishe. Finn couldn’t have possibly known, but it was also the café where Hedin had carried off a certain young boy, and also where Finn had consulted the same boy about proposing to a certain prum girl.

Royman hadn’t noticed, but Hedin had already been there from the moment they entered.

Finn had stubbornly decided to carry on his conversation even though he knew they would be overheard—partly because he *wanted* Hedin to hear—but the elf owner of the café, who was just pleasantly sipping a cup of tea at the counter, had been strangely insistent on being present the entire time as well.

“Lady Freya requested this battle with the intention of crushing all of Orario. Do not besmirch her good name with such vulgar suspicions.”

Hedin's eyes never left his book. Meanwhile, Finn played with the icy relic in his right hand.

"She intended for us to join the coalition and crush us, too?"

"If you were to stand against us, then we would merely create a plan that accounts for your presence. We will put down all the rabid beasts."

*Freya Familia* was made up of Einherjar, who fought only for the sake of their goddess—a gathering of overwhelming individuals who bucked any attempts to coordinate or control them.

What would happen if, for their goddess's sake, they somehow started working together?

...They would become untouchable.

Just hypothetically, if they could achieve greater teamwork than Finn and the rest of *Loki Familia*, then there would be no hope of defeating *Freya Familia*.

"We will deal with the first-tier adventurers. Heith and the others can deal with the rest."

"The Andhrímnir, huh...?"

"Though it pains me to say it...so long as we have Ottar, we can overcome anything that may come our way."

"..."

He was right.

Ultimately, no matter who joined the fray, it was meaningless if they couldn't topple Ottar. That was all there was to it. That was what it meant to fight *Freya Familia*, who boasted the city's strongest warrior.

"...Despite what Royman said, I am going to side with *Hestia Familia*."

"What of it?"

"Even if getting directly involved has been forbidden, cooperation isn't off-limits."

"Meaning?"

“I will be sharing some wisdom with a courageous fellow prum.”

“Spare me your sophistry and sour grapes, fool.” The two of them had remained facing away from each other throughout. “I am more than satisfied having seen you taken for a ride by the Guild’s pig. That was quite the breath of fresh air.”

“Yeah, he got me good.”

Finn acknowledged that he had been caught by surprise, as Hedin casually turned a page in his book.

Royman was more scared than anyone of seeing the city’s strength drop, so he played the trump card he had been saving. If even one member of *Loki Familia* joined the war game, he would most certainly not give them the information they wanted.

“Their chances of finding allies will not be good...”

If *Loki Familia* joined, it would make the contest a coin toss. Only then would the balance of power even out.

That was just how strong *Freya Familia* was. What awaited *Hestia Familia* was a battle that was sure to be furious, desperate, and devoid of hope.

Finn looked out the window, thinking of a certain prum girl as his blue eyes narrowed.

“I wonder if she will be able to stay calm and keep from screaming or crying?”



“Mr. BeIIIIIIIIIIII!!!”

Unfortunately, Braver’s hopes were dashed because Lilliluka Erde had reverted back into an infant as she bawled her eyes out.

“Lilly...I’m okay now, so...”

“I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorryyyy! Lilly was...! Lilly was...!!!!”

Bell was standing in the living room of *Hestia Familia*’s home, Hearthstone

Manor. Or more accurately, he couldn't do anything other than stand still there. Lilly had her arms wrapped around him and her face buried in his stomach, only stopping to peer up at him with tear-filled eyes and apologizing over and over like a broken music box. As she clung to him in tears, Bell was unable to move.

And it wasn't just Lilly.

"I'm sorry, Bell...! Saying something like that...! I'm a failure as an adviser...!"

"Even though you saved me, I repaid your kindness with heartlessness...What can...what can I possibly do to atone...?"

Eina was behind him to the right.

And Haruhime was behind him to the left.

The elf's hands were wrapped around his right hand, while the renart was on her knees as her fingers gently grasped his left hand. The flood of apologies was steeped in utter grief.

The atmosphere was heavy. It was enough to make sweat start beading on the back of Bell's head. And while it wasn't a shock to see Haruhime broken up, it was a major shock when he realized Eina was sobbing. Seeing the woman who was like a big sister crying like a child for his sake—arguably, crying *because* of him—was too large a blow for a boy not even fifteen years old. Even though he wanted to say something, the words refused to come, so there was nothing to do but endure the guilt welling up inside him.

"My humblest apologies, Sir Bell...Not only did I forget you, I pushed you away...! What is a familia good for if they can't even come to your aid in your darkest hour...! What I did was unforgivable no matter how much I beg!"

"Sorry, Bell. I...I..."

Mikoto, Welf, and several others were also surrounding Bell. Nahza and Daphne, Cassandra, Ouka and Chigusa, plus the rest of *Takemikazuchi Familia*. Even Aisha and Mord were there. Other than the deities who were attending Denatus, this group included everyone who had pushed Bell away while under the influence of Freya's charm.

"Just punch me..." "That would just make you feel better..." "Th-then what



should we do...?!" "...Seppuku?" "Don't do that, Ouka! I-I'll do it in your place!" "You're getting too wound up..." "I—I don't think I was even in the wrong...! It's just...I—I wanted to make sure you weren't gettin' depressed..." and on and on.

They all looked ashen, as if they hadn't slept at all, and none of them could look Bell in the eyes. The living room had become an apology-dense zone.

*"Ahhh, this is a huge mess."*

The Hestia in Bell's head was looking up at the ceiling and starting to spin like a windmill.

*...What should I do...*

To be honest, he wasn't sure how to feel.

He wasn't the type of person who found satisfaction in making people bow down and apologize. Bell was a simple boy, and hearing their heart-wrenching apologies weighed on him. And it wasn't as if any of them had truly wronged him. They were victims, too, manipulated into thinking he was someone else. But no matter how many times he told them it was fine, or assured them that they had done nothing wrong, it didn't help. If anything, their expressions only grew darker.

And so Bell found himself staring up at the ceiling, keeping his eyes closed as the creases in his forehead deepened, completely at a loss.

Just as he started to think how much he would like to run away, he could feel Lilly sobbing into his stomach.

*"Even...even though...even though Lilly swore never to betray you again...!"*

The first time they met, it was because Lilly had approached him to get money and out of selfish resentment.

She had lied to him and betrayed his trust, but even so, he had saved her, and she had become his irreplaceable supporter.

To her, the fact that she had hurt Bell was the most unforgivable part of all. Even if she died a thousand times over, she didn't think it would be enough to atone.

Her sobbing voice, filled with such deep regret, self-loathing, and repentance,

was representative of what everyone else felt as well.

Still not sure what to do, Bell watched her tears fall...and then he made up his mind.

Putting his hands on her shoulders, he kneeled so that he could look into her teary eyes.

“Lilly, are you listening? The punishment you want? I can’t give that to you.”

“Ugh, *sniffle*...but that’s...!”

She sobbed, and her eyes were filled with grief as she met his gaze.

No matter how many times she rubbed her hazel eyes, the tears didn’t stop coming. Keeping his eyes on her, Bell continued. His words were meant for Eina and the rest as well.

“But there is something far, far scarier than any punishment coming soon. Not just for you Lilly, but for me, too.”

“!!!”

Lilly’s eyes widened.

A ripple of shock ran through everyone who had gathered ’round.

Bell’s eyes softened, and he smiled weakly.

“By myself, this next battle is going to be impossible. As helpless as I am...will you lend me your strength?”

“Mr. Bell...”

“Instead of apologizing...I want you to stand with me. Please, Lilly. Help me.”

Her hazel eyes grew damp for a different reason this time as she met his heartfelt, earnest, red gaze.

Lilly rubbed away her tears again, sniffled loudly, and then nodded over and over.

“Of course...! Lilly will help you! Lilly will support you! Until it makes up for how much Lilly hurt you! No, more than that! Forever!”

“...Thank you, Lilly.”

Bell smiled as she shouted the vow.

Seeing that, the floodgates burst again, and Lilly grabbed on to him.

Bell looked around the room gently patting her back as she buried her face in his neck.

“You too, Welf. And Ms. Mikoto, Ms. Haruhime...and everyone else. Please help me.” As their eyes widened, Bell added a little joke. “I was always the one causing everyone else trouble, right? So, let’s just call it even now.”

*—Though my debt is still probably bigger.*

Bell scratched his cheek awkwardly.

With that, the others finally broke into smiles.

“...Captain’s orders. That’s that, then.”

“Yes...We’ll be the ones to help, Sir Bell!”

“I shall repay my debt! No matter what it takes!”

Welf smiled like an older brother, Mikoto answered as diligently as ever, and Haruhime daintily wiped her eyes with her fingers as she swore to help.

That was the moment he felt like he had finally returned to being *Hestia Familia*’s Bell instead of *Freya Familia*’s Bell Cranell.

“Bell...I’m going to make a ton of potions...I’ll try the elixirs that were always out of reach, too.”

“Thank you, Ms. Nahza!”

“As difficult as it might get, I’m going to keep sleeping until I see a good dream!”

“You don’t have to push yourself, Ms. Cassandra!”

“Bell! I’ll divert whatever information I can get at the Guild to you!”

“Th-that’s a little...”

Nahza and the rest finally managed to escape the thorniness of their guilt as well, promising to help in their own way. As they started heating up and a drop of sweat appeared on Bell’s brow, there was a bang, and the door to the room

burst open.

Hestia walked into the living room, grumbling as if she was totally fed up with the situation.

“Arrrrrghh! It doesn’t look like there’s any way to convince Loki and them!”

Returning from Denatus, she let out a shriek and tossed her documents into the air and dove into the sofa.

“*Loki Familia* has been forbidden to participate...Which means...”

Bell picked up one of the parchment sheets and skimmed it, unable to hide his concern.

He knew that Hestia had been at Denatus for several days since the war game had been decided on, trying to win favorable terms. And also that the prospects for that had been getting worse and worse.

“Freya hasn’t attended at all, saying she’ll accept whatever rules are set, but...”

“The difference in strength is just too great. Without Loki’s children, the other familias that had been raring to go are planning to sit it out now.”

Seeing Miach, Takemikazuchi, and Hephaistos trailing Hestia, their various followers all grimaced.

“Maybe we should challenge them to an eating competition...”

“Who would accept something like that to settle such a big issue...”

Daphne’s proposal made Ouka’s head hurt, but he understood why she would want to suggest that.

That was just how much *Freya Familia*’s name rang out and just how hopeless it was to fight them.

“Regarding *Loki Familia*’s sitting out, there has been significant outcry inside the Guild. However, the higher-ups are scared of Loki and Freya wiping each other out...”

With Eina’s comment, the living room fell silent.

There was no one who blamed Bell and Hestia for agreeing to the war game.

They all understood that without getting past this fight, there was no way to make a clean break from *Freya Familia*—nothing would be settled.

Pulling away from Bell after finally regaining her calm, Lilly changed her expression to that of a strategist.

“Mr. Welf...”

“I know...I’m the one who said it to Bell. I’ll forge Crozzo magic swords. As many as time allows.”

“B-but Welf...that’s...”

“My magic sword relies on the user’s strength. We need something with enough power to take down a superior enemy, even if it breaks in the process. Using Crozzo magic swords is the only way.”

Welf shook his head at Bell’s concern. The magic swords he had forged for the familia’s expedition didn’t break with regular use, but the trade-off was that if anyone else used them, their effectiveness would depend on their status.

If Lilly used one, her attacks would be limited by her Level 2 strength.

To draw out the burst of force required to mow down a formidable enemy, they needed Crozzo magic swords.

They couldn’t avoid copying Welf’s homeland—relying on the methods of *Ares Familia* and the legend of their invincibility.

For Welf, who eschewed his family’s magic swords, this decision was an expression of his resolve.

And he wasn’t alone. Everyone in the room understood that given their enemy, none of them could afford to be picky about their methods.

“...Let’s build a plan. In detail. We’ll explore every possible tool we have. Unless we do that much, we can’t hope to create a chance to win.”

Right after Lilly made that tense announcement, Aisha—the one person who had remained silent and not joined in apologizing to Bell—spoke up.

“Rather than lowering my head to Bell Cranell, I think it would be better to kick the crap out of Freya and her minions. Whether *Loki Familia* joins or not

has got nothing to do with it...Or do you all think otherwise?”

It was a provocative, aggressive response.

But in that moment, the adventurers were all in agreement.

“Yes, Ms. Aisha! Me too! I will kick their a...buh...bottoms, too!”

“Sir Bell continued to fight all by himself. Now it is our turn to push our bodies and spirits to the limit!” Haruhime and Mikoto eagerly chimed in.

Hearing their old friends’ responses, Ouka and Chigusa grinned and nodded in agreement.

Aisha’s bold words blew away the dark mood. Finally, Lilly began to lead a discussion about how they would go about the war game.

“...Thank goodness...”

As he saw their spirits and liveliness return, a smile found its way onto Bell’s face. He was relieved everyone had started to shake off their guilt.

Then a pensive look came over him. Moving away from them, he approached the window and saw that the sun had already yielded its place to the moon.

*I wonder...What is she doing right now?*

He was thinking of all that had happened in the false time he had spent in Folkvangr and the woman who had shown him so many emotions he had never seen from her before.

Gazing at the ephemeral glow of the moon, Bell murmured a name so softly that no one else could hear.



The dark night was like a black river.

Gleaming stars dotted the rippling water’s surface, and the crescent moon was a lone gondola. Its faint glow flowed around small wisps of clouds.

It was as if someone were in that boat, all alone, searching for someone who had gone somewhere far, far away, but there was no one to be found. That was what the moonlight seemed to say.



Who could they be searching for?

As she herself asked that, the goddess stopped.

These musings were just too ridiculous, so she pulled herself out of the sea of sentimentality. But she did murmur the boy's name.

"Bell..."



## CHAPTER 7

### WE'RE GETTING MARRIED ONCE THIS BATTLE IS OVER

#### Level 4

Strength: SS1033->SSS1379 Defense: SSS1218->1501 Dexterity: SS1041->SSS1383 Agility: SS1089->SSS1442 Magic: S965->SSS1251

"..."

"..."

Goddess and I are both silent as we look in disbelief at my updated status—my last update as a Level 4 adventurer.

"...Bell..."

"...Yes, Goddess..."

We both stare at the ability-only update card we hold between us. She has a stunned look on her face, and I nod earnestly, still shirtless.

"How badly did you get pummeled at Freya's place?"

"Enough to say it was definitely the worst I've ever been through. Just completely and totally beaten and battered..."

Actually, my most extreme experience was probably down in the deep levels...

But when it comes to never-ending hells, the baptism of *Freya Familia* was worse...I think.

Goddess doesn't say anything in response to my hopeless answer.

Instead, she just closes her eyes and hugs me calmly, like a mother whose son has just returned home from war.

Wrapping her arms around my back, she gently pats the back of my head.

Even though my head has been pushed into her ample bosom, I try to

maintain my calm.

After we separate, she lets out a massive sigh.

“Haaaaaaaaaah...I’m really sorry, Bell. I couldn’t help you even though you were trapped in such a terrible place...I made you suffer all the way to the very end.”

“That isn’t true at all. You came to save me, didn’t you?”

Lord Hermes and Ms. Asfi had told me how the goddess had worked so hard to break the charm cast over the entire city.

The whole time, I was preoccupied with my own problems, and I wasn’t able to do anything about the walled garden. Managing to break free from it was an amazing feat, and the time it took was just what was needed.

That’s why when I look up and see Lady Hestia’s shoulders slumping, I tell her exactly what I’m thinking.

“When I saw you descending from the sky and I realized you came to save me...I was just...so happy.”

“...!”

I look at her as I clearly enunciate every word, and soon her eyes start quivering as her emotions get the best of her.

She wraps her arms around me and hugs me close.

“BeIIIIIIIIII!”

Embarrassingly, my face has gotten buried in a soft valley again, and this time, I go completely red from my cheeks to my ears.

After spending a few moments like that, the goddess lets me go and rubs her eyes and examines the update paper again.

“Really, though...this is a crazy amount of growth. Picking on you this much while saying how much she wants you...Freya really has a sadistic streak! There’s no mistaking it!”

“Ah-ha-ha...”

There’s a barbed aggressiveness in her tone as she complains about the

goddess who isn't present.

Maybe she's in a bad mood because my status got updated by someone else's hand. Or maybe she's also mad at herself for not having been able to do more.

"I'm not feeling especially grateful...but my status really has improved a lot in one fell swoop."

"...Yeah. It was amazing enough after you made it back from the deep levels, but this is an even bigger burst of growth."

A gain of over 1,600 points. And with multiple SSS ranks, my status is a sight to behold.

As I think back on the murderous battles I endured day in and day out, an emotion I can't really describe comes over me.

After a few moments, I look back at the goddess.

"So then..."

"Yeah, time for you to level up, Bell."

As if saying all the preparations are complete, she taps my back with her pointer finger.

That touch reverberates deep in my heart, reaching all the way to my soul.

It feels like my back is the water's surface. Quiet ripples spread across my body.

And after that vivid sensation—there's a burst of heat. As if the hieroglyphs etched into my back have caught on fire.

This is a feeling I've never had before, and I hold my breath as Goddess notes my status on a new sheet of paper.

**Bell Cranell**

**Level 5**

**Strength: 10 Defense: 10 Dexterity: 10 Agility: 10 Magic: 10**

**Luck: F Immunity: G Escape: I->G Rapid Attacks: I**

**Magic**

## **Firebolt**

- Swift-Strike Magic

## **Skill**

### **Argonaut**

- Charges automatically with Active Action

### **Ox Slayer**

- All abilities are drastically enhanced when fighting minotaurs.

### **Vanadis Tevere**

- Hestia Divae
- Activates when a Charm effect is applied. Extreme boost to all abilities.
- Continuous Mind and Stamina recovery.

“Congratulations, Bell...Level Five.”

With that, she hands me the update sheet.

Since there is only one slot, I obviously haven't gained a new spell.

On the other hand, as expected, I developed a skill that counters Charm. It can provide a tremendous boost under very specific conditions, but it probably wouldn't play a very big role in the upcoming war game.

In addition, I also gained the development ability Rapid Attacks. If I remembered correctly, the Guild information Ms. Eina gave me said that the more attacks I landed in quick succession, the stronger they would become. A valuable offensive ability.

But those are just minor details. The most important point is the number at the top of the sheet.

Level 5.

Even a simple adventurer like me knows how much value that number has and how much it means.

I, Bell Cranell, have become a *first-tier adventurer*. As one of the strongest warriors of the Labyrinth City, I've earned my seat at the foot of the table. After

coming this far...I'm finally coming close to reaching my goal.

*And yet...*

Ordinarily, I would be over the moon about this, but my face is stiff.

Goddess probably feels the same way.

Even after she congratulates me, her lips are pursed, and she stays quiet.

"...Goddess..."

"...Yes?"

"Do you think I can cross blades with Master...with *Freya Familia*'s strongest?"

My question takes into account all of the latent ability points I saved up before my level-up. I ask her opinion, clinging to a faint hope.

"...I'm not a deity of fighting, so I can't judge as well as Také can."

"..."

"But..." After a brief pause..."Against Freya's children...I don't think you have a chance."

I don't think it was cruel. I've felt it myself. The cold, hard truth is that the Level 5 that is the culmination of all my efforts seems so terribly small right now.

Level 6s and a Level 7.

That's what we have waiting for us. The strongest. People who have completely broken the mold.



"...What do we even do about this?"

Lilly groaned from amid a sea of documents.

Countless parchments were scattered around tables and the floor of the library in their home. They were all documents regarding *Freya Familia*.

Welf was holed up in the workshop turning out magic swords, while Mikoto and Haruhime had gone to Takemikazuchi and Aisha to hone their abilities and



techniques as much as possible. Everyone was doing whatever they could in preparation for the war game.

As the familia's brain, Lilly had gathered every scrap of information she could find about the enemy. She had also gotten help from Eina to obtain every relevant document from the Guild.

Unfortunately...

"They're too strong. There's nothing we can do..."

The more she read and analyzed the data, the more hopeless it seemed.

The gap in combat strength seemed impossible to bridge. Rather than dog versus lion, it was more like an ant taking on a dragon.

Lilly thought she knew what the words "city's strongest" meant. This was the first time Lilly had truly grasped what that meant in concrete terms.

"One hundred fifty-seven core followers. Counting the noncombatants and other various adherents, there are more than five thousand...The first-tier adventurers go without saying, but the ranks of second-tier adventurers are massive, too. And the number of healers is unmatched by any of the other Orario familias..."

Just looking at the numbers made her sick.

A cursory glance at the total number of Level 3s and 4s—the second-tier adventurers—made Lilly want to pack up and run away in the night. If *Freya Familia* was broken up, it would be possible to make twenty different respectable mid-level familias, which put into perspective what the coalition would be going up against.

And then on top of those second-tier adventurers stood the first-tier adventurers, including Warlord himself.

"An elf who can cast with ultra-short incantations and erase a horde of monsters in the lower floors in a single attack...this is some sick joke..."

Leaked details about magic and skills could be fatal for familias. That was why the Guild maintained strict confidentiality over any information they collected. Because of that, the documents Eina gathered were all just reports from various

Guild workers and other adventurers noting general impressions and observations. Of course, even those vague guesses were more than enough to shatter Lilly's fighting spirit.

Reading about a long-range, large-area-of-effect, rain of magic made her question what the term "magic swordsman" was even supposed to mean.

Then there was the dizzying coordination that allowed just four prums to dominate an entire war game all by themselves.

And the famed chariot who bested Vanargand to claim the title of fastest in the city.

And the bestial instinct that had proved itself over and over again during the dark ages.

If *Freya Familia* still had some other trump card on top of all that, then as a strategist, Lilly couldn't do anything but faint.

*We don't have enough people. It's hopeless. I knew the difference in strength between our familias was massive from the start. But even so...!*

The scariest thought was that even after adding all of *Hephaistos Familia's* fighting strength, they still had absolutely zero chance of winning.

Lilly finally understood how much *Freya Familia* had held back when mounting their attack during the Goddess Festival.

"Even if Lilly makes a plan...how do we...?"

As her thoughts gradually turned to the insurmountable difference in raw power, she couldn't help repeating the ever-constant question.

Daphne was helping Miach and the others mass-produce potions and elixirs, but Lilly couldn't imagine how her wisdom could shine some new light on the problem. If anything, Daphne was probably at wit's end, too, and privately wondering how to escape in the night, too. Lilly's face went deathly pale.

To turn their situation around, it had to be a marshal with an even broader field of vision than they could manage— "S-supporter!"

Just as Lilly stood frozen between despair and escapism, Hestia burst into the library.

“Lady Hestia...? What is it...?”

“A visitor for you! Uh, actually I don’t know if ‘visitor’ is the right word, but you’ve got company!”

Lilly thought it was a little bit strange seeing the goddess so shaken, but when she saw the figure who walked in behind her, she immediately understood why.

“Hey. I suppose it hasn’t been quite that long, but hello again, Lilliluka Erde.”

The golden-haired prum waved as he walked into the room.

“M-Mr. Finn?!”

“Is this all information of *Freya Familia*? You’ve gathered quite the collection.”

Ignoring Lilly’s shock, Finn casually gathered up parchments he found on the floor.

She glanced at Hestia for some sort of explanation, but the goddess just shook her head. Apparently, he had shown up entirely out of the blue without any appointment.

After fidgeting awkwardly a bit, Hestia blurted, “W-well then, you two make yourselves comfortable,” and quickly slunk out of the room.

Despite being her patron goddess, she seemed intent on pushing all troublesome stuff onto Lilly.

*I won’t forget this, you useless goddess.*

“Sacrificing sleep to gather more intel on the enemy? For the person charged with command, that isn’t a bad choice.”

“...Th-thank you...” She couldn’t follow what was happening, but she barely managed to respond.

Finn smiled lightly after noticing the signs of exhaustion that had built up under Lilly’s eyes and added, “But that won’t be needed.”

“Wh—!”

Her hazel eyes widened as he tossed the parchments he had gathered into the air.

“I’ll provide you all the information you need. *Freya Familia*’s preferred strategies, all the details of their magic and skills that I’m aware of—everything. That’s what I can give you as someone who has fought them dozens of times.”

Lilly gulped.

This was a chance to obtain the knowledge and observations of someone who had actually fought their opponents. It would also include the perspective and analytical ability of a first-tier adventurer. And not just any first-tier adventurer, but one who could call on all of *Loki Familia*’s resources and research on their long-time rival.

That was a world apart from the rumors and word of mouth she had been working with. This kind of concrete information had the potential to be a powerful weapon.

And if Finn himself was taking a look, he just might be able to put together a plan using the few cards that were available to them.

“I will turn you into a peerless commander. A marshal capable of leading a coalition of familias.”

Lilly felt her heart shudder at his inspiring words.

She was struck by an urge to leap at the offer with wild abandon, but—she clenched her fist. With an iron will, she held it in and asked him a question.

“What are you intending...? Helping like this...”

“Oh, do you need an explanation?” As she did her best to stay rational, Finn’s eyes sparkled as if he had spotted something he liked. Then he shrugged a little exaggeratedly. “*Freya Familia*—or rather, Goddess Freya—broke a taboo. She ground the mortal realm’s dignity under her heel in the most atrocious way, manipulating all of us on a fundamental level.”

“Th-that’s...”

“There must be consequences. The Guild might say it didn’t cause any real damages, but it was still *supremely* upsetting. And for those of you who follow Bell Cranell, your anger is more than justified. Am I wrong?”

“...”

“Even I’m furious.”

Finn was right. There was no lie in what he was saying.

“The Guild stopped us from taking part in the war game. So right up until the moment it starts, I will lend you all my wisdom...Let me be blunt. I want you to make Goddess Freya, Ottar, and the rest of their familia squirm.”

That last part was a tiny bit of childish mischievousness. Essentially, he had followed up his formal justification by revealing a sliver of his true motives. The hero of the prums was reaching out a helping hand for both appearance’s sake and out of a genuine desire to support them.

But Lilly couldn’t immediately make the choice.

There was no such thing as free when it came to business between familias. They might not be *Hermes Familia*, but it was simply common sense to be wary of a deal that sounded too good to be true.

If she took his offer, would he demand something in return? Should she not take the decision to Hestia instead?

Seeing his fellow prum hesitating as she tried to figure out what she should do as the brain of her familia, Finn said “...Seventy points.” With a slightly wry smile, he gently rated her performance. “Lilliluka Erde, your caution is worthy of praise. But right now what you should be doing isn’t probing my motives.”

“What...?”

“Given that your coming battle is so hopeless that even I would want to surrender, you should be using anything and everything you can get your hands on.”

“!!!”

That cold assessment echoed awfully in her ears.

“At the very least, if I were in your place, that is what I would do. I would take any information I could get from someone known as the hero of his race.”

“Gh...!”

“Just like Bell Cranell, you have a truly timid side to you. I’m not disparaging

you for it. Surprisingly, that can be quite the virtue. But right now the thing you should fear most is losing someone precious to you, isn't it?"

That last line hardened her resolve.

Unclenching her fists, Lilly held her hand out to Finn.

"Apologies for Lilly's moment of indecision."

"Ho-ho...so, what will it be?"

"—Please, Mr. Finn! Please lend Lilly your knowledge!"

Seeing she had made up her mind, Finn shook her hand.

The little goddess peeking through a crack in the doorway clenched her fist and cheered.

*Hestia Familia* was now working together with Braver.

"...But...ummm...We really don't much to offer in return...so Lilly should warn you not to expect too much from us...So ummm, please be gentle...?"

"You needn't worry about that. Like I said before, if you can get one over on Ottar and them, then my pride is a cheap price to pay," Finn said with a smile as Lilly suddenly grew fainthearted at the thought of accruing another debt. "Also, your familia has a virtuous reputation. I have a feeling I'm not the only one who wants to lend you a hand."



"Why can't we fight together with Argonaut and his familia?!" Tiona thundered.

The Amazon girl was flailing her arms and making a scene in the parlor of *Loki Familia's* home, Twilight Manor. "So many other people are picking a fight with *Freya Familia*! Why can't we join?!"

"We explained it how many times now? Guild's orders. Think of it like a mission. Can you understand that?"

The dwarf Gareth did his best to placate her. Though he was a storied warrior, at the moment he seemed like any other tired parent dealing with an unruly child. No matter how many times he tried to explain it, Tiona stomped her feet

like a kid and shouted.

“It doesn’t make sense! I want to help them, too!!! Until I make up for how mean I was to Argonaut, I gotta do something!”

“You can’t. Just behave yourself.”

“Whyyyyyyyyyyyy?!! It’s not fairrrrrrrr!”

As her shout echoed through the entire home, Gareth looked like he had run out of sighs.

“Sheesh, you’re also supposed to be one of the veterans in the familia...If you keep whining like this, I’ll give you a beating like Bete.”

Gareth’s face and thick arms were covered in scratches.

The aforementioned werewolf had already let his unhappiness go out of control. He hadn’t hesitated to declare he was going to murder *Freya Familia* in the war game and came out swinging, so Gareth had brought him to heel with brute force. But that wasn’t nearly enough to quench his anger, so after telling Gareth to eat shit, Bete had gone off to take his frustrations out on the Dungeon and was apparently still down there.

“If beating you means getting to join the war game, then I’ll do it!”

“Don’t go sayin’ that like you don’t care what happens to me, lassie...Even if you managed to beat me, the Guild isn’t going to change its mind. If you ignore the rules and charge into the war game, *Hestia Familia* will lose on a technicality. You aren’t gonna repay anyone like that.”

“Urrrrrrrgh!!!”

Tiona wildly grabbed at her hair and started spinning around, staring at the ceiling like she was performing some strange dance. Unable to watch any longer, her older twin spoke up from her seat on the sofa.

“Gareth, it’s the captain’s orders, so I’ll listen. But I just can’t accept it. Raul and the others haven’t said anything, either, but they all feel the same. Even if we set aside Bell Cranell and *Hestia Familia*, they messed with our memories.”

Gareth closed his eyes.

Right when it seemed like he was about to say he felt the same, a new voice cut in.

“Drop it, you two. You know this isn’t Gareth’s fault.”

“Riveria...”

“Tione, stop making such a fuss. You’re one of the senior members of the familia. Act like it.”

“Uuuuuugh...”

The high elf Riveria appeared in the parlor. After admonishing the sisters about their senior positions in the familia, she pointedly looked away from them.

“If you have complaints, then you can take it up with me...I’ll listen to whatever you have to say.”

“Riveria...?”

As the Amazon twins peered up in confusion, the elf walked over to the dwarf.

“I’m sorry, Gareth...This is all because of my selfishness.”

“...As if this is just your personal business. There’s no way we can ignore a clue about the Ice Garden.”

Both of their voices were low as they mentioned the deal that Royman had struck with Finn—an offer they couldn’t refuse. Riveria Ljos Alf couldn’t afford to let that information slip out of their grasp.

Since the details hadn’t been shared with Tiona and the rest, the three of them had been forced to convince the rest of the familia with the official reason.

“When I checked on Aiz, she just said sorry, toooooo. Ugggggggghhhhh.....All right!”

After groaning for a while, Tiona stopped thinking.

“Let’s go, Tione!”

“Where are you planning to go, Tiona?”



“To Argonaut’s home!” Tiona rushed out the door as she answered Riveria’s question. She turned around and stuck out her tongue as her sister shrugged and followed. “Even if we can’t fight in the war game, I’m still gonna help Argonaut!”

By coincidence, Tiona had reached the same conclusion as Finn.

*Loki Familia* was not going to war.

“So, the whole familia will be backing up Welfy, right?”

Tsubaki Collbrande addressed the massive foundry known as Vulca’s Forge located in the city’s northeastern industrial district.

Unlike the branch stores in Babel and on Adventurers Way, this was *Hephaistos Familia*’s home. Having just finished a new magic blade, the half-dwarf wiped off a load of sweat with her arm and turned to hear her goddess’s response.

“Yes. Now that it’s confirmed Loki can’t join the war game, we’re the only ones who can fully support Hestia and her kids.”

Nodding at the captain’s final confirmation, Hephaistos looked around the room.

The ringing of hammers was unceasing. The furnaces were running at full blast, emitting a murderous heat. When one of the smiths nervously held out the magic sword they had just finished for inspection, Hephaistos glanced over the blade and mercilessly passed judgement: “No good. Do it again.”

Due to the quality demanded by the war game, the unusually strict standard put even the finest smiths there on edge.

Tsubaki tried to smile but failed as she said, “War with *Freya Familia*, huh? I’m curious how far my weapons can go against them, but...I’m shivering.”

And it was anything but excitement.

In the eyes of a Level 5 master smith, *Freya Familia*’s *einherjar* were not skilled weapons masters so much as berserkers who never stopped fighting.

How could the weapons that she was making stop their assault? She didn’t have an answer to that.

“Well...nothing to do but try. At this rate, Welfy is gonna get completely run over.”

After that short break, she swung her hammer down on a fresh, searing-hot ingot, banishing the extraneous thoughts eating away at her mind.

*Hephaistos Familia* was going to war.

“Why, sister?! Why can we not join the war game?!”

Inside I Am Ganesha, the odd giant elephant statue with an entrance at its crotch that was *Ganesha Familia*’s home, the Amazon second in command Ilta Faana was arguing loudly.

“Our master is Ganesha, and we act as the city watch.”

Ilta was howling like her fellow Amazons as Shakti, the familia’s captain heaved a sigh.

“If that’s our job, then we should arrest Freya’s people right now and hold them responsible for all the tyrannical acts they’ve already committed! How much has Orario already been hurt because of them?!”

“Even if that’s true, that isn’t what the Guild wants.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?! They’re strong, so no matter what they do, it’s forgiven?! When did Orario, the center of the world, devolve into such a barbaric place! This is just like how the Amazons do it back home!”

Ilta was growing more and more enraged at Shakti’s insistence on prioritizing their duty.

Ilta was on the side of law and order now, but when she first arrived in Orario, she had been one of the city’s most lawless. As a lone Amazon, she had believed that might made right and had gone on a rampage of epic proportions.

And then one day, Shakti and her sister caught and punished Ilta.

It shocked her how strong these two women were and how their spirits blazed in the name of protecting those weaker than themselves. It was unthinkable for an Amazon. After that, she joined *Ganesha Familia*, and that was how another rare Amazon defender of justice was born.

It was precisely because of her principles that Ilta couldn't accept the Guild's rotten intentions or the silence of her fellow familia members.

"...This war game is going to be bigger than anything we've ever seen before. You know that, right?"

"Of course I do! And?!"

"The manner of competition hasn't been decided yet, but the battleground will most likely be a wide-open area beyond the city walls. And we are the only ones who can watch that battleground and regulate it."

Shakti spoke as the captain of the familia who had the most followers in the entire city.

"As an unaffiliated third party, we have to keep watch on the battleground and everything around it...In the worst case, another country or city might attempt to intervene."

"!"

"There are plenty of organizations eager for a chance to weaken Orario to maintain the balance of power. And deities like the Evils are out there as well. If they target a weakened *Freya Familia* or the coalition...the city could suffer serious losses."

Shakti was talking about politics. It was a perspective that Ilta still lacked.

The Three Great Quests—Shakti understood their importance as a resident of the Labyrinth City that carried the fate of the world on its shoulders.

Ilta, who could only see what was in front of her, didn't.

However she might feel personally, as the head of the city's security forces, Shakti had the stomach to endure and do her job.

"On top of that, we are the only ones who can hold a trial. If *Freya Familia* is to be judged, it must be done fairly."

"Th-that's...! But...!"

Preparing the battleground, clearing away monsters, and managing all the necessary preparations. In more than one way, *Ganesha Familia* was going to

have to work overtime behind the scenes for this massive war game to be possible. Ilta lost her fervor as Shakti explained all of that, but she still wasn't quite at peace with it either.

"Calm downnnnnnnnnn Iltaaaaaaa! If we weren't running this war game, then who could possibly be the announcer?! Who else can scorch the peoples' ears but the Fire Inferno Flame?! Spitting fire iiiiiiiis Ibly Archer's job!!!"

"Shut up, Ibly! Are you trying to break *my* eardrums, dumbass?!"

"C-calm down, Ms. Ilta! And stop twisting your tongue like that, Ibly. It's annoying."

"I am calm, Mokada!"

"What a shame! That was so close! My name is Modaka!"

"What?! Are you makin' fun of me?!"

"Seriously, could you just learn it already, please?! Come on! We've known each other so long now, haven't we?!"

"Shut up! It's your confusing name that's the problem! Hey, Ganesha! Say something already! You're a god, so let's hear your thoughts!"

"I am Ganeshaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

"You! Pieces! Of! Shiiiiiiiiiiiiit!!!"

The other familia members butting in and her patron god were an explosive mix that set Ilta off once again.

The one serious person there, Shakti, couldn't help but let out a long sigh.

*Ganesha Familia* was not going to war.

"A-are you serious, Mord?!"

Gyle and Scott both groaned as Mord Latro shouted, "Damn straight! We're goin' with *Hestia Familia*!"

They were in a run-down tavern.

All of their fellow adventurers were deciding what to do for the war game, and so naturally it was turning into a bit of an information war around town.

“I convinced Ogma already! He grumbled about not makin’ a grave for me when I get myself killed, but what do I care! It ain’t just Orario—the whole world’s gonna be watchin’ this thing, and we’re gonna make a name for ourselves!”

The three seated at the table were all members of the Rank F *Ogma Familia*. It had Level 2 members, but it hadn’t made much of a name for itself, and while it wasn’t at the bottom of the pack, it couldn’t really be called midtier, either—a fitting place for Mord and his companions.

“But that ends now!” Mord downed the contents of his mug and slammed it on the table. “We’re gonna join the winning side of this war game and get our hands on some of *Freya Familia*’s treasure! If you count the land, too, it’s worth more than some run-of-the-mill kingdom!”

The winner of the war game could take anything and everything from the loser.

Because of those rules, if they bested *Freya Familia*, everyone who helped *Hestia Familia* would get their share, too. Mord was excitedly explaining how there was more to this than just getting payback for *Freya Familia* messing with their memories.

“If we win, becomin’ a billionaire’ll be a breeze! We can say good-bye to all those days drinking cheap booze in Rivira!”

Given *Freya Familia*’s wealth, splitting the spoils equally between every familia would still mean more than enough for them to become obscenely wealthy. Mord had always seemed a bit scary, but now he looked downright thuggish, like he had some crooked scheme in the works.

Scott and Gyle looked at each other...and sighed.

“Give it a break, Mord.”

“Huh...?”

“Just tell us the truth.”

Scott nodded along with Gyle’s comment.

Mord froze as the adventurers who had spent so much time with him

continued.

“You just want to help Bell Cranell, right?”

Mord’s face suddenly turned red.

“You were always in a bad mood while he was messing around with that Vouivre, and everyone in town was hating on him.”

“And you bet everything you had on him during the war game with *Apollo Familia*, too...”

“And after the charm was broken and you burst right into Freya’s home. You just can’t sit back when Rabbit Foot’s in danger...It’s like watching a dad or a big brother getting all worried.”

“Th-the hell are you talking about?! I’m not...!” Mord leaped up and shouted when they brought up the past. He tried to deny it, but when Gyle and Scott looked at him, he was at a loss for what to say. “...You got it all wrong. That’s not why I can’t leave that kid alone...” After slumping weakly in his seat and gnashing his teeth for a while, Mord finally looked up. “I just haven’t paid him back yet!”

Around six months ago, the Black Goliath appeared on the eighteenth floor. Despite everything Mord had done, Bell had still saved him. Now Mord was trying to argue it was that debt that drove him to help Bell, not affection.

“Yeah, yeah, we get it.”

“Seeing you try to hide your embarrassment is just sad. The joke’s not even good enough to go with the booze.”

“You assholes! What’d you say?!”

Mord leaped up again as Gyle and Scott laughed.

*So we doin’ this?*

*Not like we’re gonna be much help, but better than nothing, right?*

With that sort of resignation, the three of them decided to fight for the young boy’s sake.

*Ogma Familia* was going to war.

“Modi...and Magni.”

Grudgingly, Takemikazuchi addressed the two gods.

“Oh, Takemikazuchi, and Miach, too.”

“By any chance, are you planning on inviting us to the coalition?”

“Don’t ask questions you know the answer to.”

On the thirtieth floor of Babel, yet another Denatus was underway to decide the details of the war game’s format and rules. Takemikazuchi and Miach were going around feeling out various other deities. They wanted to gather whatever allies they could find to help Hestia.

Miach sighed as Modi and Magni smirked from their seats at the other end of the round table.

They both had brown hair, brown eyes, and a stout, hardy build. They were of course handsome. But as with many gods, the vulgar smirks they always had on their faces ruined it.

They were part of a group that often found ways to bully him, so Takemikazuchi would honestly rather not deal with them, and it showed on his face.

“Who are you planning to side with, Takemikazuchi?”

“No need to even ask. I’m siding with Hestia.”

“We are as well. We have to help Bell to make up for how much we hurt him.”

Modi and Magni still wore their smirks after hearing Takemikazuchi’s and Miach’s answers.

“You don’t say.”

Modi nodded as Magni continued. “Loki’s confirmed out, but Hephaistos is still there. It’s still hard to say how the chips will fall, so even us deities are going to have to think about our future...Well, the *neutral* ones anyway.”

Takemikazuchi and Miach listened quietly as they pulled over two empty seats from the table, sitting on either side of the two of them.

“So then? What do you two intend? Join the fight? Or watch from the

sidelines?” Takemikazuchi asked.

“If you could at least promise not to get in our—in Hestia’s way, that would be helpful,” Miach said, cutting to the chase.

Modi’s lip curled into a grin.

“Miach...Takemikazuchi...” Magni responded. “Why do you think Denatus has been taking as long as it has?”

Denatus had continued for days now, struggling to settle the details of the war game.

For deities who loved celebrations and hated boredom, snap decisions were the norm. If something was interesting, they’d generally go along. Even for something as unprecedented as a grand familia war, failing to even settle on what format the war game should be after all this time should have been impossible.

“...Because you keep saying things like that, making it hard to get anywhere.”

Modi and Magni didn’t bother hiding their smirks as Takemikazuchi grimaced.

The voices of many arguing deities shot back and forth around the massive table. For the most part, goddesses were proposing terms advantageous for Hestia while the gods were immediately rejecting them.

This scene had repeated itself hundreds, thousands of times over the past few days.

Hestia had been there since morning actively making her own proposals, but she was being completely ignored. At one point, she had even erupted, screaming “Why the hell are you ignoring me when it’s my war game?!”

“So you are Freya’s lapdogs.”

“At least call us fans.”

“We owe Lady Freya a great deal, after all. Even at a time like this, or rather precisely because it is a time like this, we still want to help her...Think of it as being seduced in a moment of weakness.”

It was an open secret that most of the male gods in Orario backed Freya. And



they would sometimes do things for the goddess they loved even without being asked.

Just like now. They were trying to support Freya from the shadows.

“This time, Freya did something that can’t be forgiven. Do you not understand that?”

“We know. We really do. But even so, our love for Lady Freya still wins out.”

“Of course, we won’t deny that we’re partly hoping that maybe we’ll get a little reward for our efforts here, but...at the end of the day, we just want to see Lady Freya stay on her throne.”

This time, there was a different sort of smile on their faces.

Takemikazuchi sighed.

It was possible that other than a few exceptions like Takemikazuchi, Miach, and Ganesha, the vast majority of male gods were acting with the same intent as Modi and Magni.

That was why Denatus had been prolonged by pointless debates for days on end, splitting opinion between Hestia’s supporters and Freya’s backers.

“It’s not as if we want the conditions to massively favor Lady Freya. She doesn’t want that herself.”

“But at the very least, it needs to be a line that’s fair. Well, considering the difference in strength, something like sixty-forty or seventy-thirty in the coalition’s favor should be more than be fine.”

“That’s why stupid ideas like an eating competition aren’t going to fly.”

Modi and Magni finished each other’s thoughts like brothers.

For Freya’s honor as well, they were making it clear what they were willing to compromise on.

“The thing with Loki is the same. If the Guild hadn’t shut that down themselves, we would have gotten in the way of them joining, too. No matter what Lady Freya might have said.”

““I””

“Yeah, for sure. And if Loki joined, there would have been an internal struggle within the coalition the moment the game started. Whether it was aimed at Bell Cranell or your kids, we would have set our children loose. ‘Cause fair or not, that just ain’t right.”

Takemikazuchi and Miach stared at them.

“...What are you talking about?” Takemikazuchi asked.

“Loki or no Loki,” Modi answered simply.

“...Isn’t that extreme?” Miach furrowed his brow.

“You think so? It’s pretty simple, isn’t it?” Magni shrugged. “Hephaistos and them, well that’s fine. They’re smiths after all. In a fight, Hestia and her kids will still be the coalition leaders, taking command and everything.”

“But Loki isn’t okay. If Loki’s there, then the whole thing just becomes Loki’s fight.”

““ ...”

Takemikazuchi and Miach didn’t have a counter to that.

“The leadership, strategy, and fighting strength would all be Loki flavored. At that point, the coalition leader would be decorative. That’s not a coalition led by Hestia, it’s a coalition taken over by Loki.”

“Might as well let Loki handle the war game from the start.”

“That’d just be a lynching, not a competition, right?”

Takemikazuchi and Miach finally realized that even if the Guild hadn’t intervened, Loki was never going to be able to join the fight.

“A proper *casus belli* is important. But you can’t miss the original point, either, right? This is a war game between *Hestia Familia* and *Freya Familia*. The rest of the coalition has to be pulled together by Hestia.”

They had a point.

The goddesses who had grudges against the absolute monarchy of Freya were looking for any means to drag her down from her throne, but the gods who knew her love were adamantly coming to her defense.

Modi and Magni's divine will was "Settle things with a proper fight." That was all.

"...Are you going to ally with Freya?"

"No. Not like we could. That's not how Lady Freya wants it."

"We're just doing whatever we can to make it a real fight. That's it. Any god saying 'Let's go fight for Lady Freya' isn't just gonna be kicked out, they're gonna get the crap beaten out of them, too."

"..."

"Lady Freya said she would fight alone when she announced the war game. We're not going to sully her pride."

They both had serious expressions befitting deities as they said that last part.

Takemikazuchi and Miach were at a loss for words. But at the same time, they revised their opinions of the two of them.

Modi and Magni both had something that could be credibly called conviction.

"Anyway, that's why I was planning to just sit it out, but...Dormul that idiot!!!"

"And my Luvis keeps saying, 'This is the time to repay our debt to Bell Cranell,' and won't listen to me at all!!!"

But the next moment, the two of them cast off any pretense of composure and broke down in tears.

"He still has a thing from their time with Eina! No matter how many times I tell him not to, he won't listen! Talking about 'who'd listen to your orders!'"

"Ahhhhhhhhh, Luvis, you idiot! You useless son!"

Seeing the two of them sobbing, Takemikazuchi and Miach both stared in exasperation.

""We're screwed! Our familias are over!""

""You brought it on yourselves...""

*Takemikazuchi Familia, Miach Familia, Modi Familia, and Magni Familia* were going to war.

“Those awful gods! Doing nothing but getting in our way!”

“If it’s come to this, it’s up to the Goddess Alliance! This is the time to visit a righteous divine punishment on that loathsome Freya!”

Deep into the night, after the Denatus meeting for the day had ended, deities clad in black robes were raising their voices inside an enchanting manor.

“Demeter won’t work! Her familia is exhausted from recent events, and more importantly she gets along with Freya! She’s the only one who can invite Freya out to the divine baths and bathe with her!”

“And those breasts!”

“Yeah, those giant boobs!”

“That size is unforgivable! So she’s out!”

“““Which means you, Hathor! Please be our leader!”””

“Wait, wait, what? Why me?”

Long black hair perfunctorily pulled back and white skin, fig-adorned earrings and necklace, and a cow mask covering the upper half of her face. At 155 celches, she was taller than Hestia.

This was Hathor, one of the deities standing on the towers during the Goddess Festival, and rumored among all the male gods to have the greatest nurturing cuteness.

“You are a goddess of fertility like Demeter and Freya!”

“With the vanguard of the anti-Freya Ishtar gone, you’re the only choice!”

“It’s not like I hold a grudge against Freya. And my fertility thing is more like an extra tidbit, not what I mainly preside over.”

She listlessly tried to turn them down while lying on her divan, but there was no stopping the goddesses.

“You were the one talking about how you couldn’t forgive a reverse harem normie and you’d show her a real reverse harem, weren’t you?!”

“You took that seriously?”

“““Just do it already!”””

“Hey, wait, stop. Ugh, what are you doing, stop—nrgha.”

The alliance of goddesses was going to war.

Days and nights came and went as the debates at Denatus continued, and the residents of the city who could only look up at the great white tower in anticipation began to be gripped by concern. Even the workers of the Guild could do nothing but wait for the decision of the deities.

Meanwhile, the number of people who decided to participate in the coming war game increased, and the gathering of families grew into something worthy of being called a coalition. Looking at the list of those who would participate, some began to whisper in the hallways of the Guild that just maybe...

“It’s no good. They’ve lost.”

But on the night of the seventh day after Freya made her challenge, Hermes slumped into his chair with a depressing declaration.

After seeing her patron god return from Denatus and throw the parchment in his hand onto the table in his private room in *Hermes Familia*’s home, Asfi was silent for a moment.

“...Is it not too early to be so sure?”

“Not at all. Hestia and Bell are going to lose. Guaranteed. It doesn’t matter how many fighters they cobble together. Without Loki, it doesn’t matter. That’s what it means to go to war with Lady Freya.”

“That’s...”

“If at least Aiz could have helped, they would have had a fighting chance, albeit no better than having to find a grain of sand in the desert...but Lady Freya shut that possibility down. With these rules, it’s absolute checkmate.”

His was the voice not of resignation or detachment, but of a god who had seen everything. Asfi’s brow furrowed when he mentioned the word “rules.”

“What will *Hermes Familia* do...?”

“If even a single member joins, it counts as joining the coalition. After Lady

Freya wins, she'll put a collar on every single deity she beat to make sure she can keep her connection with Bell forever. That alone must be avoided at all costs."

"Ngh...you're going to turn tail now after all you did while trapped inside her walled garden?"

"I'm not a hero. I don't have the urge to go all in on a bet that won't even be a gamble."

"..."

"Even if I tried to stop Aisha, she wouldn't listen...but she's technically registered as a follower of Plutus in the Guild paperwork, so that's fine."

Hermes shrugged like an old man at Asfi's weak plea.

It was right and just for a patron god to consider the safety of his familia, so while Asfi wanted to lash out, she couldn't blame him.

"...If there was some way to overcome this, it would be..."

He continued murmuring softly, only barely audibly.

As if not allowing himself any optimistic thoughts, Hermes went silent for a long time.

"I...just this once, I want to fight together with them." Eventually, Asfi said what was on her mind, even though she knew it was out of character. "Not because I've grown attached to Lady Hestia and Bell Cranell and the rest of them. But...as someone who heard Leon's plea, at least until she gets back, I want to—"

Listening with his eyes closed, Hermes held out his hand, interrupting her. He looked almost depressed, as if he understood what she was feeling and didn't look forward to what he was about to say.

"Sorry, but Perseus is banned. You were called out by name at Denatus."

Asfi gasped, and her eyes widened at a development she had never even imagined.

Just before she could shout "Why?!" Hermes held out the parchment he had

thrown on the table.

“This is...”

Asfi gulped as she ran her eyes over the rules written there.



“Welf...are you okay?”

“Yeah.....No, not really.”

In the home’s living room, seeing how long Welf took to respond, Bell started to worry.

The last traces of the sunset in the west had already disappeared from the sky. He didn’t know how many days it had been since he had last seen the blacksmith, who was now covered in an almost tangible shroud of exhaustion.

“This is the first time I’ve ever made so many magic swords...I don’t even have time to hate myself.”

His cheeks were scorched, and his voice cracked. He sounded like his throat was totally parched.

To the best of Bell’s knowledge, the smith hadn’t left the workshop even once during the past couple of days and nights. Seeing Welf down a potion even though they weren’t in the Dungeon, he couldn’t help breaking into a cold sweat.

“We don’t know when the war game is going to start, so everyone’s pouring everything into making sure our preparations and countermeasures are as good as they can be. If anything, it would be crazy not to be doing something...That would be impossible...” Lilly said that with massive bags under her eyes as well.

Mikoto and Haruhime were leaning against each other as they sat on the sofa, out of it due to a bad case of Mind Down. To increase the precision and power of their magic, they had pushed themselves to exhaustion. To land a blow on *Freya Familia* members who were so much higher level, there was no doubt they needed a magic trump card.

The timing happened to align, and they were all in the living room together

for the first time in days, but conversation was not forthcoming. Every single one of them desperately needed a break.

But even so, it was difficult to let sleep take them.

Their hearts were practically bursting out of their chests. The pounding was impossible to ignore.

Anxiety and nerves made relaxation elusive. Knowing that they would be fighting one of the strongest families, they couldn't take anything for granted. If they weren't doing everything they could, they wouldn't be able to be rest easy.

"...Are you okay, Bell? You're covered in wounds."

Bell scratched his cheek and flashed an awkward smile at Welf's question. Every bit of skin on his body was covered in open cuts.

This was the price he had to pay for an important ritual. He was synchronizing his spirit and body with the assistance of some helpers.

*Everyone has been working so hard. And so many people are helping us...I want to win. We have to...I want to stay with Hestia Familia...*

As he stared at Welf and the rest of them, he had another thought.

*—And more than anything, for her...*

He looked up at the biting cold sky that seemed to reflect the winter queen's heart.

Clenching his fist, he renewed his resolve.

"Okay! It's been decided!"

Then there was a thundering crash of the main door opening outside.

Bell was the first to react.

Welf and Lilly were next, spinning around to face the sound. Then Mikoto and Haruhime jolted off the sofa. Bell immediately rushed out of the living room with the rest of them following close behind.

What they found in the hallway was their goddess, who was just as exhausted as them and had tripped spectacularly. She used what little strength she had left to peel herself off the floor.



“The details of the war game have been set!”

““““!!!”””””

They all gasped, and then Bell asked the question on all their minds.

“Th-then what is the contest going to be, Goddess?!”

After he helped her to her feet, instead of answering, she held out the scroll in her hand.

Lilly frantically grabbed it and unrolled the document while everyone looked over her shoulder.

Five sets of eyes scanned over the Koine on the parchment until they reached one word.

And their eyes widened as Hestia answered at last.

“The contest is hide-and-seek.”



“Lady Freya, the specifics of the war game have been decided.”

Allen’s voice echoed in her room.

Freya was sitting on her couch as she took the paper delicately presented to her and quietly read it.

“The event will commence in six days. The location is the Orza city ruins... where the house of the gods stands.”

After reading it for a while, she burned the paper in the lamp set on the round table at her side, as if no longer interested.

“It has also been confirmed that *Loki Familia* will not participate. The Guild has announced it officially.”

“I see. I thought Ouranos might have stopped Royman...It seems he will watch from the sidelines.”

Frankly, she didn’t care either way.

Her expression never changed as she listened to Allen’s explanation, since

that was how she really felt.

As it happened, just like Hedin had told Finn, Freya had asked for the war game fully prepared for the possibility that *Loki Familia* would get involved. Her divine will had already been set. She even thought it would make a good opportunity to settle things with Loki's children, who were always compared with hers since their families were considered the twin heads of the city.

Whoever joined the war game, she fully intended to defeat all of her enemies.

She would crush whatever force Orario could muster and take what she wanted. That was her regal stance on the matter.

"...May I inquire?"

Because of that, her followers, who understood her divine will, pointed out the contradiction.

"Why did you keep the Sword Princess away from that rabbit?"

"..."

It had been none other than Freya who had Ottar contact Aiz, ordering him to tie her down with the shackle of her promise. Even though she was determined to confront *Loki Familia* if that was what it took to win, she was preventing the intervention of a single girl.

Those two points were clearly at odds.

As he knelt there, Allen almost seemed to be reproaching what seemed a choice unbecoming her regal honor.

Freya was silent for a moment before responding.

"You know the effects of Bell's rare skill, don't you?"

"Yes, Milady."

"By training with her, he could grow even stronger than he already is. His strength might even grow more than it did when he underwent his baptism here in Folkvangr with all of you."

She had shared the information with her followers about Bell's skill that had allowed him to resist her charm when she had constructed her walled garden.

What she voiced was a real possibility.

“Do you really believe that we might be troubled by *only that*?”

But this time, Allen’s eyes flashed. Those were the eyes of a ferocious cat who dared to scratch even his master.

“I will become a chariot just for you, to carry you wherever you wish to go, mowing through any obstacles in your way. That is what I swore when I cast aside that idiot.”

*Do you really intend to besmirch my strength as an einherjar and the vow I made so long ago?* The fangs he bared issued this silent question.

“...Everything I’ve done is to make absolutely sure I get him.”

That was the goddess’s curt answer.

The moonlight that had been streaming through the window disappeared behind a passing cloud.

Watching his master, Allen dispersed his icy rage. Without pushing any further, he stood up.

“I said too much.”

“...”

“My apologies.”

Like a faithful guard dog who didn’t dare enter the goddess’s sacred realm, he left with those final words.

Alone in her room, Freya leaned her head back against the tall backrest.

“It’s all to make absolutely sure I get him.”

*What a joke.*

Looking up at the high ceiling, she mocked herself.

“This is just...jealousy.”

She wanted to distance him from the girl he idolized.

She didn’t want to let Aiz get close to him. It was that childish thought that drove her to forbid the Sword Princess’s participation.

She had seen their training sessions atop the great city wall countless times from the top floor of Babel. The thought of more meetings like that troubled her heart. It was like a pockmarked, rusted sword tearing open fresh wounds. That was the sort of pain she felt.

She had lived with it before, but she could endure it no more.

Her desire to have him all to herself had swollen until it had burst from its restraints. Those uncontrollable emotions were threatening to drive the character that made her the goddess of beauty beyond a swirl of extreme emotions.

Even now, it felt like she was standing on the precipice. Almost like she was on the verge of sinking so low until she was nothing more than some commonplace girl.

“...Unsightly...”

She murmured in a voice that reached only her own ears.

“Does Lady Freya not believe in us?”

All of the Gulliver brothers looked at Grer.

They were in Sessrúmnir on the first floor of Folkvangr, far from the goddess’s personal rooms on the top floor. The warriors’ banquet was over, and the enormous space had emptied out. The voices of the first-tier adventurers who had it to themselves carried clearly to the corners of the room.

“Why did she order Ottar to keep the Sword Princess away?”

“To guarantee victory. What else is there?”

“Honestly, it’s vexing. Even though we would crush whatever enemies dare stand before us.”

Grer, Berling, and Dvalinn all spoke in turn.

It was a strange sight. Ordinarily, they could communicate through their connection without any words, but they almost seemed to be questioning themselves. In other words, it was nothing more than a touch of dissatisfaction as they expressed doubt in their patron goddess. The three of them were trying to guess what Freya was thinking.

“Don’t doubt Lady Freya. That goes against our vow to her.” The eldest, Alfrik, chimed in, silencing the other three.

They all knew the conclusion. No matter how suspicious they were—even though everyone else in the familia carried the same doubt—the result would be the same.

*Freya Familia* would gladly risk their lives to fight for their goddess. Nothing more and nothing less.

“I sort of understand how Lady Freya feels.” Suddenly, the only other person there with the four brothers, the dark elf Hegni, opened his mouth. Sitting on a table, he adjusted his grip on his knee, which he had propped up on it. “Having someone you acknowledge be stolen away by someone else...I don’t like that, either.”

His gaze rested on the seat where the boy who was no longer there had sat.

It had been a false relationship, and the time they spent together was not long, but there was still a clear reluctance in his eyes as he thought of *Freya Familia*’s Bell Cranell.

“Whether it be the Sword Princess or anyone else...I wanted to raise him up just a little bit more...with my own hands...”

Compared to einherjars like them, his talent should not have been anything special. And yet.

Even though he was rejected by the rest of the world, even though he was trapped in a walled garden that made him doubt even his own memories. He was someone who had struggled. Against the goddess of beauty’s words, her charm, and every other adversity he had faced.

For Hegni, who feared contact with others—and was an elf besides—that just showed how intriguing, how different that human had been.

Looking down as he expressed what he was feeling, he suddenly realized all four of the brothers were looking straight at him.

“You’re awfully chatty today.”

“And he’s even talking normally.”

“Do that all the time, you introvert elf.”

And they were able to understand him without Hedin translating for once.

“““What are you getting all sentimental for?”””

They mercilessly unloaded on him. In the blink of an eye, Hegni turned red, and his eyes rolled back while he popped the collar of his cloak up to cover as much of his face as he could.

“Hegni, indulge in sentimentality if you want, but when the time comes—”

“Yes, worry not. My body was chosen by an endless darkness, and I am but a coldhearted servant...!”

Ignoring his brothers, who shot a sour look at him, Alfrik gave Hegni a warning.

Hegni pretended to be fine with his usual forced response. His expression shifted to that of a cold warrior.

“Should we meet on the battlefield, I will cut him limb from limb—all for the sake of the goddess.”

*Freya Familia* wouldn’t hesitate.

When they stood on the battlefield, it would be to offer up a victory to their goddess.

“—It’s no good. Her eyes won’t open.”

On the fifth floor of Folkvangr, a room on the western side of the building, a youthful girl’s voice rang out.

Ottar, who had silently waited for her report, spoke. “Were we too late?”

“Even I can get angry, you know, Captain? Despite what it may seem, even if I’m always asked to do the absurd, I do still have my pride as a healer.”

Heith glared up at him.

Even under that withering gaze, Ottar’s boulder-like face didn’t crack. But despite his imposing expression, the boar ears on his head bent ever so slightly. Ottar had trouble dealing with this healer girl. More precisely, he felt indebted to her since he always left Heith and the Andhrímnir to deal with the aftermath

of the daily baptism on the killing grounds.

Heith held a grudge against Ottar for pushing so much work on her because she was an excellent healer, and he was fully aware that he usually never did anything normally expected of the leader of a familia. Because of those circumstances, a single healer and the Level 7 captain were in the opposite positions of what most would expect in *Freya Familia*.

The report continued, with Heith unflinchingly sharing her opinions with a first-tier adventurer. The giant boaz simply sighed as he silently listened like an unsociable child.

“I’ve done what can be done. I used enough healing magic to make myself sick. The wounds have closed, and the body has recovered. Her breathing and pulse have returned to normal as well. There is no reason for her not to wake up...But her eyes aren’t opening.”

“...A state of apparent death?”

“As difficult as it is for me to say this as a healer...right now that seems to be the case.”

Heith and Ottar looked down at the bed beside them.

“You really are a troublesome woman, Hörn.”

The girl lying on the bed was Hörn, the Goddess’s attendant. But her current appearance wasn’t the familiar one of Freya’s chief attendant. Her unbound blue-gray hair flowed down to her shoulders. Ottar and Heith both knew that behind her eyelids were eyes that matched her hair.

Her form was identical to the girl known as Syr Flover.

The magic she possessed, Vana Seiðr was a secret ability unique in the mortal realm that allowed her to transform into an exact copy of the goddess Freya in every way except for the fact that she would lack arcanum. Hörn’s current form was Syr, one of Freya’s many faces.

“Not only did you reveal the truth to Bell, you even turned a blade on yourself...I can’t begin to comprehend what you wanted to achieve in betraying Lady Freya so terribly.”

Inside the artificial world Freya had constructed, Hörn had made contact with Bell, whom she had been forbidden from approaching, and revealed the truth of herself and Freya, and of their connection with Syr.

It wouldn't be wrong to say that she was the one responsible for destroying Freya's walled garden. At the very least, that was what Heith and the rest of the familia believed. Word of her betrayal had spread among the familia, and were it not for their master's orders, not a single one of them would have hesitated to kill the woman—even Heith, who had worked with her so long and had considered her a trusted friend.

The girl who swore only fealty to the goddess had a chilling light in her eyes as she looked down at Hörn. Ottar watched her expressionless face, which made it seem like any moment now, she might reach out and snap the sleeping girl's neck, but Heith just closed her eyes and sighed.

"...In accordance with Lady Freya's will, she has been kept alive. However, that is all. It is an admission of my failure, but I cannot do anything further here."

Her resigned voice filled the room, which was a stylish and elegant white, unbefitting a traitor who had betrayed the goddess. There was only a single bed inside. The air here was almost holy, making it seem like a chapel, evoking the image of a soul lost in the gulf between the heavens and the mortal realm.

And the box bed she was sleeping on almost looked like a coffin. Spread some flower petals around and no one would suspect she wasn't just a corpse.

The girl who had once been called Syr was sleeping there like something out of a fairy tale.

"Do you know why she hasn't recovered?"

"It would be nothing more than the speculation of a mere mortal..."

Ottar's eyes urged her, indicating he wasn't expecting certainty.

"The natural assumption is that she herself doesn't wish to wake. It's clear from her attempt to kill herself that she believes she sinned against Lady Freya. If her spirit desires eternal slumber, then it does not matter how much we heal her flesh...Moreover..." Heith struggled to continue there. After several



seconds' hesitation, she put it into words. "She is still connected to the Lady Syr that Lady Freya tried to bury..."

This time Ottar was at a loss for words, too.

"She wounded herself as Hörn—it wasn't the body of a deity. However, right now the danger to her body is gone. Despite the fact that she is unconscious, her Vana Seiðr has not come undone."

"..."

"In which case, the only thing I can think of is that Hörn is continuing to use the magic to avoid losing something..." A few seconds after saying that, Heith weakly shook her head. "That is just a guess, nothing more than idle ramblings. Please pay it no mind."

"...Mm-hmm..."

Ottar nodded.

*Something about the Goddess's heart that only she knew...or maybe something that even she hasn't noticed?*

Tracing the connection of Vana Seiðr, the goddess' emotions had at times flowed back into Hörn.

What was Syr thinking as she lay there?

He hadn't been able to understand her wish even to the end—and he never tried.

Ottar could do nothing other than fight.

The strongest was expected to do nothing more than crush the goddess's enemies. So while he knew he wasn't qualified to do so, he still asked, "What sort of dream are you seeing?"

# MONOLOGUE VI



## MONOLOGUE VI



I am dreaming.

Not the current me's dream, nor the old me's dream. This is *her* memory.

She was alone.

Even though she should have been fulfilled by love, she wasn't satisfied at all. To some people, she probably seemed horribly arrogant, a figure of sickening extravagance.

How many people in the mortal realm had gone their whole lives without ever knowing love. You could count my old self among their number.

But because she knew love more than any other being, she experienced a hollowness that those who didn't know love could never begin to understand.

Who is more unfortunate?

One who, because she is unfulfilled, can be starved for love?

Or one who, because she *is* fulfilled, can be imprisoned by love, killed by love over and over?

There is no answer.

All that can be said is that over the span of an eternity, even love can become a hellish, deadly poison.

In the dream, she is crying in a field of flowers.

Hands covering her face, the tears flowing down her cheeks, and her grief transform a field of red flowers in the twilight sun into a sea of gold.

*"I can't find it. I can't find it."*

She kept weeping.

Until finally...a lone woman appeared before her.

It was a short, unyielding dwarf whose initial reaction to seeing her beautiful face and tears was surprise.

She immediately stood up. *"You saw, didn't you?"*

Erasing any trace of tears, her eyes turned silver.

She was preparing to charm the dwarf who stood before her, to command her to forget everything. The dwarf's body spasmed, and she stumbled closer. Just as she was about to give the order— —the dwarf unleashed a powerful uppercut.

It landed perfectly, hitting so hard even I recoiled.

Struck square in the jaw, she fell back on her bottom. The field of flowers caught her, and red petals flew into the air. She rubbed her chin, and her eyes wavered as the dwarf woman's face became like that of an ogre.

*"Don't be using any weird magic on me! You want me to send you flying?!"*

Even though she had already sent her flying, the dwarf shouted furiously. She may have been a little bit slow in charming the dwarf woman, but she had resisted and sent her flying simply because she was strong.

In a shock, she said, *"You do know I'm a goddess?"*

The dwarf woman just snorted.

*"As if I give a damn!"*

The dwarf claimed to have never worshipped any god since the day she was born.

And hearing that, she laughed. Immodestly and loudly. She collapsed into the field of flowers again, curling up like a baby. Of all people, it was this dwarf woman who had robbed her of her first time.

She was the first person to punch her.

She just kept laughing and laughing until she finally asked, *"Hey, what's your name?"*

*"...Mia..."*

She decided to tag along with this dwarf.

The dwarf had been born in a mining town. By the time she could walk, the place she called home was becoming run-down, and the mines were almost exhausted. All the men worked as miners, so the only people who remained in the village were frail, haggard girls. The dwarf woman ran a tavern—really not much more than a simple kitchen—by herself so that they could have something to eat.

The dwarf had stumbled across her in the flower field because she had been gathering ingredients to feed the people of the impoverished town.

*“Not gods, food! I want food to fill a stomach more than any jewels!”*

The dwarf knew the pangs of hunger better than anyone. And she thought warm food was worth far more than pretty jewels or a beautiful goddess. It was something that could never be seen in a perfect world like the heavens, which was so far removed from vulgar things such as hunger and poverty.

But at the same time, she had a thought. This was the true nature of the mortal realm. Precisely because it was incomplete, this world could give birth to the unknown that even deities couldn't foresee. Because it was incomplete, it could cultivate beings like the dwarf standing before her.

And the greatest exemplar of the unknown was a hero.

That was when she started to think that the Odr she was searching for might be that sort of hero.

*“I wonder if you are my destined companion?”*

*“Spare me the crap, you stupid goddess.”*

As she looked at the dwarf in expectation, the dwarf completely and totally ignored her.

The dwarf woman was a pure cook, through and through, enough so that it actually disappointed her. She was an Andhrímnir with a sooty face who satisfied people's stomachs.

This dwarf didn't revere her at all.

This country dwarf didn't understand the value she had, she who so many

deities major and minor strove to make their own. And she didn't care to know. Maybe because of how they had happened to meet, or maybe because she knew no fear. It was probably both.

So the dwarf had no problem handling her roughly, and if anything, since it was in just the right place, she paddled the goddess's bottom—the goddess who was supposed to be the treasure of the world.

No matter how much her imposing familia might glare, the dwarf refused to change her attitude. She stuck to her pride as a cook even when facing down warriors far stronger than her. Even when the people of the mining town fell for her at first glance without exception, the dwarf woman just kept cooking. She had no blessing from any god, but her powerful spirit never buckled, even when it clashed with a goddess's divine will.

This dwarf was a truly strange one.

And meeting this dwarf seemed to become her salvation, if only a little.

*"Mia, on a whim, I saved your town."*

*"..."*

*"I gave everyone a reasonable job, and this town won't fade away now. So you don't have to keep cooking anymore, right?"*

*"..."*

*"Speaking of, though, there's a goddess here who's stomach has been empty all this time."*

*"...You stupid goddess."*

She took a liking to the dwarf, and with a little bit of force, she managed to make her a follower.

The dwarf, apparently not wanting to owe her for saving her hometown, accepted the goddess's divine blessing, though she grumbled the whole time. However, she only agreed to accept under certain conditions. *"Only until I've worked off my debt."* *"If there's ever anyone starving like in my hometown, I'm going straight there."* *"And I'm going to open a real tavern like I've always wanted."* Those were the terms.

She accepted those compromises. And then she said this: *“Mia, I’m searching for my Odr.”*

*“I’ve heard it before. I’m not gonna be the one, and I’m not gonna help you with it, either.”*

*“Yes, I thought you’d say that. So I want you to make a promise with me.”*

*“A promise...?”*

*“Knowing you, if I do something you don’t agree with, you won’t hesitate to hit me again, right?”*

*“...”*

*“If it is for my Odr, I am sure I will become a saintly lady or a repulsive witch.”*

*“...”*

*“So, Mia, whether I become a good woman or a bad woman, don’t get in my way?”*

*“...”*

*“Please, Mia.”*

*“...I got it...”*

If there was anyone who would get in the way of her wish, it was undoubtedly the dwarf before her eyes.

She had a feeling. So she proposed that promise while accepting the dwarf’s terms. And surprisingly, the dwarf accepted it without an argument.

She wondered why.

But soon, she understood.

The dwarf had already seen her cry like a pitiful little girl once before...

She continued her journey searching for her Odr, accompanied by the dwarf.

While traveling the mortal realm that was so much smaller than the vast heavens, she treasured the dwarf. She decided in her heart that this dwarf alone she would never charm.

The dwarf woman was virtuous. She didn’t have an elf’s dignity, and she was

violent and wild, but she had a core more solid than anyone. The dwarf was the one person who would defy her, and she valued that. And despite the fact that the dwarf was far, far younger than her, in her heart she looked up to her like an older sister.

And that stout-hearted dwarf also knew that she could be driven mad by beauty. If the dwarf had ever sought her love, she wouldn't have been able to recover.

Their travels continued.

When she was unable to find her Odr, her shoulders slumped countless times, and her familia of followers who worshipped her just continued to grow.

One day, she lost to the worst and most vicious goddess and was trapped in the Labyrinth City. She took her place at the center of the world, but still she continued to look for her Odr.

During her search, she welcomed a young boaz child.

She freed two kings from the island racked by the atrocious ages-long war between the white and black elves.

She received the prum quadruplets who were selling themselves in an industrial city.

She took in two kittens who were all alone in a world of ruins.

And I was saved from the winter in those slums.

The powerful, brave warriors who swore loyalty to her increased with every passing year.

But even so, she couldn't find her Odr.

And when the city's dark age came, the dwarf requested to leave her side.

That was the day when, consumed by the poison of boredom and convinced that she would never find her Odr, she began her role-playing.

And then she made friends.

She found another home.

The resignation, detachment, and boredom corrupting the goddess's heart



were eased.

She grew absorbed in her days spent as a simple girl.

Did she notice it?

Even though it was nothing more than a game, the days she spent like that enriched her, replacing the gold that she had lost in that flower field.

Did she notice that the girl had brought her closer to her wish?

But...ahhh...

She reached it again.

In this dream world, a beautiful, lonely field of flowers.

I can't find it. I can't find it. Even now she is crying.

Weeping ever since that day.

*"Just let the tears out. Just let the tears out.*

*Because you aren't really there.*

*In a garden of flowers, red tears, and blossoming gold.*

*May the light we still can't see guide us.*

*And let's smile together. Yes, let's smile together.*

*Because I'm sure we will meet again someday."*

A song of tears echoed in the distance.

Though her Odr had finally appeared, she was even now still crying.

I could only watch from the outside.

Someone help.

Someone save her.

I prayed.

But there was no one to save her.

None other than the ones she had cast aside.

And unable to stop her, I helped her.

I was too slow to notice these tears.

Sorry, Ahnya.

Sorry, Chloe.

Sorry, Runoa.

Sorry, Lyu.

...I'm sorry, Mia.

She apologized as she cried.

I apologized, too.

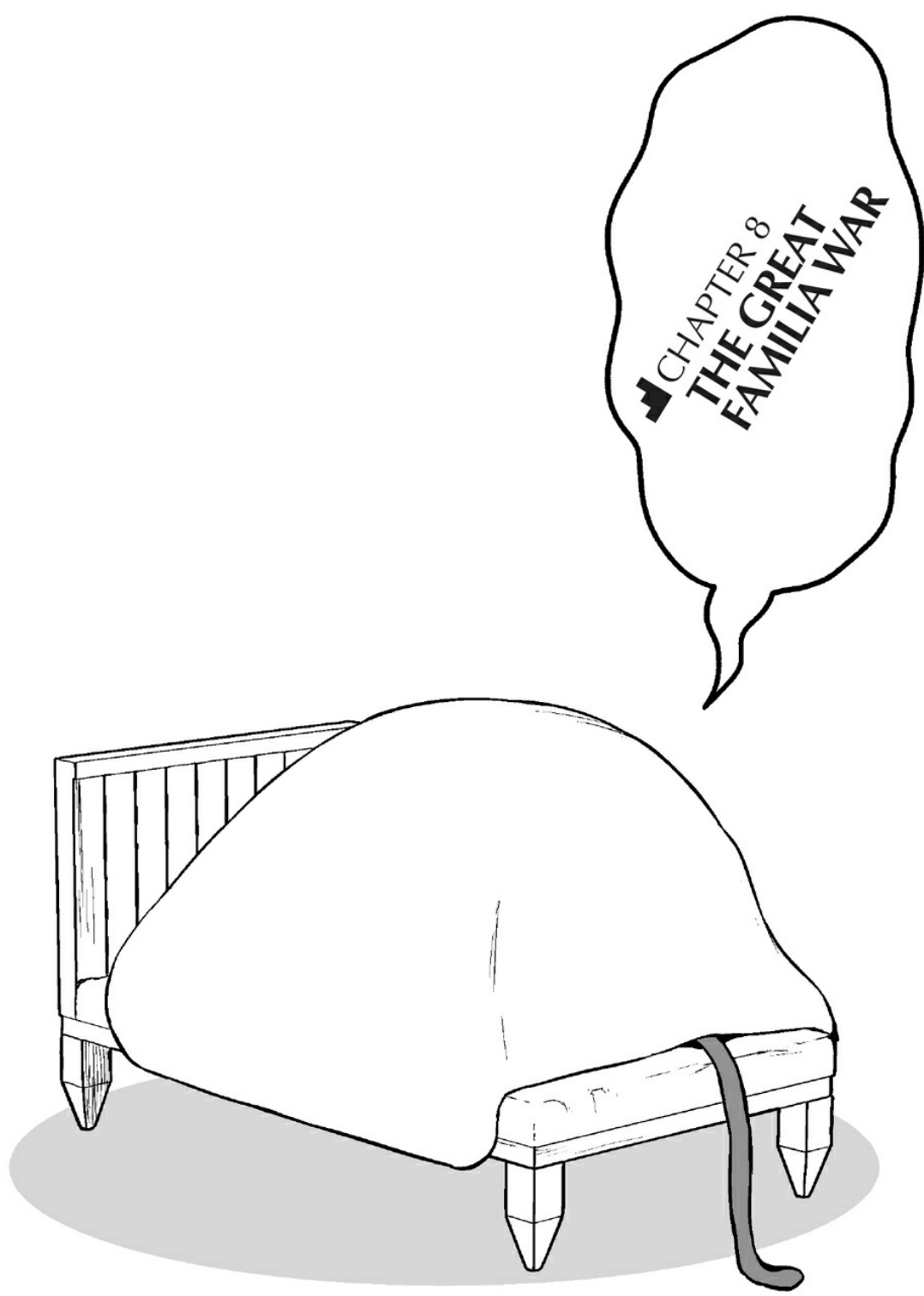
But even so, her tears didn't stop.

The gold continued to flow, and instead, her body melted away.

I clung on to her, saying the words that she would never say.

Stop me...

Save me...



## CHAPTER 8

### THE GREAT FAMILIA WAR

“Ahnya.”

“ ... ”

“How long are you going to stay like that?”

“ ... ”

“...I asked how long are you gonna stay hidin’ in bed!”

“...Runoa, calm meown.”

“Don’t stop me, Chloe! Lady Freya is Syr, isn’t she, Ahnya?!”

“ ... ”

“Then we’ve gotta go hear the full story, even it means kicking her ass!”

“ ... ”

“We just have to help out the kid and take Syr back, right?!”

“ ... ”

“Say something, you stupid cat!”

“Runoa, calm down.”

“Get up already! If you won’t, I’ll make you!”

“Runoa!”

“Gh...”

“ ... ”

“ ..... ”

“ ... ”

“...We’re going.”

“...”

“You can rot away there for the rest of your life!”

The door flew open.

The sound hung in the room; her resentment had taken shape. That left just two people in the room.

“Ahnya, we’re going to the war game meow.”

“...”

“We begged Lord Njǫrðr and Lady Demeter. Mei and the others converted, too.”

“...”

“Lyu doesn’t know...But we’re going to fight, too.”

“...”

Ahnya, do you not want this place to go back to how it was?”

“...Gh.”

“Well, I want that back...So I’m going.”

And then there was one.

The door closed. Ahnya hugged her knees and curled up in her bed.

Runoa was strong. So was Chloe.

But Ahnya fighting, that was impossible.

Her brother was scary.

Freya was scary.

She didn’t even know what the girl who had saved her really was.

And she couldn’t muster the courage to find the answer to that question.

Runoa was right. Ahnya was just wasting away. She was a lost kitten who couldn’t do anything alone.

She hung her head in disappointment at herself.

Then—

“—You.”

The door flew open, and someone rough and coarse walked over to the bed.

That coarse and vulgar tone sounded so familiar. Her shoulders quivered as she buried her head between her knees.

“...Big brother...?”

The lost kitten nervously raised her head.



The giant city walls in the east are glowing a faint white.

A bead of sweat drips down my cheek as the darkness starts to give way to sunlight.

“Eeeya!”

The next instant, sweat and a few strands of hair are wiped away by an impossibly big twinblade.

Even as my eyes widen and I gasp, my arms and legs don’t stop moving.

After twisting my body to the side, I kick the ground twice like I’m dancing, using the rotation to slash with Hakugen.

“Haaah!”

It’s a brute-force response that relies on the raw force of my Strength and Agility stats.

At a glance, it looks haphazard, and it’s something I definitely wouldn’t have been able to pull off before. But with a Level 5 status, I can combine evasion and attack into a single fluid motion.

“Don’t let your status decide what you should do!”

But my outrageous reaction is instantly crushed by my opponent’s even greater absurdity.

With insane visual acuity and courage—and an Amazon’s strength—she grabs my wrist and hurls me behind her.

“Guuuuuugh?!”

Instead of flying in an arc, I bounce against the ground like a ball.

Thrusting my free arm into the grassy field, I recover my balance and kick off the rapidly approaching wall and leap to the side. Time is of the essence because the other Amazon, whose long black hair fans out in the wind, is already slashing at me.

“Don’t be so eager to go for such an obvious opening!”

“...! Ghaaaa!”

The two kukri knives flashed in succession while the big twinblade came crashing down from above.

A howl works its way up from the pit of my stomach as I meet their combined attack head-on.

It’s just before dawn in Hearthstone Manor.

I can’t remember anymore how many times I sparred with Ms. Tiona and Ms. Tione in the courtyard.

They burst into our home a few days ago. Just like the goddess and everyone else, I was taken aback when they announced they wanted to help me. Mr. Finn had volunteered to teach Lilly, and he was the one who suggested asking them to help me with some “fine-tuning.” We’ve been fighting constantly since then.

For serious training, it would probably have been better to go up on the wall where I went with Ms. Aiz or else somewhere in the Dungeon, but Ms. Tione pointed out that the time spent getting ready and going back and forth would be wasted, so it was decided we’d train right here in the middle of the home.

“Here I come!”

The courtyard wasn’t nearly large enough to accommodate a bunch of first-tier adventurers going wild. The lawn was completely torn up, the plants were in terrible shape, and the pole holding the magic-stone lamp was broken. And Lilly had already thundered about the repair costs, but I didn’t have time to worry about that. I couldn’t afford to lose focus at all.

Training or not, that’s what it means to cross blades with first-tier

adventurers.

“Your body first! Then your head! You’ll never be able to keep up in a fight with first-tier adventurers otherwise!”

*“Freya Familia’s attacks will be even more intense!”*

Countless scratches cover my arms and legs. I feel every impact in my bones, and everything feels numb. The rapid slashes of the knives and the heavy crush of the twinblade lay into me again and again as I focus on defense.

They keep pushing me back against the wall over and over with what can only be called a torrent of attacks.

Ninety percent of my counterattacks are instantly defeated, so scrambling away is the only way for me to survive. When I unleash a kick like a cannon shot only to have it easily parried by a deft elbow, it feels like I’m having a nightmare.

As first-tier adventurers, the Amazon sisters have far, far more experience and techniques than I do. So the result is exactly what you’d expect. I’ve been getting pummeled day in and day out.

“Remember your training with Aiz!”

“You have the tricks and techniques she pounded into you, don’t you?! So draw them out now!”

But just as often, their words spur my heart and body onward.

*—Don’t let your status decide things for you.*

*—Don’t leap at every opening.*

Right, those were things she told me, too.

Now that I’ve made it to Level 5, I need to revive my old resolve.

Link my abilities and my techniques, combine my weapons and tricks, synchronize my spirit and body!

*“Grow...Uchide no Kozuchi!”*

Just then, a supporting voice reaches my bloody back.



In a corner of the courtyard, Ms. Haruhime stands up from where she has been kneeling and finishes her casting.

She's sweating just as much as I've been while focusing everything on applying her level boost.

"—Ngggh!"

Readjusting to my status that's suddenly been boosted, I launch my counterattack.

As beautiful rays of light envelop my body, I accelerate. The gleaming white and jet-black knives in my hands flash.

Using the techniques I've learned, I aim for the sides of Ms. Tione's weapons, knocking them off path to parry all of her slashes. Intentionally leaving an opening, I bait Ms. Tiona. Seizing the initiative, I swing the Hestia Knife in my right hand and put my whole weight behind it.

"Haaaaaaaaah!!!!"

Everything is riding on this attack. A single strike containing all I can muster.

Ms. Tiona's eyes widen, and she smiles as she blocks it head-on with her massive weapon before flying backward.

The impact made her adamantite weapon shudder. It's a refreshing sound that I haven't heard yet in all of our training. It feels good.

A high-pitched sound like a tuning fork rings out in the courtyard.

"AlIll right! ...So, how's it feel, Argonaut?"

"...Yes, it's probably fine now."

Ms. Tiona spins in the air and lands without issue a short distance away.

Breathing heavily, I return my two knives to their sheaths before opening and closing my fists over and over.

"The inconsistency I was feeling...is gone."

When we level up, there's inevitably a gap in perception between our body and our mind. The mind can't immediately adapt to the sudden changes in every aspect of our physical abilities. Maybe because I'm inexperienced and

have only been an adventurer for a short time, it takes a while for me to adjust. The last time it happened was while I was fighting iguaçu during the expedition two months ago.

So the goal of the training this time isn't to practice to the very last minute. Like Mr. Finn said, this is to fine-tune my body and mind to get rid of that discrepancy.

"It took us until the very last moment but looks like it worked. You shouldn't be in trouble anymore...And you did good keeping up. I've heard about it plenty by now, but that's some amazing magic."

"Th-thank you..."

Ms. Tione even complimented Ms. Haruhime, whose eyes are still spinning. She looks like she might collapse at any moment. Ms. Haruhime has also leveled up, and since a few days ago, she's been helping with my tuning.

In her case, rather than becoming physically stronger, her level boost has become even more formidable. Now that she's Level 2, it lasts for twenty minutes instead of fifteen, the cooldown has gone from ten minutes to nine, and naturally, the maximum number of tails she can muster has increased from five to six.

There's no doubt Ms. Haruhime's power is going to be key in the war game. Lilly's eyes were bloodshot from lack of sleep when she asked Ms. Haruhime to test it to her limits. This way, we won't have to worry about using it without practice during the main event.

*Plus, it's good that I got to experience pseudo-Level 6 movements...*

Combine the level boost with the mental gap I already have from leveling up and I really might have ended up rampaging like a bull.

It's a bit of an odd comparison, but the power output almost feels like transforming into a dragon. Thanks to Ms. Tione and Ms. Tiona, I'm able to control it now.

Considering this was also practice fighting against first-tier adventurers, this fine-tuning session is something that could only have been done with Level 6s like them. I can't begin to thank them enough.

“It would have been good if Aiz could have trained you all, too, so...sorry.”

“No, I heard there are reasons, and I’m sure she is cheering us on.”

I shake my head. I don’t know the details, but...the things she taught me are still firmly rooted in my heart. Now, and even during all the fighting in that field, everything she has done for me is a huge help.

I will face the war today together with her teachings.

“...The sun is...”

Ms. Haruhime looks up.

Even in the courtyard, surrounded by the walls of the manor on all sides, it’s still clear the sun has started peeking over the horizon.

The sky is bright red. So red it almost looks like twilight.

This is the third day of our training and the day of the war game.

My heart quietly but suddenly starts to race as I prepare to meet the fateful day.

“Argonaut...”

As I peer up at the sky nervously, I realize Ms. Tione and Ms. Tiona have walked over and are smiling at Ms. Haruhime and me.

“Do your best!”

“Go kick *Freya Familia*’s ass!”

Ms. Haruhime and I look at each other, feeling just a little bit relieved by their glowing smiles and rough and wild encouragement.

Nodding, we smile back for Goddess and Lilly and everyone else, too.

““We will!””



It was a track left by the giant called history.

Rows and rows of large, crumbling pillars in lines.

Countless paving stones faded of color extended all around.

Broken arches leaning but still standing after many, many long years.

A large mausoleum, several structures that were believed to be residences for religious figures, bare ground and massive boulders, green encroaching everywhere, even now in the process of becoming part of nature. It was a majestic, sublime scene, but at the same time, it was one of immense solitude.

And what was most notable was that all the ruins were on top of a lake.

This island floated atop beautiful emerald-green water—water cupped by a giant caldera surrounded by a foreboding ring of mountains.

These were the Orza city ruins.

It was the name of a massive complex of ruins in a caldera lake to the northwest of Orario, at the western end of the Beor Mountains. And this was the battlefield where the war game would be carried out.

The history of these ruins stretched back over 2,000 years. It was originally a fortress city carved out of the land to stem the tide of monsters pouring from the massive rift in the ground.

In addition to ensuring they did not have to worry about water, the caldera formed a natural moat that frustrated the monsters' assaults. With the steady work of half-elves and half-dwarves, the islands grew to be a self-sufficient city, and it apparently stood proudly until the day an especially large monster attacked it from the sky.

The warped, elliptical island that had now fallen into ruins was still surrounded by the remnants of ramparts and towers. Scattered across the rugged and undulating landscape were a great many leaning structures and many more completely broken skeletons of buildings, making it clear this place had been abandoned long ago.

And among them was one particularly large temple on the western edge of the island.

In ancient times, before deities descended to the mortal realm, people exposed to the menace of monsters worshipped imagined deities, praying for salvation. Orza was believed to have a deep connection with spirits, and that large temple was generally known as the house of the gods. Inside, several

statues of deities were enshrined.

It was believed that a goddess of beauty was one of the deities worshipped there.

*“—The breeze is cold, there are scattered clouds here and there, but as you can see, it is a beautiful day! Perfect weather for fighting, even on the battleground in the mountains where the weather can shift so quickly! I will be your host and commentator for the war game again this time! Ganesha Familia’s Fire Inferno Flame, the fire spitting flame magic, Ibly Archer!”*

*“I am Ganeshaaaaa!”*

*“And I’m joined by Lord Ganesha!”*

In distant Orario, the Orza ruins were visible in the reflection of mirrors. Divine mirrors had already been set up all around the city, and a live commentary was being run by *Ganesha Familia*.

But in contrast to the feverish excitement that accompanied the war game with *Apollo Familia* five months ago, the city was quiet. The adventurers in taverns, the people looking up at the mirrors set up on the main streets, and even the deities gathered in Babel all looked nervous in the final moments before the battle began.

*“Now, then! This is a new experience for Orario—The Great Familia War! A clash between Freya Familia, hailed as the city’s strongest, and a coalition of familias led by Hestia Familia! And the aim of the game this time is a variation of Hide! And! Seeeeeeeeek!!!”*

The annoying commentators were the only ones fired up.

In front of Guild Headquarters, Ibly was screaming into the magic-stone microphone.

*“Allow me to breeze through the rules! Victory goes to the side that finds the other side’s deity first! Every familia taking part will hide its patron deity somewhere in the Orza ruins, and the followers will race to find them! Quite literally hide-and-seek!”*

*“Is that...Ganesha?!”*

*“That’s exactly right, Lord Ganesha! Of course it is not just a simple hide-and-seek, either, though! If enemy familia members run into one another they can get in their way and fight—a full-on battle royale! Rivers of blood and graveyards of weapons will surely spring up as they try to protect and find the deities!”*

That wasn’t just metaphorical, either.

All told, *forty-seven* familias were taking part, and more than *eight hundred* followers would be fighting in this war, so no matter what the rules might be, a battle where blood would be washed away with more blood was what awaited them.

Hearing Ibly’s explanation, the people of the city all gulped.

*“Buuuuut! While Freya Familia will have to find every last one of the coalition gods and goddesses, the coalition need only find Goddess Freya to win! That has to be a pretty big advantage for the coalition! It almost feels unfair! What do you think, Lord Ganesha?!”*

*“Even that’s not enough of a handicap.”*

*“Is that a serious answer from Lord Ganesha?!”*

The live commentary and the mood of the city were at complete odds with each other as they echoed through the streets. Meanwhile, those left behind in the city...

“Bell...”

“Eina...”

In the Guild Headquarters, where a mirror was hanging near the ceiling, Eina could do nothing but pray for Bell’s safety, wishing she could do more, while her colleague Misha gently held her.

“With rules like this, they had to ban me specifically since not only could I fly around and locate Goddess Freya, I could even end it immediately with a surprise attack...Was that it?”

“Thought it was your Talaria more precisely. Some people knew there was a magic item that allowed its user to fly through the sky, but with you carrying

Hestia and charging into Lady Freya's home like that, it has definitely become common knowledge...You still haven't accepted it?"

"...Making a fuss about it now wouldn't help. Other than Talaria, which was banned, I've already shared all my magical items with them...There is nothing to do but believe in him. In them."

On the thirtieth floor of Babel, where various deities had gathered, Asfi grimaced as Hermes shrugged in resignation.

"Aiz, it might be hard...but do you want to watch together?"

".....Yes..."

In *Loki Familia's* home, Aiz held Tiona's hand and finally looked up, stepping into the parlor.

Tione sat on the couch while Gareth crossed his boulder-like arms and Riveria kept one eye closed. Finn just licked his finger. They were all watching the mirror that Loki had set there.

The war game was about to begin.



"It's so big..."

I mutter to myself as I stare out at the ruins that I couldn't completely take in even with an upper-class adventurer's vision.

"The eastern side is our coalition's camp...and *Freya Familia* is in the west?"

"That's right...the biggest structure is in the center. That's supposed to be the boundary..."

Ms. Nahza holds her longbow at the ready as she explains the layout, since I've only just arrived.

We're on one of the surrounding mountains, which gives us a vantage point from where we can see the whole of the island. The view of the caldera lake from the cliff top is beautiful. If I had come for any other reason, I'm sure I would have been stunned by the way the lake mirrored the heavens above.

This is the second time I've been to the Beor Mountains. This caldera is on the opposite end of the mountain range in relation to Edas Village, where the goddess and Ms. Aiz and I got lost during Rakia's invasion.

I never would have imagined such a beautiful sight is only a couple hours away even if I'm carrying Ms. Haruhime—which wasn't any trouble at all for an upper-class adventurer.

*"Freya Familia* has been in the ruins since this morning...Lady Freya is hidden somewhere in the western side, I'm sure..."

Following Ms. Nahza's finger, I spot the ruins of a half-destroyed giant temple.

The area for the coalition to hide our deities is on the eastern half, while *Freya Familia* holds the western half. As long as they're inside those regions, it's fair game to hide the gods and goddesses anywhere we like. They could be in one of the towers on the outer edge or right in the center. The ruins are big enough to contain a whole district of Orario, so finding a single deity will be difficult.

"But to have a war game in such a massive ruin complex..." Mr. Ouka commented.

"Considering there are almost fifty familias taking part, it's reasonable enough..." Ms. Nahza holds down her hair being rustled by the breeze.

I don't want to just steal his words, but the city ruins atop the giant lake really do look almost like a completely different world. We're about to turn what used to be a fortress city into a battlefield to settle things with the most powerful opponents there are.

"...Thank you. This is enough for me. Let's go back."

Controlling my nerves, I turn back with the both of them. We descend the long, precipitous slant, back to the field camp.

The Orza ruins are near the southern end of the caldera, and on the southern end of the island is the only bridge. The mountain side of that bridge is where the coalition's base camp has been set up.

While Ms. Haruhime and I trained until the very last moment, most of the



other coalition adventurers came to the group of tents set up by the Guild and *Ganesha Familia* the day before—*Freya Familia* had apparently crossed over the caldera lake on a raft from the north.

Once the war game starts, this base camp will be the evacuation point where injured adventurers who drop out of the fighting will be taken for treatment, which is why *Dian Cecht Familia* members can be found all around the camp.

“I feel like I don’t have enough items...Hey, anyone got some spares?!”

“*Miach Familia* has them! Go talk to Lord Miach and pick up what you need!”

“Having Crozzo magic swords and even swords from Hephaistos’s shop to pick from is like a dream come true...but I still can’t calm down.”

The camp is buzzing with excitement and nerves.

A beast person carefully inspects their weapons, and a dwarf is having a comrade help to put on heavy armor. I watch these scenes unfold as the battle draws near—when a couple of voices call out to me.

““Bell Cranell!””

“Ah...Mr. Luvis, Mr. Dormul!”

Turning around, I see a familiar pair running over to me—*Modi Familia*’s Mr. Luvis and *Magni Familia*’s Mr. Dormul. The elf and dwarf from during the expedition who we helped fight a moss huge.

“Are you going to fight with us...?”

“Of course. The life I should have lost along with my right arm, I owe it to you. If I don’t repay that debt now, then when?”

Mr. Luvis has a bow and a quiver of arrows ready as he touches his right arm.

It’s covered by his battle gear and a glove, but if I looked underneath, I’m sure I’d see a silver prosthetic just like Ms. Nahza’s. Even though he has lost his arm, he still has a neat smile befitting an elf. “The time to fulfill my pledge has come. Let us fight together, comrade of the elves.”

—*I swear on the name of Luvis Lilix that one day I will repay this enormous debt.*

I remember the promise he made when we were in Rivira after we defeated the moss huge. Behind him, Ms. Lana is wearing the same sort of smile as she stands firmly on her prosthetic leg.

“What are ya talking about, comrade of the elves! Then us and *Hestia Familia* are dwarven brothers!”

Mr. Dormul delivers his retort in a booming voice. Ignoring Mr. Luvis’s reproachful gaze, he pounds his broad chest.

“We haven’t forgotten, either. It’s a crazy opponent...but for you, we’ll fight to the end, brother.”

I’m at a loss for words as Mr. Dormul and his dwarf comrades beam at me with warm smiles.

Though I met them both in a strange way through Ms. Eina, we helped one another in the Dungeon, and now we’re standing shoulder to shoulder. It would be easy to call it an odd bond. But the connections that brought these elves and dwarves to come to our aid is making me feel so warm inside my chest, and I’m truly grateful to them from the bottom of my heart.

“Yes! Thank you so—”

“Hey! Don’t forget we came, too, Rabbit Foot!”

“—Geh?!”

Out of nowhere, a thick arm wraps around my neck. Coughing as everyone else looks on in shock, I frantically turn around and see an adventurer flashing a crooked grin.

“M-Mr. Mord?! You all came, too?!”

“Damn straight! If we win this, we’ll get every last bit of treasure *Freya Familia* has tucked away! We’re gonna break the bank at the casino!”

I can’t help but smile that even at a time like this, Mr. Mord is the same as always.

A few steps away, Mr. Gyle and Mr. Scott were just shaking their heads though...What could that be about?

“...Looks like you’re good and ready.”

Letting me go, Mr. Mord looks me up and down.

I’m wearing the sixth iteration of the armor Welf made for me and a new set of anti-detection battle gear. My weapons are the trusty Hestia Knife and Hakugen. And I have a Goliath Scarf around my neck.

My equipment also includes three dual potions and one of Ms. Nahza’s precious newly developed elixirs.

Looking down at the gear I’ve put on before going to survey the battlefield again, I nod firmly.

“Let’s win this, Rabbit Foot.”

“...Yes, Mr. Mord!”

He flashes an adventurer’s smile instead of his usual thuggish one, and I can’t help but smile back.

“Would all of the deities and children please come here! It’s time for the final briefing!”

As everyone steels themselves for the coming battle, Lady Hestia’s voice rings out from the center of the camp.

Ms. Nahza and Mr. Ouka, Mr. Luvis and Mr. Dormul, and Mr. Mord all nod to one another and start moving.

Only two hours to go before the war game begins.

We’re just waiting for the signal from *Ganesha Familia* in the final intermission right before stepping out on the stage. In front of the tent at the center of the camp, Lady Hestia has gathered everyone’s attention. The other deities and the captains of the various familias were arranged at the front of the group while Welf, Ms. Aisha, and dozens and dozens of adventurers, smiths, and the Berbera formed a half-circle around her.

“First of all, every god and goddess needs to take one of the flowers laid out here. Put it on your chest and don’t try to hide it! This is an official notice from *Ganesha Familia*!”

The deities all do as Lady Hestia asks.

Lord Takemikazuchi chooses a purple chrysanthemum.

Lord Miach a coleus leaf and flower.

Lady Hephaistos grabs a rainbow iris.

Lord Modi and Lord Magni are crying weakly that everything is over. But they and the goddesses who hold a grudge against the goddess of beauty all put flowers on their chests as well.

“The rules were settled in detail at Denatus, and I’m sure the deities already know, but...if your flower is stolen by one of Freya’s children or if you lose it, you are removed from the game, so be careful!”

“So even if a god is found, that’s not the end, and as long as they hold on to their flower, the game’s not over...Is that how it works?”

“Yes, that’s right, Mord! All of you children are aiming for Freya’s flower, and her children are after our flowers! However, if a deity’s flower is taken, their entire familia will be out of the war game, so all of you deities be sure to run or fight to the very end!”

Lady Hestia puts a red freesia on her own chest.

It’s taboo for mortals to hurt or kill deities. I heard that the flower-stealing rule is meant to neatly sidestep that issue. We’re of course forbidden to attack deities directly. If, by chance, a magic barrage hits a deity and they’re accidentally sent back to heaven, the offending side that’s responsible for the attack would be immediately disqualified. This was decided to avoid any extreme strategies like blowing up the entire ruins the moment the war game started.

*Freya Familia* will be hunting for all of our deities’ flowers.

As for us...stealing away Lady Freya’s flower is our ultimate goal.

“I didn’t get to confirm at Denatus, but how much are we allowed to resist? Am I allowed to fight Freya’s children directly?”

“Using divine authority is banned, and Freya’s charm is obviously out, too, but...”

“...Where does that put Take?”

When Lord Takemikazuchi asks his question, Lady Hephaistos didn't have an answer, and it seems like Lady Hestia doesn't, either.

All of the deities preside over something...and in Lord Takemikazuchi's case, it's war and martial arts. It could be argued that him resisting would be an extension of those things, so it isn't really clear whether it should be forbidden, and if it is, how much...Basically, it's a blurry line.

“...Just for argument's sake, if you were up against Freya's kids, how many could you fight?”

“Against second-tier adventurers, I could handle twenty of them. And against a first-tier adventurer, I should be able to take at least one.”

“““Then go out and fight on the front lines.””” Hearing his calm answer to Lady Hestia's question, Lord Modi and the other male gods all grumbled together.

While all of our expressions went stiff, Ms. Mikoto and Mr. Ouka and the rest of his familia puffed out their chest in pride.

“W-well, why don't you resist, but don't go so far that it gets ruled as foul play...The most important thing is how we deploy our forces and how the deities are hidden.”

Pulling herself together, Lady Hestia turns around to address the crowd. The commander of the operation is on the wooden box behind her, staring down at the parchment spread across the giant table.

—*Hestia Familia* stands at the head of the coalition, so naturally the brains of the operation has to be one of her followers.

There was more than a little resistance when the commander was first announced, but no one's complaining anymore.

She keeps staring at the map of the ruins with a tranquil expression that's like the calm water's surface—like a certain hero of her race.

Long before I arrived, Lilly was looking out over the battlefield, drawing up plans.

“...The deployment...will be left to all of you.”

After finally collecting her thoughts, or maybe because the time is up, Lilly looks up with a resolute look, having cast aside her doubts as everyone focuses on her. “If Lilly decides everyone’s positions, that makes the formation predictable. The enemy would be able to figure out where all of the deities are hidden. So Lilly would rather remove your hiding spots from the plans entirely.”

“...Yeah, got it, supporter.”

No one here thinks she’s shirking her responsibility. She clearly grasps the difference in ability between our side and our opponents’, and she’s taking the all-knowing deities into consideration as best she can.

Some unknown male god whistles while looking at the prum girl standing next to Lady Hestia.

“Everyone, let me say this first. The enemy’s commander is shrewd. He is far more capable than Lilly. If we prepare ten plans, he will crush nine of them and use the last one as a trap to corner us.”

Lilly looks out at the gathered adventurers as she speaks the unvarnished truth.

The enemy’s commander is almost guaranteed to be Hildsleif—the white elf I call my master, Hedin Selrand. I know painfully well just how intelligent, logical, and merciless he can be.

“It goes without saying, but we are facing einherjar. Even with the numbers we have, if we faced them head-on, they would crush us. That is our enemy. That is *Freya Familia*.”

As she watches Lilly share her analysis, her inner thoughts, and a moment of weakness, Ms. Daphne murmurs “Lilliluka...” in concern.

“Put bluntly, if the situation were any different, Lilly would want to run away right this instant.” For just a moment, Lilly averts her eyes, looking faint, almost ephemeral. “But—Lilly wants to win.”

Then the next moment, she looks up with a breathtakingly powerful light in her eyes.



sound like they're raring to go, too.

I can't help being stunned by the sudden frenzy that's consumed the camp... But that lasts only for a brief moment. I suddenly realize my cheeks are flushed, and I'm grinning from ear to ear.

"Looks like she stole your thunder, Mr. Supreme Commander," Ms. Nahza whispers teasingly.

"Ah-ha-ha...But still, I think this is fine."

I laugh awkwardly.

I'm not the right person to give everyone rousing encouragement. It might be a bit disgraceful as a captain, but...I'm happy. More than I can begin to put into words. I'm just so glad.

The person I consider my partner for my first party, the supporter who so hated adventurers—she's become someone who can move this many people's hearts and inspire their cheers.

—She really is just like Braver.

That's the first thought that comes to mind. Even though I'm hardly qualified to make that comparison, I'm still really proud of her.

"Ah, Mr. Bell..."

As the fired-up adventurers pour out of the tent, rushing to finish last-minute preparations, I walk over to Lilly and Goddess. With her first job over, Lilly heaves a big sigh and starts blushing when she sees me coming.

"You were amazing, Lilly. Really...It was like seeing Mr. Finn up there."

"It was all Mr. Finn's suggestion. 'Take advantage of your cute appearance and after acting sweet, fire them all up with a bold declaration.' ...He said that would be the best approach for adventurers." Lilly looks embarrassed after revealing her trick. "The name Braver does not fit how cunning he is."

For some reason, that's funny to me. But at the same time, Lilly seems larger now somehow.

...The way she is now, I think I can tell her...



There's something I've been thinking this whole time.

Not quite something out of place. It might even just be a wildly overblown idea. But there's a possibility that's been nagging at me.

"Hey, Lilly...could you hear me out?"

The white clouds sail eastward in the wide expanse of the blue sky.

All of the deities and other adventurers have left the central tent.

The only ones left are Welf, the rest of our familia, plus Ms. Aisha, and the people from the expedition. When she heard what I said, though, an uncomfortable look came over Lilly's face.

"Since you said it, I don't really want to doubt it, but...Lilly just cannot accept it. The possibility of something *like that* happening seems impossibly low."

"Yeah, that's fine. I think you're right. But could you just tuck the thought away in the back of your mind for me?"

When I ask that, Lilly smiles and nods.

Maybe I shouldn't have said something so strange and bothered the commander who's in charge of running the whole battle. Honestly that is exactly what I've been thinking and why I hadn't thought of saying it sooner.

But seeing how much she's grown, I decided to trust Lilly.

"Uh, ummm...could I talk to you...just a bit...?"

Ms. Cassandra clutches her rod as she nervously makes a request.

"What is it, Cassandra? This isn't about some new dream or something, is it?"

"Ugggh, Daph...even though you believed me in the lower levels...you still won't accept my dreams." She holds back the tears and fidgets awkwardly under Ms. Daphne's glare. As everyone looks at her, she starts getting nervous, so I lend her a hand.

"Umm, did you see another dream?"

"Y-yes..."

"What sort of dream was it?"

“I—I don’t really want to say...or rather, there’s no way to escape it...All sorts of things happened on twilight-colored ground...fairies and prums...and a boar and a chariot...”

That...actually makes me really want to know...

I start sweating when I see her turning pale and struggling to put what she saw into words. Her eyes dart back and forth before she finally seems to make up her mind.

“But a wind was blowing.”

When she says that, what I feel isn’t doubt but surprise.

“A...a wind...?”

“What’s that supposed to do?”

“I—I don’t know, but...still...a wind was blowing.”

Ms. Haruhime cocks her head, and Ms. Aisha is wearing a dubious look, but Ms. Cassandra just repeats herself.

I peer up at the sky as Ms. Daphne and the others sigh exasperatedly.

“The wind...huh...”

A light breeze pulls the clouds along the sunny sky.

“The bridge is lowering! The familia coalition is to deploy in its designated region!”

One hour before the start.

With the order of *Ganesha Familia*’s captain, Shakti, the bridge to the Orza ruins was opened up.

Seeing that, the coalition adventures on tenterhooks in the camp rushed out onto the bridge.

Dwarves with war hammers, elven mages with staves, smiths with magic swords, Berbera, who answered Aisha’s call, all rushed to the points Lilly had designated for them.

“What a surprise, seeing you here, Bors.”

“Who asked you, Cyclops! When the time comes, I can get off my ass! ...No, that’s a lie. The truth is even if it killed me, I didn’t want to come...!”

Bors was carrying a big ax as he started to fire back nonchalantly only to turn pale and almost start sniffing.

“I had planned to hide out in Rivira! But my stupid goddess joined up, wanting to put Freya in her place...! She dragged me all the way out here!”

“Ohhh? Is that really the only reason?”

“...Nope. If it wasn’t for Rabbit Foot and Gale Wind, I would have bitten the dust already. I’m payin’ my debt before the interest grows. That’s how we do it in Rivira.”

The head of Rivira, who got mixed up with Juggernaut along with Bell and Lyu, made his excuse.

The wide, stone bridge rumbled with the sound of hundreds of adventurers running in long strides across it.

“Ha-ha-ha! I see, I see. Then be sure to prove your manhood!”

“Damn straight! Now that I’m here, I’m gonna win and claim my share of the money and fame! And brag in front of all the cowards who didn’t come to fight!”

Tsubaki laughed at Bors’s desperate last shout, and then they reached the end of the bridge and headed off in different directions. The rest of the adventurers followed their leads and began to scatter.

There were no parting words. They knew the enemy they were facing wasn’t going to give them the time for heartfelt farewells.

“Ruins in the depths of the forest, basements—there are too many places to hide. I’m honestly a little worried about being found at all. Not being found during hide-and-seek is as lonely as the setting sun...”

The deities crossed the bridge as well and began looking for places to hide in their designated eastern half of the island.

“Quit the stupid crap and just hurry; pick your hiding spots already. It won’t be funny if you get caught before your children even get to do anything,”

Hephaistos chided Hestia, who puffed out her chest.

“I—I know! I was treated as a rare character up in the heavens, but I happened to be a master at hide-and-seek!”

“That’s the first I’m hearing about it...” Takemikazuchi glanced dubiously at her.

“Did you mean to say you couldn’t be found because you just holed up inside the temple?” Miach hit the nail on the head.

The coalition deities were moving with small security details while taking one another’s movements into consideration when deciding where to hide.

“All adventurers and deities have crossed the bridge!”

“All right, seal the bridge! Iltia, you all watch the area along the cliff like we planned!”

After the deities finished crossing the bridge, *Ganesha Familia* sealed the way again.

The Orza ruins were located on a giant island at the southern end of a caldera lake. It was impossible to reach it without crossing the bridge on its south side, and there were guards posted around the cliffs at regular intervals to prevent anyone trying to swim across. So even if outside forces or monsters appeared, they would have to get through *Ganesha Familia*’s Level 4 and Level 5 adventurers before making it to the ruins.

Their rock-solid perimeter wouldn’t come down until the flowers of the familias fighting in the great familia war were all accounted for.

“Lady Freya.”

Inside *Freya Familia*’s camp in the western ruins, their patron goddess was sitting on a stone throne as Ottar approached after finishing his preparations.

“What is it, Ottar?”

“The flower from the Guild has finally arrived. Please set it upon your chest.”

It was a small bunch of petals.

This was the flag and key to victory in this war game.

The flower she was presented was a lilac.

“...How ironic...”

Seeing the beautiful purple flower, Freya wore a smile that was almost self-deprecating.

“...? Is there a problem, Milady?”

“No, nothing.”

Freya took the flower and put it on her chest.

She wasn't wearing her usual dress that resembled a black flame.

She was wearing a stylish, modest white dress that resembled a bridal gown.

Adorned in formal white dress, the goddess made a break with all of her lingering attachment and announced to her boar attendant— “Win, Ottar.”

“Yes, Milady.”

“I will get my hands on Bell. This is the only way left.”

“...Yes, Milady.”

The warrior simply nodded. He would do that as many times as needed.

All for the sake of his master's divine will.

“ ... ”

A pair of coral-red eyes looked in their direction.

Hedin's long blond hair rustled in the wind as he peered at the goddess without any change of expression.

“What are you doing standing there, fly?”

“...Silence, ignorant cat. I was merely affirming my loyalty.”

Hedin turned away without even a glance at the cat wearing a silver pauldron on one shoulder with a hanging cape attached.

Turning away from his master, he adjusted the position of his glasses with one hand and addressed those below him.

“My loyalty is all for Milady. Followers of the sublime goddess, obey my voice

and become her arms and legs.”

“OO!!!”

As he stood atop the massive building, the einherjar roared back.

The battle cry shook the emerald-green lake, resounding like a horn blowing to announce the arrival of a battle.

“Keh...keh-keh...the time has come. Ragnarök...i-is beginning...”

The dark elf hugged his pitch-black sword in its scabbard as he muttered timidly.

“Is it time?”

“It is.”

“Now?”

“Now.”

The four prums lowered their sand-colored helms.

“Let’s get this over with. We’re not doing anything different this time. Run them down.”

The cat person readied his silver spear and clad himself in an unalloyed killing spirit.

“Once the battle has begun, you will support me, Rona, Ilda. If any barbarians appear that would harm the goddess, I will not be *accommodating*.”

““Yes, ma’am!””

The healers and herbalists known as the Andhrímnir snapped to attention in fear of the girl sitting atop the rubble with closed eyes.

“...Come, favored one of the goddess.”

The boaz warrior moved away from the goddess’s side, interested only in one single boy.

“It’s starting, Bell.”

“Yes...!”

Meanwhile—

The redheaded teen and white-haired boy clenched their fists as they heard the warrior cry echoing from the west.

*“And with that! The war game starts noooooooooooooooooooooow!!!”*

The two hands on the clock aligned pointing straight up.

In the distant Labyrinth City, the bell rang, signaling the beginning of the battle.

VS. *Freya Familia*. Hide-and-seek.

Victory condition: collect the divine flowers.

The curtain rose on the biggest war game in all of history.



The Orza ruins were certainly big enough to be compared to most cities.

The total area of the massive ruins in the middle of the caldera lake would contain almost an entire district of Orario. Meaning even with almost fifty familias milling around, there was plenty of room to spread out.

The one to offer this location as a possible battleground—when the Guild asked for suggestions—was *Hermes Familia*. A neutral faction whose patron god made a hobby of visiting various ruins, doing fieldwork, gathering information and treasures from the olden times. All sorts of artifacts from the ancient era had already been retrieved from Orza, and the ruins were an empty husk at this point, which was part of what made it ideal for the familia war.

Bathed in sunlight, there were half-broken pillars and walls forming forests of shadows. The statues of imaginary, unspeaking deities, missing parts of their faces and arms, watched on silently. The ruins of a great bath missing not only a roof but even walls had been filled with the rains stored for years on end and had been transformed into a large, tranquil pond.

Scattered here and there around the ruins were white and gray rune stones with spear-wielding gods and giant wolves engraved in them. The stones would have had cultural value, but they had been shattered by monsters long ago and

could no longer be deciphered. All the valuable burial goods in various graves had already been stolen by grave robbers.

It was a symbol of decline and destruction.

The sublime majesty of history and the emptiness of an age forgotten to the past.

The adventurers gave the scene one glance before immediately looking away. The city that had once boasted such glory only to fall to destruction was going to experience another massive change today.

“Any enemy presence?”

“None. They don’t seem to have approached the boundary between east and west yet.”

“Then report back to base! We’re moving!”

The adventurers of the coalition were constantly on the move.

*Modi Familia’s* elves, led by Luvis, and a party of beast people, and many, many more scouts flooded the ruins.

*“No enemies detected in the southeast, Lady Lilly. It appears they have not yet arrived at the eastern region.”*

“Roger, Ms. Mikoto. Leave the rest to the garrison and proceed west. From there, investigate the forward ruins. Were it Lilly, that would be the first place to assign troops.”

*“Understood!”*

Lilly gave her orders to the crystal that echoed with Mikoto’s voice.

Her location was approximately the center of the eastern region that was the coalition’s side of the island.

Lilly had set up a headquarters of sorts in the ruins of a marketplace surrounded by the bases of various broken columns.

There were crystals—oculi—spread across the stump-sized pillar bases.

By chance, it resembled the command base Hestia had set up on the roof of the tower during the skirmish in Daedalus. Spreading out a map of the ruins,



Lilly received reports from various units via the oculi and then proceeded to hand down clear and quick directions.

“L-Lilly...the reports have been coming nonstop for a while now. Are you going to be all right?”

“Everyone else is fighting the monster that is *Freya Familia*. Lilly can’t fight, so she can’t afford to complain over something like this!”

The headquarters guard Chigusa was taken aback by how many oculi were glowing with constant transmissions from adventurers, but Lilly didn’t even look up as she focused on making notes.

They were calling it headquarters, but the two of them were the only ones there.

The coalition needed to protect the deities hiding around the ruins, too, so they couldn’t afford to spare more manpower to protect Lilly. If she fell, the chain of command ran to Aisha, Daphne, and then Tsubaki. Losing her wouldn’t be the end for the coalition. The thing they most needed to avoid was failing to discover the enemy’s strategy because of an excess of caution.

With her silence, Lilly made it clear to Chigusa that they couldn’t afford to get their priorities flipped.

But—

*“Hey, prum! There aren’t any enemies in the central area! What now?!”*

*“Li’l E, there aren’t any enemies coming from the north. I don’t think we need to be worried about getting outflanked for now.”*

*“We’re at the front line and going to cross into enemy territory! Okay?!”*

*“Commander! Give us some orders!”*

*Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh! I can act tough all I want, but this is more information than I can handle!*

She had spoken as if it was her duty that she had to do, but what she really felt was different. Bors’s husky voice, Welf, an Amazon, an elf—all the oculi were blinking and making shrill sounds, and she wanted to just throw them away. She started feeling a powerful grudge against Braver for just smiling and

saying, “If it’s you, you’ll manage,” and ordering her to orchestrate and command a massive multifront operation.

*But I have to...! With as weak as I am, this is the only way to help Mr. Bell and everyone else! I can’t just rely on Ms. Daphne’s strength!*

Daphne, who had reached Level 3 with her exploits on the expedition, was a valuable fighter in the coalition.

They couldn’t afford to have her serving as Lilly’s lieutenant.

She had been entrusted with command, so she didn’t have the option to rely on anyone else.

She gave orders to all of the adventurers as her eyes grew bloodshot, sweat formed on her brow, and her face twisted so much Chigusa started getting scared. And then she scrawled the new information down on a parchment different from the map.

“Repeat, all scouts should prioritize finding the enemy forces and Lady Freya! Avoid combat if at all possible! Gathering information is the number one priority!”

Picking up a fist-sized oculus, she deftly issued critical commands.

Lilly was focusing heavily on offense in this battle.

As proof, the ratio between scouts out looking for the enemy and defenders was 70/30.

Put bluntly, they couldn’t defend against *Freya Familia*’s attack.

*Loki Familia*’s Finn made clear that a rush by Ottar, the first-tier adventurers, and the einherjar was something that absolutely had to be avoided. No matter how many adventurers banded together, they would be crushed by any serious attack.

That meant a defensive battle was as good as defeat.

Understanding that, the strongest defense Lilly had was offense—she wanted to seize the initiative and put the enemy off-balance to avoid her forces finding themselves on the back foot.

*I need more information! The enemy's approach! Positioning! Numbers! If Lady Freya has been carefully hidden, we'll have to calculate it backward from the enemy's deployment! No matter how many traps might be set along the way in that!*

She wouldn't say it out loud, but Lilly didn't mind if the scouts were wiped out.

Put another way, she was resolved that they couldn't do this without accepting some sacrifices. Because contact with the enemy was functionally equivalent to complete annihilation. Even between forces of equal level, the base strength of the alliance adventurers and *Freya Familia* was just too different.

If they were noticed, the scouts would absolutely get devastated.

One of the garrison squads in the central region of the ruins, away from the market— “Eh?! Then Lilly's treating all of the scouts like sacrificial pawns...?”

“More like whatever move she might make, it will end up that way. It would be the same even if I were commanding.”

Daphne covered one of her ears in annoyance as she explained the situation to Cassandra.

“To win in this game, both sides have to dedicate a massive portion of their forces to scouting. They have to find all of our deities in this enormous battlefield somehow, just like we have to find Lady Freya.”

She decided not to mention that *Freya Familia*, as long as they had enough time, had the option of just defeating every single follower on the coalition's side.

“If we know where their goddess is, then no matter how furious an attack they launch, we can counterattack. The more people they send out to attack us, the weaker the defenses around Lady Freya will become.”

“Ummm...so then since they have to find all of our deities to attack, they will have to spread out their forces...and that's the opening that Lilly is aiming for?”

“Exactly.”

Glancing at the oculus at her hip, Daphne was thinking about what Lilly was going through at the moment while carefully choosing her words.

“If she tries to limit the damage to her allies, we will never be able to win this fight.”

In one of the scouting squads—

“So we’re letting them graze our flesh to smash their bones?”

“Yes. That is what Lady Lilly said. Honestly, it’s not just us scouts, either; even Lord Takemikazuchi and the other deities are lures, too...”

Ouka and Mikoto were running through the woods as they spoke.

*“—And as our flesh is carved away, we will have no choice but to strike the opponent’s heart.”*

*“—No matter how much it might hurt.”*

Right after they found out the format of the war game, Lilly had said as much to *Hestia Familia*. She didn’t need Finn to tell her that much. She could recognize the flow of the strategic front.

Ouka looked amazed while Mikoto just looked forward.

“We must bring down Lady Freya before our last deity is defeated—even if we fall in the process. That is what is expected of us.”

“—Of course, some of us are more important than the others when it comes to the master plan.”

Tsubaki chuckled at Aisha’s comment.

“In that sense, she’s nasty like Finn. Or I guess I should say, determined.”

There was a limit to the number of oculi available. It was clear that Lilly had been selective about which groups were given a communication device: Aisha and Tsubaki’s group, Daphne and Cassandra’s, Mikoto’s, and so on.

Their force was large enough to be worthy of being called a coalition. Whether intentionally or unconsciously, there were sure to be adventurers who didn’t listen to Lilly’s orders. The most obvious were members of familias in the Goddess Alliance who were after Freya for personal reasons.

Taking that into consideration, Lilly assigned the oculi to people she could trust, particularly people like Aisha and Tsubaki, who could be trump cards or might have a key role in the chain of command.

“So we command—well, watch all the squadrons we can see and report back to the shrimp. Basically like field officers.”

“I’m not great at directing others. I’ll handle the vanguard and you can take care of the troublesome stuff, Antianeira!”

“There’s just two of us Level Fives here, so you’re gonna have to do some work too, Cyclops...You’re a familia captain, aren’t you?”

With a little sigh at Tsubaki’s irresponsibility, she looked back at the smiths ready to deploy behind them. After confirming the readiness of the artillery unit armed with a massive loadout of magic swords, Aisha spoke into the oculus in her hands.

“There are no movements in the center of the battlefield, Shrimp...It’s quiet. Too quiet...”

*No unit has noticed any enemy movements...?*

In headquarters.

After taking Aisha’s report, she slipped into deep thought as Chigusa watched.

*Are they waiting to see our positioning? ...But even knowing that, we have no choice but to start feeling them out!*

Feeling something off, Lilly gave another round of orders for the scouts to push into the enemy’s territory.

*We pilfered as many oculi as we could from Fels, so we should have a clear advantage in communication! Meanwhile, the farther Freya Familia gets from Mr. Hedin, the more their communication will suffer! That applies even to first-tier adventurers!*

That would create an opening that they would surely be able to strike at. That was what she believed. Or rather, that was what she was praying would be true.

Even if they were using magic-stone signal lights, they wouldn’t be able to maintain full reciprocal communication, and in some areas of the island, they

wouldn't even be able to communicate at all. For hide-and-seek, the oculi were so valuable they were practically cheating.

*Taken to the extreme, this hide-and-seek game is a war for information! No matter how many local losses might pile up, winning on the **real** battlefield is all that is needed!*

The farther *Freya Familia*'s members got from Hedin, even if they were acting on their own judgment, the more people the coalition would have to rely on. If they could use the time that the sacrificial units managed to gain to array their forces and attack Freya's hiding place, they had a chance of winning.

*Depending on how they're positioned, we can deploy our artillery units armed with Crozzo magic swords, Ms. Haruhime, and our trump card, Mr. Bell. There won't be any holding back! Time is against us! We have to steal Lady Freya's flower before we lose all forty-six of our deities...!*

She clenched her hands as a disgusting sweat formed in her palms.

As Daphne and the others understood, her strategy would require massive sacrifices.

But even so, Lilly needed a precise understanding of the state of the board.

Which squares had pawns; where was the queen hiding?

Where was the rook that could smash through everything?

Where were the black and white bishops that could unleash a long-range barrage?

Where were the knights that could disrupt everything with their characteristic movement and teamwork?

Where was the strongest king, the queen's ultimate defense?

She needed to know all of that as soon as possible to really grasp the board. If the scouts were taken out, so long as they left the information they had gleaned behind, that was worth a mountain of gold. It could even be the key to victory.

So Lilly assumed the role of a ruthless commander, quashing the guilt in her heart.

When it came to a commander's callousness, she couldn't see herself being a match for Finn, no matter how much she might grow.

*"All clear in the north."*

*"No enemies sighted in the south."*

*"We're pushing forward!"*

As the unease welled inside her, the battlefield was quiet.

At the very least, it couldn't be anything other than quiet on the coalition's side.

To find Freya as soon as possible or to catch any enemy squads aiming for their deities, they had an enormous number of scouts out patrolling or else lying in wait in each sector.

When would the silence break?

As commander of the whole operation, Lilly felt her heart grow louder and louder as time passed.

So she waited attentively.

For the moment her allies got some information.

For the moment they were sacrificed.

Waited, waited, and waited. Until—

*".....Gh?"*

That was when she noticed something was off.

It was *too* quiet.

Far too quiet.

*"L-Lilliluka Erde...we've pushed halfway into the enemy's territory."*

As if confirming her suspicion, she received a stunning report from Luvis.

*Half of the enemy's territory.*

In other words, the coalition had a dragnet spread across three quarters of the entire island.

And yet they not only hadn't met the enemy, they hadn't even seen any trace of them.

It was strange. Disturbingly so.

Had the enemy even deployed any adventurers on the island?

Did Hedin really understand they were supposed to be playing hide-and-seek?

*"Lady Lilly...w-we cannot find the enemy..."*

*"Hey, Li'l E, what's going on?! There hasn't been a single fight yet!"*

*"There's no way they're just hiding. We have a net up using Asfi's magic items. Even if they went invisible and erased any scents, there is still no way they could have slipped through undetected."*

Lilly's thoughts wavered from doubt and unease as the oculi lit up with a symphony of bewildered voices.

*No enemies? That's impossible.*

But even if it should have been impossible, the current situation was running counter to all of Lilly's predictions. The possibility that they were somehow slipping through using incredible stealth could be ruled out, based on Aisha's report.

*What is this feeling? This cold feeling.*

*Am I already caught in the enemy's trap?*

Countless worries flitted through her mind, eating away at her heart, but she just barely managed to swallow them down with an iron will.

*The island's western side...are they inviting us into their territory? But what are they planning? Are they trying to stretch our lines to separate us from our deities? Or is there some trap set to annihilate our forces in the field? Or...?*

Her hand trembled as she scrawled notes on the parchment, updating the information, and then tried to read the board in front of her.

Her brain proposed countless possibilities, and she examined every factor she could think of as the doubt seared her mind.

Should they keep pushing west? Or should she stop the scouts for the time



being?

But what would change by waiting?

Without information, they couldn't launch a preemptive attack or respond to an enemy assault.

Lilly's thoughts stalled in the face of an intractable situation—just then.

*"E-enemy sighted! Enemy sighted!!!"*

*"!!!"*

One of the oculi lit up.

The voice was Luvis.

*Modi Familia's* four-man cell had pushed the farthest forward.

Lilly shuddered, and she leaped to grab the crystal.

*"Where?!"*

*"In the west! The westernmost edge of the island!"*

*—The western edge?!"*

Lilly couldn't believe her ears.

*"How many?! In what scale?!"*

She restrained the urge to ask him if he was sure, but she reflexively raised her voice in a shout, forgetting that they were trying to hide themselves.

But there was no reply, no matter how long she waited.

Instead, she just heard a gasp through the crystal.

As she grew more baffled, Luvis finally spoke.

*"...All of them..."*

*"...What?"*

The elf's voice quavered as time froze for the prum.

*"All of Freya Familia."*



“...What the hell is this...”

Mord froze at the scene unfolding before him.

“Oy, what...”

“Wh-what are they...?”

Welf holding his magic sword and Dormul holding his shield both murmured in shock.

“...Are they crazy...?”

Bors broke into a cold sweat as his uncovered right eye widened.

“They deployed their entire force on the *western edge of the island*?! Is this a joke?!”

And Daphne, who had theory-crafted dozens of anticipated enemy deployments herself, couldn’t hide her shock.

*Freya Familia* had set up their headquarters at the edge of the precipitous cliff on the westernmost edge of the island, with the waters of the lake at their back.

It was an area where the ruins of temples littered the ground. There were 150 warriors. They were all wearing the familia honors attire, their uniform beneath their armor, arrayed like an iron wall.

They showed no sign of moving, and there was no trace of any spells being readied. None of them so much as twitched.

They had arrayed themselves on the western edge of the ruins like an army prepared to defend their goddess’s castle to the last.

“Where’s Lady Freya?! Is she really in the enemy’s camp?!”

In the ruins of a market to the east, Lilly screamed into an oculus as her disbelief showed on her face.

Shock and agitation, confusion and irritation, and more than anything, apprehension.

She was praying that this was just a trap or an empty nest as she repeatedly sought confirmation.

“W-wait! .....No, she’s there! Goddess Freya is inside the camp, too! Inside the temple farthest to the back of the camp with its back to the lake!”

In the southwest of the ruins, Luvis had climbed to the top of the tallest tower on the island and shouted back into the oculus, unable to keep his calm.

Squinting his eyes that were fittingly sharp for an elven archer, he could see through the broken roof of the largest temple—the house of the gods—and inside, he spotted the goddess herself.

She was sitting on a throne that had been prepared for her, not doing anything. Just casually propping her head up. She suddenly looked up, her silver eyes clearly looking back at him. Luvis turned deathly pale.

“Is there a detachment?! Is this massive fortress a decoy while the monsters hit us in the back?!”

“...No, they’re all there. At the very least, their core force is inside the camp. Vana Freya, Bringar, Dáinsleif, Hildsleif...and Ottar, too.”

A giant mausoleum sat in the center of the western ruins.

Aisha had moved to the roof of this mausoleum and couldn’t hide her shock. Tsubaki looked like she had just swallowed a bitter pill as she stared at the details of *Freya Familia*’s formation.

“That’s why we couldn’t find any trace of them...”

From the start of the war game to now, they hadn’t moved one step from their base.

It wasn’t just Tsubaki and Aisha, either. More and more reports came in from the scouts who had pushed into the western half of the ruins only to be left speechless.

“A bear-in-the-hole castle...?”

Mikoto was bewildered as she looked at it.

The enemy formation she saw reminded her of a strategy used in a Far Eastern board game. A castle-like formation that surrounded and protected the king with every single piece on the board.

“They’re literally fighting with their back against the water...!”

Far away from them on the eastern end of the island, Takemikazuchi groaned as he saw the scene reflected in the oculus that Hestia was holding.

The enemy had cut off their own retreat and forsaken all tricks. They intended to face down the coalition head-on.

Meanwhile, inside Orario...

“Eh? Eh? What do you mean?!”

“They’re ignoring the rules...!”

Tiona couldn’t follow what was happening, and Aiz gasped.

“So that is what he went with.”

Meanwhile, in the same room, Finn narrowed his blue eyes.

“Lord Hermes, this is...!”

“It’s not like they’ve broken any rules. They just ignored the standard approach for the game.”

As confusion spread across the city, inside Babel, Hermes calmly explained for Asfi, having seen through the strategy.

“It’s a plan we can’t possibly copy. Something only they could pull off...”

Back on the island, Hestia tensed as she clenched the oculus in her right hand.

“Gh...! Master...!”

And the news also reached Bell, who was acting alone to avoid being noticed by the enemy or his allies. His mind turned to the person who had surely planned this.

“Why should we go along with pointless rules?”

As the surprise of their deployment rumbled across the battlefield and over the mountains into Orario itself, Hedin haughtily spoke from his place in *Freya Familia*’s formation.

Standing atop the temple where he could look out at all of his forces, he adjusted his glasses with his right hand.

“Inside the range of my voice, the warriors are as freely controlled as my arms and legs. This method is the most efficient. This formation is *the strongest*.”

His beautiful golden hair blew in the breeze as he made his declaration.

The silent second-tier and lower einherjar went without saying, but even the first-tier adventurers, while they scoffed some and looked unhappy about it, gave their silent assent, too.

“Respond quickly. You have only two options.”

Hedin’s strategy was exceedingly simple.

He concentrated his forces into a single point—abandoning any thoughts of hiding or seeking.

As Hestia realized, this was a strategy that was possible only because it was them.

If the coalition tried it, they would just be trampled by overwhelming force.

It was because they could bring a heavy-weight prizefighter’s force to bear that they could turn hide-and-seek into a battle royale.

*He’s a demon...*

Lilly turned pale.

Leaving the market in the east with Chigusa, she rushed to the massive mausoleum where Aisha’s group was waiting. When she saw the enemy layout for herself, she felt her heart freeze.

She had been too naive.

Even though Finn had shared so much information with her, she hadn’t been cognizant enough of it. Of just how much Hedin Selrand loathed inefficiency and just how ruthless an elf he was. She was reminded again of just how far beyond her he was as a commander.

*He has no intention of any dialogue with me. He isn’t going to play chess! He doesn’t care about turn order or rules, he’s just telling me to draw my sword!*

He had as good as stabbed a knife down into the board and was telling her to pick it up and fight him.

Ordinarily, anyone would get caught up in the concept of hide-and-seek.

Where to search.

Where to hide their deity.

Where to spring ambushes.

How to build a strategy to account for all of the possible choices.

But Hedin had transformed what was a troublesome competition for his side into a more convenient contest of strength. By not scattering his forces, he had completely nullified Lilly's plan to sacrifice numbers to create an opening. There wouldn't be any great search for deities. From the moment *Freya Familia* chose a fortress strategy, the coalition was left with only two options.

Charge into it or not.

*He's...a demon...!*

The thought echoed in her head as her mind raced.

It was the worst sort of choice.

There was no other option. At the very least, Lilly couldn't think of another one.

She recognized she was being forced to choose between two options that were both convenient for the enemy.

*"Hey, what do we do, commander?!"*

She could hear Mord's and Bors's nervous voices ringing from the oculus.

She couldn't choose a prolonged fight.

*Freya Familia's* entire force was gathered in one place. And their fundamental strength was on a different level anyway. Sporadic attacks would just be driven back, and the casualties on the coalition's side would only grow. And if they just kept staring at each other, they would be hit by a crushing attack the moment their focus wavered.

They were far weaker in strength, so at a fundamental level, they couldn't afford to be put on the defensive. And when it came to the question of provisions, the coalition, with its significant numerical advantage, was going to

run out of supplies first.

A drawn-out fight was meaningless. Meaningless!

They had no path forward that didn't involve a decisive battle then and there, just like the enemy wanted!!!

"Lilly..."

"Lady Lilly..."

Chigusa, who was her guard, and Haruhime's squad, which had come running over to the mausoleum, both noticed the heavy sweat on Lilly's brow.

*Not good, I can't let them see me sweat. If they do, there will be no calming the panic.*

Aisha and Tsubaki, who had waited for her to arrive, and Daphne as well, all watched quietly as she stood frozen in a maze of shock, not saying a word.

A head-on fight with *Freya Familia* was hopeless, but did they have any choice but to face it?

Only a failure of a commander would make that choice. Was there not any other path? What would Finn say if he were there?

Would she really have to send her comrades into what was certain defeat...?

Just as she was about to be crushed by the weight of her responsibility—

"Lilly."

The white oculus hanging at her hip lit up.

"Let's do it."

The boy's voice was trembling. He was struggling with his own fear, too.

*Let's face it together.* Saying that, he was putting his hand on Lilly's back as she stood frozen.

That was enough to shine a light in the dark maze she had been trapped in.

Her swirling thoughts suddenly cleared, and her racing heart calmed as she made her decision.

She clenched her hand into a fist.

“—Gather all the scattered forces.”

There was still sweat on her cheeks as she glared out at the enemy.

“Quickly re-form the squadrons. Mr. Luvis and the rest of the scouts will act as a raiding force.”

“U-understood!”

“Ms. Haruhime, go inside the building here and put on a reverse veil. Do not allow the enemy or anyone in the city to notice you, and hang back close behind Ms. Aisha’s unit. Be prepared to cast your Level Boost whenever needed.”

“Y-yes!”

Surprised by the sudden change in Lilly’s demeanor, Daphne started giving directions to Cassandra and her squad while Haruhime and her Berbera bodyguards went down into the mausoleum for a moment.

“Ms. Chigusa, Lilly doesn’t need a guard anymore. Link up with Mr. Ouka’s unit and support them.”

“Lilly...yes!”

“Ms. Aisha, Ms. Tsubaki, do we know the location of the enemy’s healers?”

“...No, we can’t see them from here.”

“They’re being kept hidden. We won’t know until the fighting starts.”

“Then prioritize finding them once the fighting starts. Lilly will search as best she can, too. Breaking the enemy’s lifeline will be crucial...Prepare magic items for Mr. Luvis’s raiders, too.”

Chigusa nodded forcefully, and Aisha and Tsubaki smiled as they responded.

Hearing their commander’s unfaltering voice and seeing the commanding and courageous prum’s figure, the coalition forces escaped their moment of turmoil.

Mord and the others seeing and hearing her through the oculi, and the adventurers around her, obeyed her instructions without question.

“Other than the raiders, re-form everyone into three divisions. Ms. Tsubaki



will command the center, Ms. Aisha the left wing, and Ms. Daphne and Mr. Bors the right wing. Distribute the magic swords throughout all three divisions!”

Morale quickly recovered from its low ebb as Lilly fired off orders.

It was safe to say that the advantage Lilly had tried to gain from the oculi—communication speed and fidelity—had basically been erased.

If *Freya Familia* was entirely within earshot and well inside Hedin’s line of sight, then his orders could reach every warrior. Even if there was some lag, it would just be a rounding error. Their army was firmly under control, and they would be able to make up for the communication speed of the oculi.

Because of that, the only clear advantage the coalition had left was the massive number of Crozzo magic swords they had prepared. They would have to cut through the strongest deployment using just the powerful magic swords that *Hephaistos Familia* had provided and that Welf had mass-produced instead of sleeping the past two weeks.

*Don’t cower! You’re standing here for Mr. Bell’s sake!*

*We’ll break them.*

*We have to break through.*

*Remember the grief and anger!*

*Shred the enemy formation to get revenge on Freya and her followers for charming them and making them hurt Bell!*

*I am this party’s commander!*

Spurring herself on, Lilly drew the knife, stabbed into the board, and pointed it at the devilish elf across from her.

“We’ll do it...!”

“Passing marks.”

After receiving confirmation of the coalition’s redeployment, that was Hedin’s evaluation of Lilly’s resolution.

If she had turned tail and run just because the enemy was *Freya Familia*, or if she had trifled with some pointless stratagem, Hedin had intended to decimate

the coalition in the blink of an eye.

“I despise incompetence. But I will acknowledge the weak who strive for competence.”

An ordinary commander would have cowered at the difference in strength between the two sides and not have drawn the blade he had thrust into the board.

On that point, the prum girl who had received Finn’s shared wisdom was passable in the same way as Bell.

“If it’s you, then I can cross swords as I planned.”

Having silently acknowledged the girl, Hedin gave his order.

“Have them prepare to charge. Do not defend. Only attack.”

“Sir!”

As the one adventurer rushed off, the white elf carefully observed the coalition’s movements.



“This is like a dream. Lining up head-on across from *Freya Familia*...the *Freya Familia*...”

“I know what you mean...a nightmare, right?”

Following Lilly’s orders, a large number of adventurers started moving together.

*Ogma Familia*’s Gyle’s face drained of color, and Nahza grinned ever so slightly as she responded.

“I joined because I thought I would be able to fight, too, since they aren’t monsters, but this...this is scary. Really scary.”

Her right arm, her *airgetlám* was trembling.

The opponent was the strongest enemy imaginable. Difficult enough to make her think a monster rex would be better to face. Even Nahza, who always had an indifferent look on her face, couldn’t avoid being scared.

“...I’m not going to run. I’m doing this to help Bell. I won’t hurt him again.”

But even so, she wouldn’t say she regretted it.

She was another adventurer who had committed to fight for Bell’s sake, just like Lilly. The smile on her face captivated Gyle, and steeling his resolve, he smiled back.

“...Same here.”

They didn’t say anything else as they both headed to where they had been deployed.

Gyle with his ax to the raid squad, Nahza with her bow and arrows to the left wing.

“The center should be heavy on walls and focused on defense; the wings are mobility oriented. The dwarf-only *Magni Familia* needs to head to the center.”

Lilly was standing atop the massive mausoleum, having sent everyone else away as she continued to give orders into her oculi.

She wasn’t dividing the adventurers by level. It was natural that keeping members of the same familia together would allow them to work together more easily. Other than people like Nahza, who didn’t feel any restraint—she was mostly filling the divisions with whole familias.

The center had Tsubaki, Welf, *Magni Familia*, and many of *Hephaistos Familia*’s high smiths.

The right wing had Daphne, the healer Cassandra, Ouka and Chigusa, and the Rivira outlaws led by Bors.

The left wing was Aisha and the ex-*Ishtar Familia* Amazons. Because they had notably fewer magic swords than the other two divisions, Mikoto with her gravity magic had also been deployed there. Behind the three divisions were the mages and Haruhime’s reserves.

“Sh-should we change our positions, too?”

“Don’t. It would be pointless for us to do that. All we can do now is keep hidden and watch.”

Inside a certain ruin, Hestia was restlessly staring at the oculus connected to Lilly while Hephaistos just crossed her arms and leaned against the wall with her eyes closed.

The eastern half of the island where the coalition deities were hidden was devoid of adventurers save the deities' bodyguards. The battlefield was farther west than the dividing line in the middle of the island. The coalition set up its headquarters at the big mausoleum in the center of the western region, *Freya Familia* was deployed to protect the house of the gods on the western edge of the island, and the two sides were carefully watching each other.

*"...This is the first time I've seen such a quiet war game."*

In the city far away, Ibly, who was always so loud and abrasive, murmured to himself in a voice barely picked up by the magic-stone megaphone.

He was right, it was quiet.

The only action was the redeployment of the coalition's forces.

Other than that, there were no swords clanging and no battle cries raised.

The deities on the island and the residents of Orario gulped as they continued to watch.

But finally, the silence was broken.

*"...It's time. Advance..."*

Having finished their preparations, Lilly gave the order through the oculus in her hand.

As both camps watched, the crumbling ruins turned into a battlefield strewn with a sea of rocks. There was no one to stop what had once been blocks filled with buildings from being turned into a vacant lot. The three large divisions nervously began to advance in a line toward *Freya Familia* in the distance.

*"Hold."*

Meanwhile *Freya Familia* was unmoving.

At Hedin's cool command, they maintained their positions, not budging at all. Some had thrust their spears' pommels into the ground like gatekeepers, while

others just glared with their swords still sheathed.

“Keep advancing. Don’t stop...”

Lilly repeated the order as the divisions unconsciously slowed beneath the glare of so many eyes.

What she wanted was to get into effective range.

To reach the range where the magic swords could spit flames that would scorch the enemy's forces.

It felt like her life was being shaved away with each step the coalition force took, but with a will of steel, she had them continue the advance.

“Forward...”

The coalition pressed onward.

“Hold.”

The einherjar didn't move.

“Forward...”

A bead of sweat trickled down the prum girl's cheek.

“Hold.”

The elven marshal's expression was unmoving.

“Forward...”

The sweat dripped from her chin.

“Hold.”

The marshal's eyes wouldn't misjudge the distance.

“Forward!”

The next instant.

“Now.”

[illegible]

The battle cry marked the start of combat.

“They’re coming!”

Bors shouted as the einherjar rushed forward in the blink of an eye like a raging tide.

“Ready the magic swords!”

In the center, Tsubaki’s shout reinforced the adventurers who had been badly shaken.

“Not yet! Don’t fire yet!”

On the left wing, Aisha watched for the moment to unleash her fusillade.

“The enemy isn’t using any magic yet! They aren’t in range, so calm down!”

On the right wing, Daphne called out her analysis.

In the era of gods, when opposing armies met, it was standard to see volleys of spells instead of arrows. But there was no magic yet. Meaning the enemy had grown tired of being cautious of the Crozzo magic swords.

That was how it looked to their eyes.

“Ugh...?!”

But the danger they posed was all too real. Weapons brandished with malice, bestial roars, and a speed that could only be achieved by those with terrifying statuses. A disjointed charge poured forth like a torrent, as if they had no intention of cooperating with one another. *Freya Familia*’s followers, who built their individual strength by clashing daily in Folkvangr, didn’t pay any attention to their comrades. They only looked to cut through the coalition lines and scatter the enemy by their individual strength alone.

It was a charge that brought to mind a twisted mountain of swords, and Ouka and Chigusa holding their magic swords were overwhelmed by the vision of it.

“H-hold! Hold! Don’t get ahead of yourselves!”

Bors’s voice shuddered as he desperately tried to control himself. An eerie coldness gripped his heart.

They were pushing, closing in, stampeding. Faced with the strongest warriors

who would trample them the moment they closed the distance, they felt their mouths go dry, but even so, they endured the moment that seemed to last an eternity.

“Hold, hold! Nowwwwwwww!!!”

And Bors roared, his veins swelling and spittle flying.

“Fire!!!!!!”

Tsubaki gave the signal as well.

The next instant.

“Kazukiiiiiiiiiiii!!!”

Flames erupted from countless magic swords.

Explosive flames, crackling blizzards, thunderclaps, gales all erupted into the advancing force.

“—————GH?!”

The rainbow flashes of artillery intertwined, creating a glorious torrent of magic power, slamming straight into the onrushing *Freya Familia* and drowning out their cries.

Explosions and shock waves shattered the paving stones and shook the entire ruins.

Explosion after explosion. The concentrated fire of the entire force set off a chain of detonations, and a flood of destruction followed in the blink of an eye.

“Giii?!”

“Geeeh!”

“Gaaaaaa?!”

The unwavering cannonade sent a beast person running at the head tumbling, followed by a human, and then a half-elf.

As the overwhelming and awful contradiction of a rapid-firing artillery barrage landed all around them, *Freya Familia* couldn't escape. Even famous second-tier adventurers fell victim to the magic swords and were swallowed up in the flash

of light.

All of the Crozzo magic swords could output a power that far exceeded even long-cast magic by an advanced mage. Adding *Hephaistos Familia's* magic swords to the mix, the firepower swelled to excessive proportions. It was a pure show of force capable of pacifying even some of the lower floors of the Dungeon.

Seeing the wide swath of destruction they had cut before them, even the adventurers using the magic swords shuddered.

But that shock was immediately replaced by terror.

“—Ooooooooooooooooooooo!!!”

They didn't fall.

Even with their skin burning, even after losing their weapons.

Even if they might lose an arm, even if they might have a leg blown off out from under them.

The followers of the goddess of beauty couldn't be stopped.

“Ahhh?!”

Forgetting that she was a healer, Cassandra clutched her staff and screamed.

A human kept charging despite being covered in terrible burns.

She saw a dwarf with icicles still hanging from their body, and an Amazon holding her arm that had been cut off by a blade of wind. No matter how many times they were blown back, they kept getting up, even walking over their fallen allies as they charged at the coalition.

“Einherjar!” Daphne shouted.

The army charging through scenes of hell were the epitome of berserkers.

*Freya Familia* didn't fear death. They had experienced it countless times in the daily fighting in Folkvangr, dying and then reviving. There was fear. Pain, too. But the goddess's formidable followers forced all of that into submission with their unwavering fealty and pure, honed fighting instinct.

That was why they couldn't be stopped. That was why they continued to run



beneath the furious assault of the magic swords, still seeking battle. That was why they were einherjar. It was a feat only possible because they were *Freya Familia*—and after witnessing that live demonstration of why they were often called the strongest familia, the coalition adventurers grew pale and started to recoil in fear.

“D-don’t cower! Crush them! Fire! Fire! Fire!!!”

Bors roared in fear, but it was effective. It was a reckless command, but because it was simple, the adventurers reflexively obeyed. They fired. And fired. And fired again. Swinging down and swinging up, pleading for the fearless warriors to be destroyed, they grew desperate as they continued to unleash their barrage. Cracks formed in the blades, but when they shattered, one of the adventurers waiting in the reserve would step forward, and a new magic sword would roar to life.

Even without the divine mirrors, what sounded like a volcanic eruption echoed over the mountains between Orza and Orario and could be heard by residents all around the city.

“Whoa...that’s crazy...”

“This is just a straight up war.”

“But this is the only way Hestia’s side can win.”

“So this is why that idiot Ares is so obsessed with Crozzo...”

While the people shuddered, the deities in Babel had their own thoughts.

The thunder echoed without end, shaking the entirety of the Beor mountain range. As the mountains were shaken to their foundations, the monsters living there fell into a panic and scattered, trying to get as far away from the giant caldera as they could. And just as the number of remaining Crozzo magic swords started to reach the halfway mark of their reserves...

The massive cloud of dust, sparks, ice crystals, wind currents crackling with electricity, and multicolored magic particles quietly cleared. Just beyond, countless einherjar lay collapsed on the battlefield where even the paved stones had been obliterated.

“...Hah, ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-hahhh! We did it! Serves you right, you *Freya Familia* bastards!”

After almost a minute of silence, when he saw that the enemy wasn't getting up, Bors started laughing maniacally.

“Screw einherjar! We've got Crozzo's magic swords!”

His laughter spread, and the other adventurers, who were all breathing heavily, started cheering, too. Even if the einherjar didn't fear death, there was no one who could escape it. None except for deusdea. Because of that, the limit would come. The sheer strength of Crozzo's magic swords just happened to be greater than their fortitude this time.

The coalition roared with excitement.

Even if the enemy's first-tier adventurers hadn't been part of the charge, they had taken down a large portion of the enemy's fighting strength. It was safe to call this initial skirmish a complete victory. Holding up the hilts of broken swords, the members of every familia cheered.

All save a few who grimaced.

Even if there hadn't been any other way, Daphne and Aisha and the likes of them didn't feel great about a sheer burst of firepower that couldn't really be called a strategy.

“Rakia's mythic invincibility...dammit!”

In particular, Welf, who had mass-produced the Crozzo magic swords, had a bitter look on his face. His homeland of Rakia had fought many countries using countless Crozzo magic swords, turning everywhere they reached into a wasteland. They had earned the resentment of most elves and brought the sort of destruction despised by spirits. And the scene before them was no different from the works of Rakia that gave birth to their legend of invincibility. Or at least that was how it looked to him.

“I just ended up doing the exact same thing as them...!”

Following the same path that he had so despised, Welf was struck by intense self-loathing.

But.

There was a misunderstanding in his reaction. He didn't see the whole picture.

He was too naive.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha...huh?"

Bors's loud laughter suddenly stopped. His good eye was focused on the members of *Freya Familia* collapsed on the broken, shattered ground. And countless golden particles the color of twilight.

*"—My name is Gold. Arm of the goddess who vows immortality."*

And then a sweet voice reached their ears.

*"Thrice burned, ever pierced. Hell of flaming spears, yet light is born laying death low."*

It was coming from the enemy's formation. *They* appeared, standing within the clearing cloud of dust in the distance.

"The Andhrímnir?!"

Lilly was the first to realize they were there. Her hazel eyes picked out the group wearing white robes like a band of priestesses. She shouted, realizing she had been slow to notice them because the fusillade unleashed by the magic swords had created a curtain of smoke covering the battlefield.

*"Rejoice, be merry, go wild. My body is gold. Source of renewing light, bring endless conflict here."*

Her long, faintly crimson hair was tied back in two tails. She wore a white pinafore over a red nurse's dress and token armor. The one difference between Heith Velvet and the other healers and herbalists was she held a rod embossed with gold decorations as she wove her spell.

A giant golden magic circle appeared in the center of the battlefield strewn with piles of corpses. Time froze for the coalition forces. They simply couldn't believe the scale of the magic.

*"Zeo Gullveig."*



The einherjar had covered half the distance in the initial charge, and now their sprint was carrying them the rest of the way as they unleashed their swords, spears, axes, and hammers.

The coalition's shield wall immediately braced themselves as the lines crashed.

"Guooooooooooooo?!"

Dormul shouted in shock the moment the enemy's charge landed.

His shield caved in and the heavily armored dwarf forced back.

"I—I can't hold them?!"

The struggle only lasted a moment.

*Magni Familia's* defenses were shredded in the blink of an eye, and they were all flung clear.

"Gaaah! Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah?!"

After their shield wall collapsed, the adventurers' screams were inevitably going to follow. Under the brutal assault of the einherjar, their armor shattered, their weapons snapped in half, and before long, blood was splattering everywhere. And from there, it was a familiar scene. The unforgiving math of superior levels and statuses utterly crushed the lower-level adventurers.

A human cut down, a beast person run through, an elf hit by a thrown sword, Amazons thrown back all at once. After Dormul and the other dwarves had been sent flying, dozens of pairs of sabbaton forced their way through the hole. Panic and confusion consumed the coalition, and the line began to buckle.

"Dammit!"

Aisha's voice roared as she swung her sword in a one-sided melee.

The right wing, the left wing, and the center had all been shattered the instant they made contact. The front line was crumbling, leaving the mages and Haruhime's reserves in the rear very exposed.

There were some who unleashed their Crozzo magic swords even if it meant hitting allies, but it was no use. Even if some of them were blown away, *Freya*

*Familia* wouldn't stop. Ignoring their comrades that fell, the einherjar thought of nothing besides slashing into the enemy. The most nightmarish part of it was that even if three coalition adventurers banded together to attack, they would be taken out by just a single einherjar.

In the age of gods, quality outweighed quantity.

Just one higher-level adventurer could easily dominate a hundred nobodies. In a fight against opponents who were superior even in techniques and tactics, the coalition's adventurers were helpless.

"They're too strong...?! Even the weakest of them is too much! All of them are like this!"

Mikoto couldn't do anything but focus on evasion as she endured attacks from all sides.

She was forced to use shinobi skills to survive rather than fight head-on like a samurai. Smoke bombs, grenades, and her kunai Shakuya—she was going through weapons and items at a rate that was going to leave her empty-handed soon.

She finally managed to cut down a single person, but she could tell from the response that it was a mere Level 1 adventurer. As she stood still, struck by that merciless realization, she was nearly decapitated and was forced to continue fighting.

The strongest familia.

They should have been aware of the weight of that reputation already, but Mikoto shuddered as the full force of it hit her.

"Ms. Haruhime! Cast your level boost on Ms. Aisha, Ms. Mikoto, Ms. Daphne, Mr. Bors, and Mr. Welf!"

*"R-right away!"*

With the coalition being shredded, Lilly wasn't going to stand idly by.

She was deploying five tails. With her level up, Haruhime could now handle six, but the Mind cost grew with each tail. When she used five during the expedition, she had almost slipped into Mind Down, but Lilly couldn't worry

about that now. To hold the line, she had to use their cheat card without holding back.

*“—Mages! Commence your attack! Serket Familia through Ratri Familia, focus fire on the center of the line!”*

This was also the time for Command Call.

The effect of the skill she had gained with her level-up allowed her words to travel farther when she shouted above a certain volume.

So if she raised her voice, it was possible for her orders to reach people’s ears even on the most intense battlefields. This was how she was sending orders to those who hadn’t received an oculus.

Standing on the roof of the giant mausoleum looking out at all of the divisions fighting, Lilly used her skill and the oculi to send out more orders.

But she couldn’t erase the concern she was feeling.

*“They got us to waste our magic swords!”*

The initial charge of the einherjar had seemed reckless, but the true purpose was to bait the coalition into using their Crozzo magic swords.

Hedin hadn’t underestimated the threat that Welf and *Hephaistos Familia*’s magic swords posed. So he had provoked them to waste a large portion of their limited resources on a failed attack that was completely negated by the Andhrímnir. The fierce counterattack was just a cherry on top.

*The Andhrímnir...just as Mr. Finn said, they are far too dangerous!*

Even though the coalition should have completely won the initial skirmish, they—or rather a single girl—had completely erased all their progress.

An army that didn’t fear death and a healing ability that was at worst second in all of Orario. It was a tactic that required both of those factors to work—in other words, it was something that only *Freya Familia* could pull off.

*“But now we know where they are...!”*

Defeating the Andhrímnir was their highest priority, up there with taking out the enemy’s first-tier adventurers.

In exchange for a board state that she desperately wanted to pretend didn't exist, Lilly reached her hand to a silent oculus to silence Heith and the healers at any cost.

"Mr. Luvis, Mr. Mord! Please!"

In an instant, the troops she had set as an ambush sent up a wild cry.

"All right!"

"Let's do this!"

Far to the northwest and away from the main melee, right on the flank of where the Andhrímnir were deployed, Mord's unit cast off their robes, becoming visible again.

Fels's reverse veils.

Lilly had distributed them to the raiders and kept them hidden. She had set an ambush by having them circle around the main battlefield with the express intent of sending them after the Andhrímnir.

"We were waiting for you to show up!"

They had carefully, carefully approached the enemy while avoiding detection, and now they broke into a sprint not to let their opportunity go to waste.

Because the coalition's line had been shattered, almost all of the enemies were pouring into the front lines. And because they were pushed up far from the back lines, too, there was no one protecting the Andhrímnir.

Mord licked his lips at the sight of the isolated healers as he swung his magic sword.

"Eat this!!!!"

Mord, Gyle, and Scott each unleashed a line of flame that swallowed up the Andhrímnir.

"Keep going!"

The fierce, rough men fired off their Crozzo magic swords over and over to destroy the beautiful girls.

Not knowing that the deities watching the mirrors in Orario were booing



them, Mord and friends continued their barrage without letting up.

“H-hey! Aren’t you overdoing it a bit?!”

“There’s no such thing as overdoing it with *Freya Familia*! The whole reason we’re doing this is you said you couldn’t use these swords! Just sit back and watch!”

The elf Luvis spoke out against the merciless onslaught, but Mord wasn’t going to listen.

He was on fire. Not out of heroism but from a powerful desire to help one boy.

To pay back all of his debts, the ruffian rampaged.

“We’re gonna help Bell Cranell!”

Urged on by the feeling of omnipotence that Crozzo magic swords tended to give people, they kept summoning more explosions.

Soon, their attacks created a sea of flames, scorching the Andhrímnir.

Because it had been a complete surprise attack, they hadn’t had time to avoid it. And there was no way to defend against so much firepower.

Cracks ran down the swords’ blades as they reached their limit. Mord and his friends were breathing raggedly as they finally stopped their barrage.

“Hah...hah...no matter how much you can heal, you can’t use magic while getting scorched! Just curl up and die!”

Mord flashed a proud grin as he leaned the sword on his shoulder.

There wasn’t a single person left standing in the sea of flames.

The crackling of the flames filled the air.

The einherjar fighting on the front lines were unconcerned. Naturally.

Even Hedin standing at the rear watched in silence. Because there was no need for him to do anything.

Finally, Mord, along with Luvis and the rest of the raiders, grimaced at the unpleasant smell of burned flesh and covered his face with his burly arm.

“Maybe we did overdo it a little...?”

“Of course there would be some lying in wait to aim for us.”

Mord froze when he heard a voice coming from the flames.

“But what of it?”

Slowly, a single girl stood up from the burning ground where she had been lying.

“What?!”

Mord and Luvis couldn’t believe their eyes.

The girl was burning.

Her armor had been completely destroyed, and her clothes had burned away. Her snow-white skin was bright red.

Standing in the sea of flames, tormented by the hellfire, her body was becoming covered in grotesque burns.

And she was regenerating.

“*Ars Gullveig*. Unfortunately, I already activated my magic.”

A golden light drove away the fierce flames lapping at her skin.

A pattern of light like a compressed magic circle appeared on the surface of her skin.

“M-Mord! She’s just like...?!”

“The eighteenth floor?!”

Gyle and Scott grew pale as they remember the Black Goliath Bell and the others had fought.

The scene before their eyes was eerily similar to the nightmare of a monster rex whose regeneration outpaced the damage a whole mass of mages could deal.

Auto-heal.

A regeneration that continuously healed damage for a set period of time.

Heith's magic had been cast on herself and the rest of the Andhrímnir before they were attacked—before they had set foot on the battlefield even.

One by one, the healers and herbalists stood up after her.

“N-no way...?!”

They were like phoenixes rising anew from the ashes. It was like watching the dead come back to life after cremation. Their scorched skin regained its vibrant luster beneath the golden motes of light. The bands holding Heith's hair back burned away, but even her long, singed hair soon recovered.

The weakening flames were no match for the auto-healing, and now the Andhrímnir were not even being burned. All the crackling inferno could do was shame the girls by burning away their clothes.

What remaining battle gear they had slowly disappeared as shoulders, stomachs, supple hips and thighs, and even the well-formed lower halves of breasts were revealed.

But even so, the adventurers had no time to be embarrassed or aroused.

Holding her rod in one hand, Heith walking forward through the flames was too divine.

“Y-you monsters!”

“Mord?! Stop!”

Faced with a rare magic that only members of *Freya Familia* knew about, Mord went into a frenzy.

Not listening as Gyle tried to stop him, he slashed at Heith as she stepped from the flames.

“If I hit you with this!”

Hefting his magic sword, he intended to hit her directly with a blazing attack.

“Hideous.”

But the rod in her hand flashed with a terrible speed.

“—Gh?!”

A vertical swing from high overhead slammed into Mord like a war hammer.

His face dropped to the broken stones, and Mord was immediately knocked unconscious.

“Odious. Unsightly. Far too unpleasant.”

Gyle and Scot, and Luvis’s elves went silent as the girl stomped down on the magic sword at her feet.

“I cannot understand how the likes of garbage such as you could dare bare their fangs at the goddess. How can you dare to corrupt her authority...You cannot be sane!”

Looking up and brushing aside the curtain of hair covering her face, she revealed her bright, crimson eyes burning with wrath.

“Have some shame, you fiends! Impure wretches who reject the goddess’s divine will!”

“I will not let your vulgar gazes or your foul stench reach her. Not one drop of your disgusting saliva will fall in her presence!”

There wasn’t a trace of her usual warmth in her voice as her face twisted into a portrait of rage. If Bell had been there, he would have been taken aback by such a dramatic transformation, but it wasn’t anything special. Just like her comrade and the rest of the familia, she worshiped the goddess of beauty.

Saved by the goddess, she faithfully offered up awe and love that didn’t pale in comparison to Hörn’s.

“Everything is for Lady Freya’s sake—be gone adventurers!”

In a rage, she revealed her murderous intent and willingness to fight.

What began then was annihilation.

““Gaaaaaaaaaaaaah?!””

“Guuuuh?!”

Gyle and Scott were swatted aside by her rod before they could use their magic swords. And the arrow Luvis immediately loosed may have pierced Heith’s shoulder, but it did nothing else. After she pulled it out, it didn’t even

leave a wound behind, and right after Luvis's face twisted, his consciousness was stolen by the swing of a rod. The remaining members of *Modi Familia* were sent to the ground with all the might that the healer Heith could muster.



\*

A dedicated healer had just torn through Level 2 and 3 upper-class adventurers.

Seeing that strange scene on the mirrors in Orario, the most speechless were not the normal people or even the adventurers.

It was other healers.

“Heith Velvet...”

Among the *Dian Cecht Familia*, healers who had avoided participating in the war game, Amid Teasanare, Dea Saint, narrowed her eyes in awe.

Amid, who was famed as the greatest healer in the city, and Heith.

For a while, they had been known as Orario’s two great healers: the silver saint and the golden witch.

The main difference between the two who dominated the first and second slots on the list of best healers was above all healing range.

Amid could use healing magic with a broad area of effect, too, but Heith had been forged in the fires of Folkvangr and was on a completely different level. Amid would win out in raw healing output, but Heith likely took the flag when it came to sustained output.

And the other decisive difference was pure combat ability.

While Amid’s melee ability was in the realm of normal healers, Heith could obliterate second-tier adventurers all by herself.

“Her background as a healer is just too different...”

That was what the rumors that had reached the saint said, but they were unmistakably steeped in the truth.

The girl had originally endured the baptism in Folkvangr as an einherjar, but—just like a certain abandoned kitten—she recognized her limits as a warrior and despaired. However, with unwavering devotion to the goddess, she changed class to a healer and discovered a latent talent that eventually bloomed.

Her current status was Level 4.

Her second name was Vana Mardel.

In consideration of the golden gleam of her magic, her unbreakable determination, and her undying life force, the deities hailed her as a true Valkyrie.

“A unique follower born from the harsh environment of *Freya Familia*...Just like the first-tier adventurers, if the coalition can’t do something about her, they have no chance of victory...”

As the fellow healers in her own familia around her shuddered, the saint murmured those words with absolute confidence.

“Not good! At this rate...!”

Daphne was fully aware of that, too.

“Lilliluka, are there any more raiders you can send in?!”

*“I’m doing it already! But Vana Mardel’s healing ability is too great! She won’t go down!”*

In a gap between the onrushing einherjar, Daphne could just barely see another unit attacking, but the Andhrímnir didn’t fall. The other healers and herbalists’ work was abnormal, and as the raiders struggled to take them down, the enemy mages in the rear shredded them.

She could feel Lilly’s impatience through the oculus painfully well.

“If we don’t stop them, no matter how much we fight, everything will fall apart...”

The enemy she had just managed to put down would be revived again if Heith and the healers started moving. With the help of a level boost, she had finally taken down one. To have them come back would be a nightmare.

She couldn’t blame Lilly for incompetence in letting the ambush fail, though. The moment they had a hidden trump card like auto-heal, the most effective strategy of crushing the healers before they could activate their healing was out the window. If Daphne were in Lilly’s place, she would have flipped the board and rampaged by now.

*“Can the Andhrímnir be targeted from the right wing?!”*



“Don’t ask the impossible...! We’ve got our hands full just holding the line!”

She was in the middle of the scramble herself while commanding the right wing, catching a spear swing with her Fencer Laureate. The level boost particles around her body were shimmering as if groaning from the exertion, but she somehow managed to defeat the attack. She had no time even to catch her breath.

*“Soul Light!”*

But even so, they were still okay.

They were centered around Cassandra while Ouka, Chigusa, and Bors in particular were fighting with wild desperation.

Just like Daphne, Cassandra had managed to reach Level 3 on the expedition, and she was making full use of her healing magic, helping adventurers on the verge of collapsing recover their footing countless times.

Even as they struggled to deal with the enemy’s healers, they were being saved by their own. But unfortunately, in a battle of healers, the coalition had no hope of victory.

“The enemy’s base! If their mages move up, it will be bad! It’s over if they get in range! We have to take out the Andhrímnir before—”

Daphne was fighting without even the chance to wipe the sweat away as she pleaded into the oculus.

*“Gh.”*

Lilly’s breath caught like she was being strangled.

Daphne immediately realized why.

*“\_\_\_\_\_”*

Time froze for her as she saw it.

Near the back of the enemy base in the distance, there were countless spears of lightning targeting them.

“You seem to have gotten the wrong impression...This is well within my range.”

The color drained from Daphne's face. The voice of the elf she should not possibly have been able to hear echoed in her ears as she realized her mistake. At the start of the fighting, it had seemed like the enemy had decided to ignore the threat of the magic swords. That they had mistaken their range. That was how it had looked to Daphne and the rest of the coalition.

But they were wrong. The enemy—Hedin—had not attacked simply to get them to cough up their Crozzo magic swords. The main battlefield, the newly formed Folkvangr—it had been within that first-tier adventurer's range from the very start.

“Checkmate—*Caurus Hildir*.”

He unleashed his spell.

The bolts of lightning lit up the faces of the adventurers frozen in disbelief, arcing downward and pouring onto the battlefield.

“Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

The countless lightning strikes landing from above hit like bombs. They were an evil battalion of lightning soldiers raining chaos on the battlefield. One bolt pierced a human running away in terror, while another blew away a chunk of the ground and a beast person with it. An Amazon who tried to cover a comrade was electrocuted. And all this happened without touching a single member of *Freya Familia*.

The lightning strike had been ultra-precise. Hedin had a clear and accurate grasp of everything happening on the battlefield, and he took extra care to hit only enemy adventurers. He also destroyed many of the remaining magic swords.

“Gh—Protect Cassandra!”

“Uooooooooooooooooo?!”

Daphne screamed as the rain of lightning fell on her.

Giving up on maintaining the line, she chose to prioritize maintaining their party's lifeline instead. Responding immediately, Ouka raised his great shield while Bors and the rest of the residents of Rivira rushed over with steely

resolve. Pushed to the ground by Chigusa, Cassandra watched as countless lightning bolts crashed into dozens of shields.

Fallen pillars and rubble scattered in every direction, kicking up stone fragments as the battlefield was miserably split in two.

“The absurd number of magic swords has been whittled down. It’s time.”

As the crackle of electricity and a massive cloud of dust rose over the battlefield, the lone white elf who had created the current situation delivered his cold announcement.

The countdown to the true rampage had begun.

“It’s time now you beasts. Go.”



“That powerful a barrage, from that far away? He’s crazy as ever...!”

Tione spat in irritation as she watched the battle on the mirror.

The magic attack had traveled more than five hundred meders, and it had hit so hard that more than two hundred adventurers had gone down. His hail of lightning that managed to blanket most of the battle line inspired cold shivers even in the members of *Loki Familia*.

“Hildsleif Hedin Selrand...the range of his magic is the greatest of anyone in Orario.”

“Eh?! But, but, you’re stronger, aren’t you, Riveria?! You’re called the city’s strongest mage, right?!”

“Depending on what exactly you mean by that, the answer changes. Taken to an extreme, if it comes down to super-long-distance spell slinging or hand-to-hand combat, I would lose to Hedin.”

Tiona resolutely tried to argue against Riveria’s cold analysis, but the high elf fixed her hair as she calmly answered.

Nine Hell Riveria Ljos Alf was superior in raw power and in the number of options she could call upon for offense, defense, and support. In terms of the standard back line mage role, her power and abilities far outstripped anyone

else.

But Hedin was a magic swordsman who had also mastered close-range combat.

Their fields of expertise were too different to really compare.

He was an expert in melee and faster spells using super-short casts. He was the optimal build for an advance support class. But on top of that, as demonstrated so powerfully in this war game, he also had absurd firepower and range.

*“He once defeated a massive army using only magic.”*

Whether it was true or not, rumors about him to that effect had spread from the sand sea. If there was a single way to describe him, it would be an artillery swordsman.

“But more than anything else, the total amount of his Mind...Hedin’s ability to sustain his magic is demonstrably greater than my own.”

Riveria acknowledged that when it came to total amount of Mind with which to use magic, she lost out to him.

The fact that he hadn’t even broken a sweat after launching a hail of magic that covered an entire massive force lent her statement even more credence.

As the Amazon sisters made clear their disapproval, Riveria’s eyes narrowed.

“And the other elf of the black and white knights is coming.”

Her jade eyes sternly looked deep into the mirror as the cloud of dust started to clear.



In the center...

“Haaaaaaa!”

“Gua?!”

A sharp slash tore into *Freya Familia*.

While most of the coalition’s adventurers were being pushed back, Tsubaki

Collbrande wiped the blood and dirt from her face as she continued fighting a frenzied, ferocious struggle.

“Don’t hesitate! If three isn’t enough, swarm one of theirs with five of ours! If five isn’t enough, then make it ten! As long as you can hold out, I’ll cut them all down!”

The Level 5 master smith’s encouragement raised the morale of all the adventurers around her.

Since she couldn’t really exert command, Tsubaki transformed into a warrior who cut down enemy after enemy. Even as imposing as the einherjar were, they still fell to their knees in the face of her first-tier strength.

She had already cut down dozens of enemies, and countless warriors in armor were lying all around her.

*This is bad! The flow of enemies isn’t slowing! I’ve put down dozens of them, but they still keep coming!*

Sweat dripped down her cheek.

She muttered to herself, calling them war demons—

*And as long as those healers are around, the ones sleeping on the ground will keep coming back...! This is worse than the Dungeon!*

“This is why *Freya Familia* is so hard to deal with.”

They had been holding out with the support of *Hephaistos Familia*’s magic swords, but Hedin’s barrage earlier had taken out a lot of them. With the cloud of dust obstructing his vision now, he wasn’t going to fire another volley yet, but once it cleared, if another round came, the coalition’s morale would collapse. And Tsubaki would probably reach her limit, too.

*If it comes to that, then there’s nothing left but a suicide charge against the Andhrímnir before the cloud clears.*

Just as she was about to make her decision—

“Guaaaaaa?!”

There was a sudden sound.

Not the cry of someone who had been cut down, but a hair-raising slash.

“\_\_\_\_\_”

Tsubaki’s ears didn’t deceive her.

It was a sound that could have only come from a master of the blade.

“—Hegni!”

She spun around to the west.

The dark elf was standing in the back of the fading cloud.

“H-Hegni Ragnar?!”

“A first-tier adventurer!”

“H-he actually came...!”

Tsubaki’s shout primed the adventurers and their shouts and screams started soon filled the air.

Silver, almost purplish hair and dark skin marked Hegni as a dark elf. His pitch-black sword was drenched in blood, and his sharp gaze roved as if searching for prey to chase down. He had a cold smile on his lips, as if he wished to enjoy a banquet of blood.

Facing off against a first-tier adventurer. That was enough to make any adventurer despair, and so the alliance stood on wobbly feet.

Meanwhile, Hegni...

*Arghhhh...so many people I don’t know are looking at meeeee...!*

He was panicking.

Just complete and utter panic.

His dangerous gaze flitted this way and that to avoid meeting anyone’s gaze, and the cold smile was just a spasm that had frozen his face in a strange way. The useless elf who was the ultimate introvert and utterly lacking in communication ability felt his heart racing as he transformed into a monster.

*N-not good...I—I have to do this right...! I am Lady Freya’s follower and technically an amazing, first-tier adventurer in Orario...! If people make fun of*

*me, that would be a humiliation for the familia and Milady...!*

Her forcefully twisted his lips upward, spasming cheek and all, forcing himself to wear a sinister smirk.

“...Keh-keh-keh, coming face to face with my abyss here is your fated end...the ruins of the ancients mean nothing and sing of crimson...my blade lusts for sacrifice. And thus...d-d-d-d-die.”

Twitching beneath the gaze of so many people, Hegni tried to convey the idea “I will handle this division and exterminate you all. The initial skirmish is over. Prepare yourselves.”

Meanwhile, the reaction from the coalition was tragic.

“Uwah, what’s with him?!”

“I thought he was going to say something, but holy crap he’s weird!”

“Oy, what’s with him?! What’s he saying?!”

“For an elf, his face looks like a damn ogre!”

“Apologize! Apologize to all elves!”

““““How the hell is someone like him a first-tier adventurer?!““““

*Argh, I want to die.*

A gleaming droplet shimmered at the corner of the dark elf’s eye.

*Stop, please stop, don’t look at me like that! I can’t, I can’t, I can’t, I can’t! Why, why am I a first-tier adventurer. I don’t need the attention, just let me fade into the darkness and fight. Just let me become darkness, I want to be an embodiment of shadow. I can’t. Make it stop. I just want to be alone in the forest. Argh, make it stop. I just want Lady Freya to lay her head on my lap—no, the other way around.*

Hegni tried his best.

He really tried his best, enduring the pressure of everyone’s eyes and his own imagined victimization. But the moment he realized that his silly performance was being broadcast on the mirrors in Orario, his mental balance collapsed, and catastrophe struck. The shame and embarrassment seared into his mind, and

he executed a pathetic retreat.

*I can't...I should just use it...*

In other words, he used his magic.

*“Draw thine sword, King of the fiendish blades.”*

He held his sword up to the heavens with both hands, like a knight—or as if trying to hide his face.

At the same time, a black magic circle unfurled around his feet.

“Ghh?! Stop his cast!”

Tsubaki screamed without concern for dignity.

She was taken aback by his comic performance that had lasted just a brief moment, but the moment she heard him begin casting a spell, the biggest alarm bells started ringing in her head.

She knew the reason for Hegni’s second name, and she worriedly drew the magic shortsword at her waist.

*“Sacrifice reason and offer up blood. Slaughter all until the feast is finished.”*

It was a short cast. Even if she slashed at him now, it would be too late.

Seeing her reaction, the other adventurers and smiths followed her lead.

Countless magic swords and dozens and dozens of arrows all flew at Hegni as he stood there with his eyes closed.

*“Dáinsleif.”*

There was an explosion as he said the name of the spell.

The magic circle seemed to gleam, and then it was swallowed up in a storm of attacks.

It was a firepower that even a first-tier adventurer couldn’t just take head-on. Tsubaki and the others covered their faces and gulped. The flames danced.



And

“Gyaaaaaaaaa?!”

The sound flashed.

Tsubaki’s ears shuddered at the sound of a sublime rampage bereft of all mercy and restraint.

“\_\_\_\_\_”

Tsubaki was speechless as a spray of blood rose from one end of her formation.

Three upper-class adventurers fell to the ground.

Standing beside them was a single dark elf who seemed to be wearing the smoke like armor.

“—Rebels who refuse to heed the goddess’s will. I shall accept thy penitence in spilled blood.”

His voice changed completely. The timidity from just moments earlier was completely gone. His gaze was unyielding and cruel. He had activated the magic that he must never be allowed to cast.

“Dáinsleif...! Hegni’s personality-altering magic!”

That was the ritual and the key that allowed the dark elf who was so scared of what other people thought to transform into a warrior.

It was different from a standard offensive magic or enchantment. It was a rare magic that affected the mental state of the user. The effect was a literal transformation of both his personality and his speech. This magic was the reason why when Bell was attacked by Hegni during the Goddess Festival, he wondered if he was really the same person.

But it didn’t affect his status in any way. It only affected his personality, so among the wide range of magics, it could even be said to be rather plain.

“He switched to the other Hegni...!”

But in specializing so completely in its mental effects, it surpassed mere autosuggestion and transcended into self-reconstruction. What happened could

be called the realizing of his ideal form. A magic to summon the strongest version of himself created because he hated himself so.

“I grow tired of your faces. I shall grant you mercy. Draw your swords. I shall allow you to fall as warriors.”

A bead of sweat dripped down Tsubaki’s cheek.

During Orario’s dark ages, Hegni had used that magic and felled over a thousand followers of the Evils in a single battle. She knew painfully well just how powerful it could be.

Absorbing the light of the shattering magic circle, Hegni’s faintly purple eyes glimmered bewitchingly as he made his declaration.

“Be gone, rabble. Worms who reject the goddess’s love are not worthy of life.”

The dark elf’s body suddenly sank slightly. And then he sprinted. So fast that it almost looked like teleportation. The moment it seemed a black shadow had passed, a full squadron had been cut down.

“Aaa...aaaah?!”

It was a single slash.

The curse sword he wielded extended the range of his slashes, allowing him to cut down many adventurers in a single flash.

A rondo of destruction and despair began. There was no hesitation. No mercy. The limiter holding back his full power had been completely removed by his magic, and he transformed into the manifestation of a blade that made even his ultimate rival Hedin call him *“utter garbage, but the strongest melee fighter amongst all elves.”*

As if wielding a magical sword that couldn’t return to its sheath without bringing countless deaths, he set off a storm of blood.

Adventurers were cut down. High smiths and their magic swords were broken, too.

His slash didn’t discriminate. Not between men and women and not between races. Like a god, it was impartial. It merely handed down death sentences like a

tyrant.

“It is not my job to announce injustice. All who content themselves in weakness are at fault.”

Hegni’s second name, Dáinsleif, came from the name of his magic.

It was the highest praise from the fanatical and passionate fans he had among the city’s deities, acknowledging his transformation from a dark knight to a true tyrant of darkness.

Ten people, then another ten. He was laying adventurers low at a blistering pace. Merciless and cruel, the dark elf had transformed into a murderous, rampaging lord of war. Standing a short distance from him, Tsubaki spoke up.

“...L’il E, I need that level boost or whatever.”

“Eh?”

“Hurry!”

“*R-right away!*”

Borrowing Welf’s name for her, she called to the prum girl through the oculus.

It sounded like someone rushed over, and then suddenly a powerful magic power rose up behind her, and a golden pillar of light that looked almost like a hammer appeared overhead.

“*Uchide no Kozuchi!*”

Haruhime’s level boost seeped into her body, and her status shifted from Level 5 to Level 6.

However, even so, that didn’t put her at ease. Every adventurer other than her had fallen, leaving a crimson ring of blood around them.

“So you are the one with the qualification to battle me, Cyclops.”

“Aye, ominous blade. I will snap your magic sword.”

Hegni watched her with eyes like a sharpened blade.

She muttered to herself, “You’re no elf, you’re an evil spirit.”

With that, her expression changed, and she readied her Benishigure.

The breeze rustled the dark elf's cloak. The central division was almost obliterated as the lord of war and the smith faced off against each other.

"Your fate is decided. This blade shall be your gravestone."

Suddenly, the two of them disappeared, and there was a furious clash of blades.



"Tsubaki!"

Hearing the furious clash of swords behind him, Welf raised his voice.

It was a dance of blades that a Level 2 like Welf couldn't really even see. The pitch-black blade and long sword crashed and slid, and then sparks flew, etching an arc letting him know there had been a slash there.

Welf gasped at the afterimages created by a battle between two Level 6s, and then clenched his fist.

*Even if it's a duel, I have to help! Li'l E told me about Dáinsleif's magic! My Will-o-Wisp can work...!*

Lilly had shared a lot of the information Finn gave her about *Freya Familia*, and Hegni's magic was of course part of that. To maintain his other self, he was constantly using Mind, and his body was flooded with magic power. The mysterious light in his eyes and the purple gleam rising off his body like a heat haze were effects of that.

And if there were magic particles, then there was a spark that would ignite Welf's anti-magic fire. Dáinsleif, which had to be constantly active like an enchantment, was a perfect target for Welf.

*"Blasphemous Burn!"*

Holding his magic sword in his left hand, he thrust out his right hand.

He poured in Mind, pushing the range to the limit.

That way, no matter how fast Hegni was, no matter whether he could even

see Hegni or not, the dark elf's entire area of movement would be covered.

Targeting the entire ring where the elf was locking blades with Tsubaki, he shouted the ultra-short cast.

*"Will-o-Wi—"*

But

THUD.

There was a sound like lightly tapping a wheel with a staff.

Like a light cat kicking off the ground and into a sprint.

Just before his anti-magic fire activated, the sound of instantaneous acceleration rattled in Welf's ears.

In the blink of an eye.

A chunk of flesh went flying from Welf's right shoulder.

"\_\_\_\_\_"

A super-speed line cut into view, stealing away a part of his shoulder.

Time seemed to slow for Welf, and the moment he recognized he was being attacked, blood poured from the opening and a scream erupted from his throat.

"Guaaa?!"

His eyes were bloodshot, and a terrible sweat erupted on his face as his right arm hung limply like a broken doll.

"Don't try anything strange, small fry."

There was a voice to his right.

Turning around, he saw him.

"You're..."

Vana Freya Allen Fromel.

Having easily interrupted Welf's magic, he was standing there leisurely with silver spear in hand.

Silver armor on his right shoulder and an emerald pelisse hanging from it. His only other armor was silver greaves below his knees. An armor that didn't account for the possibility of stray hits, because he was the fastest in all of Orario.

Welf's face twisted from the searing pain as a cold sweat formed. He had no

way of knowing, but Vana Freya only wore his pelisse when he intended to fight all-out.

“Though I intended to finish you in the first hit like last time.”

“Gh...?!”

“You pulled back at the last second? Learned your lesson about being run down by me already?”

That was right.

Welf had been attacked by Allen during the Goddess Festival. The moment he heard the chilling sound of that instantaneous acceleration, he reflexively started moving. That split-second defensive instinct had kept him from being instantly knocked out of the fight.

“But it doesn’t make a difference. Just a waste of my time. Get lost.”

“Gh...screw you!”

He erupted at those eyes, looking at him not even as an enemy, but just a bump in the ground slowing the chariot’s rush. But right when he brushed off the searing pain and howled, the next instant, Allen suddenly bore down on him.

What began was a tremendous barrage of spear thrusts.

“Gah, Gh, uggggh...?!”

His shout was nothing more than spirit. It was almost a miracle his limp right arm was even still attached. All he could do was slip into a crouch and use Shikou-Kazuki, his magic sword, as a shield. But doing that, he was like a child unable to fully hide behind a tree trunk. Beneath the protection of the longsword’s flat blade, he endured a barrage of thrusts.

But he was gradually being carved away. His clothes, his skin, his whole body.

He was fading. Losing blood, the strength to hold on, the will to counterattack.

He continued yelping as his left hand holding the magic sword and his shoulder pushing against the flat of the blade were both being pierced by

attacks that evaded his defense. His flesh was tearing, and his bones were cracking and shattering as his entire body was broken down. The torrent of thrusts pushed Welf to the brink in no time at all.

*...It isn't breaking...*

Meanwhile, Allen looked quizzically at the scene.

No matter how many times it wavered from his thrusts, Welf's magic sword didn't break. An ordinary magic sword was fundamentally a consumable item. In its endurance, it was an eloquent expression of its maker's persistence.

Allen's sharp gaze shifted, acknowledging the bump in the road to be a real, if minor, obstruction.

"What is that magic sword?"

"...Just a little something...that I made...!"

Welf didn't boast at Allen's question. He called the blade he had forged with his pride as a blacksmith just a stepping stone to greater heights.

"If you can't even break a simple magic sword, you must not be much, either...!"

And he maintained a false bravado.

He was bleeding, and his body was battered, but he still forced himself to grin. It was a provocation, an arrogant blacksmith laughing off a first-tier adventurer. But Allen was untroubled.

"I'll acknowledge your skill as a blacksmith."

Indeed, for the first time, he actually recognized Welf's capabilities.

"But *only* that."

"\_\_\_\_\_"

And then he made Welf his next victim.

Kicking against the stone pavement, he accelerated. There was no way a mere blacksmith would be able to react in time. Welf had turtled behind his sword, but in an instant, Allen appeared at his side, unleashing a kick.



“Gah?!”

And that was all it took to finish Welf.

The rising right leg landed straight in Welf’s side, knocking him off the ground.

For a brief moment, he experienced a floating sensation, and then a spinning left kick slammed home. Welf’s collar bone cracked, and he went flying, rolling across the cobblestones, where he collapsed miserably.

With the last bit of his stubbornness, he managed to hold on to his sword, which grew red with the blood dripping from his hand.

“I told you before, small fry. Run back to your workshop and go play with your toys.”

Allen had said the same contemptuous line the first time they had met. That was the day that *Ishtar Familia* had been destroyed.

“Get it through your head. Smiths aren’t ever going to be any use on a battlefield, loser.”

What Welf had accomplished wasn’t even one minute of slowing Allen down.

Leaving the blacksmith quietly slumped down on the ground, Allen began to perform his mission.

“Aaah?! Uwaaaaaaaaaaa?!”

“I...I can’t hit him...nothing works?!”

At Hedin’s direction, the chariot had joined the fight along with Hegni. Seeing that, the coalition adventurers screamed in despair. Their formation had been completely shredded. Even Lilly grew pale while watching from atop the mausoleum.

On the left wing...

“Lady Aisha! The center!”

“Dammit...! Those monsters!”

As the cloud of dust finally faded, Mikoto and Aisha could see that Hegni and Allen had obliterated the center of the battle line.

In textbook fashion, the coalition's battle line was deepest at the center. The Level 5 Tsubaki had been sent there, and the bulk of their fighting adventurers and smiths had been set there, too. But now it was almost completely wiped out.

Seeing the adventurers being picked off without even being able to run away, it was clearly no longer even a battle.

"What should we do?! Lady Lilly has her hands full directing the center and right wing! At this rate...!"

"Gh...reinforce the center! If Cyclops goes down, that really will be the end! We need to get Haruhime and go help that dwarf—"

That was Aisha's agonizing choice.

The left wing was currently in a massive free-for-all. They would have to set a rear guard to move over the center, and that rear guard was sure to be lost in the process. Aisha swallowed the guilt and was about to order the Berbera putting up a valiant fight around her to die for them.

"Ugh?!"

"Gyaaaaaa?!"

But her resolve amounted to nothing.

"...?! Sharay! Eliza!"

The Berbera who were behind her were suddenly taken down by *four* people at once.

Spinning around in shock with Mikoto, Aisha saw four figures.

"A useless plan."

"Not like you could do it."

"Obviously."

"Since we're here."

Sand-colored helmets and matching armor.

A long spear, a great hammer, a great ax, and a greatsword. Four weapons for

four prums.

“The Gulliver brothers...! Bringar!”

Mikoto shuddered as the three younger brothers’ lips curled into sneers.

“Eternal Shadow and Antianeira.”

“This is a rehash of the Goddess Festival.”

“You’re going to fall to us again?”

And finally, the eldest brother, Alfrik, announced with compassion—

“Fall here, for Lady Freya’s sake.”

“Ghhh! Don’t look down on me!”

Aisha’s furious shout broke the damn, and the bloodied Amazons around her all raised a battle cry. With magic sword flames, with the light of level boost, with gravity waves, they struggled against the four prums and the einherjar with every bit of their strength.

Disadvantage piled upon disadvantage.

Looking up at the mirror above Main Street, one of the residents, an adventurer—or maybe a deity—said it. Or maybe they all were thinking it.

“This is just a one-sided stomp.”



“The strongest melee elf Hegni in the center, the cat with his extreme mobility to crush those shooting from a distance, sealing the relatively intact left wing with the prum brothers’ coordination...a textbook response without anything interesting to it at all.”

Hedin sounded bored as he looked out at the battle’s development from his perch atop their side’s temple.

If he hadn’t held back the first-tier adventurers at the start and just sent them out to begin with, it would probably have ended up basically the same.

But Hedin made absolutely sure.

As the person charged with conducting *Freya Familia's* operations, he understood just how lethal it would be for a first-tier adventurer to fall. If Hegni or Allen were to be taken down, even einherjar who didn't fear death would still lose their composure, and it would lead to a loss of morale unlike any other. And the opposing general was surely aiming for that.

Because of that, he had played his trump cards only after the singular element of uncertainty—Crozzo's magic swords—had been sufficiently dealt with. From Lilly's or Daphne's perspective, it was a despair-inducing ruthlessness.

"The coalition's main fighting power has been fully deployed...but there is one rabbit missing."

His elven eyes didn't miss the details of the enemy deployment.

Even in a massive melee, he noticed that the white-haired boy he had broken in wasn't there.

"Even if he charges his blast and sets it off in the main battlefield, it would just be a waste so long as Heith is there."

Sending in a single Level 5 now wouldn't turn things around.

After being *killed* so many times in Folkvangr already, even that stupid rabbit would know that much deep in his bones.

"And more than anything...with the rules of this war game, he can't even do that."

Indeed, the only chance the coalition had of victory was to use the main battlefield as a decoy and aim straight for the queen.

Seeing through the coalition's plans like a mind-reading demon, the white elf looked up.

His eyes narrowed as he looked to the ends of the island far removed from the fighting.

"South...or north?"



I'm running northwest, taking care to avoid notice while still moving at full speed.

My destination is *Freya Familia*'s base, all by myself.

"Lilly, maybe I should fight with everyone else...!"

*"No! Keep moving toward Lady Freya!"*

Hearing the battle cries over my left shoulder and at my back—the countless screams of my allies—I want to turn back, but Lilly's voice coming from the oculus embedded in my left gauntlet stops me.

The same moment that the Crozzo's magic swords erupted, signaling the start of the battle, I circled around the northwest of the island, completely circumventing the main battlefield.

That was Lilly's order. Use the army-scale clash as a decoy to approach the enemy's base.

*"Hildsleif and Warlord are still at the base!"*

"Gh...!"

*"There is no winning unless we take down the strongest adventurer in Orario!"*

She's right. Anything less won't be possible against that man.

I'm painfully aware of that after he took me down in a single attack during the Goddess Festival. So long as he stands before the throne and protects his master, the coalition doesn't stand a chance.

There is no future for us unless we do something about the Level 7 city's strongest!

*"And your skill is the only card we have that can take him down!"*

I glance down at the oculus and then at my right hand. The chime is ringing, and the telltale glow of the charging has already started, too.

Master and the rest of *Freya Familia* have only seen my status during the time I spent with their familia when their goddess's charm warped the entire city. If I wait until I can see the enemy before activating my skill, I won't make it in time. The einherjar would never allow that.

That means the time is now. To unleash a full power attack, I have to start charging before I encounter the enemy.

The task I've been given is to mount a sneak attack. Stay hidden and keep moving until I can land a blow on the enemy's strongest fighter—Mr. Ottar—with a fully charged attack.

After the onslaught of the Crozzo magic swords failed, Lilly concluded that this is our only chance of defeating Warlord.

*"We have to sacrifice everyone so you can reach Lady Freya! If you don't, we can't win this battle!"*

I grit my teeth as Lilly explains that in a commanding voice.

Even if our allies get cut down by Mr. Hegni, run down by Mr. Allen, destroyed by Mr. Alfrik and his brothers, shot down by Master—even if it means ignoring Ms. Heith and the healers, I have to defeat Mr. Ottar and reach out to Lady Freya—no, I have to reach out to *her*.

Even the echoing sound of the chime understood it had to be that way. Shaking off the thoughts tearing at my heart, I continue to approach the enemy's base.

Carefully, but quickly! I can't let them notice me!

Even in the northwest, far from the main battle, a great field of ruins stretch in every direction.

There are crumbling buildings, a marble street, and massive colonnades that no longer hold up ceilings. Taking advantage of these city ruins, I hide myself, making sure there's no signs of watchful enemy before sprinting to the next point.

I'm currently invisible. I'm using one of Fels's reverse veils and basically invisible.

But still I'm avoiding any bold approaches. The enemy this time is Master and *Freya Familia*. If they notice anything is even slightly off, that's the end. I used an item to erase my scent to beast people's noses, but I still can't be too safe.

And more than anything...

*The sound of the charging...! It won't reach their base yet, but when I get close, they will definitely notice!*

I can feel a wave of cold sweat break out as I listen to the chime repeating while white light gathers.

No matter how perfectly a scout erases their presence, if they make a sound that alerts the enemy to their location, they are just a fool. And I had to do just that sort of foolish stealth to launch my attack. Even though it is to gather enough strength to actually take down the enemy, I have to do it stealthily, too. The contradiction of it all makes my heart race.

*The limiter...I can't let the grand bell ring...!*

If the giant bell's chime rings out, I'll be immediately detected no matter how far away I am.

And if I'm attacked by einherjar before reaching their base, I'll lose our only chance.

I have no choice but to do a normal charge all the way to the limit while getting close.

*But...can I really evade Master's eyes?*

I keep imagining Master's face watching like a hawk from the base still far away.

He's strong. And shrewder than anyone.

He's seen through what we're trying to do, hasn't he?

I struggle against that suspicion as I keep my trembling breath down and push forward as fast as I can.

"...This is..."

I've found a structure larger than the others.

This must've been an amphitheater once.

Part of the outer wall is broken, and inside I can see the spectator seats and the arena. The arena is around 150 meders in diameter, and the outer wall and spectator seats are about 30 meders tall. It wasn't hard to imagine lots of

people walking out here to see a show in ancient times when there were fewer options for entertainment.

The faded columns lying on the ground are almost melancholic, but I quickly look away.

I don't have time to get lost in emotion. I start to circle around the outside of the amphitheater.

"Haaaaaaaaaaaaah!"

"?!"

A shadow flits across the ground, and I can sense an attack coming from above.

Just as the battle cry and blade are about to hit me, I immediately raise my knife.

"Gh?!"

The attacker's blades and the Hestia Knife clash.

I can't completely block it.

I avoided direct damage, but my reverse veil gets torn, dispelling my invisibility. As I stumble from the attack, my attacker follows up with a kick. Partly because I can't use my right hand freely due to the charge, I'm knocked aside.

I jump at the same time to lessen the impact, which brings me into the amphitheater's center.

Rolling through the broken-down wall, I get pushed into an arena where I can't escape.

"Did you really think you could avoid being noticed while making that noise! Bell!"

"...! Mr. Van!"

The half-prum einherjar, Mr. Van, followed me into the big arena, scolding me just like before.

*I did get noticed...!*



The sneak attack failed. The plan won't work anymore. This is the end of the line.

Is it just him? No others? Can I pivot? What should I do?!

While my mind starts racing, Mr. Van seems to guess what I'm thinking and shouts.

"I'm alone! This has nothing to do with Mr. Hedin's orders! I fought you in Folkvangr enough to figure out that you would come here!"

"Wh...?!"

"And I decided I would be the one to perform your last rites!"

He read my movements?! No, he hid himself here in the northwest, waiting for me?!

I struggle to process what Mr. Van is saying as he glares at me like I betrayed his trust.

"Traitor who rejected Lady Freya's divine will despite receiving her blessing! No matter what Mr. Ottar or the rest might say, you alone will fall by my hand!" It's an unmistakable rage, tenacity, and a clearly drawn line. "This is my duty as the one who was charged with watching over you!"

Even though it occurred in a twisted world, we lived in the same home and ate at the same table. We'd fought each other dozens of times during the baptism, sometimes sharing advice, and I do feel a certain odd bond with him.

It might just have been a trick, but for those twenty days, I was a fellow member of *Freya Familia*.

The half-prum's eyes are warped as he watches me. And my eyes are, too. But just as quickly, Mr. Van slashes at me, casting aside all trivial emotions.

"Gh...?!"

"Fight, Bell! Fight!"

Silver twinblades threaten me over and over. I can sense his resolve in his blades—if you won't take my hand, then I'll kill you.

I deflect the two blades arcing toward my chest with the Goddess Knife.

I can't reject him. In the middle of the amphitheater, we lock blades, just like we once did during the baptism.

Knife meets sword, and sparks fly.

A shrill clang rings out like a painful cry.

We crash.

My doubt led me to make several misjudgments.

My feelings toward Mr. Van and *Freya Familia* are stronger than I thought.

"Using just one hand?! When did you get so big for your britches that you started thinking you could look down on me?!"

"Gh...!"

"Use your charge! On me! Your enemy right now is *me*!"

His bloodred rage echoes in my ears. The fact that I'm still holding on to my charge even now, Mr. Van is genuinely trying to kill me.

As I weather his assault, what I feel isn't fear or anxiousness—it's a shocking sense of emptiness, and a maddening sadness.

A level-up is truly cruel.

The Level 4 Mr. Van who I fought so many times during the baptism, who I sometimes defeated and sometimes lost to...now seems so painfully *slow*.

I can see his attacks so clearly.

Even though I am filled with doubt, I can handle his attacks with ease.

I sparred with first-tier adventurers to acclimate after leveling up. There's no way I can lose here.

"Ghhhh!"

Gritting my teeth, I close the distance.

This is the end.

His eyes widen as I rush forward, sheathe the knife in my left hand, and punch him right in the stomach.

“Gah?!”

I shout like yelling will help me burn away the pity and sentimentality lingering in my heart.

*“Firebolt!”*

My fist unleashes a blast of heat. The lightning flame crackles, burning Mr. Van’s body and sending him flying up into the spectator seats.

“...Belllllll...!”

Mr. Van slips off the stone step he hit and falls forward. His mouth is bloody as he stretches his trembling hand toward me before passing out.

“Ngh...”

I’m not even breathing hard.

The battle didn’t last a minute. Level 5 and Level 4. The difference in those two numbers is everything. And this bitter experience has shown me the heights I’ve managed to climb.

“So this is where you were.”

But...

“\_\_\_\_\_”

That short fight was more than enough to draw the strongest to me.

“Acting on your own, Van? You did save me some time.”

I hear something touching down in the arena and a solemn voice. Holding my breath, I slowly turned around.

Rust-colored hair and eyes, and an imposing, massive body. A greatsword in each hand, and an even larger black mass of a sword on his back.

In front of the boaz who reigns as the peak of all adventurers, a hoarse voice falls from my lips. “...Mr. Ottar...”

The city’s strongest who hasn’t joined the main battle...Has he been searching for me from the start?

I’m still far from a full charge. And sneak attacks aren’t possible when he

already knows I am here. My body runs so cold it feels as if I've been encased in ice. I can sense Lilly's heavy breaths through the oculus.

This time for sure, our plan has failed. It's been completely shattered, and our one chance at victory is— *The End*. Those two words fill both of our minds.

"..."

As I stand frozen in the center of the amphitheater, Mr. Ottar's eyes silently move. Seemingly noticing the light converging at my right hand, he narrows his eyes slightly. Then he throws the greatsword in his hand.

"Gh...?"

It lands in front of me with a thud. Close enough for me to reach out and take it. Reflexively, I stare right at it.

The blade is made of mithril. The edge and sturdiness are the real deal—undeniably a first-tier weapon.

This isn't an attack. Not even a threat. It's almost as if he was giving me the weapon. After he notices that I'm not moving in my confusion, he speaks.

"Take it."

"...Huh?"

"I said take it."

The greatsword.

My eyes goes wide.

"Full power," Warlord says. "Come at me with everything."

His words carry the gravitas of a true warlord.

"I will give you one attack."

He's testing me. Or trying to measure my ability.

"Stake your everything and come at me. Attack me with all of *Bell Cranell's* strength."

"Gh...?!"

I'm speechless.

He's serious. He means every word.

The boaz in front of me knows exactly what we're trying to do and is *still* telling me to go ahead and try!

*A trap...no, it can't be! He doesn't have to do anything like that!*

He is the strongest. He can easily beat me with a simple frontal attack. There's absolutely no reason for him to resort to tricks against an inferior adventurer he can crush in the blink of an eye.

This is just Warlord's way.

As his goddess's strongest follower, he wants to test me.

—*Warrior.*

That word dominated my mind.

*"M-Mr. Bell..."*

A trembling voice comes from the oculus. Lilly is agitated, too. But she is also pleading. There'll never be a better chance than this. I can't let this opportunity go. Even if it was presented to us on a platter by the enemy, I have to take it.

And if I do nothing, all that'll happen is he'll mercilessly crush me.

But if I somehow manage to topple Mr. Ottar here, a path to victory will open.

*"...Gh!"*

I take it with my right hand—the silver greatsword.

*"Firebolt!"*

I channel the lightning flame from my left hand into the mithril. Immediately, the charging light in my right hand spreads to the blade.

The flame that should have faded clings to the metal, growing in strength.

Dual charge.

By extending the effect to cover the sword, I cause the drain on my stamina and Mind to instantly shoot up, but it's a small sacrifice.

I can't change the soft chime into a grand bell. Switching gears isn't possible anymore.

Not unless I cancel the charge and start from scratch. But doing that would mean losing all the stamina and Mind I've already spent. Considering the fight waiting for me, even if I manage to take down Mr. Ottar, I can't afford to waste any Mind.

Holding the sword in both hands, I push forward until full charge is less than a minute away.

*...Can I really do it? An enemy I could never normally beat...A fully charged Argonaut...!*

I know the full destructive power of Argonaut better than anyone. A short charge might not be enough, but pushed to the absolute limit, it can erase every enemy without a trace. I've overcome a difference in levels using this skill several times before.

It's what Goddess called the strike of a hero, the strength to overturn any hopeless situation.

Can I really hit a flesh-and-blood adventurer with such an extreme attack...?

I stare at the boaz standing in front of me. He's only wearing light armaments. The right side of his chest and the back of his hands, his forehead and the like—there are only a few places where he's wearing anything that provides any real coverage. With that sort of protection, he can't possibly withstand a full charge. Will it kill him?

My opponent is the city's strongest adventurer.

He's not someone I can afford to hold back against. I can't let my guard down. But still...

The hesitation in my heart's making me wary about using a full-power attack.

Evidently wanting to dispel my concerns, Mr. Ottar starts to chant.

*"Silver moon's mercy and the golden plains. I offer this body to the lord of battle."*

My eyes shoot open.

*"Charge bearing the goddess's will."*

It's a short cast.

But despite the quickly completed cast, a tremendous magic power is unleashed.

*"Hildis Vini."*

A golden light sears my eyes. A gleam like twilight gathers in the warlord's sword.

"What...?!"

I study the gleam, and then I catch my breath. His weapon is clad in light, turning into a golden sword. The furious magic light covered the greatsword's surface, almost like a flame of the end. It's a massive light that made the sword look like it was growing, as if the weapon had donned the fur of a golden boar.

That impossible swell of magic...is it like Argonaut?

No—it's just a straightforward and extreme form of enhancement?!

*"That is Mr. Ottar's magic...? The golden gleam Mr. Finn said defeated another Level 7 adventurer...!"*

Through the oculus, Lilly trembles at the sight of the blinding golden gleam. His increase in strength doesn't require any charge time. I can't be sure, but based on what I'm seeing and the information Lilly gathered, that's my best guess.

It's a simple strength buff.

And because it's simple, it becomes an unimaginably powerful trump card when combined with Mr. Ottar's absurd amount of strength.

Feeling the cold sweat on my skin, I cast aside all hesitation. That's just how much power was hidden in that golden sword.

"..."

"..."

As my charging continues, like a ballista being readied to fire, I slowly assume my stance. Gripping the greatsword with both hands, I lower my hips.

And Mr. Ottar takes the same stance, almost like he's purposely mirroring me.

I've been given an identical copy of his sword.

Our weapons are equal. There's no difference in equipment.

Victory will be decided by the combination of strength, magic, and raw destructive power.

A white light and a golden light.

A roaring flame and a furious gleam.

The billowing waves of power spilling from our weapons fill the amphitheater.

Lilly watches with bated breath.

Ms. Aiz and everyone else in town is surely watching through the mirrors, too.

Feeling everyone's gaze on me, I grip the thick hilt of the sword.

And the time finally comes.

Five minutes.

After waiting the full time I can charge after reaching Level 5, the ringing bell reaches a feverish pitch.

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!"

I start running.

With all of my might.

Swinging the sword imbued with sacred flame over my right shoulder, I advance on the strongest warrior standing in my way.

Mr. Ottar doesn't move. He is scarily still.

He watches me charge straight on, immobile as a massive boulder.

Unease, fear, worry—throwing all that away, I unleash a sacred flame.

"Argo Vesta!"

Full strength and full spirit.

Having climbed all the way to Level 5, I unleash Bell Cranell's strongest attack.

Recognizing that, the boaz holds his greatsword at the ready and roars.



[illegible]

As if trying to push me back with his voice alone, he unleashes his impossibly superhuman strength.

His golden slash crashes into my sacred fire.

And—

“\_\_\_\_\_gh?!”

There's a tremendous impact, a flash of light, and then a thunderous boom.

The contest lasts for only an instant.

The blazing sacred flame looks like it's being pushed back by the golden light, but at almost the exact same time, both swords reach their limit and completely shatter, blowing Mr. Ottar and me away from each other.

“Gah?!”

I'm launched through the massive arena and slam directly into the marble wall like I was carried there by a river bursting its dam. The impact shatters the wall and steals all the air from my lungs as the giant amphitheater shudders. Cracks run through the remaining walls and the spectator seating, kicking up a cloud of dust.

I'm sure I'm imagining things, but I could swear the entire island just went silent.

It's like our attacks clashing made the adventurers and einherjar stop their fights and catch their breath.

“Geha, gaha...aaaaaa...?!”

What little remains of the greatsword's hilt slips from my hand as I writhe from the aftermath. As my hands spasm, I look up, breathing raggedly, half praying.

Through the clearing smoke...I see a shadow appear.

“...So it’s a draw...”

That's all he says in a curt, low voice.

He's standing.

His thick legs carved two deep gouges in the stone-paved stage when he was pushed up against the wall. Peeling his massive body from the broken wall, Mr. Ottar slowly looks at me.

"No...considering the difference in level, your attack surpassed mine."

Pure commendation.

His rust-colored eyes narrow as he praises the Argo Vesta that matched his Hildis Vini.

Despite that praise, though, my face grows deathly pale.

A draw? Canceled out? Argonaut?

The same Argo Vesta that defeated Juggernaut's claw?!

"It was a splendid attack...However."

Even though I poured in everything I had, my full strength wasn't enough to defeat Warlord.

Smoke rises from places where the sacred flame scorched his body, but the boaz warrior walks forward calmly, as if he took no damage at all.

"The promise was one attack."

Throwing away the hilt of the greatsword that became a hunk of deformed metal, he draws the black greatsword on his back.

A shout rises from the oculus in my gauntlet. I'm sure it's to tell me I have to run away.

But even as tremors take over my body—I know.

If I turn my back to him, I'll be killed.

I'm not allowed to run. I have to fight him until I fall.

"Now it is simply a battle."

The amphitheater has transformed into a merciless boar's hunting ground.



Swords flashed.

Silver and black traded furiously.

“Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Tsubaki howled like a beast.

Her clothes had been shredded, and only a single piece of cloth binding covered her upper body, but still the half-dwarf roared. Deftly manipulating the longsword in her hands, she parried multiple powerful slashes and hit back.

The one-eyed smith-turned-asura was faced by Hegni.

The dark elf’s cloak was in pieces, but there was no fear or contempt in his eyes. He acknowledged that the woman clad in the light of level boost trying to cut him down was a formidable enemy and faced her in a head-on clash of blades with the dignity of a tyrant of war.

Silver and black. Gold and purple. Their blades and the aftereffects of their magics clashed, intertwined, tracing a path. Their duel was on a completely different level leaving the other einherjar and adventurers stunned as it intensified. And— “Sei...aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah”

“Haaah!”

The decisive blow was struck.

One threw their sheath and unleashed a full-bodied slash diagonally downward.

The other a high-speed upward slash as if intersecting the first’s path.

Tsubaki and Hegni passed each other and lingered for a few moments.

“Ghhh!”

Blood erupted from Hegni’s shoulder.

He winced at the wound to his left shoulder, the breeze on the battlefield rustling his cloak.

“——Gu...”

At the same time, Tsubaki knew she had been defeated.

Blood erupted from the diagonal cut that ran up her torso, splitting even her sarashi as she slumped to the side.

Even her long black hair broke its bond and spread like a fan as the light of level boost scattered.

“...You may be proud, Cyclops. Your attack threatened my life.”

Hegni turned around, still holding his sword up in his right hand.

Moving just her right eye, Tsubaki looked back at him from where she lay.

“But my Victim Abyss is a vanguard slayer...Your fate is the same as all other warriors of the sword—prey for this demonic blade.”

Hegni’s beloved first-tier weapon: Victim Abyss.

It was a curse weapon created with the help of a certain hexer, and in exchange for a certain cost, it could extend the range of its slash.

In a one-on-one fight, the better the sword master, the more it disrupted their distance, and in battle against massed enemies, it was a murderous ability allowing it to fell multiple opponents in a single slash. When wielded by Hegni, who possessed top-class melee strength among first-tier adventurers, it allowed him to become a demonic sword king capable of dominating single combat and group battles with equal skill.

“You...”

Tsubaki had experience with countless different weapons, yet she still hadn’t been able to see through Victim Abyss’s blade. Her dark skin had been cut dozens of times. Even with her status enhanced by level boost, she hadn’t been able to surpass Hegni’s blade.

“This is...why...I didn’t want to fight you...”

*Sorry, Goddess...Welfy.*

Just before her eyes closed, she apologized to her master and to the teen who had already fallen.

The coalition’s strongest fighter, the Level 5 master smith, had been downed, and the situation quickly began to shift.

“Cyclops...!”

Daphne grew pale as she watched Tsubaki fall.

The coalition was already in a terrible place, but now morale plummeted. That was the consequence of losing Tsubaki in the center—to lose a first-tier adventurer’s strength.

“Hey, what do we do?!”

“We don’t have any more magic swords!”

“The blacksmiths...Vana Freya got them...!”

Bors, Ouka, and Chigusa hardened their defense as a party.

Allen had rushed through freely, hunting down anyone wielding a Crozzo magic sword. Regardless of where they were standing. Right wing, center, left wing: none of that mattered to him. His legs allowed him to ignore distance as he picked off the remaining *Hephaistos Familia* blacksmiths and adventurers from Rivira.

And even the second-in-command Daphne couldn’t come up with a plan of action, let alone a stratagem to turn things around.

Her mind was on the verge of grinding to a halt when the tyrant of war mercilessly appeared before them.

“So you are to be the next offerings?”

“Gh?! Dáinsleif!”

Hegni’s next target after Tsubaki was them.

Because they had just barely managed to maintain a party-level organization, Hegni judged they were the largest threat at present—even if it was only an ant’s level of uncertainty—and so he earnestly and diligently brought himself to the right wing of the battlefield.

“D-Daph...?!”

Standing in the center of the party, Cassandra turned pale like a patient recognizing that death had come for her.

Daphne reflexively covered their healer with her back, only to remember that

it no longer made a difference anymore.

A thick and sticky mixture of blood and sweat dripped down her cheek.

“Oy, oy! What are you doing, Laurus Fuga?! What should we do! Hurry up and say something!”

Bors, who knew better than any of them there how hopeless it was to face a first-tier adventurer on the battlefield, was on the verge of falling into a panic as she shouted. The only reason he hadn’t immediately run away is because he knew as well as Daphne that it was meaningless.

“Daphne...!”

“Laurus Fuga!”

Chigusa raised her bow, and Ouka stepped out in front of the party with his ax Kougou, seeking a decision from their commander.

*Stop it. I’m not that great...*

The sound of her heart racing drowned out her thoughts.

*I’m not Braver...I can’t figure out some perfect move to turn everything around...!*

The urge to abandon all responsibility filled her mind.

*...But Lilliluka...*

But at the very last moment, she remembered that girl’s face and held on.

*No matter how bad the situation was, she didn’t run away...*

Scenes from the expedition flashed through her head. The moss huge, amphisbaena, all of the many dilemmas they had faced.

Even though Lilly’s small body trembled in those hopeless situations, she had still kept fighting.

The girl who Daphne had acted like a master for, who she had helped raise, would never run away.

*...Then I guess I have to...*

*Actually, I don’t wanna.*

With that last complaint in her heart, the strength returned to her eyes.

To her it felt like an eternity, but to the outside world, it was a few brief moments of inner conflict.

But Hegni's eyes narrowed sharply at those few moments, at Daphne, who had regained the scent of a threat that he had perceived earlier.

"So you intend to resist? Very well. Then I shall acknowledge you as enemies. I shall carefully, precisely, and without fail hunt all of you down."

The tyrant wouldn't let his guard down.

No matter how inferior they might be, his black, demonic blade would exterminate all.

Daphne glared back at the dark elf, who refused even to show them an opening.

His black blade, his dark cloak rustling in the breeze, his fully activated magic...

Observing everything about their enemy, Daphne absorbed all the information she could, and the final place she looked...was at the edge of the sword pointed at them.

"..."

Closing her eyes, she quietly gripped the blue crystal at her waist, entrusting everything to it.

"Everyone, please."

Finally, she opened her eyes and delivered the worst order with tyrannical resolve.

"Get cut down."



The southeast of the main battle in the western ruins.

"Kh...?!"

"Lady Aisha!"

Following a fearful exchange of blows, the Amazon groaned, and the human's shout rang out.

““This is the end.””

A battle hammer and battle ax closed in, filling Aisha's field of view.

A sure defeat brought about by the cooperation of the second and third Gulliver brothers, Dvalinn and Berling.

Her retreat was sealed, and she had no chance to defend or evade. They unleashed their attacks in perfect sync to mercilessly crush Aisha.

““—Only to be stopped again?””

But just before they could, the eldest Alfrik and youngest Grer spat in annoyance.

As if the four brothers' vision was synchronized, Dvalinn and Grer, who should have finished Aisha, leaped back. The next instant, a tremendous lightning blast struck where the four of them had been.

“Lady Nahza...! I'm grateful!”

“Tch, she's saved my ass more times than I can count now!”

A saber-style Crozzo magic sword was sticking out of the center of a crater—having been *fired*.

Mikoto immediately leaped to the saber and swung it at the four prums.

“We missed the kill again.”

“How many times is it now?”

“Eleven.”

“The other adventurers are falling in droves, but Antianeira and Eternal Shadow are hanging on.”

The four brothers were almost grumbling as they easily evaded the one blast that could possibly take them down—the enormous firepower of that magic sword.

The coalition's left wing had thus far avoided complete collapse. With what



even the deities watching back in the city would call a truly brave effort, they were enduring the Bringar-led einherjar's furious attack.

The reason was the cautious, cowardly archer supporting them.

"They're too fast...! I can't hit them with my arm!"

Behind Aisha and the others, Nahza had set up atop a ten meter-tall column, groaning as she pulled another arrow—or rather magic sword—from her quiver and nocked it into her longbow.

A long-range attack using Crozzo magic swords.

Her sniping that checked even first-tier adventurers had extended the life of the left wing.

"Targeting the enemy while also resupplying us with magic swords...! To think a tactic like this was possible!"

"Sometimes coincidence goes our way, too! But those prums should be getting used to it soon! Be careful not to let them get the magic swords from us!"

Nahza was firing saber-style magic swords that resembled arrows.

If they didn't hit their target, they would stick into the ground with an explosion; meanwhile, Mikoto or Aisha could rush to grab them while the enemy had backed off to avoid the explosion.

It was both covering fire and resupply.

Thanks to that, the left wing was barely—just barely—holding the line. Aisha recognized she would have been finished easily without that support. With Nahza's magic swords in hand, Mikoto and the others were bravely firing off blasts at the Gullivers.

"Chienthrope! Protect Aisha, whatever it takes!"

"We'll stop these guys! Oraaaaaah!"

Nahza was focused on supporting Aisha and Mikoto. She was their counter to the Gulliver brothers.

The Berbera who looked up to Aisha were fighting off the rest of the enemies

—the einherjar trying to erase the troublesome archer—with a steadfast resolve. Though it was a tenuous balancing act, thanks to them, Nahza could focus on support.

She also continued to move between pillars, aggressively changing position.

“They’ve got a nice sharpshooter.”

“And cautious, too.”

“A part of Hedin’s plan is getting messed up. Serves him right.”

“We’re the ones getting held back, so don’t get too happy.”

Still entirely unruffled, the Gulliver brothers commended Nahza.

*Freya Familia’s* strategy was to simply force a deathmatch once enough of the Crozzo magic swords had been exhausted. But thanks to Nahza’s quick wit, a slight bump in the road had occurred.

While every division other than the reserves had been firing off their magic swords in a stupendous display—just like Hedin had guided them to do—Nahza alone hadn’t given out her magic swords. Using her own judgement, she ignored Lilly’s order for a concentrated barrage to save her own skin.

“These magic swords are our lifeline, right...? I’m not going to let go that easily...! I’ve acted rashly before and lost my arm for it...!”

Retiring as an adventurer six years ago, Nahza Ersuisu had always fought while maintaining some insurance. The trauma of having an arm ripped off by a monster when she made a mistake while exploring the Dungeon had robbed her of the courage to fight monsters.

But it had also made her wiser and more determined.

*It’s okay. I know my limits. I’m just helping Mikoto and Aisha. So stay clam...!*

Nahza was sweating as she continuously counted how many shots of magic swords she had left, not allowing her eyes to get too big for her stomach, sticking only to support.

She didn’t think for a moment that she could take down a first-tier adventurer herself. She had no dreams of becoming a hero. But because she was like that,

she was able to extend the left wing's life as long as she had. Her past failures and experience were saving her comrades from danger now.

"But there isn't any light at the end of the tunnel...the end will still come!"

But she also understood that this was all just a vain struggle. Once she had used up all of the magic swords, the Gulliver brothers would easily go on the counterattack; Aisha and Mikoto, and Nahza, too, would all be taken down as easily as snapping a baby's neck. She just waited for the balance to eventually break, not trying to do the impossible.

There was a bitter resignation in her eyes.

80/20.

That was the current balance of the war game.

And that was only after giving the coalition every possible benefit of the doubt.

While the deities in the city watched in silence, the residents were blanching at the never-ending carnage. The one-sidedness of it broke any urge to cheer for the coalition. Even though there were some instances of resistance that could be called putting up a good fight, most of the city's residents started averting their eyes at the impossible difference in strength.

The adventurers actually fighting experienced a despair incomparably worse than what the viewers in the city felt, but still they fought. It was just stubbornness at this point. The enemy was just too absurd, too far out of their league. They were desperate to at least land one real punch in retaliation. Even if it was just a scratch, they wanted to annoy their enemies, to piss them off. All things considered, *Freya Familia* was so large that it got on their nerves, and as much as they had been scared of fighting beforehand, that stopped mattering, and even they became stout and brave warriors, *einherjar* in the truest sense.

More than anything, they wanted to make their horrible enemies howl a bit.

Because the coalition's trump card wasn't dead yet.

The wiser adventurers recognized that they were decoys. That Lilly was using them as cover to send the white rabbit right up to Freya. So as slender as the

thread might be, they still had some hope of victory. They convinced themselves that there had to be some chance still.

And so the adventurers fought. And fought. And kept fighting.

Those who knew the Little Rookie crowed.

Aisha, Mikoto, Nahza, Daphne, and Cassandra were still holding out, and Haruhime ignored the massive amount of sweat on her brow as she continued singing.

They fought. And fought. And kept fighting.

And at the end of it all—

There was a thundercrack that shattered their hope.

“”””\_\_\_\_\_””””

Silence reigned over the battlefield.

A rumbling destruction that gripped every heart, silenced every battle cry.

Everyone fighting on the island paused their battles. Enemies and allies both. Everyone looked in that direction.

The einherjar gulped. The adventurers grew pale. The first-tier adventurers' expressions were unchanged, but their eyes narrowed.

It came from the northwest, where the sound of battle had been resounding, the sounds that the coalition's forces had been pretending not to hear.

“Just stop already!”

The first to cry was Eina.

“Please...just stop...already...!”

“E-Eina...”

She leaped up, sending her chair toppling as she stood before a mirror reflecting the scene.

After her hoarse shout, droplets fell from her eyes and she covered her face, not hearing Misha's voice.

“Ghhhh...!”

Aiz clenched her fists so hard her nails cut her skin, and blood started to flow.

Her face was plastered with despair as she cursed and berated herself for not standing on that battlefield.

The other first-tier adventurers watched in silence. Tiona grew pale, too, the only one who could understand her.

“Mr. Bell?!”

The last to shout came from Lilly.

She lost all composure, and the mask of the commander cracked as she watched the conclusion.

Her trembling hazel eyes stared into the depths of the oculus, at the massive shadow standing in the amphitheater.

The lone warrior held the boy by the head.

“.....Gah.....ugh.....?!”

Barely able to make a sound, his skull was audibly creaking. His body was battered, and his armor was long ago lost or shattered. His legs hung off the ground, dangling like the hands of a broken clock. Bell Cranell had experienced complete defeat “...”

The boaz warrior said not a word. Holding his black greatsword in his left hand and gripping the boy’s head in his right, he didn’t change his expression. His rust-colored eyes remained focused on the battered and broken boy.

“Don’t break him, Ottar.”

In the distance.

Hearing the crash from the house of the gods’s ruins, the goddess of beauty discerned the course of events. Her eyes closed, and still propping her head up, she spoke. There was no smile on her face, no joy. Just an acceptance of the natural result of things.

“Stand.”

“Ghhh?!”

Ottar lightly swung his right arm. That one simple movement sent Bell’s body

flying into a pile of rubble. As testament to the furious fighting, the amphitheater had been transformed. Doused in lightning flame, hit by the aftershock of attacks, the walls and spectator seats had collapsed, the stones on the ground were carved out in multiple places. It was proof that the incomplete hero had struggled with all his might.

But standing amid all that evidence of a furious battle, Ottar was eerily unscratched. The warrior was the manifestation of despair for the boy.

“Ahgrgh...?! Guhhhhhhhhhhh...!”

Bell managed to draw a terrible groan from his lungs as he rose. As the blood dripped from his wounds and formed a pool, he wrung out every bit of his remaining strength and stood back up. His red eyes were bloodshot, growing redder, as he held his trembling right hand out in front of him.

“—*Fire...bolt!!!*”

Electric flames burst forth. A quick strike magic. As the crimson lightning spear approached him, Ottar didn’t evade it.

*SLAP.*

He didn’t even use his sword. He just swatted it with his right hand, as if batting away an insect. That was all. Just that was enough to scatter the boy’s magic.

“\_\_\_\_\_”

He leaped.

Without waiting for the bloodied boy to gasp, his giant body soared overhead. The boy kicked off the ground. He was terribly injured, but he still performed the optimal evasion that only a first-tier adventurer could pull off.

Right after the pile of rubble transformed into an empty space with the landing of Ottar’s thick, heavy kick, he reached out with one hand and caught Bell’s leg, swinging him in an arc over his head and then down into the stone pavement.

“Gaah?! ”

Landing on his back, Bell’s body was transformed into a hammer that

shattered the ground.

It was an outrageous blow. The pain was just a meaningless spark running up his spine. The blue sky in his eyes faded as he couldn't even speak from the damage and pain. Just as his consciousness threatened to actually go out this time, a merciless stomp slammed into his stomach.

“\_\_\_\_\_gh!”

He reawakened.

He switch on again.

Hell.

He yearned for Heith's healing compared to Ottar's resurrection through pain and attacks.

“Stand.”

It didn't end.

There was nothing left for Bell except despair, but the warrior's baptism wouldn't end. Looking emotionlessly down at the boy's face that was a mess of blood and tears, he spoke.

“Remember this well. This is the taste of mud.”

Not heeding the boy's frail voice begging him to stop, he grabbed Bell's chest with his right hand and threw him again at high speed. Crashes and destruction. The boy's slender body and white hair bounced like a dead rabbit. Bell collapsed like a doll whose strings had been cut, sharing a kiss with the ground as a pool of blood silently formed beneath him.

Seeing that, Eina felt her legs give out, and she slumped to the ground in tears.

“...”

Hedin, who could see the scene with his sharp elf's eyes, was emotionless.

“Bell...”

Seeing the terrible spectacle via Lilly's oculus, Hestia froze.

“—gh!”

“...Where are you going, Asfi?”

“You should know without having to ask! I won’t let you say it’s meaningless!”

Asfi leaped to her feet, turning her back on an expressionless Hermes. She clutched a shining magic item in her hand as she rushed out.

“Bell Cranell is...”

“That brat...is Level 5 now, right?”

“Even the Record Holder can’t match up...?”

In a certain bar in the city, the wise adventurers who hadn’t joined the war were dumbfounded.

Looking up at the image in the mirror, they were all in the grips of terror as one adventurer shot back.

“Dumbasses. Who do you think he is?”

He was a veteran adventurer. A beast person who had survived the strife seven years ago. His voice was filled with awe and fear.

“He’s *Ottar*.”

That was the answer.

The absolute solution that required no proof.

The city’s strongest.

Level 7.

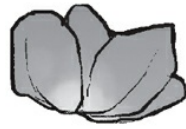
The summit.

Bell’s body spasmed silently and fell to the side as the figure of the lone warlord filled his reddening vision.

“If you are going to receive Milady’s love, then surpass me.”

Tears of blood flowing, confronted with a never-ending baptism, the boy sensed his end approaching.





CHAPTER

9



**FLOWER  
LANGUAGE  
FOR  
YOU**

## CHAPTER 9

### FLOWER LANGUAGE FOR YOU

Sorry, Ahnya.

Sorry, Chloe.

Sorry, Runoa.

Sorry, Lyu.

...I'm sorry, Mia.



“ ... ”

Sitting on her stone throne, her eyes tightly shut, Freya's brow furrowed. She put one hand to her forehead, her displeasure showing on her face as the spiral of names and voices echoed and intertwined in her head.

*Dreaming again?*

Her male and female guards alike looked on in concern, but responding to them would just have been bothersome. The dead Syr—or rather Hörn—was dreaming. Because of Vana Seiðr, Freya and Hörn's senses were linked. Hörn was in a state of suspended animation while her magic was active, and so Freya would occasionally perceive the dreams she was seeing, like now.

Her vision was dark, but the girl's apologies echoed in her ears.

On Hörn's side, depending on the goddess's emotions, a backwash of feelings could occur, but the opposite couldn't happen on Freya's side. Freya didn't experience Hörn's thoughts or feelings. She only received signals. And in this moment, those signals were an unbearably unpleasant static.

If she was experiencing the goddess's emotions and apologizing like that in

her own dream, then she was like Freya's mirror. The remnant traces of the daughter who Freya should have already put down were salvaged and running wild.

*What a truly terrible mirror...*

If even the dreams Hörn saw in the abyss of her sleep were just a bundle of her own memories and emotions, then there was nothing Freya could learn from glimpsing those dreams. Her vision was dark and closed off, so it was clear the girl was still sleeping. And the feeling of a droplet on her cheeks meant there were tears in her eyes?

She couldn't focus on the war game whose trend was already settled, and so she held her head, as if holding back a headache—when it came.

“!”

Freya quickly stood up. It was a sudden move, utterly bereft of any regal bearing.

Her guards were shocked as she opened her silver eyes.

“...L-Lady Freya...?”

“What—?”

“Tell Hedin to end this *at once*.”

The goddess's voice cut them off. As they froze, she fixed them with a sharp gaze.

“Tell him to settle this war game at once.”

““Y-yes, Milady!””

The goddess's bark, which was so rarely heard, made her guards gasp and tremble.

They raced out of the house of the gods to find the commander.

Alone in the temple, the goddess sat back down upon her throne and for the first time allowed her irritation to show on her face.

“Settle things at once?” Hedin spun around.

“Y-yes, sir. That was Lady Freya’s order, sir.”

“The coalition is on its last legs...why so suddenly?!”

Hedin looked carefully at the faces of the two guards who had come bearing their patron goddess’s message.

It was plain to see how flustered they were having witnessed Freya’s sudden change in demeanor themselves. Meaning this command was unmistakably the goddess’s divine will. Something had happened in her that caused a change of heart so great that she had to give a divine order.

Hedin’s eyes silently narrowed behind his glasses.

“...Understood. I will give the order to the army myself. Rask and Remilia, you pass the order directly to that stupid cat and the rest of the first-tier adventurers. If I order a sudden change of direction, those fools will grow suspicious and refuse to listen.”

“Y-yes, sir!”

Quickly preparing individual orders for the first-tier adventurers, he entrusted them to the two guards.

The familia members who had rushed from Freya’s side didn’t balk and sprint away again, this time running out to the main battlefield where the coalition was even still resisting. Watching them quietly as they left, Hedin raised his head.

“All forces, shift to the attack! Move the headquarters forward! At once! It is the goddess’s command!”

“Press the attack’?”

Allen, who had just run through another blacksmith with his high-speed spearmanship, raised his eyebrow suspiciously.

The female familia member who ran up out of breath as the smith’s Crozzo magic sword clattered across the pavement nodded.

“Y-yes, sir...the whole army is to advance!”

“We were supposed to crush the enemy’s forces completely here. What is

that fly doing changing the plan now?”

“It is Lady Freya’s direction, sir, not Hedin! She wishes to settle the contest swiftly!”

Allen reacted as expected, but she immediately shot back with the instruction she had been given. Allen’s expression had been dangerous, but when he heard that, his eyebrows arched.

“What...? Is that true?”

“Yes, sir. Rask and I heard it ourselves. Lady Freya’s...strongly worded...order.”

Ironically, Allen stared at her face just like Hedin had earlier.

Rask and Remilia had been chosen together as guards for the house of the gods. If they were saying it, then it was undeniably Freya’s will. Also, the fact that they had been sent away from the main camp where the goddess was waiting at all was irregular. If it were Hedin’s orders—and ones that he didn’t like—Allen would surely have rejected them, but if it was what Freya wished, then that was a different story.

Suppressing the desire to vent his annoyance, the cat quickly looked around with his sharp eyes.

The fighting was already effectively decided. If the contest was already settled, then no matter what happened, the coalition had no chance of victory. In which case, there wouldn’t be any problem in moving the hands of the clock along and settling things faster as the goddess wished.

The city’s fastest first-tier adventurer furrowed his brow and accepted the decision of headquarters.

“...I’ll go through the enemy’s right wing like he wants. Gather up anyone whose hands aren’t full and have them meet me there!”

“Yes, sir!”

While she disappeared into the distance, Allen ended his extermination of the enemy’s magic sword squads.

Because of his elusive, wide-ranging attacks, *Hephaistos Familia*’s blacksmiths and the adventurers who had Crozzo magic swords had almost all been wiped

out. There were no longer enough magic swords to be a threat. Crushing the magic longsword that had fallen from the blacksmith's hand moments earlier, Allen turned toward the coalition's right wing.

"...Hagh, haaaagh! Guoooooooooo!"

"Out of the way, fat ass."

Dormul, covered in blood, had both of his hands on the ground as he stood up in front of Allen.

He had been blown back by the crash of the einherjar's charge and trampled, and then blown all the way back to here by Hedin's artillery barrage, but he raised his weapon to at least hold back the first-tier adventurer aiming to deal the coalition a finishing blow.

"You! Shall! Not! Pass!!!! Uooooooooooooooooo!"

His cracked armor fell from his body, and blood spurted from all over him as he swung his battle hammer down at Allen.

But Allen didn't bat an eye as he evaded not just the hammer but every drop of splattering blood. He passed silently by Dormul, shredding his weapon and his tempered dwarven body alike.

"Gaaaaah?!"

He didn't even look back as the dwarf slumped to the ground.

Ordered to drive forward, the chariot didn't have any interest in a mere adventurer.

"On me, snails."

Acknowledging the force that had gathered, the chariot began a merciless charge.

*"Ah.....Ohhhhhhhhhhhh! Freya Familia's assault has started! Freya Familia!!!"*

For the first time that day, Iby offered some color commentary.

The only time he had truly gotten hyped was at the very, very beginning, during the open fusillade of magic sword blasts. Ever since then, he had been silent as *Freya Familia's* domination continued from start to finish. It was a

ghastly battle that needed no analysis or commentary, and he had been unable to do anything but watch in silence with the rest of the crowd.

But now he finally had a reason to shout.

In other words, *Freya Familia* had ridden forward to bring this match to a close.

*“Vana Freya’s force is passing through the coalition’s right wing and pushing east! Their target is, of course, the completely empty coalition base: the eastern ruins!!!”*

A stir spread among the residents of Orario at the loud commentary and the big change in the battle.

Having received Freya’s order through Hedin, the einherjar gathered on the north end of the main battleground.

With Allen at the head, they were advancing at a speed even a normal person could tell was unreasonable, tearing through the north end of the island.

“Ugh...?!”

Lilly saw the enemy shadows pass right through her field of vision but could do nothing.

Because the massive mausoleum stood in the center of the western half of the island, they were passing through the broken right wing to go around it.

The fact that she had sent Haruhime and the reserves who were cloaked by invisibility to the left wing, where Aisha’s forces were still holding on, had come back to bite her. Allen, or rather Hedin, had a detailed grasp of the formation she had created and broke through the dangerously weak right wing in one fell stroke.

Lilly didn’t have any more cards to play or any more forces to move. She could do nothing but watch the advance from where she stood atop the mausoleum while Allen’s forces ignored her, the enemy commander, to settle the competition once and for all.

In the blink of an eye, like a whirlwind passing through, the assault force led by the chariot easily cleared the center line and spread out in the eastern ruins.

“The enemy’s force...?! Lady Hestia, ruuuuuuun!”

What that meant was that their deities were going to be taken out.

Lilly’s shout went out to the oculi that had been provided to various deities.

Their eyes widened in shock.

“Wait, waiiiiiit! We surrender!”

“We are Lady Freya’s allies! We just got sucked into this by our kids! Do you understand?!”

“Shut up.”

““Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaah””

The first down were Magni and Modi. The two male gods stepped out of the shabby ruins they had been hiding in and raised both their hands in surrender, but Allen’s one flash—the wind from his sprint—knocked them to the ground. His silver spear tore just the flowers on their chests, sending red and orange petals flying.

*“Magni and Modi! Both familias are out!”*

Ibly in Orario made the call as the first gods fell to *Freya Familia*’s assault.

By the rules of the war game, followers were also knocked out if their patron god’s flower was lost. Modi and Magni’s familias had been eliminated, so Luvis’s elves and Dormul’s dwarves, lost their right to fight and were required to swiftly leave the island. But the speed of deities dropping out was faster than their followers could leave.

“Scatter! There are lots of ruins around here!”

“Roger!”

“Sighting!”

“Ugyaaaa?!”

At Allen’s order, the einherjar immediately headed off in different directions and quickly began capturing coalition deities. Allen and the other beast people with excellent senses precisely sniffed out the deities’ hiding places. The momentum of their drive didn’t slow as they stormed through the ruins in a



flash. The residents of the city could see the battlefield from multiple angles thanks to the divine mirrors, but even with that, they couldn't keep up with speed of the advance.

“Guaaaaaaa?!”

*“Ogma Familia drops out!”*

Ibly could just barely keep up with an upper-class adventurer's visual acuity, and his commentary was just a list of deities and familias who had dropped out.

“Kyaaaaah!”

*“Serket Familia is out!”*

“...So it was hopeless.”

*“Souma Familia, too!”*

The deities' flowers scattered.

Inside ruins, behind pillars, inside jars. Discovering a god hiding in a bizarre place, a goddess's chest being mercilessly cut as she tried to run away. The few adventurers left behind as guards couldn't put up a fight. The murmured “Apologies, Lilliluka Erde” to a former follower disappeared in the scramble.

“Captain Shakti, *Freya Familia* is too fast! We can't recover all of the coalition adventurers!”

“Just do the best you can! Pull the badly wounded out without getting involved in the fighting!”

With so many deities dropping out, the retrieval of the followers was slow going.

The number of adventurers standing on two legs—still conscious and fighting—was countable at this point, with the vast majority unconscious on the ground. *Ganesha Familia* was waiting along the edges of the island as judges. When they confirmed a deity had dropped out, they carried off adventurers who couldn't leave on their own, to the best of their abilities. Among those carried away were the unconscious Luvis and Mord, and Dormul as well.

“Hestia! Get away from here!”

“G-get away...where?!”

“The east is fallen! Head toward the front lines!”

With *Freya Familia*’s clutches reaching the eastern ruins, the deities’ reactions were broadly speaking two different choices. Either continue hiding, or gamble it all on a game of tag. Hephaistos, who was hiding together with Hestia, chose the former. Sending the queen across the middle was called a king’s raid in a far-eastern board game.

“Run full speed! Until you reach where the children are on the western side! Even if you have to go alone!”

“Wh-what about you, Hephaistos?!”

“I’ll go another direction! If we don’t split up, we’re both done for!”

“Gh...?!”

“You and I both have Level 5 children! At least one of us has to make it out of this! If we both get knocked out, there really won’t be any chance of winning left!”

Hephaistos became a tyrant, not allowing Hestia any debate.

She could sense it. From Lilly’s reaction through the crystal earlier, she knew that Tsubaki had already fallen, and her other followers were already on the verge of complete annihilation. So she intended to become a decoy for Hestia’s sake.

It was a situation where even deities could do little more than throw in the towel, but even so, she refused to allow the odds of victory to fall to zero.

“Go while Takemikazuchi does what he can! Quickly!”

“Ghhh...Sorry!”

Pushed along by Hephaistos’s forceful rebuke, Hestia rushed out of the ruins where they were hiding.

“Haaaaaaaah!”

“Guah?!”

“S-swarm him! Everyone surround him!”

There were few who could resist *Freya Familia*'s advance.

Or more precisely, there was just one lone god. Using the flower on his chest as a lure, the god of martial prowess skillfully grabbed an einherjar's arm and performed a one-armed throw. The einherjar's status allowed him to achieve great speed, and now that his momentum had been turned against him, he crashed into the ground with a tremendous slam before passing out. The commanding beast person roared an order as the einherjar leaped as one at Takemikazuchi, who burst into a full-bodied sweat.

"Uoooooooooooooooooo?!"

"Gh?!"

The commander reached out their arm with a bellow and stole the purple chrysanthemum from the war god's chest, rendering his struggle meaningless.

"...Sorry, Hestia, Hephaistos..."

Beads of sweat fell to the ground as Takemikazuchi furrowed his brow and looked up at the sky.

The beast person who had stolen the flower collapsed, having exhausted the last of their strength. Around them were *twenty-one* other einherjar who had collapsed in the same way. And a little further away, the rest of his familia, except for Ouka and Chigusa, had passed out as well.

The retaliation by the war god's hand had given *Freya Familia* its greatest losses of the day so far—he had wiped out an entire unit.

"Hathor! Leave this place to us and run!"

"So long as you live, the Goddess Alliance survives! Heed not our sacrifice!"

"Roger, will do."

On the eastern edge of the island, there was a movement in the former military fortress occupied by the Goddess Alliance members.

As the terrifying einherjar approached, the goddesses—taking advantage of the fact that they couldn't be handled violently—formed a wall of flesh while Hathor quickly scooted away from their fortress.

But that was the limit of the coalition's resistance.

"Takemikazuchi Familia, *is out!*"

Their advance was too fast.

"Dellingr Familia, *is out!*"

There was no end to the list of familias who had fallen, unable to resist.

"Ratri Familia...*is out...!*"

Ibly's tone gradually lost momentum, cooling along with his face.

"Hephaistos Familia...*is...is out...!*"

And with Allen's spear emotionlessly tearing through her flower, the smithing god closed her eye to dull the regret.

The vast majority of the coalition had been forced off the field, sending the viewers in Orario's and the remaining coalition members' morale plummeting to rock bottom.

The coalition's remaining strength was four familias. Of the forty-seven familias at the start, forty-two had been knocked out. Allen's charge had cruelly run through the eastern ruins, reaching all the way to the eastern edge of the island.

"B-big brother...Lady Hestia...!"

The orphanage in Daedalus street.

The human boy Lai choked up.

"Mr. Bell...d-don't give...ugh...!"

"Ruu...don't cry...!"

The half-elf Ruu started to sob as he tried to cheer Bell on, while the beast person Fiona broke into tears, too. Maria, the children's mother, was at a loss for words, too, as she watched, unable to do anything but hug them tight.

Their reaction was honest. More honest than most adults. Unconcerned for appearances, their faces were a testament to the hopelessness the coalition faced.

—It was over.

Everyone had given up. There wasn't a single person who doubted that *Freya Familia* hadn't only won, but had won in a landslide. It was the predestined result. *That's how it goes*, thought the adventurers who stayed behind in the city as their shoulders fell. It couldn't have gone any other way, the deities murmured desolately. Resignation dominated the battlefield and the city.

But amid that, there was one person who felt something other than resignation...

*Ahhhhh, just as expected...*

Lilly.

The commander who understood the battle state better than anyone still kept her composure.

*This was expected from the start...It would be stranger not to end up like this considering the difference in strength...so not yet...it's not time to go to pieces yet...!*

The battle lines were already shattered, her pieces were almost all gone, and checkmate was near.

As a commander, faced with a board more worthy of criticism than any other, she still managed to be calm as beads of sweat poured down her forehead.

She had lost her cool completely seeing Bell utterly trampled earlier. Tears had welled in her eyes, and she had almost started weeping. But ironically, hearing the silly cries of the deities through the oculi had made a blue vein swell on her forehead. And hearing Hestia's full-force sprint and shout, she snapped and hit her own forehead in rage.

The taste of blood in her mouth was like a drug, dulling her emotions.

*"Guuuuuu...ahhhhhh...!"*

But more than anything, she could see that boy still fighting inside the crystal...



“AaaAAAAaaaaaa...!!!”

He tried to pretend he was just imagining the sound of all the sinews in his body were creaking as he put his hands on the ground.

Flesh and blood were flying; his bones were crying out at the agony. My heart felt like it would give out.

*I can't. I can't win. It's impossible. Just run away. No more.*

His body and spirit wailed—but he steeled himself, forcing his fingers to grip the Hestia Knife.

*Make it stop...no more...*

How long has it been since he last complained like that?

Since meeting Winne and the Xenos, since the day he lost to Asterios, Bell had stopped those feeble complaints. He hadn't complained when he fell into the deep levels. And not when he was trapped inside the goddess of beauty's gilded cage.

No matter how hopeless it was, even if thoughts of resignation popped up in the back of his mind, Bell would act tough, as if he would never give up, even if it meant lying to himself. With a childish defiance, he would hold on in the end. He wouldn't allow himself to complain.

The day he met the Xenos, something inside Bell Cranell had broken.

An irregularity had occurred in his head, his heart, or maybe his soul.

But even unconsciously, he understood that that irregularity was a prerequisite, a condition required to be a hero.

And the warrior in front of him had returned Bell Cranell to normal.

His strength, the weight of his single blow, reverted Bell back to his pathetic rookie period, when he was still traumatized by a minotaur.

Monster.

He was a monster.

The undisputed strongest.

A power stronger than anyone transformed even a potential hero candidate into a mere child.

*Strong...scary...I can't win...!*

*How many times have I been blown away? How many times have I been tortured? I don't know. I don't want to know. I don't want to think about whose blood made the crimson spring over there.*

*This baptism is worse than what I experienced in all those days fighting in Folkvangr as the world whispered in my ear that I was Freya Familia's Bell Cranell.*

*The pain, the suffering, the hell—it's all on a different level.*

Even if he had climbed to a height that would make most blanch, he still couldn't reach the lightning splitting the skies. And even if he did, he would just be burned and destroyed. And the warrior looking down at him was that thunder's proxy. Bell, who could do nothing but manipulate weak flame and electricity, was fated to be swallowed up by it.

Rabbit Foot Bell Cranell couldn't defeat Warlord Ottar.

*...But even so...!*

His hands trembled.

His knees wouldn't listen to him, wobbling like a newborn deer's. But even so, coughing up blood, flashes of light going off in his eyes, he pulled his body off the ground.

On the other side of the mirrors, Eina, Aiz, Tiona, Finn, Rai, Fiona, Ruu, the adventurers and residents in Orario, and Hermes and the other deities' eyes all widened—as he dug his nails into the cracked stone, clutched his knife, and stood up.

“That's right. Stand.”

Ottar alone betrayed no change in expression.

He didn't cheer it, either.

Mere acknowledgment.

The boaz warrior approved only those brave warriors who fought.

“If I don’t...defeat you...I can’t go to Lady Freya...?”

“That is right.”

He was barely conscious, and his head was fuzzy.

“I can’t...meet Ms. Syr...?”

“That is correct.”

Drenched in blood, battered like a corpse.

“I can’t save...her...?”

“I won’t allow it.”

Then it was simple.

There was only one thing Bell had to do.

“Then...I’ll do it...”

Snuffing out the self that sensed his own end in this eternal baptism, shaving away at his terror, overcoming his despair, he reclaimed the reason driving him to have to fight.

Bell Cranell, the truest fool, remembered just who it was he had been making cry ever since that day.

“I will...defeat you...!”

His voice was unwavering, and the strength returned to his eyes.

His thoughts were still broken.

The lights in his eyes flashed and flickered as his consciousness faded in and out.

But he had the will to fight. He had the resolve to keep going in his soul.

If he could sense his own impending doom, then he simply had to keep becoming stronger than he was a second ago.

He would overcome this greatest baptism and go to her.

“That’s right. Come.”



The warrior didn't smile.

The goddess's strongest servant merely readied his sword.

"Rage."

As the rabbit bared its fangs, coughed up blood, and raised a battle cry, the ferocious boar met it head-on.



"Mr. Bell...!"

Lilly saw his blood spatter as he was knocked aside through the oculus in her hands.

Even though he was drowning in fear, Bell still stood back up. Even though he had been killed by despair once already, he still stood tall against the strongest.

If she didn't struggle against the strongest army, too, then it would be a lie. As his supporter, if she wasn't going to support him, then why was she even there!

*So don't give up! Even if everyone else gives up, I won't!*

She stood in a location where she could look out over the battlefield, her hazel eyes restlessly moving around, staying abreast of the seemingly hopeless state of the battle.

*One! ...One! One! One! One! One! Just one! If we could just take down a single first-tier adventurer, the tide could start to turn!*

It could dam the torrent leading to sure defeat and create a lake of opportunity for a comeback. She fully understood just how far away that one person was, how much of a wild, fantastical, hypothetical day dream it was without anyone telling her.

*I can see the shape of it already! The preparation is already laid out! The one to target is already set! We just need one more piece...if I can just find one more move...!*

But even so, Lilly continued searching. Even as every part of her brain heated up, even as a faint red seeped into her vision, she kept searching. Standing

alone atop the mausoleum, she engaged in the commander's lonely battle. Welf and the smiths were defeated, Bell was battered. Her instincts and emotions had long since slipped into panic, but her logic alone clung to a steel mask, holding her ground.

Lilly didn't stop trying to find answers.

In such dire straits, she alone tried to remain calm.

*Remember, remember! In this situation, I have to use Mr. Hedin!*

That was what none other than Braver had taught her.

"If you are to take command of this battle, then you will have to give up all hope from the very start."

It was five days before the war game.

Lilly had been undergoing training day and night without rest when Finn said that.

"Give up...?"

"Yes. What tactics can you use right now? What cards do you have?"

"...Mr. Welf's mass production of magic swords, Ms. Haruhime's level boost, Ms. Mikoto's gravity magic, and Mr. Bell's skill...also Lilly's magic could potentially be useful for scouting or causing confusion, maybe..."

"I see. That isn't anywhere near enough."

Hearing Finn say that without even a trace of regret—even though she had even trusted him enough to reveal their strongest card, Haruhime—Lilly couldn't help staring at him.

"...When you put it so bluntly, it is a little hurtful."

"It's the truth. And right now, you can't afford to avert your eyes from the reality lounging right there in front of you. Or from all of the unfairness and absurdities—like an unbridgeable difference in strength."

"I"

Sitting at the table, Finn hadn't taught her some sure-win strategy. It was something far more important: the mindset of a commander.

“Lilliluka Erde, if you are going to be in command, then you have to be more clearheaded than anyone else, no matter the situation. More so even than back line mages. Far more so.”

“...And be ruthless, too?”

“At times. But that isn’t what you want, is it?”

Lilly felt like he was reading her mind as she awkwardly nodded.

Knowing that she wanted to be able to stand at Bell’s side, for just a moment, Finn curled his lips into a smile.

“I would use *anything*. Inspiration, natural phenomena, even sacrificing my comrades.”

“...!”

“Since you don’t think sacrifices are acceptable, you will have to use even more than me. You aren’t ever out of cards. Pick up a stone off the ground and turn it into a weapon. Keep thinking and fumbling for a chance to win. I won’t be there on the day. You will have to search for the answer with your own two eyes. Amid all the despair, search for the sliver of light smaller than the eye of a needle. Or else the coalition will not win. *Your judgment and your orders have to lead them to victory.*”

With that declaration, Finn gave Lilly her challenge.

“Lilliluka Erde, let me ask you a different question. Who do you think your enemy is?”

“...The assembled force of *Freya Familia*.”

“You aren’t wrong, but you aren’t really right, either.”

Having given her so many strategies and tactics, Braver took one more step deeper.

“Right now, the person you should be watching is the commander opposing you.”

“!”

Lilly’s eyes widened, and a visible shock crossed through them.

“So then...”

“Yes, your enemy is Hedin Selrand. *Freya Familia*’s grand marshal and a ruthless strategist.”

Finn’s guidance was to limit the enemy she was watching. He was telling her that, in extremis, all of the other first-tier adventurers and any other problematic enemies could be left to her allies but that she should focus on Hedin.

“If I were to face Hedin as a commander, I would lose four times out of ten.”

“...?!”

“What puts me just barely over the edge is the ache in my finger.”

Finn shrugged and then got to his point.

It was incredibly simple, but also far more difficult for Lilly than crossing through the deep levels.

“To guide the coalition to victory, you have no choice but to use Hedin.”

“U-use him...? Not beat him in a contest of wits?!”

“That would be impossible. He has far more experience in command. His insights and the way his mind works are on a completely different level. A prum who has been a commander for all of a few months is not going to defeat a long-lived, sage elf.”

Finn was absolute in his statement.

“Use Hedin’s strategy, his tactics, and his thoughts. Calculate his goals, not to try to lay a trap for him but to steer things in the same direction. Just like how resisting a force greater than your body can handle will only destroy you.”

And as Lilly looked at him in a daze, Finn smiled.

“There is no such thing as a perfect plan. There is no guaranteed strategy or invincible formation. Everything is incomplete. Grasp those holes, the true motives that Hedin will be carefully concealing.”

*Mr. Finn told me the answer from the start...!*

Half in remembrance, it was only now that she really understood what Finn

was telling her.

There was no perfect plan. That was right. Even now, with deities falling one after the other, with checkmate closing in, even on this board Lilly could see a single way out.

There was no guaranteed strategy. No invincible formation. What there was, was simply the commander's true motive pointing toward whatever goal they envisioned.

So right now, that—

*Search, search, search! The smallest details of the battlefield, the remaining fighting strength, anything! Find any clue pointing to what Mr. Hedin's goal is!*

Experiencing the flow of time at a heavily compressed rate, Lilly could taste blood in the back of her nose, but even so, she added more fuel to the fire.

*Pick up on his aim, his thoughts! And use them! If I can disrupt them, make him misplay a card...!*

As her hazel eyes scanned the battlefield, reaching where Hedin had set up his base.

For just a one moment, time froze for her.

*That's...*

It was minor. A truly minor detail.

An intent that only Lilly, who was standing across the board from him, could have noticed.

"Mr. Hedin is *close* to his back lines...?"



The cries of gods and goddesses blended with the shouts of adventurers still putting up resistance. The deities' ends. The sound of an impending conclusion.

The shining sun had long ago started its descent, but twilight was still distant. Tilting his chin toward the clear, blue skies, Hegni slowly looked back down.

"Allen will decide this match..."

Focusing his ears toward the eastern end of the island, the dark elf stood surrounded by adventurers he had hewn and sliced. Ouka, Chigusa, Bors, and the residents of Rivira. It was an execution ground. Every last one of them had been slashed, and all of their armor broken. The fallen people were almost all people whose patron deity had dropped out, so even if they could somehow stand back up, they wouldn't be allowed to fight any further.

Glancing for a moment at those whose eyelids didn't even flutter, Hegni's gleaming purple gaze faced forward.

"And yet, you still refuse to yield?"

There were only two other people standing in the execution ground where so many silent adventurers lay piled up.

"D-Daph...!"

"Hah...hah...! Cassandra, healing!"

Daphne wore a bloody dress as she shouted at the tearful Cassandra standing behind her.

Even while demanding support, she didn't take her eyes off the lord of war holding his pitch-black sword. It was a miracle her fingers were still attached, but she still gripped her shortsword and raised it, demonstrating her will to resist.

Cassandra, who had been constantly protected by Daphne and everyone else, whose eyes long ago filled with tears, cast her recovery spell with a trembling voice.

*"Soul Light!"*

A magic glow like sunlight shrouded Daphne, but it couldn't fully close her wounds.

It was a secondary effect of Hegni's curse weapon. The black longsword's blade, known for its murderousness, obstructed healing, slowing the process.

"I ask again. Will you still resist?"

"First-tier...adventurers...ask the strangest things...I haven't fallen yet, right...?!"

Twenty-two. That was the number of times Hegni had already slashed Daphne. Even though she had leveled up, Daphne was still just a second-tier adventurer. That she had endured so many attacks from a first-tier adventurer whose slash should have been a one-shot and was still standing went well past admiration and into the realm of the incomprehensible. Ouka and the others had fallen to the ground in one, or at most two slashes.

Part of it was of course that Hegni was merciful, holding back enough to make sure that she wouldn't die. But the biggest reason was Daphne's endurance. Hegni's eyes narrowed, and he stepped forward forcefully.

"Gh?!"

Unable to block the inescapable slash with her sword, she guarded with her left arm. And that was where the mysterious phenomenon started. Her arm, which should have been severed by Victim Abyss, instead deflected the blade. There wasn't a metallic clang, but a dull sound like a giant tree being hit by a blade. The attack's force hadn't been dispersed, though, so Daphne rolled across the ground pathetically, her breathing ragged as her left arm hung limply. But even so, she stood back up. The surface of her arm had transformed into what looked almost like gnarled tree bark.

"Your ability that's stopping my slashes...is that a spell?"

"...A skill. I happened to develop it because of Lord Apollo chasing after me... Though I think of it...more like a curse..."

She tried to manage a wry smile, but she couldn't quite pull it off.

This was Daphne's rare skill, Laurel Wreath. The effect increased her endurance when she was exhausted or on the verge of death. The skill's area of effect was discretionary, and every time she used it, her skin mutated. A tree-skin texture with a green, glowing leaf pattern—just like how her left arm had transformed. Like the spirit who transformed into a laurel tree to protect its body, Daphne was enduring Hegni's slashes using the power of her rare skill.

"If I activate it...my skin will be rough for a while...so I really didn't want to use it...!"

"A woman's concerns are much like the mysteries of the moon to me."

Even as she continued impudently, beneath her battle clothes, most of her skin had transformed into bark. Her body had started creaking unpleasantly, and the bark texture was reaching up her neck, and even to her left cheek. Her tortured body was having trouble controlling Laurel Wreath.

“Daph! Please stop! If you use it anymore...!”

Ignoring Cassandra’s tearful plea, Hegni looked down at his sword.

“At this rate, you really will become a speechless, human tree. Why do you entrust your body to this hellish ritual and continue to endure my slashes?”

It wasn’t as if Laurel Wreath could completely block Hegni’s slashes.

In the last attack, a part of the bark covering her left arm had been cut away. There was an amber-and-red nectar that seemed awfully like blood now dripping from the open wound. It was the same for the diagonal slashes on her legs, the horizontal cut on her shoulder, and the big gash running across her torso. Even with the blessing of the laurel tree, Daphne was not invincible. And it wasn’t hard to see that she would suffer a terrible pain the moment she deactivated her skill.

Daphne’s eyes were twisted painfully as she curled her lips slightly, as if he was asking a stupid question.

“Simple...buying a little more time...keeping a first-tier adventurer pinned down...! So Lilliluka and everyone else...can win this war!”

That was the reason she, and Ouka, and everyone else had stood their ground and been cut down. Having heard her answer, Hegni closed his eyes. When he opened them, his eyes flared with anger.

“I see. Then this is the end. I shan’t entertain your shallow schemes any further!”

Contempt for one unworthy of being called a warrior, who abandoned chasing her own victory. But also an earnest respect for her dedication, offering up her own life for the sake of her comrades.

With both those thoughts in his hands, Hegni appeared right in front of Daphne and brought his blade down.



“Daph?!”

Cassandra’s cry filled the air. Daphne’s eyes widened in shock. The blessing of the laurel tree was broken as a fountain of blood sprayed into the air. Cassandra ran over and caught her friend as she stumbled backward, falling to the ground. Shuddering at the warmth of the nectar-like blood that spilled on her arms, she lay Daphne down on the ground.

“Cass...andra...heal...ing...!”

“Don’t talk, Daph! I’ll—”

“Don’t move.”

Cassandra started to intone her spell, but a cold blade was pressing against her neck. Dumbfounded, she looked up and saw the dark elf standing there, the merciless lord of war’s face looking down at her.

“If you use your magic, I will take that as a sign of resistance and continue to cut her.”

“Gh...?! ”

“If you want to save your friend’s life, then throw down your weapon and surrender. Only then will I allow your healing.”

It was an ultimatum. The final mercy of a dark elven knight who could slay Cassandra in the blink of an eye if he wanted to. Cassandra gulped and turned pale...as battered, rotting fingers grabbed her arm.

“Ignore...him...hurry...heal me...!”

“D-Daphne...”

Daphne was almost delirious. She was barely hanging on to consciousness. But cruelly, Hegni refused to wait.

“You have three seconds. Three, two, one—”

And Cassandra—

“I’m sorry...”

Apologizing to Daphne and to Bell and everyone else, she threw down the rod in her hands.

“I surrender...! I won’t fight...! So please...!”

Hugging the body of her friend, who was more badly wounded than anyone, she closed her eyes as the tears came.

Hegni silently withdrew his sword.

“Idiot...!”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, Daph...!”

Scolding her friend’s choice, Daphne slumped down, as if she had finally run out of strength.

Cassandra kept apologizing through the tears as she exerted all of her Mind and activated her healing magic.

“There are no more enemies in this area...It took an unexpectedly long time, though.”

As if losing interest in a battlefield where none other than he remained standing, Hegni turned his back. While Cassandra was healing Daphne, she watched his back, the tears still filling her eyes.

*This is the end for us...for the right wing...! And with Daph down...Lilly can’t turn this around all alone!*

The coalition’s right wing, the northern end of the battlefield in the western ruins, had gone completely silent. As far as Cassandra could see, the only coalition forces left were Aisha’s left wing, which had managed to link up with the survivors in the center. But that was nothing more than a candle flickering in the wind. The Gulliver brothers would crush them soon enough, shattering what faint hope remained.

*The enemy base and the Andhrímnir are undamaged! All of the einherjar who charged through to the east are still there, too! Even if Mr. Bell is still alive... we’re out of options! There’s nothing we can do!*

Having given up her right to fight so she could save her friend, Cassandra wept again.

*I’m sorry for not fighting to the end.* Her apology felt painfully hollow.

Would the last deity's flower scatter first?

Or would the last follower fall first?

Either way, this war game would end with *Freya Familia's* victory.

*I'm useless.*

*What dreams, what prophecies.*

*The dream of twilight and the end that I saw last night was right. I couldn't change fate...*

“—Huh?”

Just then.

The wind blew.

A simple wind rustled through Cassandra's long hair as she held Daphne close.

It was the breeze that had been blowing through the ruins off the lake for most of the day.

A simple, unremarkable part of the weather that didn't merit a second thought.

The adventurers and the einherjar wouldn't even notice.

That was why only Cassandra recognized it as a prophetic turning point.

“The wind...the wind...the wind is...here?”

She remembered. The oracle that she had told Bell and the others. The hope racing through the twilight of destruction she had seen in her ghastly dream.

*“The wind...is blowing...”*

Guided by it, Cassandra looked up.

The blue sky.

A dazzling sunlight.

And far, far up in the air, a bird-like shadow had spread its wings.

And slowly, the *wind* descended—

“The wind blew...”

There was a soft tap as the wind touched down on the battlefield.

“\_\_\_\_\_”

Hegni turned around.

The dark elf immediately noticed the greatest threat had just appeared. The lord of war was on guard as he immediately drew his dark blade again.

“Who are you?!”

As he was leaving the battlefield where the coalition’s right wing had stood, he had spun, his black cloak whipping as he turned to face this newcomer.

They wore a long emerald cape. The hood was pulled up, hiding their face, but the long ears peeking out marked them as an elf.

The eyes gleaming from the shadow of the hood were sky blue.

“Identify yourself!”

The wind didn’t identify itself.

“I will be joining the fight now. Have you made your preparations, comrade?”

The wind just drew her deep green wooden sword and asserted her desire to fight.

“Preparations? For what?!”

There was but one answer by the wind.

“To be cut down by me.”

“Bite your tongue!”

A clash.

Both of them moved like the wind, and as Cassandra watched in shock, the dark green wooden sword and the pitch-black longsword slammed into each other.

““““Ghhhh?!””””

In the blink of an eye, blades clashed with a thundering boom, drawing the shocked attention of the last survivors of Lilly’s coalition, Hedin’s einherjar, and Heith’s Andhrímnir.

What began was a furious sword duel. The emerald cape and black mantle danced wildly like a gale, leaving green and black arcs. Crash and offset, flash and reverberation. The wooden blade imbued with a bluish magic power and the cursed black steel crossed countless times, creating beautiful, sinister sparks.

“ZeeeAAH!”

“!!!”

Hegni’s slash tricked his opponent’s eyes, knocking back their hood.

What spilled out was beautiful, *golden* hair.

Natural blond hair tied back in a single ponytail that extended to the nape of her neck, Lyu let loose a loud shot as she countered.

“Haaaaaaah!!!”

“Guh?!”

Her emerald wooden sword pushed back the black curse blade, slicing a part of his mantle in the process.

The perfectly balanced back-and-forth of attack and defense continued. The adventurers and einherjar were speechless at the duel of elves that had suddenly started—meanwhile, on the city side, a shout rang out.

“*Wh-who is thiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiis?!*”

Ibly’s obnoxiously loud voice was the impetus for a tidal wave of commotion that swallowed up Orario. Everyone from the discouraged residents to the ruffians leaned forward, drawn in by the beautiful elven figure on the mirrors.

In particular, the deities were causing a pandemonium, with joyous and sorrowful shouts.

“Whoa, hey, what, what, what?!”

“A helper for the coalition?!”

“The masked adventurer...what Leon!”

“Skip the routine!” “She’s not even tryin’ to hide it!”

“Hey, wasn’t Gale Wind supposed to be dead already!”

“The Guild’s spreading fake news!”

“And she’s really going at it with our Dáinsleif!”

On Babel’s thirtieth floor, the goddesses cheering for the coalition leaped to their feet, and the gods who backed Freya clutched their heads.

The elf rushing around at high speed didn’t have a mask on her face. She didn’t hide her identity and stood on the battlefield as a lone elf clad in gale winds.

The funereal silence from moments ago turned into an explosion of confusion and shock. Then came the smiles of all-knowing gods who could feel the uproar approaching.

*—She is keeping up with my sword?!*

Meanwhile, on the battlefield, the person most shocked by this development was Hegni himself.

Blue eyes and a sharp blade.

He remembered. There was no way he could forget.

One of Freya’s favorites—Gale Wind, the elf from The Benevolent Mistress!

She was different from the time they had crossed blades during the Goddess Festival, when he had overpowered her to the point where she couldn’t do anything to him.

Yes, she was keeping up. She was competing with Hegni in speed, in strength. And she wasn’t clad in that mysterious golden light that increased abilities, either. This was her true, full-fledged status.

Hegni’s eyes twitched in shock as his face twisted and he unleashed a slash.

Pushing Lyu back out of range, he roared—

“You’re Level Six!”

The einherjar froze, unable to believe their ears as his question echoed across the battlefield.

“You leveled up *twice*?!”

Again, back in Babel.

“It’s possible! It’s definitely possible!”

Just as excited as the deities around him, Hermes laughed loudly.

“Lyu has fought! Ever since the day she ended the dark ages by herself! She’s fought this whole time! Even far from Astrea’s side! A history and series of great feats no less impressive than Aiz and the rest of the first-tier adventurers!”

—The annihilation of the Evils’ main forces that she had accomplished by herself.

—Defeating the Black Goliath on the eighteenth floor.

—The war game against *Apollo Familia*.

—All of the battles surrounding the Xenos incident.

—The bold push when she and Bell fell into the deep levels.

—And overcoming her destined enemy, Juggernaut.

She had made it through all of those deadly encounters, and those were just the ones Hermes knew about. They were all great feats even the gods had to acknowledge, trials that the goddesses so loved.

And more than anything, Gale Wind had already been at the pinnacle of Level 4 when she had gone missing five years earlier. At the time, it had been whispered that she was on the verge of leveling up. Considering how quickly Aiz had made it from Level 4 to Level 6, five years wasn’t an impossible amount of time for Lyu to achieve her great feats. For the first time since the start of the age of the gods, a consecutive level up had occurred. A feat that even the record holder hadn’t achieved.

*Loki Familia* watching from their home, including Aiz, stared in wonder.

“She always faltered and hesitated, but even so, all this time, she has sacrificed herself for the justice that she once believed in, saving Bell and so many other children time and again! Consecutive level-ups shouldn’t be impossible!”

All the more so because she kept fighting under the restriction of being only Level 4.

The trials that would have been easier had she become a first-tier adventurer were instead all the more cruel and severe. So long as she continued to rack up more amazing feats—so long as she kept gathering the highest-quality excelia—it only made sense that an unknown to turn the mortal realm on its head might be born.

And all of it was because she reached the answer represented by her justice: hope

“You made it in time, Lyu...Astrea!”

Hermes had a satisfied smile seeing the long-awaited reinforcement he had helped before the war game finally arrive.

“I lost miserably, unable to do anything against you or against Warlord.” Beneath her familiar emerald cape, she wore shorts and long boots the color of a great tree and pure white battle gear on top. “So I couldn’t afford to remain the same.”

She had left Orario alone, on a journey to see Astrea. To update her status that had been frozen in time. To get stronger.

With Hermes and Asfi’s information and help, she had reached Zolingam, the city of swordsmiths. The greatest sword-making city in the world, where the goddess of justice had gone five years earlier, waiting, believing that she would someday be able to help Lyu.

Thanks to that, the new weapon in Lyu’s hand was both a coincidence and a natural outcome. Alvs Lumina, her wooden sword that had been destroyed in the battle with Juggernaut, was processed and reborn into the stardust sword, Alvs Iustitia. The fairy’s new blade, crowned with Astrea’s other name, the star maiden of justice.

“This time, I will claim victory...Dáinsleif.”

Her quiet resolve summoned a gale. Before Hegni could fully recover from the shock, Lyu went on the attack. Her golden ponytail danced as she unleashed a series of attacks. Much like Hegni’s longsword, whose reach could extend, her



wooden sword was flooded with her magic power, imbued with her Mind Load skill, wielding a destructive power that was shocking for an elf.

In pure numbers, Hegni's strength should have been higher, but each and every one of his slashes was knocked away, sending a tremor into his dark hands each time.

“—Surround that elf, einherjar!”

“!!!”

Just then, an order flew from amid the healers in the back line.

Heith.

Quickly judging Lyu to be a troublesome element and taking things into her own hands, she ordered the einherjar forward.

“Heith! You would interfere in our duel?!”

“Unfortunately, I have no concern for your pride, Hegni! Nothing is more important than Lady Freya's glory and victory! Am I wrong?!”

“Gh...!”

“It is our duty to remove every minor uncertainty to offer Bell up to her!”

After gaining some distance from Lyu, Hegni had immediately roared at the healer, but when the goddess he worshipped was brought up, he could only gnash his teeth.

Despite being just a healer, Heith was skilled. Stepping in to take command in Hedin's stead, she was thorough in snuffing any possible source of a counterattack. The coalition's right wing and center had long since been shattered, so the einherjar on the main battlefield swarmed to focus on the Level 6 Lyu.

It eased the pressure on Aisha's band, but in exchange, over forty second-tier adventurers surrounded Lyu.

“...”

Lyu calmly looked around at the cage of warriors. She was standing in the middle of their circle, targeted by arrows, staves, swords, and spears.

“...This is the grave of a knight not even allowed a duel. You may curse this moment and place, and our fate.”

Once the signal was given, the wall of weapons would clip the fairy’s wings.

Seeing the result that would soon come, Hegni regretfully lowered his blade.

“That’s...! Ms. Lyu!”

“We will not allow you even the embers with which to set off a flare.”

That was the sheer difference in the current balance of power.

On the one side, Lilly could do nothing but watch because she had no pieces left to move, while on the other, Heith coldly watched the fairy’s imminent execution while the strongest army stood undamaged. The remnants of her clothes that had been burned by Mord were tied around her bare chest to give her a modicum of modesty.

Holding her arm out, she gave the order.

“End this, ein—!”

Or more precisely, she was about to give the order.

But before she could finish, Lyu whispered.

“I’m using it, Lady Astrea.”

Yes.

There was a voice that rang only in her long ears, like a star falling from the sky. It was the goddess’s smile. The blessing of the stars.

Holding the stardust sword *Alvs Iustitia* in both hands, she raised it to the heavens like a knight—like a battle maiden of the stars. Closing her eyes, she spoke the name of her new power.

*“Astrea Record.”*

The next instant, a glimmer of starlight appeared.

“What?!”

“A magic circle?!”

No.

What bloomed at her feet wasn't the bore of a mage's proud cannon, it was innumerable hieroglyphs of light. The characters that governed the sword and wings of the stars, the same hieroglyphs as the status engraved on her back.

*"Duty shall be fulfilled, and the scales shall be balanced."*

Her lips intoned a scripture-like verse of justice.

"Casting...?!"

"It's magic! Don't let her finish!"

The einherjar's eyes widened, and then they swiftly leaped into action. Arrows and the blasts of magic swords were unleashed from all sides—but they were all blocked by the starlight gleam.

"What?!"

The einherjar, Hegni, and Heith were all dumbstruck.

The field of light that extended a five-meter radius around Lyu blocked the rain of arrows and blasts of magic. The countless glowing hieroglyphs floating in the air like bits of stardust shrouded Lyu, forming a wall to protect her.

"A barrier?! No, a sanctuary?!"

There was no other way to describe it.

While Hegni's eyes widened, the elf's chant accelerated.

*"Bastion of order, crown of the honest, evil-crushing torch."*

Faced with a sanctuary that could defeat all attacks and with a psalm of the stars echoing in their ears, the einherjar impatiently charged. They attacked directly with swords, spears, and axes, trying to cut and push through the hieroglyphs of light, but it was meaningless. Not only could slashes and thrusts not pierce the barrier, they were actually pushed back.

*"In the goddess's name, charging through space, bind the star traces to this land."*

"Gh...Ooooooooooh!"

Finally, Hegni became a black arrow. Casting aside the resignation and pity he had felt moments ago, he swung his black blade to tear through the star's

protection. There was a massive spark, and for the first time, the sanctuary shuddered. Hegni's eyes flared, and he roared as the light's sparkle tried to push him back.

"Haaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!!!"

There was a shrill crack, like glass shattering, and he was through. The star's protection failed against the full strength of a Level 6, and Hegni closed the distance, swinging his sword at Lyu standing in the middle.

"—*Justice returns!*"

But Lyu was faster. She finished her spell. Her eyes flew open. As her sky-blue eyes were revealed, Hegni saw it. The fragments of stars that should have shattered.

The gleaming hieroglyph crystals. They gathered around Lyu before being absorbed into her. The vow of the stars had been completed. With the answer she had reached in her heart, Lyu called *her* name.

"*Agris Arvensis!*"

Crimson flame.

"Gh?!"

The stardust sword was wreathed in a bright red gleam as it sent Hegni flying. Thrown back by the attack, both his legs and his left hand tore through the ground as he skidded to a stop. Einherjar, adventurers, and deities were speechless seeing that red gleam.

"Flame enchantment...?! Impossible!"

With Hegni's shout, the dam burst. A shock that passed over those who didn't know, stirring up chaos among only those who knew that spell.

Beyond the island.

Watching far from the battlefield, when Shakti saw the scene, she murmured in a daze.

"...Alize?"

But before tears could leap to her eyes, Hegni's voice thundered through the

air.

“That is Scarlet Harnell’s—Alize Lovell’s magic!!!”

The name of a disciple of justice who had fallen five years ago. That magic and the girl who fought evil using it were a crimson flower seared into a great many people’s memories.

Hegni knew it, too. He remembered the gleam of *Astrea Familia* that swept through that dark age. And Scarlet Harnell’s beautiful, blazing figure, the most brilliant of them all. Hegni Ragnar had secretly respected that girl’s flame, which shone with an inner light he could never possess, and he would never forget it.

“How can you use her magic?! Answer me, Gale Wind!”

Clad in a noble flame, Lyu answered Hegni’s anger simply.

“I completed my journey.”

It was a long road. The elf who had lost every last one of her comrades, had been consumed by the flames of revenge, was once burned to ash, but lived on in stagnation until she at long last reached the end of her journey. Overcoming the darkness of the Dungeon, guided by a boy’s pure bell, she found the path that led to the shore of light. Lyu Leon had reached the answer to her justice: hope.

“And meeting Lady Astrea once again, I *inherited* their wills. Nothing more.”

In finding her goddess again, it had appeared, manifesting in her.

A new magic inscribed on her back. The flame imbued in her hands, feet, and sword swelled, as if in response to her newfound justice.

“I will say it one more time. I will hit you with all of *us*—and this time I will win!”

She launched herself off the ground. Her shoes were wreathed in flame as they tore through the stone. The next instant, an explosive flower blossomed, and Lyu became a flaming missile.

“Gh?!”

Faster than the second-tier adventurers’ eyes could track, she appeared

before a stunned einherjar and struck.

“Gaaaaaaah?!”

Crimson flame exploded. The warrior fell in a single blow.

Her enchanted sword had knocked out a Level 4 human before he had a chance to react.

“Tammuz?!”

“How?!”

“In one attack?!”

Her blazing trail didn’t stop there.

The flame enchantment on her feet was a lubricant and an accelerant. Manifesting Scarlet Harnell’s famed explosive acceleration, she bit deep into the flustered fighters of *Freya Familia*.

One slash, two, then three. A speed and sword that resembled the wind, accompanied by explosive blasts. It looked impossibly absurd, and yet it crushed five einherjar in an instant. With the pure strength and firepower that characterized flame elemental magic, whether it acted as a sword or a shield, she blasted her enemies away, equipment and all.

“Uoooooooooooooooooooooh!”

The einherjar, losing six comrades in the blink of an eye, roared a challenge. They were enraged seeing Lyu break through the encirclement only to charge straight at them instead of trying to get away. They answered with the swing of a greatsword, the loosing of an arrow, the thrust of a spear—but it was all pointless.

The crimson fairy’s flight tore through attack and defense alike.

“Fuuu!”

The wind’s crack and the fire’s roar formed a chain.

The einherjar were all scattered by Lyu, unable to do a thing. They were shot down one after the other as the mortal and divine spectators stared in wonder. If there was one fatal mistake that could be pointed to, then their inability to

immediately work together had done them in.

If Hedin had been close by to assume direct command or if it were *Loki Familia* who prioritized cooperation and teamwork, then no matter how quickly the losses mounted, they would have been able to respond. But these were *einherjar*. Because their individual strength had been forged and tempered so much in the familia's crucible of combat, even if they could charge at the same time as their allies, they couldn't independently coordinate at a high enough level that might obstruct her movements or corner her.

And the current Lyu would never lose, not so long as she could continue her series of one-on-one fights.

Hegni was sure of it.

Because he could see *her*.

"\_\_\_\_\_"

The crimson girl's face behind Lyu as she charged forward at high speed. He could see Scarlet Harnell smiling as she fought alongside Gale Wind. The fairy wasn't alone. The emerald wind and crimson flame danced together. They raged, as if they had always been together.

"Is that...Alize's magic?!"

Another bombshell landed in Babel.

There was no deity who didn't know *Astrea Familia*, which had been annihilated five years ago. Seeing Lyu use that powerful flame enchantment, deities leaped to their feet and shouted.

"She's using someone else's magic!"

"Can it be...summoning?!"

"Like Thousand Elf?!"

The gods and goddesses excitedly theory-crafted based on the one and only confirmed example of a follower with the broken ability to use another person's magic.

"No, that isn't summoning."

But Hermes shot their theory down.

“That is inheritance.”

He said it with utter confidence as he smiled, as if seeing something brilliant and dazzling.

Their justice had returned. Like the countless gleaming lights in the night sky. The spirit and will of *Astrea Familia* that had once scattered and turned into stardust lived on inside Lyu.

*Astrea Record.*

That was the new magic Lyu manifested when she ascended to Level 6. A miracle for Lyu Leon alone that allowed her to inherit the magic of all ten of the followers who shared the same falna and had Astrea’s ichor inscribed on their backs. A wild irregularity that exemplified the potential hidden in the mortal realm, an unknown up her sleeve. And a vow of the sword and wings of justice that she had been bequeathed. With a grin and the greatest excitement he had felt thus far today, Hermes also gave her a blessing in the form of applause.

“...*Astrea Familia*...”

“It’s *Astrea Familia*...”

Below the tower, in Central Park.

When he saw the flames of justice reflected in the divine mirror overhead, a tear fell from a traveling merchant’s eye. A couple who had been saved by the followers of justice during an age of darkness hugged their beloved daughter and wept. They were the fruits of justice. The proof that what those noble girls had done in the name of protecting the weak hadn’t been forgotten. They didn’t know why she was standing on that battlefield. But there was one thing they could do.

The crowd’s tears transformed into a roaring wave of cheers.

*“Distant forest sky. Infinite stars inlaid upon the eternal night sky.”*

And—

*“Heed this foolish one’s voice, and once more grant the starfire’s divine protection. Grant the light of compassion to the one who forsook you.”*



And though she had inherited the justice of her comrades, Lyu's original magic hadn't weakened.

"Concurrent casting...?!"

"S-stop herrrrrrrr!"

The einherjar abandon any semblance of calm and swarmed Lyu as her voice and magic power resonated. But they couldn't catch her. Not only that, those who tried to approach her carelessly were struck down by explosions instead.

"Tch?!"

Hegni had been standing still in shock, but finally, in a frenzy, he slashed at Lyu.

Unlike the rest of the einherjar, he was a first-tier adventurer, and even Lyu couldn't easily evade him.

*"Come, wandering wind, fellow traveler. Cross the skies and sprint through the wilderness, swifter than anything."*

But parrying one slash, and then a second, she still proceeded with her cast.

High-speed casting while in high-speed combat. Hegni's expression twisted bitterly both at her skill, as great as any magic swordsmen, and her ability to not falter even under his attacks.

This fellow elf was more accustomed to singing than anyone.

*And a magic circle even...!*

There was an emerald-green pattern resembling a forest that had spread at her feet.

It was a circle that raised the force of magic, the proof of an advanced mage.

Before she had gone missing five years earlier, Gale Wind hadn't had a mage's propensity.

Realizing she had even manifested a new ability, he also understood that the barrage she was about to unleash would send the battle into chaos.

Hegni should have been able to cut down an opponent who was splitting her attention between him and a cast, even if she was Level 6. But the crimson

flower stopped him.

Just when he was one step away from breaking her stance, the flame enchanting her sword exploded, messing up his range and knocking him off balance instead.

The shock as he realized he couldn't stop her struck everyone watching from the outside, too.

*She's too fast?!*

Heith was astounded by the elf moving faster than her eyes could follow.

*Strong...*

As her opera resounded, Hedin acknowledged his fellow elf who was capable of standing beside them.

*What is that?!*

Lilly's eyes spun at the insane scene of the einherjar being overwhelmed.

*"Imbue the light of stardust and strike down my enemy."*

And the Level 6 fairy let loose.

*“Luminous Wind!”*

The mass of giant balls of light and green wind swallowed up the main battlefield.

[illegible]

Leaping up, she unleashed a massive, wide-range spell from overhead.

Each gleaming piece of stardust had a tremendous destructive power, and every single einherjar caught by the attack was blown away, crushed, or swallowed up in a flash of light and wind.

The blast had been aimed not just at the front line but also at the back lines, where Heith and the Andhrímnir were not spared by the destructive swirl.

""""What?!""""

“That magic...!”

“Lady Lyu?!”

The Gulliver brothers were stunned by the torrent of light and wind kicked up from the direction of the coalition’s right wing, which should have been destroyed already. Aisha’s and Mikoto’s eyes shot open as well.

“...Lyu...”

Inside the goddess’s house, when she saw the chain of flashes and explosions far in the distance, even Freya, who had been unaware of the details of the battle, knew that the Gale Wind had appeared. As her bodyguards finally frantically returned, she hid what she was feeling in her heart as her silver eyes narrowed.

The tremor reached Bell where he was being pummeled by Ottar.

The sound of the explosion reached Allen’s ears while he was hunting down more deities.

The shock wave even jolted Hestia as she frantically fled her pursuers.

The intervention of a single elf had shaken the whole ruins.

“You’ve done it now...!”

The only one who managed to escape the brutal storm of light was Hegni.

He had used his own super-short cast magic to cancel out the missiles of light and, unlike everyone else, had managed to evade the danger. He quickly looked around the surroundings.

The damage his allies had suffered was horrendous. The einherjar gathered in the north of the main battlefield were practically all knocked out of the fight, and several of Heith’s Andhrímnir healers had been taken out by the blast as well, forcing them to focus on their own recovery and not maintain the battle lines.

The spell had marked the battlefield with a huge amount of debris. The blast was still echoing in his ears, and he had even lost sight of Hedin’s position in the back.

Undamaged, save for his torn and battered cloak, Hegni preserved his dignity as a first-tier adventurer, but his brow furrowed as he grasped the enemy's true aim.

*That wasn't a concentrated fire aimed at me, that was spread as far as possible! To scatter everyone else, to remove all obstacles!*

Meaning that right now they were the only two people standing on this battlefield.

Meaning the conditions for their duel were set.

“—Let's fight.”

“Ghhh!!!”

Breaking through the massive cloud of debris, accompanied by the crimson flame, Lyu approached from overhead.

Swinging his head up, his eyes flaring, Hegni had a face like that of a true tyrant as he met the star blade.

“Don't you look down on me!”

The black curse blade and crimson star sword met again.

A battlefield still shrouded by a curtain of debris.

There was no interruption, no intervention. The graveyard of knights that refused to allow a true duel had already disappeared.

And so the white and dark elves committed their body and spirit into defeating the enemy before them.

“HaaaAAAAA!”

“...!”

“Slow! Weak! Pathetic!”

Hegni hammered all of his pride in his own sword at the impertinent elf trying to defeat him. Trading slashes with Lyu's flaming sword, he unleashed a twisting cut that broke his opponent's immediately raised gauntlet. Sparks flew, but even so, Hegni didn't take a direct hit from the explosive slash. The enchant that had such absurd firepower was a threat. But he already had a grasp on the

flames' area of effect and how hard they hit when he traded blows with her while she was concurrent casting.

He saw clearly that Lyu's fighting style had a hole in it.

"Clad yourself in your friend's flame all you like, but my warrior-slaying blade will not be extinguished!"

Anyone who tried to make such a massive firepower explode at extreme close range would always be exposed to the danger of being pushed to self-destruction. Lyu couldn't control the output of the flames nearly as precisely as Scarlet Harnell had.

Which meant Hegni should move forward. If he stepped in with the resolve to endure the scorching inferno, he would find a path that the other *einherjar* couldn't travel. There was a gap there that only Hegni, who boasted the first or second highest melee strength of all of *Freya Familia*, could pass through.

"Rip and tear, Victim Abyss!"

"Gh?!"

On top of that, his curse sword Victim Abyss's power was still active. Beyond the tip of his longsword, the extended slash range passed through the crimson petal, landing a shallow cut to Lyu's shoulders as she narrowly dodged backward. The invisible blade couldn't be blocked by the bursting flame.

The title vanguard killer wasn't for show. Combined with Hegni's extreme skill with a sword, it transformed into a dance of slashes that was impossible to see through.

"Don't get full of yourself after just two level-ups! You are still below me, girl!"

Despite having accomplished the never-before-seen feat of two level-ups, Hegni's opponent was still in full control of her body. She wasn't letting her massively boosted status dictate how she moved or fought. He didn't know what she had been doing before coming there, but that was worthy of praise.

But even so, Hegni's combat ability and experience couldn't be overcome with just that alone. A first-tier adventurer of *Freya Familia* and a first-tier

adventurer of any other familia were different.

Their polished and honed techniques and tricks, their resolve that overcame the fear of death, and their loyalty to their goddess made them into warriors worthy of being called supermen. That was what it meant to overcome the baptism, to win out in the familia's internal war, to rise to the summit of the einherjar.

Even if Alize and the followers of justice lent Lyu their strength, there was no way that Hegni would lose after summoning the strongest version of himself with Dáinsleif.

—That was how it should have been.

“...Gh?”

He boldly advanced, pressing the attack. Forcing wounds to the enemy's forehead and arm.

But Hegni was being pushed back.

“Fuuu!”

Lyu's slash kept catching his black blade.

The petals of rampaging flame.

Gradually, with certainty, they were threatening him.

*What...?!*

The enemy's movements were speeding up...no. Hegni's reactions were slowing down.

His body was losing its ability to keep up with the movements he envisioned.

“—This is a war game.”

Her sky-blue eyes saw it.

As Hegni wavered at the change in his body, Lyu stepped in herself and said it.

“Comrade, how many adventurers did that sword cut before you fought me?”

The moment those words hit his ear, a tremendous shock ran the full length of his body.

*It can't...?!*

His fingers holding the curse sword trembled. The cloud of dust was gradually fading. The curtain was rising. Hegni endured Lyu's furious attack while his eyes ran around the surroundings. Not to the fallen einherjar. Not to Heith and the other healers dealing with the wounded.

To the tactician Daphne covered in wounds, still sleeping in Cassandra's arms.

*Her!*

*Her plan is...!*

"Curse weapons demand a price in exchange for the great strength they grant."

"Gh?!"

"In most cases, it is a lowered status, or a *stamina cost*!"

As Lyu correctly asserted, Hegni's Victim Abyss was a curse weapon. In exchange for the murderous ability to extend its slash range, it absorbed its user's stamina. And just like the wounds made by its blade, that damage was a curse that couldn't be immediately and fully healed by potions or magic.

Hegni had subconsciously been using his curse weapon too much. Against the coalition, an opponent like no other: an army of upper-class adventurers.

Against the rabble that had so recklessly challenged him!

"The people who fought you before me have whittled away at your strength!"

Lyu's proclamation landed with a painful blow, and this time Hegni blinked.

—*Get cut down.*

Given that order, Ouka, Chigusa, Bors, the residents of Rivira, and Daphne herself had all drawn one attack or more out of Hegni's sword. The adventurers who disguised themselves as prey to be hunted had lured Hegni into using up his stock of attacks.

"Daph...!"

Sitting on the ground, watching their furious fight, Cassandra wept as she hugged Daphne's battered body. Her tyrannical order had been all for this. Not

to stall for time by keeping him there but to shave away at his strength, entrusting the rest to their allies. For that, they had allowed themselves to experience the hell of his slashes for as long as they could bear it.

*Impossible...?!*

Ordinarily, Hegni would never have done something so foolish as overuse his curse weapon. But starting from the furious battle with Tsubaki, he had fought the coalition's strongest fighters more than anyone else in *Freya Familia*, and subconsciously, he had gone astray.

The menacing Crozzo magic swords, the light that pushed a Level 5 blacksmith to Level 6, and then Daphne and her party that didn't know when to give up. Because he had experienced the coalition's strength firsthand—and realized that if he made a mistake, he could be wounded—Hegni had grown aggressive without realizing it, rushing to annihilate all threats.

It was connected.

It was all connected.

Lilly had grasped the strategy, Daphne had implemented it, and Tsubaki and the others had fought until the very end—it all led to this moment.

“If this were a pure duel, then the result would still be unclear.”

There was a high-speed slash that knocked the sword from his weakened grip, and it seemed like time froze.

“But this time, we will win!”

*Thud.*

She shouted as the tip of her sword pressed against Hegni's chest. The crimson flame enchanting her right arm and her sword flared to full bloom. Lyu unleashed a massive burst of magic as she shouted its name.

“Alveria!”

“Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah?!”

The crimson explosion at the closest range possible sent Hegni's body flying. Burned, broken, and at the mercy of gravity, he slammed into a broken ruin.



Smoke rose from all of his limbs. His battle clothes had been scorched away. His unconscious eyes were covered by his disheveled hair.

A silence fell over the battlefield. A first-tier adventurer had been defeated. A Level 6 had fallen. The impossible had happened—a crack had formed in the bastion of the strongest.

Everyone stood quiet, unmoving.

But that only lasted for a moment.

*“Dooooooooooooooooooooown!!! Dáinsleif is doooooooooooooooooooooooooooooown!!!”*

Over the mountains, Orario erupted.

*“Down! Down?! Wh—wai—what?! A Level 6 is doooown! What?! Hooooooooooooow! That’s amaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaazing!”*

Ibly shouted in total confusion.

His throat grew hoarse, but he leaned out over his seat and continued to shout, and seeing him do that, the rest of the city joined in. And the adventurers. And even the deities roared.

*“—————!!!”*

The city shook. The ground quaked. That roar lit a fire in everyone who heard it. People in the surrounding countries leaped to their feet, wondering if an explosion had gone off in the city at the center of the world.

*“They did it! They did it!!!”*

Tiona shouted and shook Aiz’s shoulders even as the girl’s eyes were still glued to the mirror.

*“They punched through Dáinsleif!”*

Beside her, Tione leaped to her feet, in thrall to her excitement.

*“One of Freya Familia’s core members...!”*

Riveria’s and Gareth’s eyes were both opened wide at the incredible feat that had just been achieved.

“—That’s enough.”

And Finn.

Braver smiled at the girl whose strategy had led to such a minuscule possibility.

[illegible]

Meanwhile, inside Babel at the center of the town, the deities were at a loss for words.

The gods and goddesses, those cheering Freya and those not, they all leaped to their feet, hugged the closest deity to them while staring in shock at the trembling mirror.

A tremor shook the entire city.

The shooting star of justice landed in the middle of what looked like a game that was all but over and turned all of Orario into a raging inferno that couldn't be extinguished.

“Yessssssssssssssssss!”

And amid all of it, Lilly allowed herself a little celebration.

Having achieved the absolute minimum requirement for victory that Finn had set for her—defeating a first-tier adventurer—the prum girl forgot the current situation in her excitement.

Not einherjar. Not Andhrímnir. A first-tier adventurer. Both tactically and strategically, that was an absolute requirement.

This was the one person she had wanted. Lilly had focused on Hegni Ragnar. The formation where Tsubaki and the smiths and then Daphne's party had fought so hard became the setup to a massive payoff. And the final push had come from Lyu.

It wasn't just a lucky punch. It was the hope that they had all dragged out with everyone's effort even while being crushed by despair.

"The flow is changing...! With this, the flow will change!"

It was just one victory.

But for the coalition, it was larger than anything, and for *Freya Familia* it was a more painful loss than any other. The loss not of a mere pawn, but an irreplaceable major piece, was sure to cause a disturbance.

In contrast to the city, the main battlefield fell silent as the Gulliver brothers and the other einherjar fighting against the left wing of the alliance stood in shock.

“Hegni...lost? ...No way...?”

Morale wavered, and even if Hedin had been there himself, the shock couldn't have been stopped.

Outside the survivors in the southeast of the main battlefield, the einherjar had been almost completely wiped out by Lyu's barrage. Panic started to spread, even to the main base, where the goddess sat in wait.

“H-Heith?!”

“H-Hegni! What should we—?!”

The Andhrímnir were the same. The dedicated formation of healers and herbalists made up only of women cried out in confusion.

“—Silence!”

““!!!””

Heith's rebuke quickly quelled the panic.

“We are the Andhrímnir! Those who satiate and heal the einherjar! *Without end!* No matter how often the warriors fall, we treat their wounds, smack them awake, and send them back out!”

The furious witch who worshipped the goddess silenced the panic that threatened to consume her charges.

“I will heal Hegni! He will rise at once! Rona! You and the others tend to the Einherjar! Our victory is unshakeable! There is no need to lose your presence of mind!”

““Y-yes, ma'am!”””

With Heith's scolding, the healers managed to regain their calm.

Using magic and items, the healers and herbalists worked together, hastily reading their treatments.

*The coalition...and Gale Wind!!! You've really done it now! But even so, all that you did was down Hegni! Even if it hurts morale, it does nothing to change the state of the greater battle! We still overwhelmingly hold the advantage!*

Internally swallowing a bitter pill, Heith pulled herself together.

They had finished healing their fellow healers who had been caught up in Lyu's barrage. Now the full force of the Andhrímnir could reestablish the line. They had supported the struggles in Folkvangr for years now, so they could handle that much.

And that was also a massive thorn in Lilly's side. Their failure to finish off Heith and the healers at the start was redounding painfully now, as the sparks of unrest were being quelled before they could turn into a blaze.

"I won't allow the flow to change! You will never find any hope!"

With loyalty to the goddess in her heart, she rushed to where Hegni had fallen.

"Kyaaaaaaaaaaaaa?!"

A thunderous explosion struck the Andhrímnir.

Heith was caught up in it, too.

"—Waaah?! ...Huh?"

They had been bombarded.

A rain of magic was falling all around them, searing their flesh.

The Andhrímnir and Heith were being targeted with pinpoint accuracy.

That in and of itself was fine.

It wasn't ideal, but coming under attack was expected. The problem was the angle of the bombardment.

It was coming from behind them.

And it was a hail of *lightning* that was pelting them.

.....What?

There should have been no enemies behind them, and it was supposedly a direction they didn't need to worry about.

Heith slowly, awkwardly turned to look toward her familia's main base.

Standing there was a single white elf.

Of course he would be there. The marshal, holding his rhomphaia out with one hand.

Hedin Selrand.

He had placed Heith and her healers not too far and not too close, just inside the range where he could utilize the full strength of his magic—and he was sniping them.

.....Huh?

Heith's mind went blank.

As she struggled for what might have been all eternity to comprehend what was happening, Hedin said only one thing.

*"Struggle for eternity, indestructible soldiers of lightning."*

A merciless declaration of destruction.

*"Caurus Hildr."*



*"Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeehhhhhhhhhhhh  
hhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh?! Wait, what?! Eeeeeeeehhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh?!"*

Ibly's shriek was unending.

He almost dropped his magic-stone microphone in shock while verbalizing what everyone in the city was thinking.

*“Wait, wait, wait, what?! Seriously, what?! I can’t keep up, what is going on, seriously, please, wait for me!”*

Seeing the furious curtain of lightning pouring down on the Andhrímnir, the city exploded yet again. They had erupted like never before when Dáinsleif was taken out, but the incomprehensible attack by Hildsleif that almost immediately followed broke their brains' ability to process events.

No one could tell what was going on.

The first thing the masses suspected was that the divine mirrors had malfunctioned even though the deities roared that there was no way something like that could happen.

The adventurers understood what they were seeing was reality and were consumed by total confusion.

*"Friendly fire?! Is this a blunder by Hildsleif?! Did he mistake friend and foe?! But he's still firing off shots...aaaaaarrrrrrggggghhhhhh, I don't knooooooooooooooooow! Help me out here, Lord Ganesha! What's going on!"*

*"That's Ganeshaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa?!"*

*"What do we do about this?!"*

They couldn't get things under control. The commentators were less than useless. They were just hapless noisemakers at the mercy of the events unfolding on the battlefield.

Everyone in Orario watched dumbstruck, even the deities, and the exact same thought crossed their minds.

They just couldn't believe it.

Because there was no way that could happen with *Freya Familia*, who demonstrated such absolute fealty to their goddess.

*"...He betrayed them...?"*

Someone in the crowd in Central Park said it.

That one word gained momentum, transforming into a tidal wave.

*"Hildsleif switched sides?!"*

*"R-rebellion?!"*

*"No way!"*

“Don’t be crazy!”

“There’s no way! This is Hedin Selrand we’re talking about!”

The most anguished cries came from his fellow elves.

He was cruel and stern, but he was a white elf more loyal than anyone. Many people couldn’t believe he was a turncoat even with the truth staring them in the face.

“It’s like *Apollo Familia*?!”

The masses had a powerful sense of déjà vu.

—No.

Lilly could say for sure this was different.

Though she doubted her eyes after seeing such an unbelievable scene, she could still firmly say that something else happened that time. The apparent betrayal during the war game with *Apollo Familia* was what the people in Orario and many of the coalition adventurers were probably thinking of.

But they were wrong. Completely wrong.

That was a strategy carried out by Lilly using her magic. The prum Louann hadn’t actually betrayed *Apollo Familia* at all.

So this wasn’t the same.

This was true madness.

“Is what Mr. Bell said really...?”

Lilly was dumbstruck as her thoughts flew back to what had happened a few hours earlier.

Before the war game had begun.

“Hey, Lilly...could you hear me out?”

After she had fired up the coalition, what the white-haired boy had seemingly made up his mind to tell her.

“I have a feeling Master...Mr. Hedin...will *help us*...”

Not just Lilly, Hestia and everyone else there was taken aback by what he had

said.

“When the world was twisted, when I was cornered...while Master was battering me, it felt like he was also helping me.”

“So he was battering you...”

“Well, yeah...uh-um, anyway! It was like he was talking to the *real me*, not *Freya Familia’s* Bell Cranell...!”

—*Whether you would be a heretic or not is irrelevant.*

—*Move forward. Standing still is what is unforgivable.*

Those were the words he had spoken when Bell had been on the verge of losing sight of himself. And during the twilight in Folkvangr, with the bright setting sun at his back, he had shown Bell what seemed like the smallest of smiles.

In Bell’s vague explanation, Hedin had carried out an unrelenting baptism, but it had felt like he was trying to guide a hapless pupil.

“Master seemed somehow different compared to Mr. Van or Mr. Allen and the others...but it’s not like he will be our ally, either, though...that’s probably impossible...”

Looking down at that, Bell struggled for the words to explain himself, before finally looking up.

“...Maybe, even before my date with Ms. Syr...Master was only acting for *her* sake...That’s what I think now.”

“So he might lend us his strength...to use us...”

Bell sounded like a pupil who couldn’t fully comprehend his master, but even so, he still believed in him.

It wasn’t a possibility that could be fully counted on, so as the commander of the entire operation, Lilly couldn’t afford to just have faith. That was why she had answered, “The possibility of something *like that* happening seems to be impossibly low.” And Bell accepted that, just asking her to keep it in mind.

“His hunch really...turned out to be...”



Snapping back to the scene in front of her, Lilly stared in amazement.

A fresh hail of lightning was falling on the Andhrímnir. Even far away from her perch on the mausoleum, she could see it. And that scene was proof that the possibility Bell had sensed was coming to fruition.

She didn't know what Hedin intended. His true intent was still shrouded in doubt. But cutting away all but the strict reality in front of her, the first-tier adventurer Hedin Selrand had— “—Switched sides?!”



“AAAaaaaaaAAAAaaaaaaa!!!”

Heith let loose a voice somewhere between a roar and a shriek.

The cascading lightning continued to fall. Healers and herbalists blown away by the raining bolts slumped to the ground one after the other, while Heith alone shuddered as every emotion erupted inside her.

“What! What are you doing! What are you thinking, Hedin!!!”

Performing high-speed healing on her charred and scorched body, then batting one of the bolts of lightning aside with her rod, she glared straight at the elf in the distance.

“Shooting us, your allies! Have you lost your mind?!”

As if expressing her rage, her long red hair billowed free from its bindings.

After summoning seventy-eight magic soldiers, Hedin answered calmly.

“I am of sound mind. I would never misfire.”

“Gh...?!”

“By my own judgment, I decided to annihilate you.”

As if to support his statement, the magic circle at his feet swelled with more magic power. The coral-red eyes behind his glasses betrayed no trace of madness. With the thoughtful and intelligent gaze the Heith knew so well, Hedin had performed his brutal act with full understanding.

This time, another hundred white bolts of lightning appeared in the air,

targeting her, as her fists trembled.

“You would betray Lady Freya?! You?! Her loyal retainer?! Even if the whole world turned against her, I thought you and the captain at least would always protect her!”

“Do not measure me by your selfish standards, fool. You make me sick,” Hedin replied in annoyance. “And I have not the slightest intention of doing Lady Freya any harm.”

“What?!”

And then he put it even more simply, so that Heith in her fury could understand it.

“I will sin for the sake of my devotion. That is all I am saying. Just like Hörn.”

“\_\_\_\_\_”

That was the name of Heith’s fellow healer.

She didn’t know how Hörn felt. But to Heith, she was a clumsy girl who annoyed her at times, who she looked after at times, who she sympathized with at times. One of the few people she had counted as a friend. And she had been a traitor.

“...You too...even you!!!”

She experienced the same feeling of betrayal she felt when she found out Hörn had betrayed the goddess. A traitor like Hörn. When she confirmed that, Heith cast aside all doubt and embraced a raging inferno of wrath.

“Have you no shame, apostate! Lady Freya’s will is absolute! How can you speak of devotion while turning your back on it?!”

“Talking with zealots like you is tiresome. And a waste of time. Go to sleep.”

The barrage of lightning began anew.

Even though Heith was the only one still left standing, the awful lightning strikes continued to fall.

“As if!”

Struck by successive blows, her body was scorched and blasted, at times her

limbs were barely hanging on, but the golden crest on her skin quickly undid all of the damage.

*“Ars Gullveig!* Even if you are a first-tier adventurer, you can’t finish me off! I am Heith Velvet—the witch Lady Freya bestowed with gold!”

A golden glow emanated from her as she continued healing with a bottomless regeneration. The auto-heal that even Crozzo’s magic swords couldn’t break. Despite being a Level 4’s magic, it still endured Hedin’s Caurus Hildir. It was truly an absurd ability.

“So long as I am here, the einherjar and Andhrímnir will not fall! I will protect Lady Freya!”

Heith raged as the anger went to her head. Bathed in countless lightning strikes, her body shuddered, but she stepped forward, attempting to advance.

“Silence, pig.”

“Wh—”

Hedin spoke, as if it was a waste of his time.

“Can’t finish you off? Fool. Your magic isn’t eternal. It’s finite.”

As if it was bothersome even to explain.

He continued speaking while maintaining his barrage.

“Mind is required to make use of magic. That is something everyone knows.”

Heith’s Mind capacity was a clear cut above other healers and mages of the same level as her.

The amount of healing she could sustain over time was one of the coalition’s greatest concerns.

However...

“Between my Mind and yours, who do you think has the greater capacity?”

“\_\_\_\_\_”

Hedin Selrand.

The magic swordsman who even Riveria Ljos Alf acknowledged had the

highest total Mind of anyone in the city.

When that realization hit Heith, it quenched her fiery rage. and she froze.

“It goes without saying who will run out of strength first.”

The barrage accelerated.

A furious torrent of lightning that surpassed even Heith’s healing levels.

She healed, regenerated, recovered, and continued to be struck and scorched by lightning. Heith’s magic creaked and groaned. Her advance halted, and finally her knees struck the ground. Buffeted by an unceasing barrage, she saw it—the scornful sneer on the elf’s handsome face.

“Your gold is inferior to that incomplete goddess—to Hörn.”

Her eyes widened, and she screamed as he revealed the jealousy that she had felt toward Hörn.

“Aaaah!!!”

Lightning.

Destruction.

When the merciless artillery barrage finally stopped, what lay on the ground was a golden wreckage that turned out to be not so eternal after all.



“Hedin Selrand...!”

Lyu was visibly stunned.

It had been almost instantaneous.

Right after she had defeated Hegni, he immediately unleashed his magic and annihilated the Andhrímnir.

She went still for a few moments at the impossible situation.

“Gale Wind! Go to the northwest!”

After putting Heith down, Hedin fired off a command.

“That stupid rabbit...Rabbit Foot is fighting Ottar in an amphitheater there!”

“!”

“Facing that one alone is hopeless! Go do something!”

Her fellow elf unhesitatingly gave Lyu an order. After a brief instant’s shock, Lyu shot back.

“You expect me to listen to a member of *Freya Familia*! To believe you’ve switched sides?”

“I cleared away all the healers that were such a threat to you. Do you need any further proof?”

As he said that, a bolt of lightning floating above his shoulder—magic he had had on standby—activated.

The target was Lyu’s position...because a battered beast person had been sneaking up on her. He slumped to the ground with a groan. It was an einherjar who had used his allies as shields to somehow survive her Luminous Wind.

Lyu’s eyes widened at the efficient shot that had protected her.

“...I find it difficult to accept this. You could rightly say I am agitated.”

“From my view, you are just as irregular yourself. As a result, I had to move up the timetable for my plan.”

Hedin leaped closer, still keeping a certain distance as he stood across from her.

Despite their words, the two white elves calmly revealed their thoughts.

“But there was value and meaning in moving sooner.”

“...”

“I’ll use you. So make use of me, too.”

“...Answer me one question. Why?”

Hedin’s answer was unchanged.

“Obviously, for my master’s sake.”

Their eyes locked.

Their matching blond hair swayed in the sandy breeze.

After a moment, Lyu decided to trust her fellow elf's eyes.

"I will go to Bell. What will you do?"

"My thunder is more efficient for destruction than your wind. I will follow after taking care of some cleanup. Go."

Turning away from her, Hedin deployed another magic circle.

He didn't even look at Lyu as he put the determination in his heart into words.

"It is I who embarked on this foolish path. I am the sinner who disgraced the goddess."

*I won't yield that position to anyone else.*

With that last, unspoken declaration, Hedin began the bombardment of *Freya Familia's* headquarters.

"Gaaaaah?!"

"H-Hedin! What are—?!"

"Uwaaaaaah?!"

The einherjar on standby were devastated by a storm of lightning.

Even though he had moved the headquarters forward while leaving Freya in the house of the gods at the westernmost point of the island, he let go of all hesitation. The members of *Freya Familia* that had been held back in reserve were swept away before they could realize what was happening.

The stone pavement exploded, and a storm of lightning filled the area.

"L-Lady Freya?!"

"Hedin is attacking the headquarters!"

News of the disaster quickly reached Freya.

Hearing the report of her guards who came rushing in, there was a look of amazement on her face.

"Gh...? Hedin...?"

This was a development even Freya hadn't predicted.

Even she never doubted Hedin's loyalty. Because before the war game, even with the eyes of a deity, she could detect no lie in his pledge of loyalty.

"I will not beg your forgiveness, Lady Freya."

Imagining the look that was likely on her face in that moment, Hedin murmured to himself.

Narrowing his eyes slightly, hiding the foolish emotion he felt, he looked out over the battlefield more nobly than anyone.

"This is my ego. In exchange for being branded a traitor, I will see this through to the end."

With Hedin's resolve, the bombardment intensified.

It was a lighting blast that made friend and foe alike stare in surprise.

*Freya Familia's* headquarters and its left wing.

The entire main battlefield was in firing range for him, and his mopping up made a giant mess of the battle.

""""What are you doing, Hedin?!""""

Dodging or swatting aside all of the magic bolts fired at them, the Gulliver brothers erupted.

"Guaaaaaaaaa...?!"

More einherjar fell, helpless to do anything against the menace falling from the skies.

It was an ultra-dense fusillade that struck only *Freya Familia*, and in the face of its terrible destructive power, even Level 3 adventurers were knocked out entirely from a single shot. And there were no more Andhrímnir to revive them. Without the blessing of resurrection, they were just simple adventurers.

The ultimate formation that had so tormented the coalition melted away before their eyes.

As the screams and shouts reached his ears on the wind, Hedin monologued.

“I did say this was the strongest formation.”

—*When they are within earshot, I can command the warriors as freely as I move my arms and legs.*

—*This method is the most efficient. This formation is the strongest.*

He had said all of that himself.

An absolute brain controlling the individually powerful einherjar like arms and legs. That did indeed possess a destructive ability greater than *Loki Familia*, who excelled at strength in cooperation.

However—

“But if I were to fall, or to *change sides*, that would make this the weakest formation.”

From another angle, *Freya Familia*’s current deployment was too dependent on Hedin. More than *Loki Familia* depended on Finn, even. So if there were some disruption to the head of the formation, it would collapse in the blink of an eye.

They had already completely lost the chain of command. The einherjar were overly optimized for fighting and ran around aimlessly while the elf who could precisely see the board was able to unleash an accurate and mercilessly fusillade.

“There is nothing strange at all about this. It is the natural consequence of my decision.”

Who possessed the greatest magic firepower in this war game?

Hedin.

Who had the greatest range on this battlefield?

*Hedin.*

And who understood the deployments of each side and grasped the current state of the battle better than anyone?

***Hedin.***

Hedin Selrand’s betrayal was the one and only event that could sink this



battle into unrecoverable chaos.

“I have preserved my Mind. Don’t worry, I’ll eradicate every last one of you.”

The defeat of a first-tier adventurer would break the spirits of any army.

So what happened after the betrayal of a first-tier adventurer?

The answer was simple.

Despair.



“It’s shifting!”

Finn’s eyes opened wide.

“It’s shifting?!”

Hermes was dumbfounded.

*“It’s shiftiiiiiiiiiiiiing!!!”*

And Ibly let go with a loud shout.

*“The balance! Freya Familia’s overwhelmingly superior position! A single savage elf has upended the balance of power!!!”*

His stupendous bombardment that had poured down across the main battlefield. Orario shook again after witnessing the destruction Caurus Hildr left in its wake.

Even complete amateurs could tell that *Freya Familia* had been dealt a painful blow.

This was a situation that Finn hadn’t imagined and Hermes hadn’t foreseen. That was only natural. Even Hedin’s patron goddess Freya hadn’t suspected this.

But regardless, the tide was turning.

“You can’t say the remaining forces are even! The first-tier adventurers, even minus the black and white knights, are still unscathed! But the einherjar and Andhrímnir being taken down means that Lady Freya has her back against the

wall now...!”

Hermes leaned forward toward the mirror as cheers and boos filled the thirtieth floor of Babel.

Most of the coalition’s deities had dropped out. Only four remained: *Hestia Familia*, *Miach Familia*, *Hathor Familia*, and *Plutus Familia*. The number of followers who could still fight had dropped below thirty. It was already just a coalition in name only, hovering on the precipice of complete destruction.

But *Freya Familia*’s *einherjar*, excepting those at the house of the gods serving as Freya’s guards and the squadron in the east led by Allen, were almost completely wiped out, and the familia members following the Gulliver brothers were even now running for their lives from the barrage.

Strictly speaking, if the coalition could keep Ottar and the other first-tier adventurers in place while scraping together a force strong enough to assault the house of the gods, they could pressure the queen whose defenses had grown terribly thin.

“This is different! They have a clear path to victory now!”

Meanwhile in *Loki Familia*’s home, Finn shared his thoughts with the familia.

“It’s huge that Ottar and Allen are so far away...!”

He was excitedly standing on the sofa.

*Freya Familia*’s number one and number two. If they worked together, they would be able to put the coalition down, even with Hedin switching sides. That was just a testament to how much power and speed the city’s strongest and the city’s fastest could bring to bear.

But Allen was currently on the far eastern edge of the island on Hedin’s orders.

The lines of communication couldn’t be stretched any further. And Ottar was fighting in the ruins to the northwest, far enough away that even Allen couldn’t cover the distance in an instant.

“He gained a lot of time and distance sending Allen after the coalition deities! ...He adapted Lilliluka Erde’s original failed strategy!”

That theft made Finn groan as he looked down at the game board from a distance.

And Lilly, whose strategy had been hijacked, just wanted to scream at Hedin.

“What is this cherry-picking all the good parts for yourself...!!!”

Lilly was furious atop the mausoleum.

Her anger was understandable. After all, he had easily coopted the strategy that she had feverishly crafted while enduring pressure that she swore would be the death of her. There was a sense of defeat and inferiority seeing him easily accomplish what had been impossible for her.

“What nobility? What honor? He’s just a savage, evil elf!”

She stomped and flailed her arms, screaming with tears in her eyes.

“—Is probably what your spewing, but don’t misunderstand.”

Hedin spoke, accurately predicting that she would be having a tantrum.

“This is all your achievement. Your deployment was excellent. Be proud. It was adequate enough for me to recycle it.”

Because the positioning, commands, and tactics were all skillfully done, Hedin was able to adopt her strategy for himself. Or more precisely, because it was skillful, he judged it worthy of coopting. It was because she was there that the battle had gone in this direction.

“Arrrrrrrggggghhh! Ms. Haruhime, Ms. Aisha! Fall back with the Berbera! Forget the enemy! Just completely ignore them! You’ll get used as cover from the barrage!”

“Y-yes, Miss Lilly!”

*“I know! I’m not getting mixed up in this insane magic!”*

What made that clear was the fact that Lilly had given that order through the oculus *before Hedin had announced his betrayal.*

The einherjar couldn’t even try to use the coalition adventurers as shields. Aisha’s group had pulled back from the left wing at some point, linking up with Haruhime’s reserve, aiming to gather in front of the mausoleum, at the point

where Tsubaki's completely destroyed division had been.

A location where they wouldn't get in the way of Hedin's shots.

"Efficient. But that is as it should be."

Lilly had promptly anticipated the situation and prepared for the possibility that Hedin would switch sides. Precisely because none other than Hedin had arranged it.

He had set out all the signs in advance.

He had moved *Freya Familia's* headquarters up farther than necessary, approaching the Andhrímnir, as if signaling the possibility of his betrayal in a way that only a commander in the field could possibly notice.

Not because he had confidence in a commander he had never even met before.

But because he trusted the shadow of Finn lurking behind her.

"If he was giving you hints, then you should be able to see it."

Hedin had even used the information he learned at Wishe, that Finn intended to teach Lilly.

They hadn't arranged it in advance. It was solely Hedin's decision. His plan couldn't work unless he succeeded in deceiving both his allies and his enemies, so of course he wouldn't share it there. Allen and the others had sharp noses. If he had made contact with Lilly, they would surely have seen through it no matter how much subterfuge was involved.

Because of that, on the other side of the mirror, the prum hero smiled, guessing everything.

*Lilliluka Erde...you probably noticed the possibility of my betrayal based on the fact that I was holding a good portion of my Mind in reserve.*

Other than the opening barrage that had stunned Daphne and Lilly, Hedin intentionally refrained from any area-wide bombardments. He left the following rampage to Hegni and the others, preserving his Mind for this moment.

Lilly might have been scared the magical barrage could resume at any

moment, but on realizing that it wasn't coming, she would surely have felt something was off. Putting all those pieces together, she would guess what he was really targeting.

Even though he couldn't be sure, he expected her to be prepared to use him, even as she fought against such an immense force—and though Hedin had no way of knowing, it was the possibility that Bell had voiced earlier that was the final factor in her decision.

“You pass. I acknowledge it. You are capable, prum. Far more so than that stupid rabbit.”

After giving her his greatest praise, which would have made Bell cry if he heard it, Hedin adjusted his glasses.

It wasn't just Lilly, either.

Though he accepted the insolence of it, he had also made use of his master's sudden change of intent. Thanks to that, he had been able to distance Allen from the main battlefield. If it was Hedin's order, it would have invited argument, or in the worst-case suspicions of his betrayal.

Hedin hadn't let any of the opportunities that had appeared slip by, including Gale Wind's sudden reinforcement. Sifting through the enormous range of possibilities, he had managed to materialize this current situation.

“The majority of the coalition was sacrificed all for this moment. And even with that, the balance of power is still disadvantageous.”

It had been a major gamble.

Like a king embarking on a once-in-a-lifetime gamble, Hedin had been forced to push all-in.

That was just how powerful *Freya Familia* was.

“But there still remain some usable pieces.”

There were still cards left at hand with which to fight.

So they still had a chance of victory.

“To fulfill my wish—and to have her realize her wish, I shall lend my strength.

Work like your life depends on it, adventurers.”



““““Hedin, you bastard!!!”””””

The Gullivers were furious.

Of all people, it was the retainer whose loyalty they never questioned, even if they did detest him. Their rage knew no bounds.

“That piece-of-shit four-eyes!”

“How mad does he have to go before he’s satisfied!”

“Purge him!”

“Murder him!”

The lightning continued to rain down. And worst of all, the Andhrímnir who were the familia’s lifeline had been wiped out. The balance had shifted. There was no scale great enough to measure the sin Hedin had committed. The four brothers let loose a shout that terrified friend and foe alike and, ignoring the coalition entirely, they started to charge at the loathsome white elf.

But—

“Oraaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!!”

A steel fist unleashed a thunderous blast.

“Gaaaaaaah?!”

The powerful blow slammed into the ground, blowing away all the einherjar fleeing the hail of lightning in a panic.

The shock emanating from behind them forced the Gulliver brothers to turn around.

““““What now?!”””””

Spinning around in annoyance, they were greeted by several figures.

“Who, us? Allies of justice of course! We’ll be jumping on Lyu’s bandwagon, mew!”

“As if there’s an ally of justice like you, black cat.”

The shadow of a cat person spinning a knife appeared in the cloud of dust. And a human figure stood up, pulling their fist out of the cratered ground.

The breeze flowing through the massive caldera blew the cloud away, revealing the group that had appeared on the battlefield.

“We’re here for some payback, minimes!”

Runoa Faust drove her right fist into the palm of her left hand.

*“Meooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooow!!!”*

Chloe and the rest of the cat people yowled to echo that declaration of war.

“That’s...! Lady Runoa, Lady Chloe?!”

“They’re...the tavern girls?!”

Haruhime, who was still invisible, and Aisha were both taken aback.

“““““The Benevolent Mistress!”””””

There was venom in the Gulliver brothers’ cry.

The workers at The Benevolent Mistress were not wearing their usual green uniforms but an array of battle clothes and armor. Runoa wore short clothes that bared her stomach and a scarf, Chloe a short, hooded cape. They and the rest of the girls were wielding weapons that no civilians would hold and brimming with determination to fight.

“More reinforcements after Ms. Lyu...?”

Lilly also noticed the girls from The Benevolent Mistress appearing at the southeast end of the main battlefield. Runoa and Chloe, who were Level 4, went without saying, but the others also gave off the air of upper-level adventurers.

Orario’s strongest tavern had joined the fray.

“Whoa, enemies and allies are sleeping everywhere meow. This is why we were in such a rush.”

“We’re seriously late. All ’cause of a certain stupid cat.”

Chloe casually swished her tail as she looked around while Runoa's lips broke into a smile.

And then a single cat person walked out from behind the group.

“—I'm back meow, *Freya Familia*.”

A golden shoulder guard that reflected the sunlight and a spear with a gold design.

The few remaining einherjar murmured at that familiar sight.

“Vana Alfi...”

“Ahnya Fromel!”

The stunned voices focused on Ahnya.

And the chaos also reached the eastern edge of the island far in the distance.

“Allen! The lightning flashes that have been going off! That was Hedin attacking our—!”

“That miserable fly...! What the hell is he thinking?!”

Allen and the einherjar hunting down the deities noticed the disturbance at their main base. Hearing the report of the scout that had run to the center line and then hurried back to report, Allen was furious, but his expression changed again when he heard the next part.

“A-also...reinforcements from The Benevolent Mistress have been confirmed! Including Vana Alfi—”

“—What?!”

The scout was speechless after giving that report because of the mask of fury that appeared on Allen's face. As the other einherjar gulped, Allen clenched his silver spear, as if to snap it, and glared to the west.

“That dumbass!”

The hellish gazes of the einherjar skewered Ahnya. And her brother who was somewhere on the island would find out soon enough, and he'd scorn her, too.

Surrounded by her personal trauma—Ahnya kept her eyes up and forward,



refusing to flinch.

“Abandoned cat! Still clinging on!”

“Didn’t Allen and Lady Freya—no Lady Syr—already break your spirit?!”

When the city had been twisted by Freya’s charm.

Her own flesh and blood had poured salt on her wounds, and the goddess had given her the most cruel revelation.

In fact, she had crumpled. She had holed up in her room and wasted away ever since then.

Answering Dvalinn and Alfrik’s insult and observation, Ahnya nodded honestly.

“My spirit did break, meow. No, it was totally shredded and messed up...I didn’t understand anything anymeowre,” she answered in a lonely voice.

Runoa and Chloe and the others held their tongues.

“But I won’t waver anymore.”

But the next moment, she looked forward with determined eyes.

Past the Gulliver brothers.

To the western end of the island, toward the house of the gods, where the girl was.

“I came to help Syr, meow!”

Ahnya howled her resolve across the battlefield.



Going back in time.

“Why are you here, you useless goddess?”

“What’s it matter, this is a bar, ain’t it?”

Before the start of the war game.

The CLOSED sign was hanging on the door to The Benevolent Mistress, but a lone goddess was drowning her woes in alcohol, her cheek resting on the bar. It

was Loki, of course.

Other than her, there was only one other person in the tavern: the owner, Mia.

Because she refused to serve the goddess any more alcohol, Loki had even brought her own.

“Hey, Mama Mia...not gonna join the war game?” Loki rambled drunkenly, looking up from the counter.

But even so, Mia was unwavering.

“Go home. Nothing will change no matter how many times you come here.”

As Mia implied, Loki had been coming to the tavern for days now.

Or more precisely, every day since before the rules of the war game were set, trying to persuade Mia to take part.

“I can’t join, but the Guild can’t say jack about me hanging around anywhere outside the battlefield. I don’t like letting that shrimp take the cake, but just this once, I decided to do what I can to make sure Freya loses.”

“Got nothing to do with me.”

“Bete and them are all pissy, too. Finn’s even giving out all the advice he can.”

Loki just kept talking, and Mia, who had heard it all several times before, now just looked at her in disgust. She was polishing a glass, as if fed up with having to deal with this drunk customer.

“Hey, Mama Mia. We’ve got a bet going for the war game this time, too. You know what the numbers are?”

“How would I?”

“One hundred to zero. No one will take the bet. Every last deity bet on that bimbo.”

“...”

“That’s not even a gamble anymore, so the bookie just gave up. That’s how rigged this war game is. ‘Cause of that Guild idiot, this is just gonna be a public execution.”

Loki didn't try to hide her annoyance.

She just grumbled more complaints into her cup like "What three great quests, stupid, stupid, stupid."

"But...there is a way to make it ninety-nine to one."

Loki's joking demeanor suddenly disappeared, and she raised her head.

"If you joined the coalition."

"..."

"*Freya Familia's former captain* Mia Grand. The Level 6...Demi Ymir. If you switched sides, then just maybe...is what everyone's thinkin'."

That was before Ottar was captain.

She had half-retired from *Freya Familia* during the dark ages, but she had made it through that terrible baptism, all while sniffing her nose at it all. She knew all of Freya's children well, and still had the goddess's blessing on her back, so if she joined the coalition, she would immediately boost their chances and could even be the ace up their sleeve.

But Mia kept her silence.

This time was different from when the city had been trapped in Freya's world. With Freya, who had been willing to abandon everything for Bell, Loki could accept that Mia hadn't been able to take too big a step out of line—as demonstrated by Hestia's, Hermes's, and Asfi's struggles to break free.

But it was different now. Freya couldn't use her charm. There was no reason for Mia to be so passive.

"You gave his back a nudge, but you won't lend him your strength?"

Mia polished the glass.

And polished it.

It wasn't like her.

Getting frustrated with the goddess's all-seeing eyes and the pointlessness of it all, she sighed.

“...I made a deal with that goddess.”

“A deal?”

“I swore that if she ever happened to meet her Odr, I wouldn’t get in the way.”

Mia skipped the details, but she was referring to an old story. When a still small dwarf had met a goddess in a field of flowers.

“And that boy is her Odr...That bimbo’s fated partner?”

“That’s how it is.”

“How stupid...You’re gonna keep that deal? You? Mia Grand?”

Mia didn’t particularly blame Loki’s reaction.

She had resisted and rebelled before because she didn’t like how the goddess of beauty was going about things this time. She had felt something from Bell when he kept trying to fight while still being driven into the corner from every angle, so she gave him a little push.

But in the back of her mind, she also thought that if she hadn’t done anything at that time, the goddess would have gotten her hands on her Odr. As terrible and twisted as it might have been, she would have achieved part of her wish.

“What do you think that goddess was doing the first time I met her?”

“...? What, pull that high-handed ‘Become my follower’ crap or something?”

“She was crying. On the ground in a field of flowers, hands covering her face.”

“!!!”

Loki’s eyes widened, and she couldn’t believe her ears. Mia’s gaze drifted into the distance.

“My start with her wasn’t the goddess, it was the girl...I knew her true nature was on *that side*.”

That girl weeping all alone in a field of flowers at twilight was still burned into her eyes. At the time, Freya hadn’t made her deal with Hörn, and of course she didn’t have the girl’s face then, either. But in Mia’s eyes, the goddess crying in the field of flowers had just looked like a lonely girl.

“Chloe and Runoa and Ahnya...I snapped when she messed with my stupid girls. That was why I pushed that kiddo’s back.”

“ ...”

“But your bimbo is just another one of my stupid girls.”

“ ...”

“If even I betray her this time, if I give her a real good smack...that idiot might really break this time...That’s what I’m afraid of.”

Mia set the glass she was polishing aside and weakly shook her head. The doubt and hesitation that only she knew, as the one who had spent more time with the girl than all of her other followers. Looking at the fist that had once clocked a goddess but that she couldn’t swing again, she closed her eyes.

Loki fell silent and looked at her.

“I understand you can’t abandon Freya or Syr.”

“ ...”

“But you know, Mia. I’ve known that bimbo even longer than you.” Bringing up their time in the heavens, Loki flashed a wicked grin. “She is a nasty queen who reeeally hates to lose. Being real here, I think she can’t control herself anymore and is just desperately flailing around. I’d bet on it.”

“...What are you getting at?”

“If Freya was looking for a way out, would you help stop her?”

Mia refused to bend her will, avoiding getting caught up in a deity’s smooth-talking.

“Unless that stupid girl herself asks me to help, I won’t go.”

That moment. Loki grinned like a jester who had trapped her prey.

“You said it.”

“...What?”

“I’ll take you up on that promise.”

The goddess stood up.

“You’re coming with me, Mia.”

Lots of familias’ homes had been empty since the day before the war game.

It went without saying that it was because they had moved to the Orza ruins. *Hestia Familia* and all the others had put in requests to the Guild and *Ganesha Familia* to have their homes guarded in the meanwhile. Some had asked friendly familias not participating to watch their homes, and a few had left behind a few members.

*Freya Familia* was one of the latter.

There was no one willing to openly ally with them after what they had done to the city, not even the Guild. And even in this situation, Freya didn’t want to borrow anyone’s strength. Because of that, there were around twenty upper- and lower-class adventurers in the giant home.

*Freya Familia*’s accumulated wealth was immeasurable. With its defenses completely weakened, Folkvangr was like a mountain of treasure ripe for the taking. But even so, there was no one fool enough to try to break in.

The majority of the Labyrinth City, and above all the deities in charge of familias, didn’t doubt that Freya would win the war game. Anyone who tried to rob their treasure would assuredly be obliterated upon the einherjar’s triumphant return.

Because of that, there was no one so reckless as to break into their home, let alone to invade it.

No one besides *them*.

“Leeeeeet...meeeeew...go...!”

Ahnya’s loud voice rang out.

She was squirming and trying to break free while a lone werewolf carried her over his shoulder.

“Let mew go, Vanargand! This is kidnapping, no, catnapping! Copying big brother’s voice to abduct meow! You fiend!”

“Who’d copy that shitty asshole! Shut your mouth, you stupid cat!”

After Runoa and the others left, the person who had appeared in Ahnya's room was Bete.

A crass attitude, crass actions, and crass tone of voice. He and her brother shared those common traits. Ahnya had looked up in shock thinking her brother had come to see her, and then she had been forcibly carried off by none other than Vanargand.

"Take a nap!"

"Guaaah?!"

A member of *Freya Familia* had come running, drawn by their shouting, but Bete silenced him with a kick. Even with one arm locked up carrying Ahnya over his shoulder, the lowest-level guards couldn't stop the assault of a Level 6.

"B-breaking into Folkvangr...?!"

Ahnya was pale as a ghost. Even an ex-familia member like her couldn't help shuddering at such a reckless action as invading *Freya Familia's* home. Or rather, precisely because she was an ex-familia member, the blood completely drained from her face.

"You're more evil and awful than big brother meow..."

"Quit comparing me to that asshole over everything little thing! It's not like I want to do this crap, either!"

Bete shouted in annoyance as Ahnya withered on his shoulder.

"That stupid goddess...I won't forget this!"

He had rampaged wildly at not being able to join the war game, been silenced by Gareth's fists, and vented on everything around him when a few days ago his goddess had snuck up and whispered in his ear.

*"There's a way we can make Freya and them really cry. You in?"*

Even if he had been really pissed off then, he still wondered what the hell he had been thinking. Even though he knew he would end up getting used like this!

"Where are you going?! I've never been this deep inside the home, meow!"

The palatial estate had fallen silent. The only sound that could be heard was

Bete's footsteps as he ran down the wide, long, white corridor, making it clear that most of the guards had already all been dealt with.

"How should I know! I'm just following the smell!"

"...Smell...?"

Bete sniffed as he ran up a long staircase, reaching the fifth floor of the estate.

Before Ahnya's doubt could be resolved, he arrived at a big room on the western side of the building.

A white room with a chapel-like, atmosphere.

The ceiling was tall, and there was nothing inside other than a bed in the center of the room. And a girl with blue-gray hair lying atop it.

"Ah..."

Ahnya was speechless as she was set down on the ground.

The big space brought to mind a soul lost between the mortal realm and the heavens, and the girl sleeping like the dead, unmoving.

Finally, she reflexively tried to run over.

"Sy—mgh?!"

"Not so loud."

She was stopped by Bete's outstretched hand.

Loki had already told him about the connection between Hörn and Freya. SO he knew the identity of the girl lying there. Loki had given him something of the girl's, and he had followed its smell all the way here.

Glaring at Ahnya, his eyes told her not to make a noise as he covered her mouth. She just barely managed to nod.

"...This is...Syr, right? Syr...wasn't just Lady Freya?"

"...She's like a mirror. What she's saying is the same as that bar girl's true feelings."

Bete didn't like bothering with complex explanations, so he just covered the



basic point.

With Vana Seiðr active, Hörn's senses were connected with Freya's. So even if the war game had already started, he still kept his voice down to avoid Freya realizing what was happening.

Ahnya looked down in disbelief at Syr's twin—or rather Syr herself. The bed almost looked like a coffin. As if the girl had slipped into her eternal slumber. Her heart ached, and she almost slumped to the ground.

Ahnya understood why the rough werewolf had brought her there.

He was telling her to listen. To learn what was true and what was real. What the girl who had pushed Ahnya to destruction really wanted.

But Ahnya couldn't do it.

She was still terrified. Of Freya laughing at her again. Of Syr betraying her. If the same cruel, unchanging reality awaited her, Ahnya wouldn't be able to stand back up again.

Covering her mouth with her hands to keep herself from sobbing, Ahnya somehow managed to bring her spasming lungs back under control as she stood in front of the bed. Standing there trembling, unable to ask anything— “Sorry... Ahnya.”

“\_\_\_\_\_”

Time stopped when those words slipped from her lips.

“Ahnya was abducted by Vanargand?! Are you sure, Roshi?!”

“Y-yeah! Mei saw it...!”

“What's going on! Why now!”

The corridor outside was growing noisy.

Chloe and Runoa and the rest of the workers at the tavern appeared, having chased after Ahnya. Reaching the big room, they started to say something, but time froze for them as well when they saw what was there.

“Sorry...Chloe...Sorry...Runoa.”

In a holy white room that brooked no lies, they heard it.

“Sorry...Lyu.”

Their eyes widened, and they stopped breathing.

“I’m so sorry...Mia.”

Mia, who had just come rushing in with Loki, was stunned.

“...Sy...r...”

Ahnya’s eyes wouldn’t listen to her anymore.

A tear trickled down her cheek, and she couldn’t untangle her tongue.

“Stop me...”

And as if sharing her feelings.

A tear welled from Syr’s closed eyes.

“...Save me...”

Ahnya’s tear fell on the girl’s cheek. Her hand trembled as she touched the girl’s cheek, wiping away both of their tears.

Bete didn’t stop her. Even though she knew it would be transmitted to the goddess, Loki didn’t stop her, either.

The others watched, speechless as Ahnya slowly turned around. Facing away from Syr, she walked forward, eyes down, until she stopped in front of Mia and everyone else.

“Chloe, Runoa...everyone...Mama...”

Several teardrops fell at her feet. The translucent tears splashed against the marble floor and shimmered in the light.

“I...am scared of my brother...I’m even more scared of Lady Freya, meow...”

Her voice was trembling. The cat’s tears didn’t stop. Runoa was teary, Chloe hid her eyes behind her hair, and Mia watched as Ahnya looked up.

“But...Syr asked...She asked to be saved...”

Tears fell from both of her eyes. Her face a mess, the cat that had been abandoned still mewled.

“I’m an idiot. I don’t know anything...What’s a lie, what’s true...! But still!”

The tearful mewling turned into a powerful resolve.

“I want to save my family!”

In that room where no lie could be told, her plea lingered in their ears. Runoa, Chloe, the other waitresses, none of them said a word. They didn’t have to.

“...So, what will it be, Mia?”

And finally, the goddess’s question. The dwarf who had watched Ahnya’s tears closely, closed her eyes. As if being overwhelmed by Ahnya’s resolve. As if accepting Syr’s plea.

Quietly clenching her fist, her eyes opened forcefully.

“—I’m going.”



And back to the present.

“Can you hear me, Syr? It’s fine even if you can’t because I’ll shout loud enough that it doesn’t matter, meow!”

Holding her spear in her right, she put her left hand to her chest and shouted toward the house of the gods.

“I’m coming to save you now! Even if Lady Freya says not to, I swear I’m coming!”

The tears were gone from her eyes. She had already made her decision. The cat had parted with her doubt and let out a roar.

“Until we hear you!” She turned her golden spear against the Bringar and Einherjar standing in their way. “We’ll beat alllll of them! We’ll fight and win! To stop you, Syr!”

The answer of those warriors was, of course—

“““““We won’t let you!!!”””””

The prum brothers and the few remaining einherjar bellowed.

As the strongest army charged with weapons drawn, Runoa cracked her knuckles, Chloe licked her lips, and Ahnya spun her spear overhead like a fan.

The Benevolent Mistress raged.

“Meow! Don’t get in our waaaaaaaaaaaaaay!”

The two sides clashed. Fertility and brave warriors.

It was like Ragnarök was beginning.

Though they were both aspects over which the goddess ruled, they both sought a battle to the death over *her*.

The golden spear swept enemies off their feet. Fists that knew only destruction shattered armor. A nasty knife created blossoms of warriors’ blood.

Enduring the four brothers’ fierce assault, they thundered their determination across the battlefield.

“Wait for us, Syyyyyyyyyyyyr!”

—*Thud!*

The goddess’s slender arm slammed down against the armrest.

“...How far must you go before you are satisfied?”

The stone throne easily broke her skin, causing blood to slowly well. But Freya didn’t pay that any heed as her eyes flared in rage.

It was the first time.

The first time that Freya had struck something.

The ground quaked, and the heavens cowered as the goddess’s anger was laid bare. All sound disappeared from the house of the gods. Her panicking bodyguards watched as Freya raged.

“How much must you get in my way until you are satisfied, Syr?!”

Was it directed at Hörn, who had once called herself Syr?

Or was it a curse aimed at her other self that she had already buried?

She wasn’t asking to be saved at all. What they had heard was all just the result of Hörn’s emotions and that dream blending together. *Asking to be*

*saved, the gall.* That was the goddess's assertion.

Her vehement declaration.

She would never ask to be saved. It was impossible. She would never accept it.

Freya was indignant her emotions had slipped all bounds and control.

"Hörn, Hedin, and you...! What is it?! Why do you go so far for Syr?!"

In place of the lightning that had stopped for a time, Ahnya's shout echoed outside the temple.

This was what Freya had been apprehensive of. Though it had been used by Hedin in his betrayal, her intent in hastening the complete destruction of the coalition was absolutely correct. A countermeasure taken out of concern for this awful situation—the joker card that was The Benevolent Mistress joining the fight.

It was all because Hörn—or rather, Syr—had misrepresented Freya. That was the source of the apology that had echoed in her head via their shared senses. At first, Freya had mistook it as part of the dream. That Syr, who was even through this still sleeping, was just talking in her dream.

But she was wrong. It was a message for Ahnya and them when they came to see her. Probably at Loki's provocation. Her oldest, insuperable bond among the deities, Loki was the only one who had an accurate understanding of the connection between Freya and Syr. She had done it as payback, just to see how she would react.

And right now, just as she had feared, the state of the battle had now become something where the result was up in the air.

They had come.

Ahnya and them.

And her.

"Ngh...Mia!"

"Bell!"

At the same time they had appeared on the battlefield, Lyu reached the amphitheater.

“Ms...Lyu...?”

“So you’ve come, Gale Wind.”

The boy was on his knee, barely more than a bright red lump of flesh. The boaz was standing calmly.

Lyu’s eyes flared when she saw the two polar opposites, and she swiftly transformed into the wind.

Ottar didn’t try to stop her as she cradled Bell, carrying him to a distant place to heal him.

“So...rry...”

“Don’t talk. Just stay still.”

“You...came...”

“Of course I did. If anything, I am sorry for being late.”

She held his shoulders, apologizing for letting him suffer like this as she filled with regret.

She continued using Noa Heal over and over, but his body wasn’t recovering at all.

The amphitheater looked like it had been cratered by artillery, and there were several crushed vials and bottles scattered all around. Even though Bell had clearly used all of his potions and even the elixir that Nahza had completed and was still terribly wounded. Lyu furrowed her brow as she wrapped Bell in healing light and looked forward.

Warlord Ottar. An opponent who was just too strong.

Even now that she was Level 6, Lyu couldn’t envision them defeating him.

The heart-chilling strongest warrior stared back at her.

Then—

“I’m butting in.”

It almost felt like a giant's footstep shook the ground—a single dwarf appeared.

“...! Mama Mia!”

“...Mia...”

Lyu was shocked, and Ottar's eyes narrowed ever so slightly at the second uninvited guest.

Mia was the same as always. She wasn't wearing armor or even battle gear, just her usual outfit and the white apron she wore while running the tavern. The only difference was a *shovel*.

It was a massive steel shovel, so large it almost looked like an ax. She was holding it lightly in one hand, letting it rest on her shoulder. Mia Grand was standing on the battlefield for the first time in a long, long time, wielding only a single shovel.

“You don't look surprised, boar boyo.”

“I suspected that you would come, too.”

Lyu and Bell couldn't believe their ears hearing her call a Level 7 boyo.

“Still...you chose here instead of Lady Freya?”

“Don't be stupid. If I went there, you'd just come flying over anyway.”

Mia was right. If anyone drew near the goddess, he would have swiftly concluded his baptism of Bell and moved to block the way. He was the final hurdle that Bell and the coalition—that Lyu and Mia and the rest of The Benevolent Mistress—would have to clear.

“Lyu! Hurry up and heal the kiddo and then help me out! Let's get this boar out of the way! You've got somethin' to tell Syr, too, don'tcha!”

“...!”

“And I need to give that stupid girl a good smack!”

“Yes, ma'am!”

Mia's big, booming voice lit something warm in Lyu's heart, something different from battle spirit or resolve.

“And kid! How long are you gonna keep lying there! Did you already forget what I told you!”

“Ghhhh!!!”

“The last one standin’ is top of the pack!”

It was the same for Bell.

As he sat down in the elf’s arms, his eyes opened wide, and he felt something burning deep in his heart.

“...Y-yes...!”

Seeing Bell borrow Lyu’s hand and manage to rise to one knee, Mia smiled.

“Come, Mia.”

The giant black sword split the air.

Unlike when he had been facing Bell, Ottar assumed a stance, preparing for battle.

“Don’t go gettin’ cocky!”

Shattering the stone beneath her feet, the dwarf rushed the boaz.



“““Mama Miaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!!””””

Orario roiled at a feverish pitch yet again as Demi Ymir joined the fight.

The reaction took one of two extremes. The relatively younger adventurers and those residents who had only recently moved to Orario were confused, but those few who knew her true identity cheered themselves hoarse. The deities even now making Babel quake aside, the cheers outside split between those who knew Orario during the early stages of its dark age, and those who didn’t.

But there was one thing they all shared.

The dwarf who was even now fighting with Warlord was unbelievably strong, and the cat people who had rushed in as reinforcements were also surprisingly powerful.



It was impossible to know now.

The adventurers and residents of the city were losing it because finally, the competition was no longer a foregone conclusion. Adventurers watching the mirror from a tavern wildly shouting “Kill ‘em!” while people looking up at the mirror on Main Street put their hands together in prayer. The bookie started making rounds among the deities, trying to open bets again, but Freya’s fans tied them down, and no one could take their eyes off the mirror for even a moment.

Voices rose in shouts too violent to be called cheering all around the city.

“C-Captain Shakti?! Is this really okay?!”

But there were some who couldn’t allow themselves to be carried away in the moment.

*Ganesha Familia.*

Deployed all around the giant caldera lake, the security detail who were watching the ruins had been plunged in chaos.

Just as they were doing their best to recover the adventurers who had been trampled by *Freya Familia* and those whose familias had dropped out, this reinforcement mess had started. Lyu had appeared from high above in the air, which they had had no way of stopping, but the humiliating part was that their perimeter around the lake had been broken as well.

At the southern end of the east-west dividing line of the island, the one bridge onto the island, The Benevolent Mistress’s staff had forced their way through, a blot on the pride of the city watch.

But it had been Demi Ymir of all people leading that charge, so even *Ganesha Familia* could be forgiven for being batted aside.

“Even if we avert our eyes to Demi Ymir and Vana Alfi, since they are Goddess Freya’s followers...none of the others are members of any of the coalition familias, right? This is a rule infraction, isn’t it, Captain?”

Outside the island, in front of the bridge, multiple Level 5 first-tier adventurers were still lying on the ground, eyes spinning as the young familia

member Modaka pointed at the island.

Shakti, who had been watching from a different location and only just rushed over, had a deeply conflicted look on her face.

“Quit complaining, Morsaga! Now Freya and them can finally be put in their place! Just look the other way!”

“You know we are supposed to be judges, right, Ms. Ilta?! And my name is Modaka!”

Ignoring their argument, Shakti considered the current rules.

Only those followers whose deities were on the island were allowed to participate. From that alone, Lyu’s participation was a clear infraction.

There were more than a few familia members like Ilta who couldn’t forgive *Freya Familia* and were willing to overlook it. But they were the city watch, the guardians of order.

If she were to say her personal opinion, Shakti wanted to support Lyu, who had fought together with her during the dark age, but *Ganesha Familia* also had to fulfill its duty. Even if that meant being berated for being hardheaded and inflexible.

“...Modasha is right. Leon’s participation goes against the rules set out at Denatus. The patron deities of all followers fighting must be somewhere inside the island. In view of the infraction, the coalition must be penalized—”

Shakti grimaced, prepared to make the hard decision, even though she knew that in this situation, a penalty would mean the immediate defeat of the coalition.

“So if the children’s parents are on the island, then it’s all fine. Isn’t that right, Shakti?”

Before she could say it, though, a beautiful goddess’s voice rang out from behind them.

“—! You’re...”

Shakti spun around at that.

Before she even had time to wonder at what sounded like a familiar voice, she reflexively shouted her name.

“—Lady Astrea!”

Long walnut-colored hair flowing down her back, she was wearing a pure, unblemished white gown. Her eyes were even clearer than Lyu’s sky blue, a deep indigo like the starry sky. It was unmistakably her—the goddess of justice, Astrea. Seeing her there, Shakti was dumbstruck.

“Why are you...?”

“Lyu found her answer and came to see me. So I am supporting her. That’s all.”

The goddess of justice, who had left Orario five years ago at Lyu’s request after she decided to seek revenge, smiled at an old acquaintance with an honest gleam in her eyes.

Behind her were several girls who seemed to be her new followers.

And behind them.

“Thank you for guiding us, Asfi. With your help, it looks like we just made it in time.”

“Not at all, Lady Astrea. I was just keeping my promise with Leon.”

Asfi could be picked out immediately due to her iconic aqua-blue hair.

She had been watching the war game with Hermes in Babel, but she left to go meet them. Lyu and Astrea and her new followers had been on their way back from Zolingam so far away from Orario.

Everything had been planned beforehand.

When the rules and date of the war game were set, she had sent word to Zolingam, and in the event that they were not going to make it back in time, Lyu would light up the paired magic item Asfi had given her before she left Orario as a signal, so that Asfi could meet them.

They had at least made it to within sight range of the city, so Asfi carried only Lyu, taking her into the air over the Orza ruins and dropping her, and then she

quickly returned and guided the rest of the re-formed *Astrea Familia* to the caldera.

“We’re here, too, Shakti.”

“Chloe and them took forever to come, so I wondered what would happen.”

“Lady Demeter...and God Njǫrðr...”

Another god and goddess appeared along with Astrea.

Demeter, who led Orario’s biggest agricultural producer, and Njǫrðr, who ran Meren’s fishing industry.

“The Benevolent Mistress’s girls have all converted already.”

“...!”

“They’re all our followers now. So if we take part, too, it shouldn’t be a problem as far as the rules are concerned, right?”

Shakti was taken aback.

Runoa and Chloe had begged their deities the day before the war game, and the girls from The Benevolent Mistress had finished their conversions already. So if the two of them set foot on the island, it wouldn’t be a rule infraction.

“I heard from Lyu. I never would have dreamed Freya and that girl were connected like that. But...she told me she would fight, even if it meant overcoming Freya’s will. To question the one who saved her when she should have died after losing Alize...”

Astrea didn’t hide the emotion she was feeling as her gaze grew distant.

But she also voiced her own determination, like a parent watching her own child grow up.

“Right now her justice involves stopping her friend. So I wish to shine starlight on her path, so that she can safely spread her wings...We will join the coalition.”

“Lady Astrea...”

“May we cross that bridge, Shakti?” Astrea’s walnut hair swayed as she smiled.

Shakti looked between the goddess and her followers.

They wore their familia's emblem—the sword and wings of justice arranged like a scale. The symbol of justice that had been Shakti's model and whose spirit she still carried.

As the deities and the familia members watched, Shakti closed her eyes.

And finally, she stepped aside, clearing the way for them.

"Please. You have the right to cross this bridge."

"...Thank you, Shakti."

Modaka couldn't believe it while Ilta and the others grew excited.

Without their captain's orders, the familia members provided a flower to each of the deities. Forming a path for them to walk past, *Ganesha Familia* and Asfi and Shakti watched as *Astrea Familia*, Demeter, and Njǫrðr entered the island.

"It's been a while, Astrea. Sorry for the late greeting. Have you been well?"

"Yes, Demeter. I'm glad to see you and Njǫrðr looking healthy."

"I would have liked to have a little reunion party...but this isn't the time."

The three deities who had known one another since before the dark age smiled in tandem, setting foot in the ruins on the other end of the bridge. The moment they stood on the island, the sounds of battle resounding through the air grew even more intense.

It was the sound of a life-and-death struggle, not something for adventurers from outside Orario to intervene in.

"Sorry for making you come all the way from Zolingam with me, Cecille, everyone."

"Not at all! We are your followers, Lady Astrea, and we will protect you no matter what! And also, this is an important thing for our predecessor."

The girls who had become her followers after she left Orario five years ago smiled cheerfully.

Astrea giggled as she looked ahead again.

To the western ruins where battle cries were even then still ringing out.

“We have the right to watch, but not to fight. So let’s watch from here.”

The goddess’s indigo eyes grew focused.

“We forgot to ban any outside familias!!!”

“I’m sorry, Lady Freya!”

Seeing Astrea, Demeter, and Njörðr, the male gods cheering for Freya cried out.

The fans who had thought it was impossible that any reinforcements would come to fight *Freya Familia*—who had even thought that if there were any, it would be more interesting if they did—were a day late and a valis short in their regret. As long as there was a loophole in the rules, the omniscient, impotent gods couldn’t blame Shakti’s judgment allowing them to join mid-war game.

The pandemonium happening on the thirtieth floor of Babel was unending, but a single goddess made her way through the noise.

“Now it’s finally a real fight.”

With an old man’s grunt, Loki sat down in an empty seat.

Diagonally behind her was Bete, who she had dragged there with her.

Ignoring him as he complained about watching with a bunch of annoying gods, she crossed her legs and looked up at the giant mirror hanging overhead.

Another god sat down in the seat next to her.

“Hey, trickster. Sending Mia in? What magic did you use to pull that off?”

“You’re one to talk, pretty boy. You pulled out all the stops to throw Astrea into the mix, didn’t you?” Loki snorted as Hermes waved his hand.

They were both supporting the coalition from the shadows.

Even understanding that the odds of the coalition winning were hopelessly bad, for their own reasons—to protect Bell, out of annoyance with Freya—they had continued working in the shadows, preparing countermeasures, all the way to the end.

It wasn't just them, either. Finn and many others who couldn't fight had provided support. And thanks to all of that, the coalition had managed to row themselves all the way to the watershed.

"Got any more tricks up your sleeve?"

"Nope. This is the real deal now. No more funny business."

They had used up all the arrows in their quiver.

Would the coalition grasp victory, fall in defeat, or arrive at some other result? The ones to decide that were the adventurers—and the deities—standing on the battlefield.

"I really don't like siding with that Jyaga titty monster, but...right now she's better than Freya. A whole hell of a lot better. So." The vermillion-haired goddess stared at the scene projected on the mirror. "I set the table for you shrimp...now win."

"Whoaaaaa...?! It sounds like something incredible happened while I wasn't paying attention...!"

Unaware of Loki's stare, Hestia muttered her hapless thoughts aloud like the epitome of incompetence.

As far as she could tell, there had been thunder, and a bunch of cats had gone on a rampage, and the stench of guaranteed defeat seemed to have cleared away some.

She had run for a while to not let Hephaistos and everyone's sacrifice go to waste. The self-proclaimed hide-and-seek master had managed to escape from Allen and the einherjar's clutches. Or more accurately, Hephaistos and Takemikazuchi had earned her enough time to slip out of range of their keen senses.

"The item Miach gave me...! It threw off the beast people tracking me!"

And also, the item Miach and Nahza had prepared.

Noticing that many of the pursuers were beast people who tended to rely on their noses, Hestia had put it on her head. That she had used it after parting from Hephaistos, while so many deities were dropping out all at once, had also

helped. The beast people chasing after her were confused when her scent disappeared, but they just changed to another target.

Not realizing she was hiding her face but not her chest—that her large bosom was peeking out from the shadows of the ruins—she stealthily looked around as the massive game of hide-and-seek wound its way down.

“...The enemy is...going back to the west?”

From deep inside a ruin, she saw a massive cloud of dust and heard a furious gallop that wasn’t horse hooves.

Learning of the danger to their main base, to Freya, Allen and the einherjar called a halt to their hunt.

Hestia breathed a sigh of relief seeing the einherjar cutting through the ruins at high speed on their way back west.

“But what do I do now...? Keep hiding here? Or keep moving? It feels kind of like reinforcements came from the south, so maybe it’s safe over there...?”

She had some knowledge about what had happened so far, but Hestia didn’t have the feel for the flow of battle, and so she was unsure what her next move should be. She would have liked to ask Lilly’s opinion, but most likely she was probably desperately firing off commands with bloodshot eyes. And if she activated the oculus, the prum’s loud shot might echo all around, revealing where she was.

*There aren’t many deities left other than me, either.*

She was at wit’s end in a situation where she couldn’t rely on anyone else.

“Hestia!”

“Ngh?!—Phew, Miach! Thank goodness. So you were safe, too!”

She almost sprained her back at hearing her name all of a sudden, but when she spun around and saw her friend running over, she called back cheerfully.

“Yes, you too! I was saved by Nahza’s item.”

If Hestia had fled using an item, then it made sense that Miach had made good use of that same item. Seeing they both still had their flowers on their



chests, they congratulated each other on making it out alive.

“Miach, what do we do now? It seems like Freya’s children went back west, so we should sneak off some other direct—”

“West!”

“Eh?”

“Let’s go west, Hestia!”

“What?!”

Hestia was taken aback when Miach unflinchingly suggested the one choice she had removed.

“Hide-and-seek has no more meaning in this battle! If Nahza and Bell and the others are defeated, we will just be hunted down!”

“...!”

“I saw the fighting from a hill! The battle in the west involves the full remaining force of both sides! It has to be won! And if there is one thing that we powerless deities can do—”

“—it’s update our kids’ statuses?”

Realizing Miach’s idea, she finished his thought.

“Considering the excelia they’ve gained in this war game, I’m sure Bell’s and their abilities have gone up at least a bit. Am I wrong?”

“No. Of course, we have to avoid being knocked out of the game, too, but...”

If they were to drop out, their followers would lose the right to continue fighting.

Miach’s face tensed at the accompanying risk of having their flowers stolen, but—

“No, let’s go. We can’t just sneak around in safety.”

“Hestia...”

“Let’s do what we can for Bell and Nahza and the others! We’ll become the goddesses of victory, Miach!”

“Yeah! Though I’m a god!”

Smiling at each other, they started running.

To the main battlefield in the west, where their followers had gathered.



For the first time, many adventurers discovered that the strikes of weapons that were far too powerful, far too heavy, could eclipse even thunder itself when strung together in succession.

“Whoa...”

The repeated clashes between the black greatsword and the steel shovel were just that.

Watching from where he had fallen in the spectator seats, the half-prum Van watched in awe as the destructive crashes seemed like explosions.

He had just woken up, and the furious battle left him speechless.

“Urrrrrrrrryaaaaaaa!”

“Nrgh!”

Bell and Lyu were just as speechless.

And even as they froze like statues, Mia renewed the assault. The attack from high above was met straight on by Ottar’s black greatsword. He himself was unwounded, but the stage itself couldn’t endure it. His thick legs broke the stone pavement, sinking as the amphitheater creaked. Swinging the sword aside, Mia was knocked back, and her massive body landed, shattering a marble column lying across the ground. There was an instant of stillness as the dust rose, but she immediately charged at Ottar again.

Destruction and annihilation collided. An absurd shock wave consumed their surroundings. The first thing destroyed by the fierce battle wasn’t either combatant, but their surroundings.

“Tch!”

As if lashing out because she couldn’t break his greatsword’s defenses, Mia resorted to her fist instead of the shovel. An uppercut with her free hand. Ottar

defended it with one arm and leaped backward. In the brief lull, the already half-wrecked amphitheater breathed a sigh of relief, and one of the pillars on the outer edge fell.

“You’ve gotten a little better while I’ve been away.”

“I see...”

Ottar rested his sword on his shoulder without sentiment. What crossed the warrior’s face was acceptance of the natural result, and also the disappointment associated.

“Mia, you’ve gotten *weaker*.”

“...!”

“You’ve stagnated, and I’ve advanced. It is probably only that. But even so... right now I am higher, and you are lower.”

Level 7 and Level 6.

Even in simple comparison, it was clear that Ottar was superior. If anything, Mia was the strange one for challenging him while ignoring that absolute difference in level.

But even accounting for that, Ottar was saying that she had gotten weaker. As if betraying his lingering attachment to the wall that had once stood before him, as if he had wanted there to be someone stronger than him.

“Before you left Folkvangr, I never once won. I wanted to win against you... but I don’t need it any more. It’s enough.”

He was unusually talkative as he gave up that regret he had clung to. Meanwhile Mia’s reaction, was incredibly easy to understand.

Anger.

“Don’t get cocky with me, boy!!!”

The stage groaned as the second act of their battle opened.

Bell and Lyu gasped at the battle between the monsters who unmistakably reigned at the summit of the city.

“I thought Ms. Mia was amazing...but I never thought she was this strong...!”

“But even so...Warlord is too overwhelming!”

Even as they were amazed by her true strength, they both sensed how this battle would go. Mia couldn't crack Ottar's defense. She couldn't blow a hole through his overwhelming array of techniques and tricks. It was a question whether he would go on offense first or whether Mia would exhaust herself first, but either way, Warlord's invincibility remained so long as his absolute defense remained.

The two fledgling first-tier adventurers had achieved enough insight to see that much.

“Ms. Lyu, let's go! I can move now!”

“—No. Not yet.”

Bell started to dash off from his kneeling stance, but Lyu held him back while she sat on her own knees. A green light like sunlight through the trees was still emanating from her left hand on his right shoulder and her right hand around his left, continuing to heal his battered body.

“If you don't wait until you are fully healed, it will be over if he so much as grazes you. You would just be getting in Mama Mia's way.”

“Gh...!”

“Restrain yourself, Bell. It will be done soon.”

Lyu's Noa Heal recovered stamina while also closing wounds, but it didn't have the instant effect of a potion or elixir. Because it had a strong effect, it had the downside of being slow to reach full recovery. And the terrible damage dealt by the Level 7 pushed full recovery all the further away.

Bell couldn't argue. He had experienced firsthand with his body just how absolute the difference in strength between him and Ottar was before they had come.

He prayerfully watched as Mia clashed with that terrifying strength.

“...Bell, before we go to fight, I want to ask you something.”

As he focused intently on the fighting, he heard Lyu's voice whispering in his ear.

For the first time, he noticed how close they were. Before he had been practically dead on his feet, so he hadn't noticed, but there was no distance at all between them. For a moment, he remembered what had happened in the deep levels, but neither he nor Lyu had the capacity for something like embarrassment in the face of such a furious battle. Their senses were numbed.

Lyu was holding him close, like a knight protecting a wounded princess—as if holding back a rabbit that might leap away at any moment—even as her eyes were fixed on Mia and Ottar.

“What do you intend to do to Syr?”

“...Do...?”

“I intended to bring her back and slap her.”

“Eep.”

Bell trembled, forgetting the situation for a moment after she said such a violent thing. Lyu herself had never thought to do something like that to her savior before. But she couldn't forgive the goddess, forgive *her* for that outrageous, high-handed behavior.

“I expect Ahnya and the others feel the same as I do. So I will drag her back before all of us...and ask her what she really thinks of us.”

“...!”

“So what of you? After this battle...what will you do to Syr?”

Hestia and all the other deities, and every adventurer on the island, they were fighting to win. But Bell and Lyu and girls from The Benevolent Mistress, they were different. Their eyes were only on *her*. That was why, before Lyu asked *her* what she really thought, she was asking what Bell was thinking.

“Ms. Hörn...Ms. Syr herself told me.”

Bell inhaled slightly before quietly answering.

“That she didn't want to be driven mad by love...that she wanted to be saved.”

“!”

“So I will save her. And I’m sure...I will hurt her, too.”

As he said it, he grit his teeth, as if tearing open his own wound.

“Because it’s my fault that she was driven to this.”

He already knew it. That he was the impetus at the start of it all for *her*. Syr, Freya, and Bell. Their egos were bloodied.

“It’s my fault that she is suffering even now.”

If *she* hadn’t been suffering because of him, he would never have insisted on this egotistical path. If Syr had fallen in love with someone else, or if she just started hating him, Bell might have felt nauseous, and maybe a little bit relieved, but he would never have butted into it.

*Let’s go back to being friends.*

The reason they hadn’t been able to part on those terms was because of Freya’s obstinacy and because Bell had already stood her up.

“So I will keep helping her, even though we are just hurting each other...until she can smile like she did before.”

It wasn’t Bell’s fault. With the push of Welf’s advice, and with significant anguish, he had chosen his aspiration. Freya was the one in the wrong.

So Bell, in attempting to carry her sins, was kind.

“...Bell...you are disgraceful.”

Lyu rebuked him, as if censuring his kindness.

“You are a horrible hypocrite.”

Her face was right in front of him, close enough that their lips might touch. Her blue eyes staring sharply into his. Bell looked down guiltily for a moment—and then he smiled. “Yes, I’m a hypocrite.” He looked back at Lyu with a smile that was battered and exhausted. “So if nothing else, I am going to hang on to this hypocrisy.”

After all the time they had talked in that moonlit room, he already had his answer. The die had long since been cast. All that remained for the two of them was to hit each other with their egos, hurting each other, crying tears of blood.

Neither of them could turn back anymore.

So—

“Even if it means hurting her again...I will stop her.”

His red eyes looked into Lyu’s sky-blue eyes.

Their gazes intertwined, and their feelings clashed and blended.

And finally—

...Lyu quietly smiled.

“...The healing is finished. Let’s go.”

The green light faded. His wounds were completely healed. Lyu stood up first and lent him a hand as he got to his feet with a wobble. Standing beside each other, they watched the boaz and dwarf crash in front of them. If they went there, the battle would just continue. They couldn’t do anything but continue their life-and-death struggle until it was settled. Until they reached *her*...

“Bell, there is something I have to tell you first.”

“Yes?”

“I love you.”

“Yes...wait, what?”

Just as he was about to step out, he pitched forward with a jolt. Managing to avoid tripping to the ground, he quickly spun around.

“I love you...as a man.”

Lyu was standing there, smiling like a maiden. Not blushing, just tranquil. Bell, who knew it wasn’t his imagination or some misunderstanding, gradually reddened and looked pathetic.

“Now it’s fair. Now I can slap Syr.”

Her eyes sparkled slightly, almost like a mischievous child, and she ran forward. Left in her tracks, Bell was stunned, like a soldier left holding a massive bomb right before the decisive final battle. Confusion and agitation mixed, but he quickly shook his head.

*—Just focus on the battle in front of me.*

*—Right now, just think about her.*

Telling himself that, he shifted gears, and his expression changed to that of an adventurer facing a final battle. He would be a hypocrite who stuck to his hypocrisy.

Leaning forward, he ran, chasing after Lyu, throwing himself into the furious battle.

““Haaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!!””



From the direction of the amphitheater, there was a thunderous crack, like lightning in the distance. Even as the intensity of the performance increased, the einherjar were unfazed, performing their own accompaniment.

“That dumbass...!”

A gale to terrify even the winds themselves was born.

Allen was brimming with rage as he ran across the battlefield faster than anyone. The loathing fire in his heart at the adventurers who continued to struggle threatening his goddess, at the fly who had turned traitor, and at his little sister who had appeared on this battlefield of all places became fuel for his dash.

“H-hurry up! Double time!”

“Don’t fall behind Allen!”

Behind him, the beast people einherjar were desperately trying to keep up even as he grew smaller in the distance. The fastest elite could see the main battlefield where the Gullivers were clashing with the girls from The Benevolent Mistress.

“—Chloe, Runoa! Brother’s coming, meow!”

Ahnya was the first to sense the arrival of the squadron being led by that chariot. Raising her sharp ears, sensing it like a wild cat, she looked to the east.

“It’s fine, so—Hurry up and get ready!”



“Goaaa?!”

“We have our hands full with just them, meow!”

“Kaha?!”

Runoa roared while shattering a dwarf’s ribs with her iron fist while Chloe, sweating, made an elf vomit blood due to the poison on her knife.

*“Ms. Aisha! At this rate, you can pincer them!”*

“You don’t have to tell me...!”

“B-behind—gh?!”

The coalition joined in with a back attack.

Linking up with all of the reserves, Aisha gathered what remained of the left wing re-formed at the eastern side of the main battlefield. The girls from the tavern had crossed the bridge onto the island and come up from the south, and were holding the Gulliver brothers’ squad in place. Exposed to a pincer attack from the front and back, *Freya Familia* were forced to endure the onslaught.

“Hey, eastern girl! Give these to your friends, meow!”

“Hah? These are...earrings? What are these, Lady Chloe?”

“Magic items that Lyu and them asked Perseus to make before! We brought everything we had! We’ll find a way to manage this place ourselves, so hurry up and give them to everyone you can!”

“I—I don’t really understand...but if you insist, Lady Runoa!”

Finally, the last einherjar left standing on the battlefield—the last upper-class adventurer other than the core of the familia—fell. Between Hedin’s bombardment and The Benevolent Mistress’s numbers, they had hunted down that formidable force of Level 3s and Level 4s. All that remained were Bringar.

But—

“““““Die!!!”””””

“““““Nyaaaa?!”””””

The four brothers’ attacks laid low four different cat people at once. Seeing

their coworkers finished in one blow, Runoa and Chloe both had a bitter look on their face.

They couldn't bring them down. The Gullivers were all that remained, but the elf's barrage and the full force of the tavern still couldn't solve them.

Sand-colored armor, helmets spattered in blood, and their four weapons. Devil spawn was too gentle a description. Each one was like storm compressed down into a prum's body. Executing an impossible level of coordination, they were devastating at the force of girls from the tavern.

"Uwaaaaa?!"

"Leisha?!"

And the Berbera as well.

The Amazons who immediately tried to counterattack were cut down in one stroke. The coalition's force was down to just the reserve squad, the guards protecting the invisible Haruhime—Aisha, Mikoto, and Nahza. Even though they had cornered the enemy, they had their backs up against the wall, too.

With the Bringar being the only enemy left, the powerful artillery support stopped being of any use, which was a painful loss. As much as they quarreled, Hedin and the Gullivers knew each other's moves well. The four brothers understood the nature of Caurus Hildr and thus used both the waitresses and coalition fighters as shields to intercept the shots. And even with Hedin's concentrated precision fire, hitting a first-tier adventurer from several hundred meders away was exceedingly difficult.

"...So that's how it is."

Far removed from them, in the north of the main battlefield, Hedin's eyes narrowed. As if sensing that it would no longer be effective, he switched from direct targeting to harassment strikes. He aimed the lightning up into the sky in a parabolic arc, shooting at them from overhead.

Of course, they wouldn't be hit by that sort of indirect bombardment. In exchange for not hitting Aisha and the others who were being used as shields, he was only throwing up a dense cloud of smoke and setting off a series of thunderclaps.

Lilly's face twisted as she concluded that she could no longer rely on Hedin's artillery barrage.

The absolute strength of first-tier adventurers was standing in their way.

"It would have been really bad without this golden light, meow...!"

"I can't see her but is this that girl's work...! If I let my guard down, I might get taken for a ride by my status!"

The reason they had managed to endure the four brothers' furious assault and escape instant defeat was only thanks to the power of level boost.

Following Lilly's timely orders, Haruhime had buffed Aisha, Runoa, and the rest, effectively pushing them into the realm of Level 5s. In numbers at least, they were at the same level as the Gullivers. By sticking to hit-and-away tactics to avoid getting drawn into the opponents' coordinated kill zones, they had managed to somehow force a stalemate.

But it still wasn't an even match.

The chariot had already crossed the center of the island and was closing in fast.

*If Vana Freya links up with those brothers, it's over...!*

As she looked out at the scene in front of her, Lilly's heart raced.

It was a searing back-and-forth taking place almost right under her nose. If Allen and his unit joined in, too, the position would collapse. Looking up, she saw them in the distance, a trail of dust in the air behind them.

*We need to defeat Bringar immediately! If we don't, we'll miss our chance!*

Lilly filtered out everything else, focusing only on Alfrik and his brothers.

Their fierce attacks, their movements, their coordination, everything.

Habits, weaknesses, tricks, anything.

She analyzed them thoroughly, combining it with everything that Finn had given her, too.

Her thoughts accelerated as she focused to the limit, trying to find a revelation.

And the conclusion she reached was—

*—There's no opening!*

That was the cruel reality. There was no gap to exploit in their renowned infinite coordination. The four of them supported and complemented one another, not exposing any gap at all.

Berling took down a waitress who bravely attacked him, Alfrik deflected one of Nahza's carefully aimed shots, while Dvalinn and Grer knocked back Aisha and Runoa's pincer attack.

It wasn't just boasting when people said as long as all four of them were together, they could win against any first-tier adventurer.

*As long as they're together, there won't be any openings!*

Despair washed over Lilly. And mercilessly, their time limit was ticking down.

"I'll run you all down."

The chariot skewering them with a furious glare was now clearly visible.

Allen accelerated to blow through the coalition and the girls from The Benevolent Mistress, and even the Gullivers, too.

*"Gray skies, lost home, darkness falls, ruins' rain."*

Just then, a voice rang out.

"\_\_\_\_\_"

When he heard it, Allen's mind froze for several seconds.

*"Headless eyes, questioning statue. What are you, what are you? You are a kitten, a lost little wheel. I am servant to tears and sobs,"*

The cloud of dust cleared. A single cat person appeared from inside it. An abandoned cat who had stabbed her spear into the ground, put both hands on her chest, and closed her eyes as she spun her voice.

*"Where is my home? There is no answer. Ask the birds. There is no reply. That is why I cry. Singing to the back of my only family."*

The thunderclaps faded.

The Gulliver brothers were now able to hear the cast that had almost been finished. Dumbstruck, they stopped attacking for a moment.

“Ms. Ahnya’s...magic...?! Is that...was Mr. Hedin’s attack just to make cover for her?!”

Watching from above, Lilly was the only one who understood what was happening.

Hedin’s harassment, the barrage of indirect fire that only kicked up clouds of sand and set off explosions, was just to hide Ahnya while she focused on her casting. Allen, the Gullivers, and of course Hedin all knew Ahnya’s cast. And it was a magic that put Allen and the prums on edge. They couldn’t stop it now.

Lilly was captivated seeing Ahnya singing there, so different from her usual self, looking almost holy.

“Hurry up and put on the ear plugs!!!”

“Meow! The tone-deaf apocalypse is comingggg!”

“Eh? What?”

Meanwhile, Runoa’s and Chloe’s faces warped as they plugged their ears, setting off confusion among Mikoto and the rest of the coalition fighters.

The next moment.

*“Please don’t abandon me—Remisto Felis”*

She announced the magic’s name.

And then—

“MEEEEEEEEEEEEOOO  
OWWW!!!”

An awful, mysterious sound wave enveloped the battlefield.

“GiiiiiiiieeeeeeeEEEEEEeeeeeeee?!”

Lilly, who of course hadn’t gotten one of the magic items from Mikoto, experienced the full force of the ear-splitting catastrophe. She held her ears and fell over backward. Her eyes spun from taking the full brunt of the ultrasonic weapon, and she was writhing in agony on the ground.

Allen, who immediately covered his ears, and the einherjar behind him as well all suffered from the sound. Alfrik, Dvalinn, Berling, and Grer all took the blow without any chance to protect themselves.

Even Hestia and Miach leaped at the sound.

It had been an ultra-wide range attack with an incomparable area of effect.

Hedin had firmly plugged his ears with his index fingers, but the masses watching in Orario through the mirrors were blown back by the loud screech.

The magic began to show its effect. Lilly noticed the change immediately as she managed to push her upper body up with trembling arms.

“Gh...? I can’t...?”

A loss of strength that wasn’t simple fatigue. It was also different from shouldering a heavy burden. It was as if her body had grown smaller. Looking closer, she saw a faint, red magic glow around her whole body.

“Wait, this...is it an anti-status effect?”

Her hazel eyes widened as she reached the answer.

“It weakens statuses?!”

As Lilly guessed, Ahnya’s magic Remisto Felis was anti-status magic. The exact opposite of Haruhime’s level boost, it was a debuff that dramatically lowered abilities. Those who experienced the ear-splitting destruction of Ahnya’s voice—everyone inside the magic’s area of effect—enemy or ally alike, was given a status-down, and it couldn’t be blocked without a specialized magic item.

Experiencing the full effect of that magic with her own body, Lilly quickly looked up. Below her, the beast people einherjar, Bringar, and even Vana Freya were all shrouded in a telltale red glow.

“What did you—?!”

Allen raged as it continued echoing in his ears, tormenting him.

“Keh, gah...meow, they’re all a lot weaker...!”

Ahnya rubbed her sore throat after she finished.

In exchange for being a powerful debuff, it could only be used once in combat

—she had to wait more than twelve hours before using it again. It wasn't quite a full level lower, but Remisto Felis was incredibly powerful among debuffs. In addition to massively lowering abilities, it also disrupted the effects of skills and magic. Knowing that the latter was even more dangerous than the former, Allen glared at Ahnya like she was his mortal enemy.

“Brother...I'm scared of you, meow. Even after I was abandoned, I still wanted to go back to my family, so I was always scared of making you mad, meow.”

But Ahnya didn't cower at his sharp glare. She had joined *Freya Familia* and had always been watching his reactions to not be abandoned, but now she was looking at him head-on.

“I still really want to go back to being family, meow. But! I have another family, too! Lyu, and Chloe and Runoa! Mama Mia and everyone else who saved me!”

As dumb as she was, she didn't know why *she* had saved her.

On that rain day, when Allen and none other than Freya herself had abandoned her, Syr was the one who saved her. They had given her a home called The Benevolent Mistress. Maybe it was all just a goddess's capricious whim like *she* had said. Maybe doting on Ahnya only to break her again was just an ugly form of entertainment for the goddess.

—*Save me.*

But Ahnya had heard Syr's heart. She knew that something was tormenting Syr.

“So I'm going to Syr, meow!”

She was a fool. A lonely, abandoned kitten. But because she knew how awful it was to be all alone, she wanted family. Family was more important than anything to her. So if it was to save her family, she would even fight her brother.

“I'll beat you, brother, if that's what it takes! For now, *I* will be your enemy!”

“You idiot!”

Allen erupted angrily at her declaration of war. Ignoring the anti-status debuff

he had just taken, he sprinted, aiming to skewer his sister with his silver spear. Ahnya readied her own golden spear and raced forward to meet him. The curtain raised on the two cats' first ever sibling squabble.

“We’re coming, too, meow!”

“Come on, hope you victims of Ahnya’s recital are ready for a fight!”

Seeing their chance, Runoa and Chloe took off the accessories they had passed around and went on the attack.

Its name was Silence Lyra. It was an accessory originally designed to block the songs of sirens and mermaids that Perseus had modified—because of a powerful enemy that used sound attacks during the dark age. Lyu had had a pair among the mementos of her former comrades, and having experienced Ahnya’s catastrophic recital and almost been wiped out before, Ruona, Chloe, and everyone working at the tavern had put in a request with Asfi for mass production.

““““Youuu!!!”””””

Having escaped that powerful debuff, they leaped at once on the brothers who were still wobbly.

“Th-this is...!”

Ahnya’s magic signaled a sudden change in the battle.

Buffed by level boost, their attacks forced the Gulliver brothers onto the defensive for the first time. The beast people einherjar couldn’t do anything as Ahnya and Allen were fully engaged in their own high-speed combat, so they frantically moved to support the Bringar.

*They’ve been weakened by the anti-status, too! There are only a few Berbera and waitresses left, but even so...!*

The situation was even. At the very least, as long as Ahnya with her pseudo-Level 5 strength could hold Allen back, there was some leeway to work with against the Bringar.

“So if we could just do something about their coordination...!”

Watching from atop the mausoleum, Lilly directed all of her remaining



strength to her head. They couldn't let even one second go to waste. She quickly wrung out a plan that was both possible and had the highest chance of success. Having sacrificed so many of her comrades throughout the war game, she would bet her own life in those few seconds.

And so—

*“Ms. Aisha, Ms. Mikoto, Ms. Nahza! Here's the plan!”*

Healing herself with Nahza's item, she sent orders out to the last of the main battle force she had left. They all understood one another's strengths, so there was no need for detailed explanations. The transmission was simple and quick.

“Wh...?! W-wait a moment, Lady Lilly! For this plan, you're...?!”

*“Lilly has already sacrificed countless adventurers and deities! Lilly will put her life on the line, too!”*

“Gh...!”

Mikoto objected, but Nahza, who had listened quietly, spoke up.

“...All right, I'm in.”

“Lady Nahza?!”

“I'm all out...I've got no more arrows.”

“!”

“I can't put up any real fight anymore...so I'll be a decoy, too.”

Nahza smiled. Despite her being a back line support, her battle clothes and armor were covered in scratches.

“Mikoto...use me well. Let's sock it to some first-tier adventurers.”

“...Yes!”

Seeing their resolve, Mikoto could say nothing more. Watching them nod in silence, Aisha grinned.

“I'll tell the girls from the bar. Don't screw this up, shrimp!”

*“Okay!”*

There was a light from the Amazon's oculus as the final piece came through.

*“The effects of the level boost will run out soon! The next time Ms. Haruhime casts her magic is the signal to start!”*

“—Noga! Go after the enemy’s reserve!”

Alfrik shouted without concern for appearances.

“There’s a mage or sorcerer using some cheat spell! Finish them off!”

“Gh...! Yes, sir!”

The werewolf immediately obeyed the first-tier adventurer’s order.

The remnant einherjar followed, too, charging into the Berbera who had taken up positions in front of the mausoleum. Aisha and the others tried to stop them, but the four prums’ coordination prevented it.

Alfrik’s decision was on point. Even pushed into a corner, his intelligence and instinct proved him an excellent first-tier adventurer. But at the same time, it also meant that the Gulliver brothers, who had previously been focusing on taking out the enemies as quickly as possible, had now set foot into the tactical dimension.

That was the ultimate proof of a first-tier adventurer being pushed to the limit.

“Fire!”

“Uwah?! ”

Just as they were about to clash with the reserves, the einherjar opened up with a blast from magic swords. The Amazons used their bodies to shield the girl they were protecting, but the wind shrouded in flames and lightning reached all the way to Haruhime in the middle of the formation.

“Haruhimeeee! Are you okay...?! Wait, you’re visible!”

“...! Fels’s mantle...”

Lena frantically ran over as Haruhime stood there in panic. The goliath cloth she had equipped protected her body, but the reverse veil she was wearing over it had been blown away, crumbling to scraps. She wouldn’t be able to go invisible again.

“Lena, what happened?!”

“Samira! Haruhime can’t go invisible! She can’t use her magic like this!”

The Berbera at the front were falling to the einherjar while the commander of the reserves, the gray-haired Amazon Samira rushed over.

“The fighting is being broadcast in the city, right?! Haruhime’s secret will get out!”

“Gh...!”

“What do we do? Run away like Aisha said to?! But there isn’t anyone left other than us...! Lady Hathor is still in the game at least...”

Samira couldn’t immediately give an order as Lena lost momentum. Haruhime’s level boost was something they had to keep secret no matter what. A broken ability that delighted even Ishtar, and if it came to light, people who wanted to seize that power for themselves would come out of the woodwork. Haruhime would never have a day’s rest again.

Aisha had been firm about it before the war game. If her level boost was going to be discovered, then they should spirit her away without using it.

*But if we run with Haruhime now, Aisha and the others will...!*

Lena was right. Hathor’s followers, including Samira and the remaining Berbera, were the only ones left.

All but a handful of deities were left after Allen’s god hunt, and several of the Amazons in the reserves had had to drop out, too. But more than anything, without Haruhime’s level boost, the balance between the two sides would be broken.

Aisha’s orders or holding the line. Samira was drenched in sweat and unsure what to choose—

“I’m going to start...!”

Not waiting for them, Haruhime stood up.

“The magic has already run out...I have to cast the next level boost...!”

“Whoa, wait, you can’t, Haruhime! Aisha will get mad at us, and it will be bad

for you, too, if it gets out!”

Haruhime’s face was coated in sweat. It was a warning sign of Mind Down. She had already gone through the huge number of magic potions she had stocked up on before the start. The dual needs of Kokonoe and level boost were terrible for Mind usage, and she had been using them nigh constantly to support the adventurers on the front lines.

Without Haruhime, Lilly’s plan would never have reached this state. She was the secret MVP of this war game.

“Even so...I will sing...!”

Unable to fight, unable to take command. Because she couldn’t do anything, she pushed herself to constantly sing. The ex-*Ishtar Familia* Amazons sucked in their breath.

“Haruhime...you...”

Samira stared at the renart girl.

“...Lena’s right, if your level boost is revealed, there’s no going back. There might be another huge commotion like with the killing stone...No, there definitely will be.” Forgetting about the battle, she asked, “And there might be something even more horrible than with Lady Ishtar...are you really okay with that?!”

“It doesn’t matter!”

“!!!”

“It doesn’t matter, Lady Samira! Lady Lena! My safety is irrelevant!” Haruhime shouted back, already decided. “What value do I have if I am only protected?! How can a despicable woman who abandons the man she loves and takes no heed of her comrades dare to walk in the warm sunlight?!”

“Haruhime...”

“Master Bell will be stolen away! Lady Hestia and the others will mourn their loss! No! I refuse to accept that! The Haruhime who could only be protected and rescued is already dead!”

The girl that they knew wasn’t there.

“I am not a symbol of destruction anymore! I am not just a prostitute who can do nothing but cry! I am *Hestia Familia*’s Haruhime!”

The girl who once grieved destruction was no more. In her place stood a lone sorcerer.

“...Haruhime. I hated you.”

As Lena stood froze, Samira spoke.

It was the truth.

Unlike Aisha, who couldn’t resist Ishtar’s charm, or Lena and the others, who were being threatened, Samira had actively taken part in the ritual to create the killing stone.

She didn’t care at all about a weak girl who could do nothing but cry. She didn’t mind using the life of a girl who she couldn’t stand to enjoy a fight with *Freya Familia*.

But now—

“But the way you are now...it’s good.”

“Lady Samira...”

The girl’s green eyes widened as Samira smiled.

Standing in front of the kind of strong woman she liked, she slammed her fist into her palm.

“All right, sing all you like, Haruhime! We’ll protect you!”

“Eh, Samira?! Are you sure?!”

“It’s fine! If any nasty guys come after her, we can just protect her!”

“Don’t say ‘just’! Doesn’t that mean we’re gonna have to guard her for the rest of her life?!”

Samira turned around and charged over to the Berbera being overwhelmed by the *einherjar*. Lena grumbled but chased after her, leaving in shock when the gray-haired Amazon turned her head back.

“Do it, Haruhime!”

Haruhime smiled and nodded.

*“Kokonoe.”*

A different sort of magic power started gathering.

For the first time, her sorcery was being performed in the light of day.

*“Beloved snow. Beloved crimson. Beloved white light.”*

The golden light reflected in countless mirrors watching the battle drew the gaze of the masses. The adventurers in the city and the deities in Babel were all drawn to the renart who had appeared out of nowhere.

*“Please let me be beside you—this love I have found at the end of two thousand nights.”*

Poetry and music, a stirring, brilliant performance. Her unfaltering verses drew the gaze even of those on the battlefield.

*“My name is Magic Fox, former destroyer. My name is Ancient Song, former dreamer. For you who beat your wings like a bird, I shall allow the nine spirits to dwell within me.”*

The einherjar found their target.

They realized she was the devil fox capable of killing them. They loosed bloodcurdling howls, ready to do whatever it took to bring her down.

*“Echo song of gold, sacred poem of Tamamo. White face, golden fur, king of nine tails.”*

The Berbera roared. They fought like walking storms to prevent the enemy from laying a hand on the girl who had once been their sister. And if that poor little sister of theirs could howl with all her might, then they had no choice but to raise an even greater battle cry.

*“Oh, tails of the auspicious beast, consume all, grant all wishes”*

Samira punched. More than anyone, she raged, punching the enemies, kicking, shattering, destroying her own limbs in the process, but even so, continuing to fight. Together with Lena, she drew a line in the sand and refused to let any einherjar past.

*“Grow.”*

Chained casting.

Finishing the special enchantment, she switched to the verse that Samira and the others had heard countless times now.

*“That power and that vessel. Breadth of wealth and breadth of wishes. Until the bell tolls, bring forth glory and illusion. Grow.”*

She picked up speed.

Intoning the lines she had recited so many times as fast as she could, Haruhime raced to the end.

*“Confine divine offerings within this body. This golden light bestowed from above. Into the hammer and into the ground, may it bestow good fortune upon you.”*

The einherjar were using all their remaining strength while screaming that they had to stop her.

The Berbera threw themselves into the fighting, shouting that they would not let the enemy come near. Those who had already fallen stirred once more, grabbing einherjar legs and dragging them down to the ground.

They couldn't advance. They were not allowed to.

They couldn't reach her. They were not allowed to.

At last, a howling beast person thrust with wild abandon.

Struck by the spear of a warrior far stronger than her, her shoulder skewered, Samira smiled. She smiled even as she coughed up blood. And grabbing on to Noga's chest, she hit him with a full-strength headbutt.

The headbutt crashed through his helmet and into his forehead. Falling together with the white-eyed beastman, she murmured.

*“Go.”*

*“Grow.”*

Haruhime answered her.

The image of her sisters protecting her seared into her eyes, igniting her tears as she sang.

*“Uchide no Kozuchi—Dance!”*

The highest tier of miracle had been activated.

Ahnya, Chloe, Runoa, Mikoto, Nahza, and Aisha.

Using all six tails that she was now able to control after her level-up, she applied the strongest buff to their side. Adventurers with keen instincts and omniscient deities perceived the trick of the massive buff that the coalition had been receiving since the start of the battle. There was no going back. Hearing Haruhime’s resolve through the oculus mounted on one of her hands, Lilly shouted.

*“It’s time!”*

That was the only order. Sending up the signal along with the glittering gold light, she threw her opening pitch. A black ball thrown by Lilly, falling to where Runoa and the others were fighting the Gullivers.

Landing between the adventurers, it hit the stone pavement and exploded forcefully.

*“Smoke?!”*

*“A smoke bomb!”*

It was a magic item.

Fels’s high quality black mist that had even held off *Loki Familia* when they were saving the Xenos. The mysterious black smoke writhed like a living creature, entangling their limbs, made them lose sight not just of their enemies, but even of one another.

*“Insolent!”*

*“Trying to disrupt our coordination?”*

The pitch-black fog was almost sticky, clinging to their bodies, shutting out all sensory information. It blocked sight and even scent. Sound was the only sense still fully functioning. The brothers who prized their telepathic connection were,



for once, alone.

*“—Futsu no Mitama!”*

The next instant, a powerful gravity weighed on them. The tremendous pressure flowing from above pushed their bodies to the ground.

““““Ghhhhh?!”””””

Mikoto’s magic, enhanced by the level boost. The full-strength knockout blow of a pseudo–Level 3 was enough to slow down the massively debuffed Level 5s.

The magical black smoke was compressed by the deluge of gravity as well, creating a mysterious situation that made their connection even more difficult to maintain for the brothers. The damage was gradually building up, but they could still escape. A cage of this level wasn’t enough to bring down the Bringar.

The problem was choosing which direction to escape in. In all likelihood, the enemy was waiting outside the cage of gravity and darkness to attack them when they popped out. If they leaped out in different directions, it was sure to lead to them being defeated in detail. All four of them had to escape together. Just as the seed of impatience started to take root, with a tremendous gravity slowly eating away at their endurance...

“Two o’clock! No enemies to the northeast!”

—Berling’s voice!

The third brother was the best of them all at detecting threats. Hearing his callout, Alfrik, Dvalinn, and Grer immediately responded. The first-tier adventurers, who had maintained a firm grasp of where they were standing before being trapped in a cage of darkness, made their escape with fearsome leg strength and an unshakeable internal compass.

Breaking free from the gravity well’s grasp, first Dvalinn, then Grer, then Alfrik, and finally Berling leaped from the cage.

“They came out! Get them!”

Adventurers immediately leaped at them.

Obedying Aisha’s command, Runoa and Chloe joined, attacking from three sides.

It was only natural. The enemy could hear Berling, too. Even if the enemy wasn't lying in wait in that direction, they would immediately react, so there was no time to carefully confirm the situation.

But that was trivial to the Bringar. A mere trifle.

As long as they could see one another, each of them knew without a doubt that their brothers would do something. And they would know what they should do, too. The instantaneous consolidation of information was the essence of their limitless coordination.

Alfrik attacking the Amazon's podao with his spear.

Dvalinn shattering the cat's knife with his battle hammer.

Berling slashing the human and her fists with his battle ax.

Leaving Grer free to unleash a spinning slash with his greatsword to mow all three of them down.

Sharing that foresight with each other in an instant, Bringar put it into action.

"Haaaa!"

"Futile!"

Alfrik's spear knocked away Aisha's podao.

"Nyaaa!"

"Futile!"

Dvalinn's hammer shattered the cat's knife, sending shards flying.

"Raaaaaaaaah!"

"Futile, we said!"

And Runoa, who was trying to punch Grer, was cut down by Berling's ax.

That was the end.

Or at least, it was supposed to be.

"Oraaaaaaaaaaaaaa!"

"Gah?!—Eh?"

Runoa's iron fist landed straight in Grer's side as he was starting to wind up for his attack.

Time stopped. A fatal static appeared in their minds. Their limitless coordination had been disrupted.

"What are you doing, Berling?!"

Alfrik roared at the back of the formation behind him as he swung around.

In an instant, he saw it. Berling was moving in entirely the wrong direction. He saw his younger brother, his sand-colored helmet and armor, *empty-handed*.

His mind went blank.

"—,—Gh, —Ghhh?!"

The black mist was wriggling.

And then he saw it, inside the darkness.

Berling had been trapped in the middle of the gravity field, tied to the ground so tightly that he couldn't even raise his voice.

""\_\_\_\_\_""

Alfrik's shock and that fragment of information were shared with Dvalinn and Grer, too.

It was intentional. They had intentionally let Alfrik, Dvalinn, and Grer escape the cage. The pitch-black barrier of gravity hadn't been aimed at all four of them from the start—it was targeting just one of them. A prison to hold only one.

A magic box to switch the original for a fake!

Feeling the world around him slow to a crawl, Alfrik shouted.

"—What are you?!"

He immediately swung his spear. The being who had taken his brother's shape held up their left arm to protect their head from the attack. The resulting damage was enough to dispel the magic, and as the particles of grayish light fell away, what appeared was a prum girl.

*Lilliluka Erde?!*

The transformation magic, Cinder Ella. The child's play granted to Lilly alone. But she used that child's play to turn things around.

*—Impossible—*

Alfrik was speechless as Lilly's bloodshot eyes lost focus. Her feet floated off the ground and flew to the side as her light body was batted away at furious speed. Her flesh tore, and the bones in her left arm easily shattered, igniting a searing pain in her head—but she didn't cry.

*Don't cry—!!!*

She swallowed the pathetic scream she had partially let out, the tears she had cried when her arm had been broken by Alfrik before, and instead reached out to grab her chance at victory.

*I'm the commander!!!*

She had sacrificed adventurers and used deities as bait. So the last thing she used was herself. She offered up her powerless body without complaint. She cast away all doubt and tears. It was only right to use herself as one more card they could play. The commander who had engraved Braver's teachings in her heart let out a roar for victory.

*As long as the four of them are together, there is no hope...*

The answer she had reached before. It was the ultimate and hopeless conclusion to the four warriors' coordination.

*—But if even one of them is missing, there will be an opening!*

But there was an even simpler answer beyond that hopeless conclusion.

If they just removed one of the four, their infinite coordination would become finite.

Their world was over. The high-speed thoughts that they alone shared, the accelerated perceptions came to an end.

Lilly's right hand was already reaching into her pouch, holding it. Sensing they were in a dangerous position, Alfrik, Dvalinn, and Grer were already regrouping.

But Lilly's hand was faster. The three brothers tried to gather up, ignoring Aisha and the others, when something was thrown in their midst—a single bottle. It was a present from Asfi.

Burst oil.

“““Gah?!”””

They were sent flying in three different directions. The bloom of fire and energy sent the prum warriors to the east, south, and north. Lilly rolled across the ground as the Bringar were completely separated.

It was the ultimate opportunity and the perfect chance for a counterattack.

“You have any idea how much you’ve done to me all these years?”

“Ghh?!”

East.

A woman appeared in front of Grer as he used his sword to stand back up. Short beige hair rustled in the breeze. The knuckles on her gloves were soaked in blood.

This was the avenger who had kept challenging and losing to Bringar until today.

Runoa's eyes flared as she glared at her hated enemy.

“Time to pay it all back, with interest!”

“D-don't look down on meeeee!”

Runoa came head-on, and Grer charged to meet her.

He swung his sword to cut her down just like he had during the Goddess Festival.

Then Runoa suddenly stopped.

“\_\_\_\_\_”

Not failing to notice that Grer was on edge and rushing to settle things after being separated from his brothers, she slipped to the side, letting his swing pass her by harmlessly. The fist-fighter unleashed a quality feint followed by a hail of

punches that contained everything she had been holding on to for so long.

“Dooooaa!”

A body blow with her right. Coming up from below, scraping the ground, it smashed into Grer’s stomach. Grer’s body bent at the impact point as a rush of punches followed.

“Without your stupid coordination, you aren’t shit!”

A storm of punches.

Straight, hook, uppercut, elbow, backfist. She tore into Grer’s body from all angles, destroying the greatsword that slipped from his hands, smashing his helmet, shattering even his armor. She didn’t let his body land back on the ground as she kept him floating in the air with an explosive combo.

“Gaa  
aaaa?!”

—Back when Orario was still shrouded in chaos, there had been a bounty hunter.

Hailing from outside the city, she had made a name for herself using only her fists, taking down many upper-class adventurers. She had been invincible, until she met the Bringar.

She was obsessed with head-on fights, and her gauntlets were stained a reddish black from the blood of her targets. Because of that, she came to be known by the alias Black Fist. She didn’t use any magic or anything of the sort. She just defeated her enemies with the pure strength of her punches—a thoroughbred infighter.

“Rot in helllllllll!”

Her finisher was a punch swung downward into Grer’s chest, slamming him down to the ground and exploding the stone pavement beneath him.

“Gahaaaah?!”

Buried in the cratered ground, the prum coughed up blood. His helmet and visor were gone as his eyes glazed over and his head slumped to the ground.

“Yeaaaah! You see that?”

She traced the wounds from where she had been cut by his sword, and cracked her knuckles.

The girl who was quicker to start a fight than anyone grinned victoriously.

“Grer?!”

West.

Seeing his brother laid low by the immediate assault, Dvalinn shouted.

“Should you really be worrying about your brother right meow?”

“Gh?!”

There was a cat’s meow from behind him.

Chloe had a scornful sneer on her face as she leaped at him.

“That’s more like it!”

A sandy wind from the burst oil blast kicked up a gust of sand. A surprise attack burst out from behind, but Dvalinn managed to react. Swinging his massive hammer, he shattered the rash cat. Chloe’s entire body literally shattered to pieces.

“?!”

“*Felis Kurus.*”

Dvalinn was stunned by the splintering cat’s body for just an instant before he heard the name of the spell whispered in his ear. The super-short cast spell had already been completed *Illusion magic?*

The cat disappeared in a glimmer as the real surprise attack closed in on Dvalinn.

“UuuuwwoooooooAAAAAA!”

But Dvalinn even managed to react to that, attacking Chloe, who was lunging at him from overhead.

He shattered her.

“Tooooo bad. There can be three illusions.”

“—Gah?!”

The real Chloe calmly stepped out from where the first illusion had leaped out of the dust.

Dvalinn had lost ruined his posture attacking the second illusion, and she tore into his back while he was off balance. The weapon she used to cut him was a dagger with an eerie purplish-black color, unlike the knife that had been shattered before.

“This one’s called Violator, meow. It’s my special toy that’s absorbed aaaaall sorts of poisons and venoms from monsters in the Dungeon.”

The prum just managed to hang on and was about to insult the cat boasting about her demonic weapon. He was about to yell, *As if that would work on me.*

“—Gahhh?”

But the words refused to come. A spray of crimson spilled from his lips.

“You wanted to say how poison wouldn’t work on a proud first-tier adventurer’s super-trained body, didn’t you? Toooooo bad, soooooo sad.”

But Chloe just purred in satisfaction. A top-class cruel, spiteful, sadistic, evil smirk on her face.

“Even your antipoison abilities are no good thanks to Ahnya’s magic.”

“\_\_\_\_\_”

Dvalinn froze as he learned the details about Ahnya’s magic that he had fatally not known before. A terrible amount of hideous, black blood started welling up in the prum’s mouth while a Cheshire grin appeared on the cat’s lips.

“And meow that you’re like that...even I can beat you up.”

“Giii, aaaaAAAAARRRRRRRRRRRGHHHH?!”

The poison dagger danced. Slashes aimed perfectly at the gaps in his armor tore into his arms and legs. Every blow laid into him with even more poison, making blood flow from every opening on his body, until he finally collapsed.

“Gaha...gugh...gaaaaaah...?! Ugh?!”

And as he lay on the cracked stone pavement, the cat’s heel landed on his



cheek.

“How does it feel?”

“Gaaaah...?!”

“How do you feel being walked all over by an enemy you thought was nothing?”

—There was an assassin who had been active during the same time as Black Fist.

A woman who was always careful to hide her identity, never approaching a fight straight on, using every trick in the book, who contributed greatly to the city’s wet work industry.

A dancing poison blade and a cat’s tail. If you heard her purr, you were already dead. Her alias was Black Cat, the exact opposite of Black Fist, who loved head-on fights. Chloe put her hand to her hot cheek and shuddered in exhilaration as she ground her heel into the first-tier adventurer’s face.

In a word, she was evil.

“Because right now, I feel great.”

“Uooooooooooooh!”

“Ghhh?!”

After gathering all of his strength inside the barrier, Berling finally broke free from Mikoto’s Futsu no Mitama, which had been focused on the tiniest area possible.

As the cage of gravity shattered, magic power exploded, and the black mist started dispersing.

Berling was stunned to see his brothers scattered in all directions.

*I have to go to them—*

*“Shadow moves. Darkness falls. Mine armless self is decay embodied.”*

*“!”*

But just then, as he was preparing to relieve his brothers, a different cast

stopped him.

*The chienthrope...that sharpshooter!*

Nahza had only taken shots with her bow up to this point, only to reveal an unknown magic at the last moment. Berling's unease flared as he swiftly changed angles, expecting another trick coming.

*"Evil bugs, infested flesh, disgraced spirit. Silver tormented by writhing wings' flutter."*

"You traaaaash!"

The distance was closed in an instant. He swung the battle ax he would never allow himself to let go of down straight at Nahza. The cast was complete, but his attack would be faster than her magic.

*I won't let you do anything else!*

As if anticipating Berling's decisive slash, Nahza had held out her right arm.

"Gh?!"

Even though his abilities were lowered, it was still the attack from a first-tier adventurer that would send her whole arm flying. But instead, his attack was ground to a halt by an incredibly solid resistance.

"Wha—a silver arm?!"

The gleam of metal through her torn sleeve and glove. A man-made arm.

Airgetlám.

Berling hadn't bothered to research the unimportant trash among his enemies, so this discovery caught him totally by surprise. It was half-severed, but the airgetlám's multiple joints ensnared his ax like a silver snake.

"It's fine, you can have it."

Evading the one attack at the cost of her prosthetic arm, she squinted at the scattering fragments.

*It's worth the price.*

The chienthrope offered up the prosthetic without any regrets, even though

the massive loans that had been taken out for it were far from being paid back. It was all so she could activate her one and only magic.

*“Darbh Daol!”*

Vibrant black particles spewed out of her broken silver arm, almost looking like a horrifying swarm of insects. Activated at such a short range, there was no time to evade, and the wave of black swallowed the prum’s body. There was no damage. Instead, he experienced a terrible fatigue.

*Another anti-status?!*

Nahza’s magic had an anti-status effect just like Ahnya’s. She had manifested it when she lost her right arm, when both her body and spirit had been battered beyond belief. Ironically, it was an emblem of decay, sparked by the indebtedness that had so troubled her familia and even tormented Miach.

*“All of youuuu?!”*

Berling raged as his status dropped even more from the stacked debuffs.

Shaking of the airgetlám ensnared around his ax, this time, he swung to lay Nahza low.

But before he could.

*“I am in your debt, Lady Nahza—”*

*“?!”*

Overhead.

Mikoto flew through the air with her hand on her longsword resting in its sheath.

Nahza was a decoy to keep Berling from joining up with the other Gulliver brothers. To keep him from restoring their coordination, she had intentionally cast her spell in a loud voice, drawing his aggro.

Entrusted with the finishing blow, Mikoto responded with her full strength.

*“Zekka!”*

*“Gaaaaaah?! ”*

The slash erupted, running through Berling.

The quick-draw taught directly by the war god dealt a critical blow to the first-tier adventurer whose status had been lowered to the limit. There was a thud as the prum collapsed. And also a thud as Nahza collapsed from losing her prosthetic and the aftereffect of her magic.

The last girl standing, after a moment's regret, sheathed her sword.

"Grer, Dvalinn, Berling?!"

Finally, in the south.

Seeing all of his younger brothers defeated one by one, Alfrik was overcome by shock.

*They planned this from the start...!*

Somehow or another, Lilly had gotten a firm grasp on Bringar's habits and idiosyncrasies, including the knowledge that Berling was particularly skilled at detection. And on top of that, she had observed them as much as possible during this war game. Anything less and they would have seen through her when she pretended to be their brother.

*She even used that up-close experience during the Goddess Festival attack...to trick us?!*

With her one and only weapon, Lilly had waited all this time for the moment when she could catch them.

Seeing her at the edge of his vision, limp and lying weakly on the ground, this time Alfrik really was speechless.

*"Come, reckless conqueror."*

"Gh?!"

As he struggled to shake off the shock, he was attack by both a podao and concurrent casting. Aisha charged in with everything she had, not letting the opportunity that Lilly and the others had created go to waste.

His three younger brothers were already down. All that remained was Alfrik, standing all alone. The defeat in detail that Lilliluka Erde had aimed for had

blown away their infinite coordination. The girl that Alfrik had acknowledged on the day of the Goddess Festival had defeated the Bringar.

*“—My famished blade is Hippolyta.”*

Aisha pushed her chant through to the end, her body covered in scratches from his spear’s tenacious resistance.

*“Hell Kaios!!!”*

*“Ghhh?!”*

A vertical slash swung down from high above. He immediately readied his spear horizontally to defend. There was a cross formed as he caught the sword with his spear’s haft. But that was the end of it.

A crimson wave erupted from her blade.

*“DgggghaaaaaAAAAAAAAAaaaaaaaaaaaaa?!”*

A magic blade far bigger than his body hit him directly, sealing Alfrik’s fate. His spear split in half, and he slammed straight into the wall of the mausoleum.

*“—We did it, shrimp!”*

Aisha roared in victory as the last of the Bringar fell.

Runoa, Chloe, Mikoto, and Nahza cheered as well, and sitting on the ground, Haruhime flashed a sweaty smile, too.

*“Thank you...everyone...!”*

Lilly, who was barely holding on to consciousness from the pain of the compound fractures in her arm, managed to return to her senses at the sound of victory. Pulling her face up off the ground, she looked around, confirming the state of the battlefield.

The reserve squad was completely knocked out except for Haruhime. But the Berbera had managed to drag the einherjar down to hell with them. With the Gulliver brothers out of the battle, too, all that remained was Allen, who was still fighting with Ahnya.

*“Gh...someone!”*

There was just a single first-tier adventurer left. They could manage

something themselves. They *would* manage something themselves.

So she squirmed, bringing her right arm and the oculus in her hand up to her mouth.

Her body was covered in blood and dust as she raised her voice as loud as she could, pleading to the *whole army*.

“Is there anyone who can still move?!”



*“The enemy’s main battle force is almost wiped out! All that remains are Warlord and Vana Freya!”*

Her voice resounded across the city ruins.

*“Mr. Bell’s group is taking care of Warlord! We are holding down Vana Freya!”*

She called on her allies using the oculi scattered all around the battlefield.

*“Anyone who can still move, go west! Go toward Lady Freya to support Mr. Bell! This is our one and only chance! Take the goddess’s flower! Bring us victory! Please...anyone!!!”*

Lilly’s voice fell on the broken weapons and unconscious adventurers.

There was no movement at all from any einherjar or any of the adventurers who hadn’t yet been recovered by *Ganesha Familia*. Not a single one moved. The long-ago-abandoned ruins were silent. The warriors who had spent their last energy in the face of their end couldn’t answer her plea.

*“Someone...anyone...!”*

*“Lilly...!”*

The only one who could hear the voice echoing from the crystal, Cassandra, wept.

She had given up her right to fight. She had surrendered to Hegni to save Daphne.

She cursed herself, regretting not fighting to the end like her friend had said,

as she hugged Daphne’s still-unconscious body tight. The girl’s voice desperately reaching out toward victory echoed hollowly in the blue sky hanging over the ruins.

“.....Gh.”

His eyelids twitched. Kicking aside the desire to linger in the comforting darkness, he forcibly woke himself up. He didn’t have the strength to answer her voice. But he should be able to answer her plea.

So he moved his body. But it wouldn’t move how he wanted. He was half-dead, just like all of the other adventurers around him who had burned the last bit of their strength. It was amazing he even managed to open his eyes. His consciousness was fuzzy and faded in and out several times.

So he relied on items. With a slow, listless movement, he pulled the elixir the chienthrope had completed out of the pouch at his hip. But even so, it took all of his will just to turn his head to the side. Since he couldn’t do anything else, he poured it out on the stone his cheek was lying against.

Like someone starving for water lapping at mud, he slurped pathetically at the puddle of elixir.

Finally some energy returned to his limbs. He wasn’t close to fully healed, but he had some energy again. So he could move. Even if he couldn’t stand, he could crawl across the ground. Picking up the weapon that had fallen near his hand, he dragged himself miserably but surely in the direction of the goddess.

“...”

Hedin watched that scene in silence.

He didn’t speak. He didn’t lend a hand. Instead, he didn’t get in his way.

If someone with determination was moving forward, even if it meant going on hands and knees, then no matter how unsightly it might be, Hedin wouldn’t stop them. Because that was the proof of a person struggling to be useful.

For the same reason, he hadn’t intervened in Lilly and Aisha’s group’s furious battle. At first, he had butted in unnecessarily. But they were far more capable than he had expected. And with their own strength, they had laid the Gullivers

low. All that remained was a single chariot.

So the location he needed to go was already settled.

As he was about to turn—

“He...din...!”

“...”

A dark elf whose body was battered called out.

Swallowed up by the flower of flames, the battle clothes on the right side of his upper body had been scorched away. His slender but well-trained abs and chest were bare. The look of a loser. His dark skin had been atrociously burned and charred.

Holding his wounds, wheezing in pain, Hegni glared at Hedin.

“What are you...doing...?! Why would you betray...Lady Freya...?!”

“...I already answered that question for Heith.”

“Me! Right now! I’m the one asking you!”

Using his entire battered body, Hegni shouted furiously.

His magic was already dispelled. These were not the words of the lord of war who dominated the battlefield. These were Hegni Ragnar’s own words that he was unleashing on the white elf, whose expression went blank.

“Don’t screw with me, Hedin...! It was Lady Freya who saved us both, wasn’t it! When we were fighting on that accursed island...!”

“...”

“She was the one who freed us from the shackles of being king, wasn’t she?!”

The elf in front of him slammed him with the memories of days past, of the scene the day they had sworn loyalty to the goddess.

When he opened his eyes and finally learned that Hedin had betrayed them, it was Hegni who had felt the greatest shock. The dark elf bared his anger as tears welled in his eyes. He swung his trembling fist.

“And yet youuuu!!!”



There was a dry sound.

A first-tier adventurer could easily have evaded it, but Hedin had allowed Hegni's wounded fist to strike his cheek.

Because the dark elf had the same origin as him, because he alone had the right to lay his hands on him. That was his quiet statement as the glasses flew from his face and clattered to the ground.

"Even though we—If nobody else, we—We should never betray her!"

"Don't push your luck, idiot."

"—Ghfeh?!"

But even that was tolerated only once.

The stern elf punched him back, as if to say there was no right to a second punch.

Already barely hanging on, Hegni took the solid punch to the cheek and almost went groggy just from that.

"What are you blathering about after getting your ass so miserably kicked by a child of an elf. As if you could hope to match me as you are now."

"Whoa, ghhh, argh?! S-stop! Please! You're always like this, Hedin! Argh, ow, ow, ow, wait!"

To top it off, he swept Hegni's feet out from under him, sending him tumbling to the ground, and then began to stomp on him over and over. The dark elf cried for the ultra-rationalist white elf to have mercy.

"Why did I commit my sin? Because it was necessary."

"Gh...?"

"As she is now, it will be lost to Lady Freya. The wish that she will never again be able to attain."

Hegni looked up, stunned at Hedin's answer after he stopped kicking him.

"Because I concluded that Lady Freya cannot be saved without that stupid rabbit."

“!!!”

“And so I trained it up until today. I continued tailoring it, so as not to be swallowed up inside her gilded cage. Whatever the result, there is no future to it. The goddess’s love cannot fulfill her wish.”

That was why Hedin had visited so much suffering onto Bell.

In the event that a stout wall was built around him, he could pretend to be the same sort of merciless warrior as Allen and the others on the surface, while training Bell’s spirit and body to the limit. Because he sensed that it would be necessary, regardless of whether the wall was broken down or not. Even if he hadn’t predicted a great familia war like this, in the future that Hedin Selrand envisioned, Bell Cranell would still have to reject the goddess’s love.

Kicking the boy down into hell, pushing him to the breaking point, overlooking his exchange with Mia after slipping the familia’s surveillance—all of it had been intentional.

He hadn’t needed to steel his heart to do it. Because he had that intention from the first moment he approached Bell.

The journey that had begun with the boy’s reconstruction in the lead-up to the Goddess Festival, all of it accumulated to the goddess. That was why Freya hadn’t suspected Hedin’s loyalty. Because his statement that the rebellion he was currently perpetrating was all for his master’s sake wasn’t a lie.

“Saved...? Wish...? What are you talking about, Hedin?!”

“*Quit playing dumb, you fool.*”

“Gh?!”

“I’m sure you’ve noticed it, too. You played at being a king just like me, so even if you can’t understand, you should be able to feel it.”

His coral-red eyes pierced Hegni.

“If it’s not that stupid rabbit, she won’t be set free. Because *she* chose him.”

“Gh...!”

“I don’t know whether she can really be saved. That fool has already hurt *her*

several times. But even so...we cannot be the ones to do it. So we can do nothing but allow it.”

There was almost a resignation in Hedin’s cold voice as Hegni steadied himself with wobbly arms and stood up.

“What is that...what are you saying, Hedin?!”

“The truth.”

“Don’t screw with me! We just have to protect her! Just like we’ve always done! We can just support her, be her hands and feet —!”

“—Accept the truth already!”

“!”

Hedin grabbed Hegni’s ragged chest and pulled him close.

“You understand it, too! Even if we protect the goddess, we can’t ever save her!” Hegni’s eyes widened all the way as Hedin continued shouting. “Quit dressing it up in pretty words and just say what you really think! You just don’t want to let anyone else have your beloved goddess!”

“Gh...?! Wh-what...”

“Of course I understand it! *I feel the same!*”

Hedin’s violent tone and his true feelings robbed Hegni of all escape.

“Why him?! Why not me?! I wanted to be the one who was special to her!”

It happened the first time he had seen Syr and Bell together. When he saw one of her smiles, Hedin had been shaken to his core. It was a childlike, joyous, irreplaceable smile, as if she had forgotten being a goddess.

Along with that shock, he also understood that that smile was the true her. And he was immediately jealous. Of none other than Bell Cranell.

*Why that brat? Why him?*

But—he realized the reason.

Goddess Freya had given Hedin and all of them love.

A love that no mortal could ever match, a love like the sea, wide and deep,

enveloping all those who wished for it.

But “ ”...

That could only be directed at one person.

Because she was the goddess of love.

Because she presided over love, she didn't know what it meant to “ ,” and so she was a clumsy, pitiful girl.

“But we can't! We who worship the goddess! Who were saved by her! Who desire her! We can't set *her* free!”

Yearning for the goddess, they fought for love and to be loved. That pushed *her* away from the truth. It pushed her away from her wish. The more she tried to be a goddess, the more Freya's wish wouldn't be fulfilled. She wouldn't be able to even notice her true wish.

“What devotion! What retainer would I be if I didn't consider my master's wish!! What is love if I can't even protect *her* smile!” Hegni's hand trembled as if it was spasming. The gaze right before his eyes hammered him with an unvarnished resolve. “Hegni, lend me your strength! If you will allow yourself to be deceived by my nonsense, then help me!”

“Gh...!”

“To save the woman I wanted to save—to free her from the goddess's yoke!”

Without his glasses, every trace of his logical mask was gone. Struck by his rival's raw emotions, Hegni slumped. The strength drained from his arms and they dangled limply.

“...I'll let you trick me, Hedin.”

And then, Hegni smiled.

“Because I'm an idiot. I don't know what's right or what's wrong. Because I was a fruitless king who only ever drifted with the flow of things.

—There had been two pitiful kings.

On a desolate island divided between white and dark elves killing one another, they had been raised up to the head of their peoples and killed at the

demands of their loyal followers.

Scared of others, the dark king had been unable to go against his comrades, and even as he cursed his own weak will, he fulfilled the duty he had been given. The white king, who despised incompetence was a slave to his pride, and unable to abandon his duty because of that pride, he was a puppet to his small world.

Both of them trapped by the symbolic meaning of the word “king,” they had thought that at least if they could slay the opposing king, there would have been some meaning to their existence. The black sought the white king, and the white sought the black king. That was their only wish.

*“Sorry I destroyed your countries. They were just too unsightly.”*

However, the goddess had saved them.

Destroying that island of miserable fairies, the goddess had set both kings free. No matter how much anyone else might criticize what she had done or curse her as a witch, those two elves alone worshipped her. Because to free them from the shackles of being king, for just their sake, she had become a witch.

Having lost their need to be king, Hegni and Hedin kneeled before the goddess and swore their devotion. On that day, both kings died—and the white and black knights were born.

“I’m just trash, always leaving my fate to others. But...!”

Putting his right hand on Hedin’s hand, which was grabbing his chest, he clenched it and shouted.

“But even so, I didn’t know *Miss Syr* could...that *she* could smile like that!”

He shared his resolve, remembering, just like Hedin, how she had smiled like an innocent young girl in front of that boy.

“If she can smile like that, then I want her to always be smiling! So I’ll fall for your nonsense!”

Looking back, the white elf’s lips curled as the dark elf shouted as if it was a competition. It was a real smile, one he hardly ever showed. The sort only Hegni

would recognize.

“You go south. Do something about Allen. He’s too much for them alone.”

“Got it...What will you do, Hedin?”

“That’s obvious.”

He pulled an elixir from his cloak and put it to his lips and then picked his glasses up from the ground. As they turned away from each other, Hedin looked to the northwest.

“I’ll remove the greatest obstacle.”

The eastern end of the main battlefield.

“Chloe, help Ahnya! Hurry!”

“I know, meow!”

Runoa’s and Chloe’s voices rang out over a field where einherjar, Berbera, and the Gulliver brothers lay fallen. The only enemy left was Vana Freya. Ahnya was still holding out, but she was gradually being pushed back. As much as his abilities might be lowered, it was practically a miracle that she had managed to hold out even that long.

Just as they started to run toward Ahnya—a spearhead came flying through the air.

“Whoa!”

“What meow?!”

They leaped back as the pitch exploded into the spot where they had been just one second earlier.

The remnants of a long spear whose haft had been broken in half stuck out of the ground. It had been thrown by a lone prum.

“I won’t...let you...”

Alfrik had stood up, his body such a bloody mess they couldn’t understand how he was able to move.

Aisha’s Hell Kaios had broken his spear and sliced through his armor, leaving a

deep, vertical gash in the right side of his chest, staining his battle clothes crimson. Part of his helmet was missing, revealing his left eye; he winced as fresh blood dribbled over it. With his small body, he looked like a battered tin soldier toy.

But even so, the last brother of the Bringar was standing.

“You...! Are you not dead yet?! You have an immortal body or something?!”

Aisha was caught between shock and annoyance as Ruona and Chloe leaped into action.

“Don’t get in our way! Just take a nap!”

“Hmph, missed the memo? Then I’ll perform your last rites!”

Even if he was barely standing, they couldn’t risk turning their backs on a first-tier adventurer. Runoa charged in, fists flying, and Chloe followed up with a cliché villain line.

Empty-handed, Alfrik reached his hands out to his younger brother’s weapons which were sticking out of the ground like tombstones. He drew Grer’s greatsword with his right hand, Dvalinn’s battle ax with his left, like a thunderclap.

““Gh?!””

Runoa’s eyes widened at an attack sure to kill her, and all traces of composure disappeared from Chloe’s expression. There was a sudden, loud crash as they defended themselves with gauntlets and knife, getting knocked back by the blow.

“Both of them?!”

“Youuuu!”

Even as Nahza was shouting, Aisha had already charged in. Mikoto drew her blade, Shunsan. Runoa and Chloe immediately leaped to their feet and started running, an entirely different look in their eyes. All trace of carelessness was gone as they swarmed the prum to make him taste defeat again.

“I won’t let you...”

But he refused to fall.

“I won’t let you...!”

Not only that, he swept away the two humans with his greatsword while pushing back the Amazon and cat person with the battle ax.

“—I won’t let you go!!!”

Even if his back was cut, even if his shoulder was stabbed, the prum wouldn’t fall.

“So long as we are here, we will never let you reach Lady Freya!”

Howling what sounded almost like a vow, Alfrik transformed into a blood-drenched asura. His eyes were hollow. It wasn’t even clear if he was fully conscious. He seemed almost a revenant. But after being pushed to the very limit, he revealed a hidden reserve of strength that left them all speechless.

*Bringar’s tenacity...*

Collapsed on the ground, Lilly watched that monstrous scene unfold. The shades of his fallen brothers—of Dvalinn, Berling, and Grer—at Alfrik’s back. With him wielding their weapons, *they* continued to fight. They were still the Bringar.

Her face paled as she saw the first-tier adventurer, steeped in anti-status, having lost his infinite coordination, still forming a wall that stood in their way.

“Gh...enough already, meow!”

“We have to get to Syr!”

Losing their patience with the prum who still kept fighting, Chloe and Ruona both shouted.

The next instant, Alfrik’s rage exploded, as if set off by that name.

“Shut up! What Syr! What *girl*! She is Lady Freya!!!”

His eyes flared, his face twisted in wrath, overwhelming the two girls.

“She is a goddess, now and forever! She will never stoop to being a mere girl!”



“Th-that’s not for you to decide! Syr was always with us!”

“Even if it was a goddess’s whims, that was what Syr herself wanted! You’re just spouting your own selfish wish!”

Runoa and Chloe slammed their arguments back into him along with a fist and knife, but his will remained unshaken.

“Even if that’s true! As the *girl*, she can be hurt, can’t she?!”

““!””

“At this very moment, she’s sad, isn’t she!!!”

Runoa and Chloe were speechless at what came out of Alfrik’s mouth, at the words of a faithful retainer who had guessed his master’s feelings.

“If she is a goddess, then she cannot be hurt! No matter the brutality, no matter the cruelty! Because she is the absolute monarch! The goddess won’t cry!”

Aisha, Mikoto, and Nahza froze, too, dumbstruck.

“But if she becomes a girl, she can be easily hurt! That’s what it means to be a woman! That’s what the mortal realm is! If she isn’t a goddess, she could be easily broken!”

Alfrik had lost his armor and the defenses of rationality as he vented the feelings deep in his heart.

“Bell! He will surely hurt her! And you! You all will deceive her and bring her sadness in the end! So, we! We want her to remain the goddess!”

That was Alfrik and his three brothers’ bare, honest feeling.

The roiling swell of emotion shattered the stopper on his heart.

The boundary between present and past faded as his eyes filled with regret.

“We disgraced her...!”

Each of his brothers shed a tear on the ground all around him.

“Because of us, she was defiled!”

—There were four prums.

The brothers born in an industrial town were highly skilled craftsmen.

It was a common tale. A greedy manager exploiting ignorant but talented workers. Those unselfish brothers were being used by the dwarf who was their intermediary for work, knowing almost nothing of the world outside the cave where they were closed away. They didn't even notice they were being exploited, that the reward for their work wasn't even close to fair. Then a goddess appeared before them.

*"I would like a necklace made by you. Could you please do that for me?"*

Free of avarice and self-interest, they were satisfied with the opportunity to honor the goddess's request, and so they promised to make the greatest necklace and present it to her four days later.

But four days later, the goddess didn't appear. Instead, the dwarf came, telling them that they were free.

The brothers were confused and asked what was going on. The dwarf had a vulgar grin as he answered. In exchange for freeing them, he had slept with the goddess for four nights.

It was nothing special. The goddess had wanted to free them from their vicious exploitation, so she had negotiated with the dwarf, who demanded the goddess herself. She hadn't used the charm she so loathed to forcibly steal them away. Because if she didn't pay a fitting price for the brothers, she would be no different from the exploitative dwarf. She understood that their souls had that much value.

Learning that, the brothers butchered the dwarf. Dragging him into the cave, possessed by pure rage, they pummeled him with hammers and other tools. Dyed red with the dwarf's spattered blood, they wailed and begged forgiveness from the goddess who appeared later.

*"Spending a night with a boring man is a cheap price to pay to get my hands on you."* The goddess looked almost sad, but then she smiled. *"Because what I really wanted...was you."*

The goddess's love was fair and equal to all four, and it didn't begrudge them for what she endured for their sake.

And that grace granted became a sin that the four brothers would bear for all of their lives.

Even though the goddess said there was no need to be bothered by it, they would curse themselves forever. They swore to eradicate all who would wrong the goddess, who would defile her, who would hurt her. Whether she desired it or not. Even if it meant being punished by the goddess, the Gulliver brothers would always protect her body and heart.

That was how they showed their devotion to the goddess, and how they intended to earn their atonement.

“Allow her to be defiled?! To be hurt?!”

Pure obsession. The other side of the coin to an unwavering loyalty. That was the impetus that drove Alfrik and his brothers. They had always hated themselves. But even more than that, they had always prayed for the goddess’s safety.

A bloody tear dripped from Alfrik’s left eye as he roared.

“There’s no need for her to get hurt pretending to be some mortal girl!”

It was the shout of a man who knew regret. The lamentation of a man who had begged for repentance.

It was a feeling toward Freya that didn’t pale in comparison to what they felt toward Syr.

They couldn’t put him down.

Ruona and Chloe couldn’t defeat the prum standing in their way.

Blocked by the four prums, the adventurers were forced to confront Bringar’s tenacity and their vow.

“What are you doing, you idiot?!”

“Meow!”

A battle between two cats without any reinforcements or interference.

Their spears crashed and clanged. The silver spear continued accelerating, making the gold spear groan dangerously.

“I told you not to get in the way! So what the fuck are you doing here?!”

“Ugh...I...?!”

“Do you not understand words?! How much do you have to piss me off before you’re satisfied?!”

He showered Ahnya with a barrage of insults and abuse as they fought.

Annoyance and anger merged as his spear rampaged. Thanks to that, Ahnya was managing to survive.

If Allen was even a little bit calm, he would have been able to finish Ahnya in the blink of an eye, even while debuffed. That was just how much of a blind rage her brother was in.

Ahnya grit her teeth and put her words into her spear.

“I already told you...Brother! I want to save Syr! Just like when I was small... and you always saved me!”

“Ghhhhhhh!!!”

Allen’s eyes flared.

The next attack was one that Ahnya couldn’t defend.

“Don’t make me remember that aggravating stain on my past!”

His deadly attack bore down on her, as if he wanted to blot out all memories of that past.

Just as her face twisted bitterly at the attack that would pierce her right shoulder no matter what she tried to do—

“I’ll be interrupting.”

““I””

A pitch-black shade broke between them, deflecting the silver spear with a black slash. There was a bright flash of sparks, and then the dark elf leaped back, holding Ahnya’s body.

“Hegni...?! What are you doing?!”

“Yeah, you would be mad...sorry, Allen.”

Hegni had appeared so gallantly, but he was practically in tears and already apologizing the moment Allen erupted.

Ahnya's eyes darted in confusion even as the dark elf still held her.

"Sir...Hegni...? Why did you...?"

Back when she was still with the familia, Ahnya had only sought to remain with her brother, so she had just the bare minimum interactions with anyone else in the familia. At the time, Hegni was already one of the candidates for promotion to the core of the familia, someone she had absolutely no connection with at all.

Hegni winced as his wounds ached and slowly lowered Ahnya.

"I'm the same as you."

"Eh...?"

"Me too...I want to save Miss Syr."

Brother and sister alike looked stunned, but Allen's eyes quickly filled with a raging fire.

"Hegni, you bastard!"

"Sorry, Allen. Sorry for being trash. Sorry for being tricked by Hedin!"

Meeting Allen's glare, Hegni apologized without arguing.

"But I also thought her smile was precious! So I want her to be able to smile like that!"

The elf was a ball of negativity, but even so, he shouted back.

"So sorry! I'm...going to help your sister and Bell. I'll bet it all on them, just like Hedin. To set her free!"

Declaring that in his own words, without activating Dáinsleif, was Hegni's demonstration of his resolve. The shred of etiquette for an elf who was sinning and disgracing himself.

Allen's anger had long slipped his reins, and betrayal had pushed him to his boiling point.

“Have you lost your minds! That fly, and you too! What *Syr*! What *girl*! It’s all just make believe!”

“Ngh...No it isn’t! Big brother, *Syr* is...!”

“Shut your damn mouth! I didn’t put up with this stupid farce all this time to worship the likes of you idiots! If it was going to end up like this, I should have just locked her up in a cage!”

Allen had always been tasked with guarding *Syr*. And he never hid his annoyance with it. He hadn’t hesitated to call the goddess’s role-playing a farce in as many words plenty of times before.

“That idiot and I were saved by the goddess!”

“Allen...”

“The goddess is my master! Not some girl!”

—There were two cats.

A sister who depended on her older brother. And a brother who was annoyed by his little sister and hated her very existence. The two of them were all alone when the goddess appeared in a world empty and deserted by all save them.

The goddess had granted them salvation and days filled with struggle. The brother threw himself into that vortex of combat of his own accord. The sister shuddered in fear but desperately chased after him. In the end, the sister was abandoned and wept over her brother being taken from her.

And the brother who abandoned his sister—

“I obeyed the goddess because she promised to give me strength! What I wanted from her was to always remain the absolute goddess who made me strong!”

“I”

“Not being a goddess anymore? Fuck off. You think I’ll allow it? I won’t accept some damn girl!”

Allen leaped, incapable of forgiving those before his eyes who wanted to degrade the goddess into a mere girl, unleashing his fury on *Hegni* and *Ahnya*,

who readied themselves.

“The haughty, cruel goddess! A goddess more powerful than anyone! That’s who stole my heart!”

—There was a lone boy.

He was a foundling.

His oldest memory was a bitter cold that burned his skin and a merciless, cruel dark night.

Before he knew it, all alone at such a young age, he attempted to end his own life in a solitary back alley.

*“Are you all alone?”*

That was when the goddess appeared.

A halo of silver light swept away the violent darkness. The little boy barely had any self-awareness, but in that moment, consciousness took root along with that silver light.

*“What’s your name?”* she asked, but he couldn’t answer.

She smiled. *“All right, then I’ll give you a name.”* But he couldn’t nod.

To the boy who hadn’t even been self-aware, let alone know his origin, the goddess who held him in her arms was the world.

She was everything to him.

*“You will be Ottar.”*

And from that day, he was Ottar—

“Rrrrrryyaaaaaaaaah!”

He slammed his black greatsword into the dwarf’s steel.

“Haaaaaah!”

*“Firebolt!”*

He batted aside the fairy’s star blade and the rabbit’s flame lightning with one arm. They unleashed a continuing stream of attacks, but Ottar intercepted and repulsed each and every one.

He didn't have any words to give. He knew nothing but fighting. To Ottar, there was no line between the past that was his origin and the present that spread before him.

*—Why do you fight?*

No one had ever asked him that, and he had never asked it of himself. There was no room to doubt. It was simple. He could do nothing else.

Brusque and unsophisticated as he was, there was nothing he could do to please the one who had given him everything. So strength. He couldn't repay the goddess except with strength. Ottar couldn't prove himself except by fighting. Because he couldn't separate good and evil, or even right and wrong, without fighting.

And so—

“Nrgh!”

“““Ngh?!”””

Ottar tested.

Ottar questioned.

Ottar checked.

For the sake of the goddess who was everything to him, he asked what they could do. He refused to allow lip service such as claims of rescue to pass. His plummeting greatsword split the stone and the ground beneath, blowing Mia, Lyu, and Bell backward. With his attack, he interrogated three souls that the goddess had loved at first sight.

*And if you cannot defeat me, then—*

*Then you will die here.*

*Those who cannot overcome this body have no right to save the goddess.*

*Let alone save the girl.*

“Ooooh!!!”

Something that could satisfy Ottar. It couldn't be a pipe dream, not some fantasy or sophistry. It was strength. If they couldn't demonstrate that, then the



goddess's victory would never waver.

The strongest warriors remaining on the battlefield roared their will and vows. Not one of them was mistaken. Every one of them followed their faith, maintaining their feelings to the goddess, clinging to their egos. The goddess of beauty's followers rampaged, to save her, protect her, tie her down, repay her.



“Supporter! Your goddess of victory has come! Here to power up all of—whooooooooooooooooa?! You’re crazy beaten-up! You look like a half-drowned rat?!”

*Shut up.*

The goddess's voice was loud and annoying from start to finish as she ran over, causing a vein to bulge in Lilly's forehead even as she lay collapsed on the ground.

“A-are you still alive, Supporter?! Wh-what about healing?! Are you out of items?!”

“Items are wasted on Lilly...Lilly can't fight, so Ms. Mikoto and the others are more important...!”

As she finally sat up with Hestia's help, a cold sweat appeared on her brow.

Hestia gasped seeing her shattered left arm and all the other wounds on her body. She started to say something, but when the commander's gaze met her eyes, she swallowed those words.

After at least doing the basic first aid she could, she pounded her bountiful bosom.

“Like I said before I came rushing over to give you a powerup! So hurry up and let me see your back! I'll update yours and Mikoto's stat—”

“We don't need it! Why did you come here?!”

“—Whoa?! Are you denying all the hard work it took to get over here?!”

Hestia's eyes widened at that spittle-flecked immediate rejection.

Even though, out of the corner of her damp eyes, she could see Miach cradling Nahza as she hugged him back. Why was she getting this reaction? While Miach was updating his follower's status under cover so as not to expose her through the mirrors, *Hestia Familia's* band of little girls were shouting at one another.

"Lady Lilly! Lady Hestia!"

Haruhime, who also couldn't fight directly, rushed over on unsteady feet. Seeing her approaching, Lilly put away the oculus she had been about to take out since it wasn't necessary anymore.

"Lady Hestia, Ms. Haruhime! Go to Mr. Bell!" She endured the pain, explaining as the two of them looked stunned. "We will take care of things here ourselves somehow! You go to Mr. Bell in the northwest! In the very end, if we don't do something about Warlord, we will never win this war game!"

She wouldn't say they had enough fighting strength left here. They couldn't let their guard down against Alfrik, who was still holding on, and Vana Freya. But it was looking more and more like a stalemate at least with the unexpected help from Dáinsleif. That was most likely at Hedin's prompting.

He and Lilly were seeing the same scene. If Ottar remained, everything would be for naught. Even if they somehow took down Allen and Alfrik and tried to approach Freya, Ottar would surely sweep away Bell and everyone else fighting there to stop them. As long as the summit of Orario was defending the throne, the coalition couldn't win. So they needed to pour as much of their limited resources as they could into the Warlord fight.

"Ms. Haruhime, can you still use Kokonoe?! On three, no, *four* people?!"

"—!!! ...I can. I will!"

"Then cast Level Boost on Ms. Lyu and everyone there! Lady Hestia, update Mr. Bell's status!"

"...Supporter...from the start...you...?"

"That's what Lilly has been saying, yes?! If you are going to raise anyone's base strength, then it makes the most sense to do it for Mr. Bell! Leave us and go!"

She alluded to his Liaris Freese in a way that wouldn't be noticed by anyone watching from the city. Enhancing the Level 5 Bell would obviously have more strategic impact than slightly improving the Level 2s Lilly, Mikoto, and Haruhime, whose combined abilities probably hadn't grown by more than 100 total points.

Hearing Lilly explain it even as she struggled to breathe, even as she continued bleeding, Hestia finally made up her mind.

“...Let's go, Haruhime!”

“Yes, ma'am!”

Enduring the grief, she turned her back on Lilly, who was still badly wounded, and Mikoto and the others who were still fighting. Leaving command in this battle to Lilly and Miach, they started sprinting toward the amphitheater on the northwestern edge of the island.

“Hah, hah, haaaaah...?! Dammit...I've been running all day!”

But they were slow. They were hardly making any progress.

Even just making it from the eastern end of the ruins to the main battlefield near the western edge of the island was already a rough journey for a goddess with physical abilities below those of an average person. Even accounting for her slow pace, serious fatigue was starting to become apparent.

And also—

“.....Agh”

“Haruhime?!”

Haruhime's legs suddenly gave out.

Hestia frantically stopped as Haruhime braced herself with both hands on the ground and turned back. Haruhime's green eyes were open wide, and her whole body heaved with each breath. She was sweating an unnatural amount, her skin glistening all over, the sweat dripping to the ground and forming a stain.

“Haruhime, your body is...!”

She was showing clear signs of Mind Down.

Her firm answer to Lilly's command had been false bravado—no, it was a resolve to grind her own body down to nothing for the sake of her comrades. Haruhime didn't have enough strength left to use Kokonoe. It was dubious whether she could even reach them on her own two legs.

Putting her hand on Haruhime's back, unable to do anything else, Hestia struggled in mental anguish.

"...No...no! Haruhime can still stand!"

"H-Haruhime...wh-whoa?!"

"I can run while carrying you, Lady Hestia!"

Haruhime forced herself to her feet while somehow managing to lift Hestia off the ground. Her golden hair glistened, and beads of sweat flew as she started running on sheer willpower.

"H-Haruhime, are you okay?! A-am I not too heavy?!"

"I am...Level 2 now! I can carry a pair of breasts fine!"

"Who are you calling the manifestation of breasts!!! Heyyyyyyyy?!"

The goddess's breasts bounced and swayed, blocking Haruhime's view, even as she complained. And Haruhime continued running despite her mind barely still hanging on—her mental state was so shot that she had equated Hestia with breasts out loud.

Racing to the northwest, she believed that she needed to push through her own limits, just like Mikoto and Samira and the others had before.



"Doryah!"

The dwarf's full-strength swing was met by a slash of the greatsword.

"Fuuu!!!"

The human's twin-bladed combination of attacks were all deflected, nullified by the back of a single hand.

*“Luminous Wind!”*

And the elf’s barrage unleashed with those two as decoys, all seventy-two orbs of light.

*“Weak.”*

Even they were knocked down by a barrier of slashes, and the final one was snatched out of the air by his right hand and crushed.

*“““Ghhhhh?!”””*

He defended. And defended. And continued defending. It wasn’t a furious torrent of attacks, but of defense. A defense that even Mia, Bell, and Lyu’s combined assault couldn’t pierce. A defense made manifest utilizing his black greatsword and his sturdy limbs. Even as he hammered them with shock after shock, Ottar’s face was unchanged, nullifying each and every possible attack.

The ultimate defense.

Ottar’s attacks that could crush everything tended to be what people focused on, but his true worth was in defense. An unwavering stance like a great tree, techniques that could deal with any attack with ludicrous precision, and eyes that saw through enemy tactics as if he knew the future. Adding his incredibly extreme endurance ability, and he could endure attacks like a divine shield.

He didn’t need buffs from magic or skills. All he used was simple time spent. His body, which he had never stopped forging. The crystallization of the techniques and tactics that he had never ceased polishing.

The world that Warlord had reached.

*We can’t break through...?!*

*There isn’t even a single dead angle!*

As proof, Ottar hadn’t even really moved from the center of the amphitheater.

Bell and Lyu, who had both been sunk in a single attack during the Goddess Festival, sensed it. That up to this point, Ottar hadn’t even really fought them.

*This rotten brat...! How much did he keep training himself after that!*

Mia, the only one who had the right to actually fight with Warlord, guessed it.

The truth of just how much more time Ottar had spent training and how much more intense it had become after she had retired.

Even as he attended to Freya as her retainer, he had never once slackened his diligent efforts. After Syr left early in the morning for her role-playing, he devoted everything to his own training.

Ottar didn't descend into Folkvangr anymore. Because there were none who could challenge him. Because even Allen and the others who were forbidden to fight were not a threat.

He had long ago ceased to descend into the Dungeon on a regular basis. Because he knew his body was already at the limit. He was at the point where mere exploration barely increased his abilities if it even raised them at all.

Ottar was the strongest. There was no one left in Orario who could further strengthen him. And so Ottar had immersed himself, sinking deeper and deeper into himself.

Swinging his sword alone, imagining powerful enemies past, spending all his time building techniques and mastering tactics. Until the day permission was given by his master to embark on a trial staking his life, he built himself up simply as a warrior.

That was the difference between him and the Sword Princess, the monster slayer who simply slaughtered monsters in the Dungeon.

"We...couldn't get through it."

"Yeah...! Even with both of us fighting!"

Tione glared at the mirror inside Twilight Manor, while Tiona nodded furiously.

Ottar and *Loki Familia* had fought several times. And they hadn't ever been able to crack Warlord's defense. Aiz had only been able to escape his follow-up attack when he was blocking her way with the help of Tiona and Tione.

Sitting on the sofa, the golden-haired, golden-eyed girl clenched her fists in her lap, trembling at the severity of what these challengers were trying to

achieve with just the three of them.

“He’s already *there*.”

“...Finn.”

“Yeah, Gareth, Riveria. I know.”

Gareth murmured, Riveria’s eyes narrowed, and Finn nodded.

*Ottar is already on the verge of Level 8...*

Braver’s eyes saw through the cruel, despair-inducing truth.

Ottar was a Level 7 who was on the cusp of reaching Level 8.

He had his hand on the summit that the strongest, Zeus and Hera, had stood on.

Braver acknowledged it. And the deities could definitively say it. There was no one who could stand with Warlord. He was the summit of all adventurers.

“Ghhhhhhhh?!”

Because of that, they were doomed to struggle against impossibly bad odds.

Mia’s attacks were deflected, and the damage she took from his counterattacks quickly added up. The only reason they were somehow managing to make a fight of it was thanks to Mia.

She was the overwhelming vanguard who could go toe-to-toe with Ottar and trade blows, but if she fell, then they would immediately lose. Lyu’s and Bell’s fighting styles were focused on agility. They specialized in high speed maneuvers, so they couldn’t match Ottar blow for blow when he was specialized in pure strength and defense. No matter how good their hit-and-away tactics, no matter how much they tried to disrupt his flow, if none of their attacks made it through his defense, they had no hope of winning.

Lyu and Bell sprinted, drenched in sweat as they supported Mia, not allowing her to fall. The adventurers desperately struggled, with the sturdy dwarf as a base, trying to latch onto something.

And as if acknowledging their hard fighting, the boaz warrior began to cast.

*“Silver moon’s mercy and the golden plains.”*

Lyu was the first to be stunned when that unrefined voice rang in her ears.

“Concurrent casting?!”

To be more accurate, it was a bit different. Ottar didn’t have the knowledge of casting that Hedin or Hegni or other first-tier elves had. He didn’t have the ability like Lyu to combine attack, movement, evasion, and casting all at once in real combat.

Just like Mikoto during the battle with *Apollo Familia*, he limited himself to a single action other than the casting. For a short cast, where less time was required, even a non-mage like Ottar could manage to brute-force that much. Unlike Mikoto, though, the one additional action he chose wasn’t movement, but defense.

Planting his left foot, which was his fixed pivot, he combined his absolute defense with casting.

“That magic is...?!”

Hildis Vini.

It was a simple enhancement magic, and the ultimate attack that could even cancel out Bell’s full charged attack.

He shuddered, and the dwarf’s face warped. The elf filled with impatience, and they all three charged from different angles.

“Don’t either of you dare let up!”

They didn’t stop.

Like a barrier that surpassed all reason, he deflected back all slashes, slams, and lightning flames.

*“I offer this body to the lord of battle.”*

Ottar didn’t hold back.

He would never make the foolish mistake of preserving his one-and-only magic as a trump card or ultimate attack out of vain pride. But because he was able to bend most every enemy to his will using raw strength alone, he didn’t resort to his magic that was so terribly fuel-inefficient.



But that meant he would use it when the time came.

*Forget attacking...we can't even stop his casting!*

If Ottar was using his magic, that meant it was an opponent who couldn't be brought down by just his monstrous strength and his absolute defense.

So just having made Warlord use his magic was honor enough.

Bell could be proud. He had made Ottar use his magic twice.

And the boy could also despair. Because it was unmistakably a death sentence.

"Kh?!"

Mia had no choice but to go.

Even knowing that the bait of his almost finished cast was purposefully dangled in front of her, if she didn't stop the cast, the bomb would erupt. Even knowing that she was playing into his hand, she had no choice but to commit to what was almost a suicidal charge.

"—Weak."

Ottar pointed out the truth in the face of Mia's full-strength blow aiming to destroy him, defense and all.

The Warlord's defense was synonymous with offense. As he unleashed his greatsword, it crashed into her shovel, and instead of locking against it, he swung powerfully.

"Gahhh!"

"Ms. Mia?!"

"Mama Mia!"

The slash pushed back her shovel and carved a gash diagonally across her body. As her blood spurted, Ottar mercilessly let loose with a kick. Mia stumbled, somehow managing to block it as Ottar gripped the hilt of his greatsword with one hand, readying it at his right shoulder.

His steel deltoid and trapezius bulged. The next instant, he unleashed a thrust like a cannon blast.

“Ghhhhhh!”

Bell leaped, moving fast enough to make it look like time flowed backward. He activated his skill, just a brief, half-second charge. Light gathered around his right foot, and he kicked off the ground with explosive force, moving between Mia and Ottar.

As the greatsword thrust forward with a growl, Bell raised his Hestia Knife. His left hand held the hilt, the right the flat of the blade. With both hands supporting it, he precisely blocked the thrust with the flat of the blade.

The divine blade didn't shatter. But there was a cry instead.

“UgGaaaaaa?!”

The knife was pushed back by the sword's thrust, slamming into Bell's stomach, making him cough up an absurd amount of blood.

“Ghh!”

He became padding, but even so, the tremendous force sent him and Mia, who had caught it behind his body, both flying backward.

*“Charge bearing the goddess's will.”*

Of course there was a merciless follow-up.

The final verse. Ottar would crush his enemies with the magic he had intended from the start.

*“Hildis Vini.”*

A gleam.

A golden fur covered the black greatsword, just like he remembered.

Ottar unleashed his golden slash at the two of them where they had crashed into the amphitheater's north wall.

“If you die, then that is all you were ever going to amount to.”

Hildis Vini was a simple enhancement spell.

It wasn't even an enchantment, so it should not have been a method that allowed his attack to reach an enemy who was out of range of his blade. But

what happened when a simple enhancement raised the force of his already monstrous strength?

The answer was that the slashes he unleashed killed even space itself.

““\_\_\_\_\_””

A golden slash that surpassed Aisha’s Hell Kaios. A slash that severed the air. Blood-drenched, Bell’s and Mia’s vision took on a golden glow like twilight.

“Khhhhhhhhhhhh?!”

Lyu came flying in.

With a speed befitting the name Gale Wind, she made her escape at full-speed carrying Bell and Mia.

Just one instant after they slipped away, there was a thunderclap.

“~~~~~?!”

A tidal force of sound and energy crashed over them.

Battered by that, they skidded and rolled across the ground.

Unable to move, Van shouted wordlessly as he endured the tremors of the amphitheater.

The sound quickly faded. The aftereffects subsided. It was a simple destructive slash that didn’t bring about the secondary destruction of a high-tier magic. But everything that had been in its path was completely blown away.

“Wh...?”

Bell raised his head, Mia and Lyu pushed themselves up, and they were dumbstruck.

The wall, the columns, the high spectator seats, an entire section of the north side had been erased.

The slash continued out into the ruins, piercing all the way to the outer edge, reaching past the island. They could see all the way to—and through—the beautiful emerald-green lake.

“...I can’t manage it so well as Leon.”

The murmur that slipped from the warrior's lips disappeared in the sound of waves.

The lake surface split by the arc of his slash burbled as it sank back into place.

Bell and the others shuddered. Van, who had fallen on the southern end of the spectator seats, was ashen. The people in the city who saw it through the mirrors all froze. The entire world halted at the sight of that destruction that obliterated everything in its path.

"Again."

And the golden fur hadn't disappeared.

""""?!""""

A second attack was coming.

He swung his sword, still clad in golden light, mercilessly down. An extra-large slash, as if rerunning what had just happened.

—*It's over.*

Bell, Lyu, even Mia felt their impending doom.

*"Strike forever, indestructible lord of lightning."*

What stopped that end was a brilliant, ringing spell.

*"Valiant Hildr!"*

An enormous bolt of lightning shot down. Not a barrage, but a single, concentrated blast.

The massive bolt big enough to consume even a floor boss rushed from the east, crashing straight into the side of the slash. There were sparks before their eyes, and the next instant, the golden light's path nudged from northeast to northwest. The buildings and ruins to the northwest were obliterated.

Meanwhile, having narrowly escaped death, they spun to look in the direction of the spell.

"How much Mind do I have to spend just to shift the angle, you lump of irrationality?"

A white elf calmly descended from the eastern spectator seats where he had unleashed his cannon blast.

Hedin Selrand. Rhomphaia in one hand, he adjusted his glasses with the other hand in annoyance.

“...Master? Why?! Wait, does that mean...really?”

“Don’t show me that unpleasant face, stupid rabbit. Figure it out from the fact that I saved you, fool.”

Because he had been constantly enduring Ottar’s baptism, Bell didn’t know about Hedin’s change of sides. For a second, he couldn’t believe his eyes, but he remembered the feeling that he had told Lilly before the battle, and shock filled his eyes.

He grimaced as Hedin looked at him like he was looking at human waste...but then the joy came, and he broke into a clumsy smile. He recognized clearly that this wasn’t the Hedin Selrand who had tormented *Freya Familia*’s Bell Cranell, this was the master who had done so much to remodel him before the Goddess Festival.

Considering the situation, it wouldn’t have been that strange that the boy might even have a tear in his eye, but Hedin snorted in disgust at the smile anyway.

“What a pathetic display, even with you here, Mia.”

“...Quit yappin’. I’ve got a bit of gap in my résumé.”

“Then fill it at once. If you’re going to casually sleep it off, we will all be crushed.”

Hurling venom equally at Mia, too, Hedin finished his descent and tossed two small vials.

Those were his last items. Mia used part of the high potion to close the wound on her torso, and then poured the remaining half of the high potion and the high magic potion over Bell’s and Lyu’s heads. They were both surprised, but as if recognizing there was no point in complaining, they didn’t say anything, wobbling to their feet after recovering.

“Hedin...”

“You don’t need any explanation, Ottar.”

“No.”

Even though his attack had been diverted and Hedin, *Freya Familia’s* marshal, had switched sides, Ottar didn’t show any reaction.

Resting his greatsword, the golden aura now faded, on his shoulder, he met the elf’s gaze.

“Answer me one question.”

“What?”

“How much did you know?”

With Bell and the others standing up behind him, Hedin faced Ottar and calmly spoke. “I took measures to break in this stupid rabbit. That was why I instigated Hegni and the others to make him suffer and push him to the brink of death. It was so he could be at least a little bit useful.”

Bell forgot all his earlier happiness and froze like a stone statue.

“But you alone rejected my directions.”

When the cracks started to form in Freya’s twisted world, after he had intentionally intensified the baptism. Hedin had argued that they should push Bell to the limit immediately, that the entire first-tier adventurers should join the baptism.

—*You too, Ottar. Crush that rabbit with your sword.*

—*There is no need for me to join as well. I leave it to you, Hedin.*

But Ottar had declined.

“Did you predict then I would revolt, that it would end up like this?”

Hedin had been continually acting beneath the surface. Even Freya hadn’t noticed it.

But the warrior before his eyes had distanced himself, as if sensing it.

Ottar’s expression was unchanged as he answered.

“...I am not so wise as you. I couldn’t have known what might come.”

His rust-colored eyes looked at Hedin and Bell standing diagonally behind the elf.

“But at that moment, I saw an image...An image of the two of you standing before me. Just like now.”

Hedin’s face twisted.

“Don’t foil my stratagems on a mere hunch, war fanatic.”

He scoffed in growing annoyance at the boaz’s warrior instinct.

Glaring at the person who was the exact opposite of him, he finally swelled with the determination to fight.

“Are you done talking?”

“Yes. Now I will swiftly destroy you. Or else that noisy cat will come chasing, too.”

Kneading his mind, calling an end to the questions, Hedin shifted to a battle stance.

Bell frantically called a halt to it.

“M-Master? You’re going to fight together with us?!”

“What other option is there in this situation, you trash. Stop talking.”

“...We couldn’t do anything to him. Do you have some plan for dealing with him?”

“Why do you not? What are you doing fighting a true monster head-on? Make a plan. Use every trick you can. Would you face a monster rex in a head-on match?”

Rudely insulting Bell, who slumped, he continued to heap scorn at Lyu for her question.

Not even glancing at them, he made it clear that this was equivalent to fighting a monster rex.

“Mia, I’ll handle the rear guard. Take them and try again.”

“...We can’t pull off the kind of teamwork that your directions will need.”

“I’m not expecting anything of the sort.”

His wise eyes looked only at the warrior standing calmly before them as he made his order.

“Ten seconds is enough. Buy me that much time.”

The next instant, he unleashed his magic power, signaling the start of the battle.

*“Struggle for eternity, indestructible soldiers of lightning.”*

His voice was the signal for the three of them to leap into action. Lyu concurrent casting as she did.

And for the first time, Ottar switched from a defensive stance to an offensive stance.

A straight charge.

“Whoa?!”

“Kh?!”

“Don’t look down on me!”

As if to say there was no reason for him to just wait for Hedin’s artillery barrage.

Bell and Lyu were easily knocked aside by the charge, but Mia resisted.

As if proving with her body that she was a dwarf, she caught the boaz’s tackle head-on, her feet sinking into the battered cobblestones. Her shovel and his sword clanged together, struggling evenly for a second. But in that second, the fairy was already on the move.

Using Mia as a shield, Hedin began running.

“...!”

He ran in a circle around the outer edge of the stage, sometimes leaping. What appeared in the wake of his quick movement was countless missiles.

Arrowheads of lightning crackled into existence, but they didn’t immediately



launch themselves at Ottar. They were instead set, hanging in the air to the east, northeast, and north. For the first time since he had started fighting, Ottar's eyes widened slightly. Immediately recognizing Hedin's aim, he pushed Mia forcibly away and moved to crush Hedin.

*"Firebolt!"*

*"Agaris Alvesince!"*

But two flames stopped him.

Bell's lightning flame quick shot and Lyu reapplying the blazing flower petals.

The former was just harassment not calculated to stop Ottar, while the latter was a forceful attack making use of its extreme firepower.

Fired off in succession without even proper aim, the lightning flames created a flare and explosions to block Ottar's view while the explosive slice closed in from the side, forcing him to meet the attack. It couldn't break his absolute defense, but it forced him to stop his charge. Ignoring Bell's consecutive shots, he batted Lyu aside, but in that moment, Mia recovered and attacked again.

While they persistently latched onto him, the lightning was set in the northwest, west, and southwest.

And.

"That was ten seconds, as requested. I will reward your hard work."

With the final rounds set in the southeast, Hedin stopped.

"This is...!"

"Lightning encirclement!"

Bell and Lyu looked around in shock. All around the stage, there were dozens of lightning rounds floating in the air. A series of depth charges set using the magic's standby phase.

With his Level 6 status and his supreme magic control, he had maintained the lightning rounds already set while moving around the circle, laying out even more. Even though she had reached Level 6 herself, Lyu couldn't begin to do that sort of feat.

The dome of magic shots resembled a dreadful starry sky. The total number of the lightning arrows set was 978.

Ottar's eyes narrowed as he looked all around at the arrows, every last one aimed at him.

"Run wild, vanguard. I'll align the rest."

Understanding the substance of his instructions on an instinctive level, they rampaged, just as ordered.

"Haaaaaaah!"

Bell took the lead, slicing from the side with his knife.

Ottar prepared his absolute defense, ready to completely shut him down. So far, it was exactly the same as before. But that was where the differences started.

"Þrír."

Lightning arrows set to the east fired in time with Bell's approach.

"?!"

It drew surprise from Ottar.

Three bolts launched from directly behind Ottar, at a completely different angle from Bell's charge. His upper body and arms were originally preparing to meet the boy's attack, but he was forced to quickly change stances, allowing the Hestia Knife's blade to flash. There was a metallic crash. The backhand-grip upward slash was blocked by the gauntlet on the boaz's immediately raised left arm.

But...

*He blocked it! But I still got through!*

Bell's own eyes widened as he shuddered at the first proper feedback he had gotten from an attack all day. In good hit-and-away style, he immediately retreated to avoid taking Ottar's counter attack. And taking his place was Lyu, flying in from the exact opposite direction as him, swiftly, sharply, low to the ground so Ottar couldn't see her, swinging her flaming sword upward. Ottar

reacted to that deft slash with inhuman speed, but— “Sjau.”

Another small barrage at his back, this time from the southwest.

As if refusing to let the same trick work again, blood vessels bulged in his arm as he swiftly unleashed two slashes with his black greatsword, knocking aside Lyu and the lightning both, but—then came Mia.

“Uraaaaaaaaaa!”

“Nrgh?!”

She made her move in the momentary pause after his attacks ended. Closing in at that brief opening, she swung her shovel, sending the boaz’s massive body backward.

“It landed?!”

“Amazing!”

The deities watching from start to finish in the mirror on the thirtieth floor of Babel roiled.

Seeing Warlord finally pushed out of the center of the stage, everyone, regardless of who they were rooting for, got excited.

“That’s sick! Timin’ what’s supposed to be a sure-kill magic right with the vanguards’ attacks!”

“And he’s even controlling the force and number to not damage Bell and them with it, too!”

Loki and Hermes praised the adroit performance.

Their all-seeing, all-knowing eyes immediately saw through the stratagem that Hedin had devised.

“One-sided coordination! You can’t expect perfect understanding from a ragtag party! It takes everything just to make things work! And he’s making up for all of that with just his head and supporting them in the process!”

Synchronized attacks with the frontliners. That was Hedin’s plan.

Accurately predicting Bell, Lyu, and Mia’s movements from the rear, he deftly manipulated the lightning arrows deployed all around the stage, timing them

perfectly with their attacks.

He wasn't foolish enough to try to unleash them all at once, hoping that would somehow be enough. Even if he was wounded a bit, Ottar's complete defense could endure a full barrage from all angles. And so, synchronized attacks. By timing his shots with a skilled vanguard's assaults, he could force Ottar to make more decisions with his defense. Even if it didn't cause any damage.

Shifting timings, disrupted concentration, a discord in attack and defense, all of those accumulated impediments would bring about a collapse of the complete defense. It was an extension of a forced choice. A series of them repeated on end. He was forcibly broadcasting static noise into the gap between Ottar's tactics and everyone else's.

"Each one of those shots has the force to knock out a second-tier adventurer. Then there's Mia's and everyone else's attacks as well. Warlord has to account for all of it!"

"Hedin turned that defensive focus against him. Even though he's got a pretty, girly face, he's a pure sadist! Course this is all 'cause their movements are good, too...but not bad, rubbin' a little dirt on Ottar of all people! Ain't that right, Bete?!"

"Tch...with that rear guard, anyone could at least get him a little dirty."

While Hermes and Loki got excited, Bete frowned angrily.

He didn't want to acknowledge Bell even if it killed him, but that just meant praising Hedin, making him more and more pissed.

"Ottar, this is a formation I theorized to roast you. I shelved it because I couldn't manage the front-and back-line movements alone, but it's just right for recycling now."

Hedin calmly held his position at the east of the stage, manipulating the lightning.

It has been said many times before, but the members of *Freya Familia* famously didn't get along well.

The first-tier adventurers were no exception to the fierce internal conflict between fellow familia members. This was a deployment that Hedin had expressly developed several years ago to defeat Ottar, and now its time to be used had finally arrived.

“Gh?!”

His counter-Ottar tactic was proving highly effective. The synchronized attacks made it such that each and every lightning bolt effectively had a will of its own. It was as if an army of lightning soldiers were performing wave tactics at the order of their king, and even Ottar couldn't afford to ignore the bite of their blades.

And Hedin was cunning.

At times, he held back his soldiers, which were deployed in every direction, including overhead. But at other times, he boldly sent in masses of them. There were moments where it seemed as if each was aimed precisely at the dead angle of Ottar's back, but then someone would come in blatantly visible from the right and left to camouflage the true shot that landed a clean hit. Sometimes, he used Bell's and their attacks as decoys, while at others, he used even thirty rounds as a feint, carefully calculating their angles, timings, and orders, so that even if he failed to break Ottar's defense, it forced him to continuously think, increasing the mental load. And as a bonus, if Ottar defended using his sword or gauntlets, it would still cause an electric shock, slowly but surely building up minor damage.

Manipulating his magic from the back lines and synchronizing it with the vanguard, Hedin was just like a conductor. But instead of a conductor's baton, he swung his rhomphaia, the first-tier weapon Dizaria.

A long-hafted weapon made of a branch of sacred tree, just like Lyu's Alvs Iustitia, it could also be used as a staff that increased elven magic power. The magic stone at the top of the staff gleamed, making the lightning soldiers roar.

“Lyu, kiddo! On me!”

Gradually, the three of them adapted to the lightning support, and now they didn't just trade places but even began attacking at almost the same time. And the moment Ottar's perfect defense faltered, they began.

“Soraaaa!”

Mia charged from the front.

In perfect alignment, Hedin barked.

“Tólf! Legio!”

Sending in all of the bolts in the north, he made it rain on Ottar’s back.

“Gh!”

Pincered from the front and back, Ottar stubbornly refused to choose evasion.

Recognizing that casting aside his absolute defense was what Hedin wanted, and also that he was steadily being cornered as if by hunting dogs, Warlord twisted his upper body, creating a storm.

It was ferocious spinning slash.

Using the full reach of the greatsword almost as long as he was tall, he batted away Mia, the lightning, and all who tried to approach him.

Mia barely managed to use her shovel as a shield and retreat, but there was a smirk on her lips. She and the massive amount of lightning were decoys.

*“—Charging through space, bind the star traces to this land!”*

A flowing concurrent cast. Lyu had dispelled the flaming petals, charging in while reaching into her Astrea Record. Just after Ottar had used his whole body to attack.

He had even spun around, so there was of course an opening. Ottar’s eyes widened as the racing gale slipped in, trying to get inside his range—but even so, he managed to react.

“Nrgggggggh!”

Ignoring all inertia and reaction, his joints and muscles creaking, he unleashed a slash. A transcendent reaction speed. A strength that surpassed even giants. Lyu’s sky-blue eyes reflected the black guillotine about to swing down right at her— “Nowwww!”

“?! ”

A matching black scarf flew.

Bell undid the Goliath Scarf he was wearing and threw it in. It was a snakelike, writhing, indirect attack. The cloth wrapped around Ottar's sword, binding it, sealing the guillotine's slice.

A Level 5 and Level 7. Ordinarily, he would never win that tug-of-war. But with his spinning slash and the target being off balance, for just one brief moment, the boaz's stance wobbled.

And that brief moment was enough.

*"Justice returns!"*

Finishing her cast and her approach, Lyu activated the magic. She crouched, her star sword at her hip in a quick draw stance. Her left hand was in the approximate place where a sheath would be if she had one, blending magic and technique together seamlessly.

*"—Kaguya, lend me your strength!"*

She unleashed the Far-Eastern secret technique that her bitter rival and comrade Kaguya Gojouno had used.

*"Gokou!"*

The sword flashed like it had been drawn in an instant, giving birth to five slashes.

*"Gh?!"*

The five separate attacks moved as one, coming from all angles. A downward slash from overhead, upward slashes from left and right, from the back a diagonal slash down from the shoulder, and from the front a horizontal slash. The five flashes were like five different slashes unleashed from all angles and directions, closing in on Ottar.

*"Ghhhhh?!"*

Gojouno Kaguya's Gokou. It was a magic that merely created a magic slash in the positions she set, but she had combined it with her draw to turn it into an unblockable, inescapable sure-kill attack.

Even caught off guard, he would absolutely defend. He could even withstand Alize's Alveria. Because she knew that, Lyu had chosen this Gokou attack. As expected, the strongest managed to block the horizontal slash from the front with his gauntlet, but he was caught by the remaining four lights.

The magic blades destroyed his chest piece, his gauntlets, his headpiece, the few bits of armor that Warlord wore. Blood erupted from the warrior as crimson particles of magic danced like a petal storm.

"This is—!"

Bell immediately pulled the Goliath Scarf, raising the greatsword.

As Ottar stiffened, the hilt was dragged out of his hand. The giant sword flew through the air. He lost his armor and his weapon. It was a decisive decrease in his defense.

Hedin's eyes flared sharply as he bellowed.

"Fire, stupid rabbit!"

"Ghhh!"

As he let go of his muffler, a furious flame rose in his right fist, while his lightning-wielding master unleashed all of his magic.

*"Fireboooooolt!"*

*"Caurus Hildr!"*

Powerful lightning flames and the full remaining volley of the lightning bolts set in a dome all around the stage. A storm of magic poured into Ottar.

"Ooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!"

The flame and lightning landed just as Lyu backed off.

In addition to the more than five hundred remaining lightning rounds volleying all at once, Bell poured firepower into the Firebolts he was wildly shooting off. Sealing the boaz in the center of a vortex of fire and lightning, not allowing him to escape. The lightning continued to thunder down, and the boy shouted, still firing his magic.

They fired everything, carving away at the entirety of Ottar, to settle it then



and there.

The black greatsword fell to the ground, sticking out of the ground like a grave marker as Hedin and Bell refused to let up.

*“Strike forever, indestructible lord of lightning—Valiant Hildr!”*

The moment he reached the end of his arrows, Hedin immediately prepared another cast, summoning the great general. A final lightning strike to end everything. The extra-large cannon blast erupted in the center of the amphitheater.

*“~~~~~!!!”*

A terrific shock wave and blast wind forced Lyu and Mia back.

Electricity crackled, and a massive number of sparks flew. Bell was breathing raggedly as he finally lowered his left arm, but he immediately readied his knife.

It was a storm of artillery capable of obliterating even a first-tier adventurer. But the enemy was far beyond that. They smothered all trace of negligence and conceit.

Hedin held his Dizaria at the ready, too, as they all four looked into the gradually clearing smoke.

*“...!”*

On the other side, there was a massive shadow standing at the center of the firing ground.

Ottar was alive. He was standing on two legs, his massive trunk-like arms crossed like a shield. His steel body was scorched and bleeding. It was plain to see he had taken heavy damage. Just like them.

*He’s hurt...*

*He’s barely standing...*

*We can do this...!*

The light of hope shone in Bell’s mind.

He was sure of it, that they could defeat Ottar now. But just as he took a step forward.

His eyes met the bestial, twisted, fang-like pupils that appeared as Ottar looked up from behind his crossed arms.

“ \_\_\_\_\_ ”

His heart, his instincts, were caught in an oppressive grip.

The light of hope transformed into the loudest alarm bell ringing in his head. Lyu and Mia gulped, too, while Hedin's expression twisted and, giving up all pretenses, he screamed.

“Finish—!”

But a discordant sound interrupted him.

*"UUUUUUUUUU00!  
!!"*

That shout thundered to the heavens.

It was a beast's roar.

The clamor was enough to make Bell and the others recoil instinctively, and some spectators watching through mirrors fell backward as well. Stunned adventurers tumbled out of their chairs. Even deities' eyes peeled back in shock.

The feral boar's challenge might as well have been a monster's howl. It evoked a primal fear, physically and mentally fixing them in place. And he had performed it despite having a human body.

That meant one thing.

The warrior had adopted the mind of a beast. That howl robbed even first-tier adventurers like Bell of their freedom to move for several moments. And during that opening, the beastly eyes that had been looking to the heavens now lasered forward, glaring at their prey.

As their hearts and bodies screamed, the true rampage began.

“000000000000000000000000000000000000!!!”

A headlong rush.

An explosive dash that shattered the cobblestones he stepped on, followed

by a violent closing.

Not allowing evasion, attack, or resistance, he caught an elf with his massive, weapon-like shoulder.

“—Gaaaaaaa?!”

Hedin was sent flying with an unrefined shout.

Bell and the others stood frozen, unable to react as he charged into the wall of the amphitheater.

Stone fragments scattered, and his consciousness fluttered, and his breathing stopped for a moment. It had been a monstrous, unthinking tackle, completely devoid of strategy or tactics.

Hit by a force that surpassed his magic barrage, Hedin coughed up blood only to see a palm.

“Nuuuuuraaaaa!”

“Giiii?!”

A palm heel strike slammed straight into his face.

The wild boar’s fingers covered his vision and his whole face. The glasses he had been wearing were of course shattered, the glass and metal frame pressed into his flesh, shredding his fair face. But that was a trivial, laughably small thing.

Next, the five fingers gripping his head started to close on his skull, making Hedin’s brain and vision swim. His point of view shifted dizzily. Up and down flipped. As his body twisted, his intelligent mind came to the pointless conclusion that he had been thrown at an absurd speed.

And the next instant, the ground exploded like a bomb had gone off.

“Guh, aa...”

“Master?!”

“Kh?!”

As he was thrown from the edge of the amphitheater to the center, a cloud of dust erupted around Hedin, setting time back in motion again.

Realizing what was happening, the adventurers swiftly began moving. Standing firm before the monster moving on pure instinct to attack its prey, Bell, Lyu, and Mia readied themselves to defend their rear.

But their wall was utterly shattered.

“““———gh?!”””

A clumsy swing that hit like a sledgehammer pulverized Mia. A single finger not even straightened into a blade slashed Lyu. And a diagonal clawing of fingers tore through Bell's battle gear and bit into his flesh.

The dwarf suddenly sharing a hug with the ground vomited blood. Blood spattered from the elf who had evaded and was only barely touched. And the human was adorned with a dress of blood from the five hideous claw marks carved into his chest.

An instinctual rampage, devoid of any techniques or skill or tactics. The cruel force acknowledged no evasion and no defense.

Absolute offense. The reversal of his ultimate defense, he transformed his body into claws that existed only to destroy his enemies. This was no longer a battle between adventurers, but a hunt or be hunted scene, and the spectators watching through the mirrors blanched at the sudden change.

“That’s...”

Amid went pale.

“It can’t...”

Asfi's lips quivered.

“Transformation...!”

Finn's eyes went wide.

“Warlord's true ace in the hole!”

“Even if he's stronger now that he's feral, there should be a limit, right?! This is crazy!”

Watching the same scene in Babel, Hermes and Loki both raised their voices.

Transformation was a phenomenon confirmed only among a limited number

of races of beast people. It was the embodiment of fighting on instinct. As Loki said, by unleashing the bestial strength within their bodies, they could increase their physical abilities. Werewolves were the classic example. Wolf beast people would transform when exposed to the full moon, gaining a level of strength that inspired the adage that “no race is a match for a werewolf during the full moon.”

“...Unlike us, that hulk can choose when and where to transform...” Bete spat in disgust.

The moment beast people received Falna, their transformation became tied to their skills. Some requirement needed to be met to transform, or else it would carry some risk.

But most likely, the trigger for Ottar’s skill was arbitrary. Unlike werewolves who could only transform under the full moon, he could become a beast during the day, or even in the Dungeon.

Knowing Warlord’s fighting style, Bete had no doubt of that much.

“And you can’t compare the effect here to any old nobody. That boar’s transformation isn’t some enhancement...He’s a goddamn monster.”

As he was acknowledging Ottar’s transformation wasn’t any weaker than his own, the tattoo on his left cheek twisted.

The beast in the mirror was clearly distinct from the warrior who had been fighting before. It almost resembled the scene brought on by Haruhime’s Level Boost. While most of the residents in the city were falling into a panic, adventurers in the tavern murmured, turning deathly pale.

“So then right now Warlord is...”

“.....Level 8...?”

No one acknowledged it.

Because if they did, there would be no more point in continuing to watch.

“Ghhhhh, aaaaaaaahhh...!!! *Strike forever...indestructible lord! Of lightning...!*”

Ignoring the other three being torn and battered, Hedin raised his trembling body and held out an arm. All trace of composure disappeared from his bloody

face as he readied his highest output magic.

*“Valiant Hil—”*

But he was too slow.

Sensing the lightning gathering on instinct alone like a wild beast, the boaz raised his boulder-like fist up to the sky.

Unable to even stand fully, Bell, Lyu, Mia, and Hedin saw only despair.

The bulging mass of muscles that was his arm became a twisted fang, and the next instant, he pointed it toward the ground.

[illegible]

He swung down.

The ultimate fist to blow everything away.

“\_\_\_\_\_gaaah!”

Did that sound come from Hedin or Bell?

The center of the amphitheater erupted.

Cracks spiderwebbed out as the foundation shook, and the ground itself groaned under the weight of the boar's strike. A shock wave raced outward, swallowing up all of the adventurers, buffeting them and tossing them aside before burying them in rubble. The stage's outer wall crumbled, completely losing its form. The cliff connecting to the lake even collapsed, changing the shape of the island. The biggest quake of the day shook the Orza city ruins.

There were no more paving stones left as the boar pulled his fist out of the pile of rock fragments. As the cloud of dust and debris cleared, the only one still standing was a lone beast. The adventurers lay unmoving on the ground as the cloudless sky looked down at them in pity.

The fleeting sunlight started to take on the color of twilight.



The sun began to set, and the ground groaned.

The entire city ruins creaked from the tremendous tremor, bouncing Plutus and Hathor into the air from their hiding spots. But even so, the remaining followers still had to keep fighting. They had to defeat the opponents standing before them.

“Cut the crap!”

“Gh...! I...won’t! I won’t lose to you, brother!”

The golden spear tenaciously matched the sweeping slash of the silver spear.

Allen lost all ability to hide his irritation with Ahnya, who refused to waver or give ground, no matter how much she was injured or how much he berated her.

He had grown tired of her unsightly, stubborn resistance, and a murderousness welled up as he lashed out, fully intending to send her to the ground. Then— “Don’t ignore me, Allen.”

“Ngh! Hegniii!”

That black blade blocked Allen again. Even though he hadn’t been affected by Ahnya’s debuff, the dark elf’s wounds were not fully healed. But his attacks were still enough to stir up Allen’s emotions even further.

“I told you not to get in my way! Get lost, fly!”

“I will get in your way. I want to defeat you, even. And besides...why don’t you quit just yelling and jump over me like always?”

Due to the effects of his curse weapon, Hegni’s endurance couldn’t fully recover, so they both lacked the burst of power necessary for a decisive blow. But even though he couldn’t hide his fatigue, oddly, Hegni smiled.

Not the sort of smile directed at a friend. Not even one directed at family.

Even though, unlike Hedin, he wasn’t skilled at plots, Hegni flashed a clumsy smirk.

“Are you tired, Allen? No, that’s not it.” He was trying to throw him off balance using a certain kernel of information. “For a while now, your spear has been a little off whenever you point it at your little sister, hasn’t it?”

“I”

“...Eh?”

Those words had their biggest effect not on Allen, but on Ahnya. Even as her brother’s eyes widened, she froze midmovement.

“...Quit talking stupid shit!”

Allen’s momentary surprise was immediately overwritten by rage, and he leaped at Hedin, to make sure he never opened his mouth again.

As the spear approached, Hegni’s smile remained.

*“By the power of the demon blade, bring eternal destruction.”*

And he finished the super-short cast he had begun whispering to himself.

Astonishment rocked Allen.

The collar of the tattered black cloak had perfectly covered the dark elf’s mouth. And because he was unable to see his lips moving, the cat’s reaction was fatally delayed.

*“Burn Dáin!”*

“Gah?! ”

Just as his spear was about to land, Allen was struck by an explosive flame at super-close range. The magic’s range was extremely short, but in exchange, it packed enough punch to completely blow away any enemies that fell within its area of effect.

Allen’s light body was sent flying. The chariot immediately threw himself into the air to escape, avoiding any damage as he coughed up black smoke.

“See, a hit cat always yowls,” Hegni calmly pointed out. “The normal you would never have fallen for such an obvious taunt.”

The current situation, Allen’s mistake, was the nudge that made Ahnya think just maybe...

“Big brother...is that really...?”

“Don’t show me that stupid face! Why the hell would it be true?! ”

Every time she heard her brother’s fiery shout, her body shuddered, and her



tail cowered. Ahnya started to feel overwhelmed by Allen's rage, unquelled from the fiery anger she remembered, but even so, she squeezed her hand and put it to her chest.

With significant hesitation, struggling to begin, she finally spoke.

"...Before I came here...Vanargand said something."

"...What are you talking about...?!"

Her brother's eyes were a mixture of wrath and suspicion, but as she met his gaze, her mind slipped back to a few hours earlier. When Bete had dragged her out of her room and was carrying her through Folkvangr.

*"Let go! I was abandoned by Syr and big brother! They don't care about meow at all!"*

She was emotionally unstable and desperate. Ahnya had been venting and complaining wildly. And as if he had finally had it up to here with her, something slipped from the gray-haired werewolf's mouth.

*"That piece of shit...is a lot like me. Even if I don't want to admit it."*

"Eh?"

*"If he didn't need you, he would have just killed you straight up. You're an eyesore and an earsore, too."*

"Uh, ugh..."

She was taken aback by his sudden outburst when—

*"But if you're still around...then that says it all."*

Ahnya's eyes widened.

The werewolf who had just been running with his eyes pointed forward quietly muttered, *"I'm losin' my edge."* And didn't answer Ahnya again.

"Do you hate me, big brother?"

"You're damn straight I do!"

"Did you abandon me...because you hate me?"

"What are you talking about now! Do you not understand anything?!"

“Then why didn’t you kill me?”

“I”

Ahnya, who was by no means the smartest cat in the litter, her eyes quivering, a naive look on her face, managed to put her question into words.

“You always say you’ll kill me, or you’ll murder me...so why didn’t you?”

“Gh...!”

“Why...?”

Allen’s angry shout never reached his mouth because he saw the tears glistening in her eyes. Hegni had watched in silence as the siblings came to a standstill, but finally, he broke in.

“...That’s right, Allen.” Hegni announced the kernel of truth that he had discovered before. “If you loved her, you couldn’t abandon her.”

“\_\_\_\_\_”

“You had no choice but to hate her.”

For an instant, a single cat’s heart was stripped bare. The two cats stared at each other, eyes open wide. Allen’s lip trembled. His usual torrent of abuse wouldn’t come. Every sort of emotion crossed his face, and it could no longer be called just a mask of pure rage as he took a step toward the dark elf talking nonsense.

“Allen...sorry, but...” Before he could erupt, before he could leap forward, Hegni averted his eyes and said the truth. “You said you wanted to grow stronger at Lady Freya’s side...but you’ve gotten *weaker*.”

“I”

Allen was speechless.

The dark elf was a first-tier adventurer just like him. He was a person who possessed strength comparable to Allen’s.

“Hedin said the same thing...Do you remember? When you were made the new second-in-command? When Hedin stepped aside, yielding that position to you.”

It had happened several years ago.

That was back when Ahnya was still in Folkvangr.

When Hedin had been recommended to become second-in-command, he had refused, pushing it on Allen.

“Hedin understood that you were stronger than him then...That was why he yielded it to you. His pride wouldn’t allow him to stand at the top if he was weaker.”

“...!”

“But...after your sister left, you got weaker. Without the one person you needed to protect...you got weaker, Allen.”

Not in terms of status. Not in terms of level. In those senses, Allen far outstripped his past self. What Hegni was talking about was something much more fundamental—his spirit, his drive, his will.

Compared to before he abandoned his sister, Allen was decisively different now.

“That is why Hedin called you a coward. That’s why he was angry, saying he shouldn’t have yielded the position to you.”

Allen was dumbfounded by the truth that even he hadn’t known, no, that he couldn’t possibly have noticed. Ahnya was staggered by the dark elf’s confession.

Hegni looked down. He had stayed silent at the goddess’s request—she had asked him not to say anything until Allen realized it himself.

“...Don’t screw with me...Don’t...don’t you...!”

“Don’t bother, Allen...You can’t deny it anymore.”

Hegni was deeply apologetic, struggling with his own guilt, but out of the little bit of good will he felt for the cat, he dealt the finishing blow.

“We who can only speak through combat cannot allow that to be denied...!”

This time, Allen froze.

Even if he bellowed angrily or cursed, that was proof that Allen himself

couldn't deny it. Einherjar would never compromise on strength. They wouldn't resort to deceit when it came to strength. And the brave warrior who lined up shoulder to shoulder with him had shared his honest assessment of his strength.

“Brother...”

Even Ahnya understood it. She hadn't barely evaded any fatal blows in this battle. Allen had let her evade them.

Before Hegni had intervened, the attack he unleashed to knock her out of the fighting had been aimed at her right shoulder. It was an attack that was wholly unlike Allen. Aimed at her golden armor, its ability to kill or wound was significantly lower.

The reason their sibling battle had lasted as long as it had was because he was holding back.

“I was utter garbage. A terrible king. I never had any family at all, but...” The dark elf's assessment put himself at the lowest depths, but even as he deprecated himself, he looked up. Nervously, but with a gaze that was like the windswept sea, he said it. “Allen, the way you two are now...is wrong.”

The wind blew. The sound of weapons crashing stopped as a humid wind swept between the three of them. A stillness removed from battle, rustling their hair, shifting black hair over a cat's eyes.

—There was a single cat.

The love he felt for his family was a piece of the hatred he always carried.

When he was small and weak. When they were buried in a world of ruins. His one and only little sister. He didn't know how many times he had thought of raising his hand against her. How many times he had pushed her away, had thought of abandoning her.

But he had continued to protect that kitten, that crybaby, that irredeemable idiot, that hopelessly bad singer, that little sister who had annoyed him so many times.

Because his sister had always kept singing her awful song, showing even if

they were lost, he wasn't alone.

Because it made him smile, even though he would turn away so she couldn't see.

*"I will fight to make up for her share, too, so please discard that idiot."*

In time, the cat was saved, underwent the baptism, and finally faced a fork in the road.

Seeing the little sister who had almost died with him, the cat cursed his own weakness. He decided that he needed to become even stronger, and at the same time, he resolved to cast aside his love.

*"Please remove her from my world, from battlefields where the weak will never survive."*

The cat understood. To repay the goddess who had saved them, he would throw himself into combat, and so long as he did, his stupid, dimwitted little sister who always followed him would undoubtedly end up dying someday. He was sure of it. The dark age wouldn't suffer weakness or naivete. And even if that chaotic time drew to an end, his sister would not find happiness at his side. Not when he was always fighting.

*"I will sever my connection with that idiot, too. I only need you. I swear it. So —"*

Even as he was attracted to the goddess's divinity, the relationship he desired with *her* was complicity. He wanted to cast aside his little sister, so that *she* could take his sister to the tavern, to give her another family and another home.

The cat swore his loyalty.

He offered his everything to protect his little sister. He made himself into a chariot. No matter how much it might hurt his sister, he decided to remain the goddess's chariot by himself, to distance his little sister from a brother who brought only death and misfortune.

The one he loved most had never changed. It was the same person now as it was long ago. Allen Fromel didn't have any way of praying for his little sister's

happiness except to turn his most beloved into his most hated.

“...”

Allen looked up.

The sky was a beautiful blue that almost brought tears to the eye. In the western sky, there was a darker red gradually spreading.

“Big brother...you always...”

Tears fell from Ahnya’s eyes as she finally understood his true intent. Her heart wouldn’t listen to her as she realized the family that she thought she had lost was still there.

“Big brother...! I want to be a family with you again, meow! Together with Syr and everyone—”

That was why she leaned forward. And that was why Allen held out his left arm, pushing his palm at her.

“That’s enough.”

“!”

“Stop talking.”

It wasn’t an angry growl. It was a quiet, earnest plea. The voice of a brother who cared about his sister.

“I can’t lose the goddess.”

“Gh...! What do you mean, brother?!”

Ahnya tearfully pled as his resolve wavered.

“My serving her makes me strong. My contract with her is to make me strong. My battle won’t end until I kill the dragon who destroyed our home.”

“!!!”

“As long as that dragon exists, your happiness can be obliterated again. And... when I’m running toward the end of everything, you will definitely chase after me.”

Ahnya and Hegni were both shocked to hear Allen’s true goal.

He looked at his sister with eyes now devoid of anger and hatred.

Ahnya's golden right shoulder. His silver left shoulder. Their paired gold and silver spears. They were like mirror images. The left and right wheels of the goddess's chariot. Theirs was an unbreakable bond. No matter how much he wanted to end it, the gold-and-silver curse would drag Ahnya into battle, too.

"To protect you—I have to kill you."

His wishes for the goddess had increased by one.

Her charm, her absolute authority...The same way Syr had made her walled garden, Allen wanted her to make his stupid and hopeless little sister forget him.

He cut away his hopeless self that had avoided considering that option until this day.

Once everything was over, if he could, he would bury his ego, the selfish wish that still wanted to hear her awful singing again.

Now that the chariot's wheel knew everything, the chariot would run down the person he most loved.

He wouldn't allow the goddess to be torn down.

*"Golden wheel, silver collar."*

And so, Allen began singing the chariot's song.

"Casting?!"

"Magic?! Brother?!"

Hegni was stunned, and Ahnya was shaken. She didn't know that her brother had any magic. But it wasn't because he only developed it after they parted. Allen had just been careful never to recite it in front of her.

*"Hated love, illusory corpse, thy destiny is here. Be gone, gold wheel, before the rut kills you."*

The disgraceful spell that reflected the depths of his heart, what rage and hatred couldn't hide. The truth of what he felt toward his sister.

"Kh...! Stoppppppppp!"

“Ghh!”

Hegni charged with a shout, and Ahnya cast aside her doubts and launched herself into the air.

At this rate, she would lose Syr. And Allen. Sensing that as the fearsome magic power swelled, she overcame the contradiction of hurting her brother in order not to lose him.

*“Whip of honor, lips of favor, thy payment is here. Spin, silver wheel, until thy head falls.”*

But Hegni’s sword missed, and Ahnya’s spear hit nothing.

Casting and moving at the same time. That was all he did. He took a massive leap backward, and then he did it again and again. That was enough for Allen to fly tens of meders backward.

He didn’t need to attack. He didn’t need defense. He could just keep running away in this ridiculous fashion until his spell was done. Because once the song was over, there wouldn’t be anything left on the battlefield save the chariot’s tracks.

*“Run bearing the goddess’s will—until death and distant heavens when you can hear the wheel’s song again.”*

The last lines had come.

All of their attacks hitting nothing but air as the spell finished, Ahnya’s and Hegni’s faces froze in a chill.

The next instant, the fastest chariot activated.

*“Glarinese Fromel!”*

As he started running, his body was swathed in a bluish, silver gleam.

“Kh hh, gaaa?!”

The light that couldn’t be stopped by magic or blades had been unleashed. First, it sent Hegni flying into the air.

This spell granted superspeed. And it was getting faster. The more he ran, the more he accelerated. He was like a spinning wheel...Like a chariot dashing



across the battlefield, the goddess's chariot ran with wild abandon, going wherever it pleased.

“Big brotherrrrrr?!”

Even Ahnya was knocked aside and wounded. But that wasn't enough to stop his acceleration.

At the same time that Hegni slammed into the ground, the chariot moved to another battlefield.

“What?!”

“That's?!”

“Unyaaa?! Run!”

The flash raced through where Aisha and the others were fighting Alfrik.

Even Allen couldn't control the speed perfectly, leaving a swerving track like a giant, gleaming dragon as he passed in the blink of an eye. The chariot's flash didn't allow a chance for evasion or escape as it mercilessly swallowed up adventurers.

Aisha slammed into the mausoleum, her podao breaking. Mikoto and Nahza flew up into the air like Hegni had. Runoa and Chloe were thrown to the sides with the force of a river breaking free of its dam.

“Allen, you—?!”

Even Alfrik was not spared, battered by the track of light along with his unconscious brothers.

Glarinese Fromel.

Allen's one and only magic massively buffed his agility and granted improved strength relative to his speed. In other words, the more he accelerated, the more his destructive power increased. There was no upper limit. Theoretically, Allen could increase the force of his charge as much as he could accelerate.

Clad in an armor of light, Allen could run down and trample anything with that spell.

A chariot's rampage that could even run down a monster rex.

“Ghhhh?!”

“Uwaaaaaaaaa?!”

Just the aftermath of the chariot rushing past was enough to destroy Miach’s flower and send Lilly flying, too.

The oculus slipped from her hands and cracked on impact.

His charge crushed all obstacles in its path without even being able to see them.

All that remained after Allen rushed past was a single track that erased ruins and rubble in its wake.



The first signs of sunset were starting to appear in the west. It was still blue overhead, but that would soon give way to twilight. It was a sign of the end. The shifting color of the sky signaled the end of battle to the warriors who had fought in Folkvangr.

Ottar picked up the black greatsword at his feet and glanced slowly to the west, toward the hill where the house of the gods stood.

“.....”

“Gh...agh...”

Ottar was the only one still standing in the now destroyed amphitheater.

The dwarf buried in rubble and the elf only barely shuddered.

*So then that’s the end.*

Just as the boaz had that thought.

“...Gah...aa...ghh...!”

There was one who stood up, with a beastly groan.

Long blond hair covered in dirt. A makeup of blood and wounds, a face devoid of all beauty. But his coral-red eyes alone hadn’t yet let go of the light that he was barely clinging to.

“Hedin...”

Ottar didn't reveal any emotion, just looking at his fellow einherjar.

Just barely managing to stand, the elf wobbled several times, almost falling before stopping himself and looking up, glaring at the boaz.

“Is this what you wanted to achieve?”

It was almost like a challenge.

Hedin's lips curled, barely forming what was evidently meant to be a smile.

“Who knows...how does...it.....look to you?”

“At the very least, it does not seem like you.”

His pupils were still warped. He was still in his transformed state, but the intelligence remained in his voice, even if it was as curt as ever.

“You who prize efficiency so much could have managed things better. You should have been able to win this battle.”

“Hah...! Victory...!”

Hedin snorted as blood dripped from the corner of his mouth.

“This stupid...game...! It was over the moment I decided to betray you...! I could just take her flower myself...!”

That was the reality.

At the moment he destroyed the main base, Hedin could have just rushed into the house of the gods and stolen the flower from Freya. That would have brought an abrupt end to the battle being called the great familia war.

“But...that would be...pointless...! Utterly meaningless!”

“...”

“That isn't what I wanted to do!” An intensity started taking root in his words, his spirit kicking down all physical limits. “I was freed from the duty of being king by her hand! So then, I...! I had to pull her down from her royal throne!” Ottar listened to his confession in silence. “I had to free her from the yoke of the goddess!”

Though he could surmise the goddess's feelings, he couldn't understand them the way that Hörn could. But even so, he understood what it meant to be king. In his heart, he noticed the goddess's unhappiness.

Seeing the smile that the girl had, he understood what her true wish was.

His shout couldn't reach the goddess sitting on her throne. But his will stretched to those who hadn't yet been able to stand.

"Do any of you know?! The goddess's face as she was tormented by love even as she searched for it!"

In her room. The mask of a goddess tempted by love as she stared at the hair ornament modeled on a spirit. The dwarf's fingers clawed at the rubble.

"Do any of you understand?! Her regret and anguish, even after she has cast aside everything other than 'love'!"

The conversation in front of the boy. The girl's sentiment as she was pulled by bonds of bounty, even though she wanted only the boy's heart. The elf's hand stretched, grabbing her wooden sword.

"Have *you* noticed?! That her cheeks are even now wet with tears!!!"

That was the final blast. The boy's fist trembled like a flame.

"If you have, then how can you allow yourself to lose?! If you lose this battle, those tears will never stop! With a lonely victory, she will have love, and she will remain forever the goddess!"

His voice thundered, pummeling their hearts.

Pushing their legs to stand again.

"So she must be sullied! To perform the noble goddess's last rites!"

"...Even if Lady Freya will not forgive that deed?"

"What retainer would I be if I failed to do everything in my power for my master out of mere self-preservation! What follower would I be who lacked the resolve to be hated when I do what must be done!"

And he said:

"This is my devotion that I offer up to *her*!!!"

That which made Hedin who he was.

A fool who turned his blade on the goddess, even if it meant bearing the brand of traitor.

All for *her* sake.

“So—”

As if inspired by his selfish, conceited, sublime sin, the elf stood up. The dwarf pulled herself up from the ground. Then the three of them stared at the wall blocking their way.

“Get lost.”

“Be gone.”

“Get outta the way.”

Hedin’s conviction, Lyu’s will, and Mia’s fighting spirit bore into Ottar.

“...I will defeat you...!” And finally, the boy stood. “And go to Ms. Syr...!”

Ottar’s eyes narrowed.

He took in those who stood against him. These were the ones who still fought. These were the souls that had so charmed the goddess.

“Despite receiving the goddess’s love, you reject it and resist...”

He looked at not just the boy, but all of them who were beloved by the goddess.

“—Very well. Come.”

And reading his greatsword, he glared down at them with his bestial eyes.

“This is the end.”

It was the final clash. There was no hope of victory. No path to success.

But those who still resisted, still sought to grab the light of victory, who refused to surrender, those were true adventurers.

So it is only natural that those who rose would be blessed with light.

*“Uchide no Kozuchi—Dance!”*

Fox tails compressed into orbs of light descended from above, enveloping Hedin, Lyu, and Mia. Their stunned eyes immediately discovered the intruder.

“BeIIIIII! Elfffff!”

“Goddess?!”

Hestia was covered in sweat as she ran out from a crevice in the shattered outer wall. Behind her, standing atop the rubble of the southwestern side, stood Haruhime, using her magic. Following Lilly’s order, they had struggled and struggled, and finally, they had reached the amphitheater.

“Bell, show me your back!”

“Eh...?! ”

“One last status update! To turn all the excelia you’ve gotten into strength!” Hestia hugged onto Bell and shouted as he looked stunned. “I heard! You’re going to beat him, right! That Warlord!”

“!”

“You’re going, right?! To Freya—to that girl!”

Bell’s eyes widened, and then he nodded forcefully.

Looking back, he saw Lyu and Mia glance at him and smile.

“We’ll be waiting, Bell.”

“We’ll start rampaging first!”

Hedin didn’t even glance back.

But—

“Finish up quick and come, stupid rabbit.”

“...Yes, sir!”

Trusting them, Bell kneeled down.

He had lost his armor, and his battle clothes were shredded. His back was covered with open wounds. Seeing that, Hestia blanched for a moment but quickly set a drop of ichor on his back, moving to update his status.

Leaving him behind, the adventurers and beast turned the broken theater

into Folkvangr yet again.

“UOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!”

The first attack was Ottar’s.

All three of them scattered as the greatsword swung down from high overhead.

*I can react to his attacks, now! But...*

*This light is a crazy wild horse! Let my guard down, and my status will take control!*

*But there is no path to victory if I don’t control it!*

Lyu at least had experienced it once during the Xenos incident, but Mia and Hedin were experiencing level boost for the first time. They were stunned and a little shaken by the tremendous output of suddenly ascending to Level 7. All that remained was to grab the reins with all of their mental fortitude.

The three of them attacked Warlord with their own tactics.

*“Duty shall be fulfilled, and scales shall be balanced.”*

What Lyu chose was a midair battle.

Flying out without fear above the wingless boaz, she disrupted his field of view.

Lyu wanted air superiority. She wanted to try a pincer attack using the ground. Like a fairy with glittering wings, she drew Ottar’s attention overhead, unleashing her star sword boldly from above.

Ottar disliked the sharp, meteoric slash.

He easily defended and avoided the blow, slashing his own sword back in annoyance, but Lyu used her Futaba to slide over the enemy’s attack. There was a shower of sparks, and a terrible shock rocked her body, but with her pseudo-Level 7 status, she completely nullified the attack.

“Where are you looking, idjit!”

And Mia of course took the opposite, ground-based approach. Not allowing Ottar to press the attack against the elf, she unleashed a furious attack up close

and personal with her shovel.

Ottar defeated that attack as well. He attempted to crush Mia head-on, but he was stopped by the immediate intervention of the star sword from overhead.

Drawing the enemy's attention both up and down, they strained his reaction time, preventing his rampage. Understanding Lyu's intent, Mia performed the role of the powerful vanguard, trading blows with the beast's monstrous strength.

While their combination troubled the transformed Level 7, the song of justice rushed by in the blink of an eye.

*"Justice returns! —Rea Vindemia."*

What Lyu activated was the area of effect healing that was the specialty of *Astrea Familia's* one and only healer, Maryu.

Her own Noa Heal could only target one person, and while it had a powerful effect, it was slow. So instead, she relied on the power of the girl who had always healed her friends. The purple starlight stretched even to Bell, who was getting his status updated, healing everyone a little.

"Mighty kind of ya, Lyu!"

The pain eased, and Mia grew more lively as she hammered home another heavy attack.

Meanwhile, directly behind her, Hedin was carefully and precisely observing the board.

"But even if our wounds are healed, our Mind is running low! We can't afford a protracted battle.

He performed the role of an overwhelming support class.

There was no more meaning in devoting himself to staying in the rear. If they didn't combine their strength now, then even with their boosted strength, they would still be overwhelmed by the transformed boar. Striking with his rhomphaia so skillfully that it put most frontliners to shame, Hedin joined the assault on Ottar. He also boldly made use of his magic, not being picky with his



range, aggressively filling the openings left by Lyu and Mia. His original role was a magic swordsman, and he showed his worth as party support. Having lost his glasses, he no longer had the face of a sage magic caster, but a wild and savage warrior, cutting into Ottar alongside Mia and Lyu.

“Nuuurggghh!”

Ottar chose to respond not with absolute defense, but absolute offense—he desired to trade blows. Entrusting his body to his bestial manifestation, even as he retained his warrior’s intelligence, he put himself in the middle of a fight to the death.

He didn’t allow himself foolish thoughts of enjoying the hunt. Igniting his battle instincts, he faced down the adventurers who raised the battle cry of the weak.

The first-tier adventurers used their wisdom and techniques, and a moment’s insight to endure that absolute offense which neither evaded nor defended. If a single attack would be fatal, then they simply needed to never allow him to attack. They peppered him with magic, peeling away his absolute armor. Using attacks from three different angles to disrupt his aim and range, making his attacks hit nothing but air.

Turning a single defeat into a solid foundation, they were wiser now. They had adapted. They were stronger.

The broken ability of level boost was a powerful wind in their sails, allowing the furious battle to become an almost even affair.

“...Amazing...”

Bell murmured as he watched.

The boy who had just reached Level 5 was captivated by the figure of those adventurers so far above him.

“Don’t lose your head! You’ll be joining them soon!”

“Goddess...”

“You’re going to stand shoulder to shoulder with those amazing adventurers, too! So—”

Hestia was engraving the hieroglyphs into his back as he kneeled in front of her.

Sweat beaded on her brow as she hurried, working precisely and without hesitation. The black figures danced, recording the prologue of the story that was about to unfold.

**Bell Cranell**

**Level 5**

**Strength: I41-> G222 Defense: I39-> F340 Dexterity: I49-> G245 Agility: I77->F311 Magic: I4-> I98**

**Luck: F Immunity: G Escape: G Rapid Attacks: I**

An increase of over 999 across the board. These were breathtaking results for just a single battle.

But it wasn't enough. Not nearly enough. Even with that sort of growth, he couldn't reach that despair-inducing summit, couldn't reach the strongest.

"Don't lose, Bell!"

But even so, the goddess shouted, making her heart and his tremble.

"Win, Bell!"

"Yes!"

Bell shot to his feet. The Hestia Knife in his clenched fist reacted to his growth and ignited with a powerful gleam as well.

"Master Bell...may you find victory."

And the blond fox smiled and offered up the final tail that she had reserved for him. Uchide no Kozuchi provided a dramatic increase in status by granting a level-up that lasted only twenty minutes.

Even if Haruhime passed out, the golden miracle wouldn't fade. And so, the girl who had exhausted every bit of her strength let herself slowly drop, searing the image of his back shrouded in golden light into her memories. Then, at long last, she slipped into unconsciousness while praying for his victory.

"I'm going!"

As his goddess held the fox girl close while she watched him go, the boy dashed off.

Though he couldn't hear it, the cheers of everyone in the city were at his back as he threw himself into the battle once more.

*"GOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!"*

The curtain rose on the true finale.

With the addition of the final person with the right to fight, Folkvangr raised its final roar. Across the mountains, those left in Orario turned their remaining strength into cheers as the adventurer challenged the summit.

A heroic battle had begun.

Erupting flame and lightning, white and black slashes. The star sword sang the song of justice as blazing petals crackled, and stardust riding a green wind poured down. At the same time, countless lightning soldiers charged with every barked command, and the dwarf warrior surged forward to strike the black greatsword. Under the direction of the lord of lightning, the four coordinated, meshing together strength and speed to attack from all directions.

And despite all that, the wild boar facing them didn't waver.

No matter how the rabbit bore its fangs, no matter how the fairies' songs echoed, no matter how the earth woman exerted her iron strength, Warlord remained standing at the summit. Swinging his greatsword as if looking down at the ground below, he turned his steel body into a shield, hammering home the meaning of the strongest as a pool of blood formed below.

*"One Level 6...! And three Level 7s!!!"*

Asfi's voice had none of her usual calm as she watched the mirror rapt.

This level of destructive power and combat strength was overpowered enough to easily crush anything found in the deep floors of the labyrinth. Ordinarily, there would be nothing that could stand before such force.

*"But even so...!"*

*"He just won't faaaaaaaaallllll!"*

Eina was watching in the Guild headquarters, and Ibly in the courtyard.

The addition of a pseudo–Level 6. The final push of the white rabbit who was agility made manifest.

And yet, they still couldn't crack Warlord's fortress.

“Arrrrrrrrrrgh! How are we supposed to beat that!”

“How the hell should I know?!”

Tione snapped back, as if telling her grumbling sister to shut up.

“There’s an opening!”

“Ottar’s beast form isn’t invincible!”

As they watched the finale unfold, Gareth and Riveria shouted.

“Hedin should understand! Keep attacking!”

The mask of the leader slipped as Finn sought the answer that lay beyond their dauntless push.

“Surpass him...”

Aiz clenched her hands to her shivering chest.

“And win!”

That was all she prayed for as she watched the boy covered in wounds through the mirror.

“Don’t lose!”

The elf girl shouted, her short hair fluttering.

The human, the dwarf, the Amazons, all raised their voices in a massive, swelling battle cry.

They cheered until their voices grew hoarse, raising their clenched fists.

[illegible]

And the boar king's roar drowned out all of their wishes. The voice of the supreme warrior who would allow no faint hope. The masses grew quiet, losing

their voices.

There were none who cheered him. Even if there were, their voices were weak and quiet. But even on that solitary battlefield, for just a brief moment, Warlord flashed a smile.

“...!”

Hearing that rumbling roar, for the first time Freya stood up from her throne.

Unable to use a mirror or oculus, she had no way of quickly grasping the details of the battlefield. But when she heard that beast’s roar echoing, she knew that her follower had maintained his transformation.

“...Stop it, Ottar.”

One of Ottar’s skills, Vana Arganture.

As Bete guessed, it was an active trigger skill connected to his beast transformation. It granted a strength almost as great as a level-up, affecting his base abilities and his skills. However, it had downsides. A massive amount of stamina and Mind had to be paid every time he activated it. And to maintain his transformation, his body experienced an exhaustion that ate away at his strength so much that even his auto-heal skill couldn’t fully make up for it. That was the difference between Ottar and werewolves who could transform without risk so long as the full moon requirement was met.

“Stop this at once, Ottar!”

If he continued to fight like this, he would run out of strength at some point. Before that happened, he needed to find an opportunity to reset his position. Even though she knew her voice couldn’t reach, she looked toward the northwest through the columns and the wall that had collapsed in ages past.

“Haaah, Haaaaagh...! UOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!”

Ottar continued to fight while apologizing humbly to the goddess in his heart. Even though he knew that her divine will was concerned for him, just this once, he couldn’t obey. The warrior couldn’t turn his back on these adventurers who were striving to defeat him, and so he continued to howl with that bestial look in his eyes.

“Ghhhhh?!”

Bell and everyone shuddered at the menacing presence that somehow continued to grow even now.

The warrior before their eyes was injured, just like them. The grave wounds he had suffered before his transformation remained, and he couldn't continue to fight them without injury now that their levels were boosted. His steel body was surely reaching its limit.

But even so, he didn't fall.

Like a nightmare, he continued to unleash attacks that swept everything aside.

The boy was in awe of this display of strength. But even so, he pushed himself on, declaring that he refused to lose now. He unleashed a full-strength blow of his own.

That attack could slay even a giant, but the beast easily deflected it, as if swinging a conductor's baton.

A monster.

The man before him was a true warrior.

A man who survived the age of Zeus and Hera, who had known the muddy taste of humiliation more than anyone, and who was now trying to destroy them with the strength he had gained from never giving up.

If his fingers so much as brushed Bell, they could easily tear through his neck.

He was the loser who had fought his way to victory. Even as his attackers exhausted every last bit of their strength, they couldn't defeat him. Even after surpassing their limits, they couldn't win.

When Bell raised a battle cry, it was met by a deafening roar. Staring at the beast's face that was flecked with foam and bloody spittle, the boy experienced the most intense terror he had ever felt in his short life.

—*But even so!*

He had exhausted all of his techniques. It was clear that tricks wouldn't work

from the start. He was inferior in every category. In a situation where every last requirement for defeat had been arranged, the only weapon Bell had left was sheer force of will.

*Ms. Syr!*

The girl who was supposed to be dead. The girl who had always helped and supported him. The girl who he had hurt. He had decided to save her.

So he transformed that hideous ego into an unquenchable fighting spirit, into a do-or-die attack. Hakugen flashed, igniting with a lightning flame. His whole body burned with resolve and determination, like he was physically expelling all his fear and anxiety.

“I swore I would save her!!!”

The Hestia Knife unleashed an indigo slash, striking Ottar through his black greatsword.

“...!!!”

Hedin watched on as he struggled to breathe. He was covered in a horribly unpleasant, unending sheen of sweat. The first Mind Down he had experienced in decades was about to crash upon him. He had used magic more than anyone, starting from his annihilation of Heith and the Andhrímnir all the way until this very moment, and he had finally run dry.

Just as he realized that he wouldn't be of any use very soon, he saw it.

The cloyingly green, unbearably foolish boy who continued fighting despite the odds.

Hedin didn't have the eyes of a goddess, and so he couldn't understand the color of a soul, or any so-called gleam. But he understood that the source of that pure white cry was surely translucent.

“It makes me sick...To corrupt even me...!”

Even though he was weaker than all of them, the boy's will to keep fighting Warlord was firmer than anyone's. Lyu and Mia followed him. Seeing his battered back drew the adventurers to him.

The scene was truly heroic, like watching a single ship setting forth into the

vast open seas.

*That fool...won't choose to be her companion.*

No, he couldn't make that choice.

If he could, things never would have ended up becoming so complicated.

But because he hadn't chosen it, he was the one and only person who could make her “ ” for sure.

It was revolting beyond compare. But even so. That stupid boy, just like Hedin had anticipated, should be capable of becoming the hero who saved *her*.

“Very well...I'll acknowledge it.”

Hedin smiled.

It was a small smile that not the masses, the adventurers, and the deities—not one of them noticed.

“—! Dodge, Hedin!”

He reacted to Mia's shout.

A beast was closing in on him.

Even as Hedin was reaching his limits, Ottar burst through the front lines to crush Hedin once and for all.

“Hgh—*Strike forever, indestructible lord of lightning!*”

But that was within expectations.

Hedin had already anticipated that Ottar wouldn't let him escape after he could no longer put up a fight, and so he slung together a quick, super-short cast.

“*Valiant Hildr!*”

A lightning cannon launched from melee range.

He had purposefully dangled himself as bait for the final ploy, forcing Ottar to eat a full-strength, inescapable lightning shock.

“A direct hit!”



“Yea—ghhh?!”

Bell stared to cheer at Lyu’s observation, but then his smile cracked.

“\_\_\_\_\_”

Time froze for Hedin, too.

Bathed in the torrent of lightning, the boar carried on and charged through.

“OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!”

Bursting through the electric blast, Ottar struck with a tremendous diagonal slash.

With ungodly speed, Hedin held Dizaria horizontally, but both he and his rhomphaia were cut.

“Gahhaaaaa!”

It was a fatal wound.

A diagonal gash opened up. Mia had managed to endure this blow, but Hedin didn’t.

A hot spurt of blood that didn’t feel like his own flew into the air as Hedin fell to the ground. What his eyes saw was the beast preparing to finish him off once and for all.

“—Masterrrr!!!”

Bell became a streak of light.

Accelerating at full speed, he reached his hand out in the dumbest sort of plan to save someone who had already dropped out of the fight.

The first thing to touch Hedin’s shoulder wasn’t the swinging blade, but the boy’s fingers.

“~~~~~gh?!”

The blade that failed to catch the elf split the ground wide open.

An ear-rattling shock wave blew Hedin away and knocked Bell aside as well.

“Bell?!”

“Hedin!”

“Bell!!!”

Lyu’s, Mia’s, and Hestia’s voice disappeared in the cloud of debris.

Rolling across the destroyed arena’s floor, Bell lost track of everything, not just Hedin. Holding his head as his ears still rang, he stood up.

“Gah...Master! Masterrr!”

Panicking like a lost child, he spun around, whipping in every direction, but before he found his target, the debris cleared.

Standing in the middle of it, he saw the boaz standing calmly.

Lyu and Mia were to the left and right, and beyond the boaz were Hestia and Haruhime.

They were saying something, but he couldn’t hear them.

He couldn’t ignore the beast’s eyes watching him, but he still tried to make sure Hedin was safe, looking around him, when—

“...Look forward...”

“\_\_\_\_\_”

He couldn’t hear anything, but those words alone, he could clearly make out.

“...Save...her...!”

His trembling hand touched Bell’s back, as if it no longer had even the strength to smack him.

With a frail voice on the verge of failing, he began to sing a verse.

*“Sing forever...indestructible...saint.”*

And then he spoke the name.

*“Laurus Hildr!”*

Shock.

Electricity.

*Awakening.*

“!!!”

He wasn't being roasted by electricity. This was an enchantment—a blessing of lightning that enveloped Bell's whole body.

Laurus Hildr, the saint's lightning eulogy. Hedin's third and final magic. A rare magic that, when activated, healed the target's wounds as if touched by a saint, then applied a blessing of lightning. Its greatest distinguishing characteristic was that Hedin couldn't use it on himself. He could only cast on those whom he acknowledged.

At the cost of all his Mind, he entrusted Bell with a power that made the boy's eyes shoot open.

“Go...stupid pupil...”

“\_\_\_\_\_!!”

He was incandescent.

The lightning protected his body as he shook off all the emotions filling his head and heart. He didn't cry. He didn't look back at his fallen master. He had been pushed forward by the palm that remained on his back to the very end.

The boy became a bolt of lightning.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!!!”

He charged.

The distance between him and Warlord in the center of his vision disappeared in an instant as he slashed with his twin lightning blades.

“Gh?!”

“Fuuu!”

Ottar immediately used his black greatsword as a shield against the storm of lightning slashes. Thunder erupted with a dazzling flash. It had happened at an abnormal speed. The sparks didn't stop flying as Bell became an embodiment of lightning, displaying a speed that outstripped even Lyu with her pseudo—Level 7.

Rabbit Rush—Hildr.

The brilliant white and purple slashes were blotted out by the crackling arcs of

lightning. It was a furious rush of continuous attacks. His hands blurred as he dealt forty-four consecutive slashes in a single second. And as Warlord defended against all of them, he suddenly realized he chose incorrectly in opting for his absolute defense.

“Guooooooooo?!”

He was electrified.

Even though Ottar defended perfectly, the electric charge in those slashes passed through his sword and coursed through his body. No one in *Freya Familia* other than Freya herself knew Hedin’s final magic. In addition to that speed, its special traits were an absurd force and penetrating capability.

In Hedin’s own words, the requirement that he expend every bit of his Mind to activate it was the worst possible condition, but with his having paid that price, it boasted a power even greater than standard enchantments, granting its target a massive boon.

The lightning armor optimized for attack and speed didn’t pale even in comparison to Aiz’s Airiel.

And more than anything, every time its attacks fell upon a defense, damage still racked up, making it the best possible counter for Ottar’s absolute defense.

“E-every time Bell attacks, there’s a flash...I can’t see anything!”

Hestia stared, desperately trying to watch as she covered her face with her arm, but Mia and Lyu with their first-tier adventurer visual acuity were able to precisely see through it.

Each and every slash from the lightning-clad knives had the force of a bolt of Caurus Hildr behind them.

Even if Ottar tried to evade, Bell’s natural agility would block any escape with a scythe of lightning.

*My movement speed, my attack speed! They’re rising! My reaction speed, too! I can see his every move so clearly!*

Realizing that Laurus Hildr’s effect extended not just to ordinary movement speed but even to speed of perception, Bell experienced a new sort of

omnipotence that wasn't like a level boost.

His body was completely revived.

The lightning welled up as the saint's blessing returned color and sound to the world. The scene he saw as sparks of lightning flickered all around him was brilliant and vivid. Bell continued accelerating as his mind surpassed the edge of the lightning. It even felt like he could feel Hedin's presence.

He could go anywhere.

Defeat any enemy—and he had to.

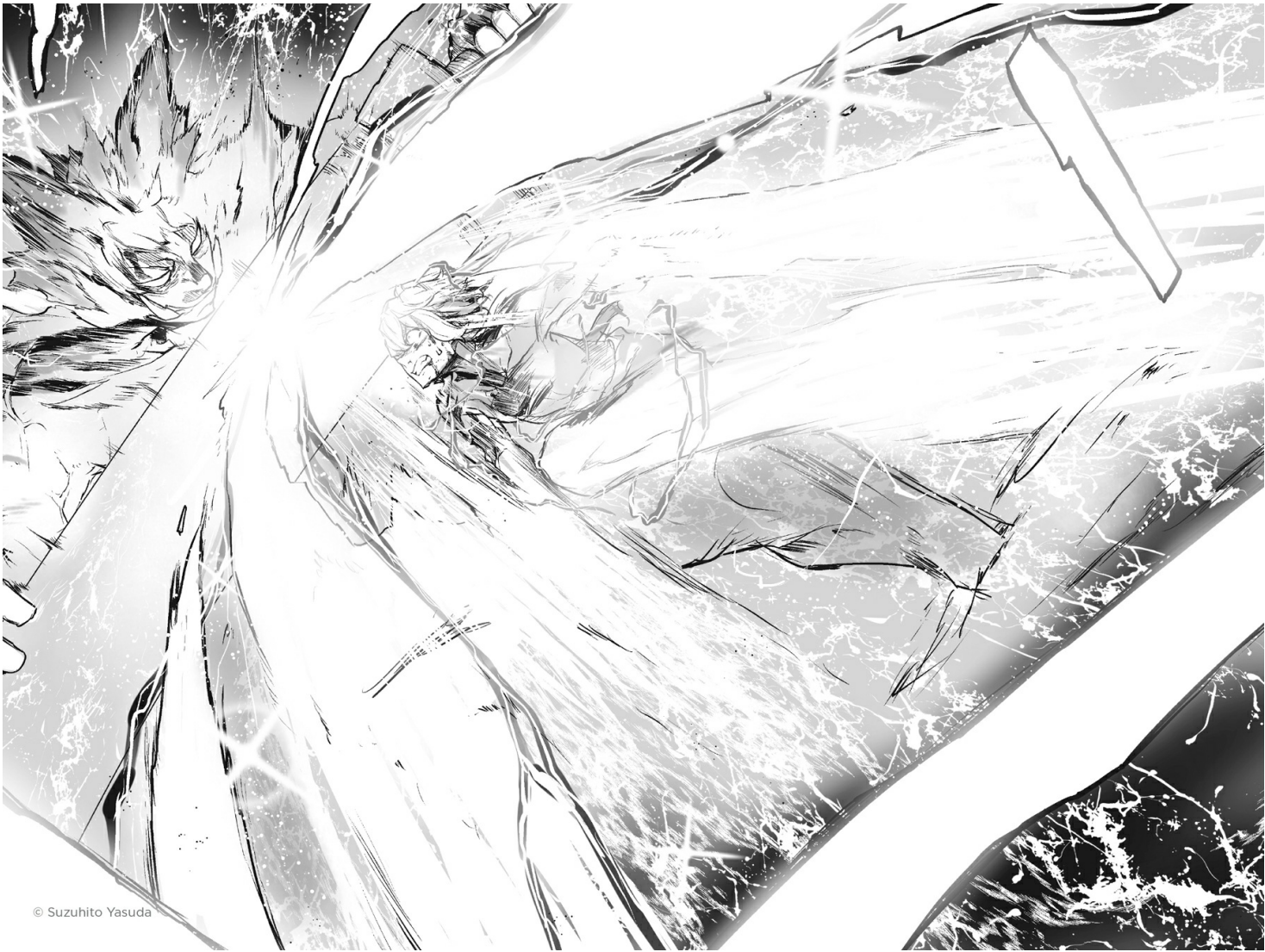
Drawn by the rampaging lightning, Bell shouted.

“Haaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!!”

A torrent of lightning shot out. A heroic slash. His knives' reach extended to the range of a shortsword with the lightning enchantment.

Seeing what looked like a lightning knight charging out of myth, the city's voltage shot through the roof.

“Gooooo!”



Aiz shouted to the awakened Bell.

“Gooooo!”

Eina pleaded to the heroic boy running toward victory.

""“Big brotherrrrrrrrrrrrr!!”"""

Rai and the other orphans cheered as they saw the vision of a hero in the boy's back as he continued to stand, continued to fight.

[illegible]

But Ottar—

“Ghhh?!”

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!”

Even with his whole body being seared by lightning, he pushed back the charge. Abandoning his absolute defense, paying no heed to damage, he demanded a bullfight.

Even though he could react to the sword and even though he could evade it, the pure, brute force of it still posed a danger to Bell's body. Even pushed all the way to the brink, Ottar used all of his techniques and tricks, turning the tables on the boy who was far inferior as an adventurer. Now Bell was the one who found his back up against the wall.

The beast was using his eyes, brute strength, mental fortitude, and skill as an adventurer. Bell's eyes started swimming as he suddenly started taking damage. His fully recovered body started being wounded in the blink of an eye. Even with dual miracles of level boost and Laurus Hildr, Warlord refused to fall.

Meanwhile, the golden light and flashes of lightning were beginning to weaken.

This was the decisive moment, and both sides staked everything on this clash.

“\_\_\_\_\_AAAAA!!!!”

The boy clad in his master's lightning let out a roar, hungry for victory. The guardian who had always protected his goddess swore to maintain an

impenetrable defense. Lightning blades met greatsword. Lightning flame met massive fist. The storm of destruction.

Bell raged.

Ottar raged even more.

In this precise moment, they were channeling their standing, their fate, and their very lives into fuel and using it to strike down their enemy.

All their spilled blood was immediately scorched by lightning as they crashed again and again.

*—I know it. I know this feeling!*

Minotaur.

And Asterios.

Everything that made Bell Cranell what he was today was currently inhabiting the warrior before him. That was where everything started. Even though he couldn't explain it, Bell understood on an instinctive level. And when he realized that, he drew forth even more energy from the depths of his soul.

*I can't lose. I don't want to lose. Not to him!*

He remembered the determination he felt when he made a vow to become stronger on the city wall that fateful day. That determination meant that no matter how badly it hurt, no matter how hopeless it seemed, he had to overcome this warrior.

But—just this once, he couldn't have a repeat of that battle with Asterios.

“Lyu!”

“I know!”

Mia and Lyu attacked at the same time. Their determination to defeat Warlord and claim victory was the same as Bell's. This wasn't his personal duel. He couldn't make that mistake. This was a war to stop *her*. To save *her*. He had to remember his hypocritical vow and throw away all personal pride.

So. So. So.

Bell clenched his teeth and looked back at those rust-colored eyes.



*I'm sorry for being weak. I'm sorry this isn't a match with just me alone. I will defeat you with everyone—so I'm sorry.* Putting all those apologies and his unshakeable resolve into his gaze, he met the warrior's gaze.

And then even though it couldn't have been possible, he could've sworn Ottar snorted *"You're fifteen years too early."*

"Outta the waaaaaaaay!"

No matter how injured he was, Ottar wouldn't fall. He wouldn't yield the way. It was like running into a castle wall or an iron gate that refused to open for anything other than raw strength. This gate could not be moved by words or feelings. And beyond that barrier was a princess with blue-gray hair.

No, she wasn't anyone so innocent as that. What waited beyond those walls was a witch. A disagreeable, free-spirited, selfish, fickle witch. A girl who had trapped Bell, trifled with Lyu, twisted the world around her—and a girl who couldn't understand why she was crying.

So—

"!!!"

Concurrent charging.

Moving at super-high-speed using the power of lightning, Bell concentrated a pure white light on his right hand.

What rang out wasn't a chime, but a grand bell. The limit was off. As Bell activated Argonaut, Ottar immediately understood. In their first clash, he had experienced the full force of the hero's strike. And he realized that it was a move that was capable of killing him in his badly wounded state.

And so, the boar changed target, reversing course.

"Ghhh?!"

"Dammit!"

Lyu and Mia formed a wall in his path, enduring his heavy blows several times, but it wasn't long before he crashed through. But they had managed to buy some time.

“Ms. Mia! Ms. Lyu! I’m going!”

““!””

Bell made up his mind as Ottar charged at him.

Lowering his hips, he readied the Hestia Knife. This would be a twenty-second charge. His eyes locked with Ottar who readied his sword in one hand, and the next instant, they both rushed forward.

“Oooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!!!”

“OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!!!”

The distance between them melted away.

The light gathered in Bell’s right hand; Ottar’s veins bulged as he clenched his sword.

And the instant their attack’s collided—

“Gh!”

Lyu’s shoulders twitched.

*His right arm is drifting...!*

She had mentioned it during the march through the lower levels. Bell had a bad habit that showed when he got impatient. And in a decisive moment like this, telegraphing his moves would be fatal. Ottar wouldn’t miss it.

A thrust from the right. The trajectory of the attack was plain to see. The boaz swung with all his strength to defeat Bell’s attack and cut him down in the process.

“Nrreaah!”

“Bell?!”

Ottar’s slash and Lyu’s cry overlapped. In that moment—

—*He bit!*

Bell had left his right arm high and switched attacks.

““?!””

Ottar and Lyu's next reaction was the same—total disbelief.

What was clearly supposed to have been the windup for a thrust seamlessly became a sliding kick. The boaz's horizontal slash caught only the Hestia Knife, which hadn't quite escaped the blade's path, which knocked it out of the boy's right hand. But in that brief opening, Bell's left leg raced toward Ottar's right leg. The sliding kick clad in lightning landed cleanly on his defenseless knee.

"Fuu!"

"Urgh!"

A clean hit.

The combined power of level boost and Laurus Hildr broke Ottar's stance.

*That's—*

When he saw that scene, time stopped for Van, who was watching from the spectator seats in the south where he had fallen.

*"...Bell. You have a habit of letting your right arm drift upward, don't you?"*

*"Eh...? Ah, yes. Apparently, I have a tendency to do it when I get flustered...I-it's still there, I guess?"*

*"The opposite. You focus too much on fixing it, so when you attack, your right arm telegraphs your movements. It's not a problem if you're just after a monster's magic stone, but against a first-tier adventurer, it's a fatal weakness."*

That memory was from weeks ago. It was a piece of advice Van had given the boy, when they had been comrades, inside the twisted world the goddess of beauty had created.

*"Just leave it be. You can mix it into your attack and defense patterns as a feint."*

*"It's useful as a tactic for fighting against other people. You can't use it too many times, but it's impossible to win against a first-tier adventurer without using every last tool at your disposal."*

He had done it. Bell had used it.

He had purposefully used the habit as a lure, baiting Ottar's attack. He had

turned his fake comrade Van's advice into growth, using it on the biggest stage possible.

"That bastard!"

Van thumped his right fist on the ground, with an aggravated look on his face. But at the same time, it almost looked like a smile. The half-prum's trick had caught a first-tier adventurer off guard, landing a blow, creating a critical opening.

For the first time, the never unfaltering Warlord staggered, leaving a huge opening.

"Attaboy!"

Mia had been the only one who noticed Bell's intent and was already running. Unable to ready his absolute defense, Ottar widened his eyes as she struck him with all her strength.

"Uuurrriyyaaaaaaa!!!"

"Gaaaaa?!"

The steel shovel slammed into his right side. The boaz's massive body left the ground, floating upward. He coughed up blood, his bestial eyes unfocused. At almost the same moment, the shovel that slammed into his forged body broke at the base. Mia immediately dropped it. Then she rained down a furious salvo of punches.

"Not yeeeeeeeet!!!"

"~~~~~?!"

Her fists pummeled Ottar's face, chest, shoulders, stomach.

The one and only person on the island who could hurt Ottar with bare fists began a one-sided onslaught.

*"Cross the skies and sprint through the wilderness, swifter than anything. Imbue the light of stardust and strike down my enemy."*

Quickly getting over her shock, Lyu readied her own attack.

A deep green magic circle appeared as she poured all of her Mind into the

spell. Knowing that there would never be a better opportunity, she called upon the greatest magical power she could summon and called forth the stardust.

*“Luminous Wind!”*

Timed perfectly with Mia’s retreat after sending Ottar flying, the massive orbs of light wrapped in green wind slammed into Ottar. Gale Wind didn’t miss a single shot as her barrage blasted the boaz into the spectator seats.

“Gh.....ah...?!”

As the storm of magic particles faded, it was obvious what terrible condition Ottar was in.

And then—

*GONG, GONG.*

“\_\_\_\_\_”

It was Bell’s turn.

When the great bell tolled, he unleashed the white light that had gathered in his empty right hand. This was the power of a full sixty-second charge.



Ottar froze as the boy closed the distance and sent his right fist flying forward.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!!”

Vorpal Fang.

Ottar’s eyes sprang open as it slammed directly into his chest.

And—

“FIREBOLT!!!”

A massive explosion engulfed them.

“\_\_\_\_\_?!”

Flames and crackling lightning drove into Ottar’s chest and blew him away. The streak of white-hot fire swallowed up everything in its path, slamming into the western edge of the amphitheater and blasting a giant hole through the wall and the spectator seats.

The island shuddered. The ruins trembled. The twilight-colored sky sought a victor.

“Haaah, haaah...haaaaaaah...!”

Bell’s right arm hung limply as he heaved with every breath, staring in the direction where Ottar had disappeared. The agony in his right hand didn’t fade. His vision shook in time with his pulse, and his heart felt like it wanted to leap out of his chest.

*If even that wasn’t enough...!*

Bell didn’t have energy to fight anymore. Lyu was barely standing, too, and Mia was the most battered and bruised. Bell watched the rising smoke, hoping this would be the end of it. Hestia gulped and watched on while holding Haruhime, who was still unconscious.

They both waited with bated breath when they saw it...A shadow moved.

“\_\_\_\_\_”

The smoke parted to the sides as if in terror, revealing a steel-forged body that looked completely broken.

But even so, Warlord walked on both legs, returning to the center of the stage.

“.....Ahhh.....”

Bell’s spirit almost broke, but he grit his teeth. It was a miracle he even had the strength to bite down.

Lyu was drenched in a waterfall of sweat, and Mia’s brow was a mass of wrinkles as they endured this waking nightmare. Hestia went pale as what little strength she had seemed to slip away.

Witnessing the strongest warrior calmly walking forward silenced all of Orario.

“.....Grh”

But—

Like a massive tree cut at the base, Ottar’s body tilted to one side, and with an impact that shook the ground, he fell to one knee.

Bell gasped.

Lyu, Mia, and Hestia all looked stunned.

Bleeding profusely and struggling for each breath, the boaz had no more strength to draw upon.

*“Do...DOOOOOWWWWWNNNNNNN!!! Warlord has been put out of action!!!”*

Ibly’s shout pierced the sky.

Thunderous cheers filled Orario, but in the ruins of the amphitheater, there was an unnatural silence.

It was Ottar.

Even after all this, he might still be able to fight. The challengers were on guard, holding their breaths, thinking the same thought as time slowly crawled forward.

“Ottar, this is our win, right?”



Mia's gruff voice broke the silence.

Bell and Lyu both turned while Hestia watched nervously as Ottar raised his head.

His right eye was covered with blood, but his left eye was focused on the boy who stood perfectly still.

"...Can you free her?"

"Eh...?"

Their eyes met.

"Can you save her?"

Bell's eyes widened.

"...I can!"

His answer was a single nod.

Looking at the badly battered boy's face, Ottar slowly closed his eyes.

"Five minutes."

"...?"

"I will wait five minutes."

Everyone other than Mia looked shocked.

"When my body has recovered, I will stop you. In that time—show me your answer."

But shock quickly gave way to understanding. Ottar wasn't lying. Once he could move again, he would come for them. No one felt any need to ask if he needed a full five minutes just to recover.

They had proved their strength to Ottar. The castle protecting the witch had opened its gate.

"D-did you win?! You did, right?! My heart won't last if I have to watch another fight like this!"

Not reading the mood at all, Hestia made her way over to the adventurers with Bell's fallen knife in one hand and dragging Haruhime with the other. The

fox girl groaned in her sleep as she was dragged across the ground. Lyu had also come over, as did Mia after she collected Hedin. They smiled and nodded.

“Don’t worry, that boy will keep his word...More importantly, kiddo. Can you run?”

“Eh?”

“It’s a sorry excuse, but...we cannot really move anymore. Most likely, we wouldn’t reach Syr in time.”

Mia and Lyu were struggling just to stand. Bell suddenly realized what they were saying. Thanks to the healing from Hedin’s Laurus Hildr, he was the only one with any strength left. His right hand, which he’d used for the charge attack, was useless, but he could still rush to the house of the gods.

“Bell, go! Miach and the supporter have all wiped out.”

Checking the state of the battlefield with her oculus, Hestia blanched as she urged Bell to hurry.

“Gah...!”

“Vana Freya’s work...”

Bell looked startled while Lyu sensed a new danger.

Allen had the fastest feet in the city. If he caught up to them, that would be the end. If Bell fought him now, he would surely lose. He had to reach the goddess before Allen’s spear ran him through.

“Hurry, kiddo. We’ll protect this goddess. We won’t let her flower get stolen!”

“Please go, Bell.”

Mia and Lyu glanced at Ottar and Van. The former stayed silent while the latter was desperately trying to stand back up.

“...Understood!”

Nodding, Bell immediately finished his preparations. He removed his Goliath Scarf and all other armor that would slow him down. Finally, Hestia handed him his pitch-black knife.

“Sorry, Bell. For putting everything on you...But please!”

“I will!”

He looked at Hestia, Lyu, Mia, Ottar. At Haruhime, who was sleeping. At Hedin, who was still unconscious.

With the telltale glow of the level boost and crackles of lightning still emanating from his body, Bell set off at a run.



“...Ottar?”

On the eastern edge of the main battlefield, Allen looked up at the sky.

The ferocious beast’s roar that had shattered the sky was gone now.

Ordinarily he would never have doubted Ottar’s victory. But just before the silence had fallen, he had also picked up a sound he had heard once before: the tolling of a grand bell. And outside the island, on the outer edge of the lake, *Ganesha Familia* seemed almost excited.

“That bastard...did he screw up?!”

Exuding his usual rage, Allen turned toward the northwest. A trail of defeated adventurers and tavern girls lay in his wake.

The only remaining einherjar was Allen. He alone had fought not for the goddess, but for his little sister—even if it meant fighting his little sister, too.

That had been the decisive factor. That was what led to this result. Because he desired the goddess for the sake of his sister, his faith wasn’t corrupted, he didn’t have any doubt and he hadn’t faltered.

“...Bro...ther...”

Having kicked aside all obstacles, Allen looked back only once, at his sister, whose eyes wavered. He half closed his eyes and then steeled himself before racing away. Ahnya’s faint voice couldn’t reach him anymore.

The chariot would fulfill its duty.

Running.

“They beat Ottar!!!!!!!!!!!!!! But...”

Tiona immediately raised her fists high in joy, but then her expression became serious.

“What’s the situation now? What about Argonaut’s allies?! How many enemies are left?!”

“The only one left who can move is Bell! The enemies are Vana Freya and...!”

“Just those inside the house of the gods...Goddess Freya’s four bodyguards.”

Unexpectedly, it was Aiz who answered Tiona’s question even as she continued staring at the mirror, while Riveria supplemented it.

There was a stir among all of *Loki Familia* who watched this gallant struggle—at this point, it was fair to call it a complete upset— “There are five enemies left still...? Then Rabbit Foot is...”

“No, the guards are Level 4 at most. So long as that strange sorcery and Hedin’s lightning last, that youngster can force his way through. So long as Allen doesn’t catch up, that is,” Gareth explained calmly.

“...And if Allen does catch up?” Tiona asked.

Finn was the one who answered.

“If he’s caught, it’s over. And if he’s cornered...it’s almost guaranteed checkmate. The final stretch is a simple game of tag.”

In Babel—

“Oy, what’s this...what’s going on here?!”

“...R-run, Belllll!”

“Argh, what’d you say?!”

“Aren’t you one of Lady Freya’s royal guard?!”

“Lady Freya, ruuuun!”

The deities leaped to their feet at the unexpected turn of events.

Some never thought it would get this far. Some feigned calm while visibly fidgeting. Some flocked to a new bandwagon because they were enthralled by the delicious unknown. It was practically chaos as they kept changing what was

displayed on the mirror, viewing the game from every angle to get a better idea what was going on.

Even for deities who were constantly aloof and self-assured, what they were watching went beyond a mere anomaly. This was something they had never seen before—Freya was being pushed to the brink.

“So? What are you doing, pretty boy?”

“...Loki, you know how children have a custom of praying to gods? If we gods prayed, who would it be to?”

“...Probably one of those stupid great gods...or just worship whoever you like, I guess.”

“Zeus is out. Not a chance. He’d just laugh his ass off. In that case...Astrea, Artemis, and maybe Athena ...! Please let Bell escape...!”

“I suppose those are righteous goddesses, but it seems like you picked all the goody-goodies...”

Asfi would have found it more than distasteful if she saw how earnestly Hermes clasped his hands together in prayer, and Loki looked plenty exasperated herself, but...

“Tsk.”

Behind her, Bete vented his frustration as he stared at the mirror.

“...Too bad, Hermes.”

Glancing at her follower, Loki looked back at the mirror.

“Looks like we’re just gonna have to roll the dice on a torturous game of tag.”

The bird’s eye view of the island reflected in the mirror showed a chariot closing in on its target with impossible speed.

“Faster, faster, faster!”

Bell was sprinting southwest.

His target was the house of the gods sitting on the cliff at the far edge of the island. It was in view, but he wasn’t there yet. In his current state, it wouldn’t take even three minutes to reach there, but right now, that was three minutes

too long.

He had already entered the temple grounds. A great many collapsed structures littered the area, but almost nothing blocked his line of sight. Bell was wrestling with his racing heart as he ran through the field of debris with a clear view in all directions.

*It's over if he finds me! But...!*

Bell knew.

He had experienced it during the regular baptisms of Folkvangr inside of Freya's twisted world. He had tasted the brutality. He knew the power of the fleetest feet. The chariot allowed none to escape and blew through every obstacle without a second thought.

Bell was scared to look around. Attempting stealth would be suicide. That cat person's nose would find him in an instant. His only choice was move as fast as she could and pray.

However, just like the viewers in the city, Bell was soon gripped by despair.

"\_\_\_\_\_"

There was no need to search for him.

Ironically, Bell had become much more sensitive to gazes thanks to the goddess of beauty, and so he immediately sensed that man's eyes boring a hole into him.

"\_\_\_\_\_"

His throat suddenly felt bone-dry. And yet he broke into a massive sweat. Giving in to the pressure, Bell looked.

"\_\_\_\_\_Ah."

The menace was approaching. He could almost hear wheels spinning furiously.

The fastest chariot was in hot pursuit—

"Found you."

The boy's legs were forced to shift into their highest gear.

“Run, Belllllllllllllllllll!”

Those left in the amphitheater had climbed to the roof of a nearby ruin and saw what was happening. That was when Hestia screamed to the heavens.

“Run!!!”

“Faster!!!”

Aiz and Tiona shouted at the top of their lungs at the mirror.

“Uwaaa?!”

The screeching race began.

Everyone in the ruins and the city could only watch. Even so, they exploded into shouts.

The hopes of two familias had been entrusted to exactly two people, and now their feet were pounding against the racetrack of a shattered brick road.

The cat’s supreme acceleration was quickly turning hope into despair as he rapidly gained on the rabbit.

“Stop! Stopppppp!!!”

“Run!!!”

“Do something! Rabbit Foot!!!”

Outside the island, at *Dian Cecht Familia*’s first-aid base, Mord, Gyle, Bors, and many other wounded had regained consciousness thanks to Amid and the other healer’s hard work. Now all their patients were screaming wildly at the divine mirror, and many promptly collapsed as the blood rushed to their heads.

But Bell had no way to know that shouts and screams filled the air as he ran.

He was putting every last bit of energy into his legs, to the extent he couldn’t process any external information.

*So fast! He’s right behind me! And catching up!*

Allen had originally been heading northwest, toward Ottar, but along the way, his enhanced, first-tier adventurer eyesight helped him catch Bell heading to the house of the gods, and so he wheeled around and changed course. The

worst news for Bell was that Allen was now freed from Ahnya's debuff since she had been knocked out.

A hunter who could be sensed but not seen exerted an enormous pressure on the runner, gradually driving them into a wall.

Bell pumped his arms as hard as he could. He was moving so fast that bits of the ground were coming loose with every step. But even then, he couldn't escape the sound of the wheels. Those wheels were not whittling down the distance between them—they were mercilessly shredding what little remained.

*I can sense it...He's getting closer!*

Bell Cranell's greatest weapon was his speed.

This was the first time he had ever been chased by someone even faster than he was, and that gave birth to a new fear.



The eastern part of the main battlefield that Allen had cleared earlier.

*"Be—! Ruuu—uu—n!"*

The goddess's distorted shout coming from the oculus roused Lilly.

"Mr. Bell...!"

Lying amid the stone rubble where no one remained standing, Lilly had avoided sustaining a mortal wound. Allen had grazed her, likely deciding that she wasn't worth the effort. And even though she had woken up, Lilly couldn't move at all. She could only whisper into the oculus in her right hand.

It was beyond her to take notice of the cracked crystal or realize that it was almost impossible for her voice to reach anyone.

"Someone...help...Mr. Bell...!"

There was no response. She expected that, of course. She had already tried once much earlier. But even so, Lilly refused to give up and resort to silently hoping for Bell's safety.

"The island's...west...the temples...near the house of the gods...someone...!"



It was a truly pitiful scene. These were not the actions of a commander. Right now, Lilly was just a girl crying about a boy as she begged for help in a weak voice.

Her ruined left arm cried out in agony, and she was barely clinging to consciousness. Her arm, her shoulder, her stomach, her chest, her legs, and her back burned, and after a certain point, she didn't even know what she was saying anymore. But even then, she continued to plea, putting voice to her prayers and the information she had, to her wishes and thoughts.

"Someone...anyone...!"

As if resonating with her powerless emotions, the hieroglyphs on her back glowed.



*"This is the drama we've been waiting for! Even though we didn't have to wait for it!!!"*

Ibly's sweaty bellows continued.

Forgetting his job, he simply shouted whatever came to mind first, while Ganesha grit his teeth and watched on nearby with a rapt expression.

*"Laugh or cry, scream or shout, this is the end!!! Rabbit Foot and Vana Freya are in a dead heat!!! Wait, whooooooooooooooooooooa?! It's coming already!!!"*

The mic that had been exposed to Ibly's rampaging emotions this whole time finally reached its limit and became scrap. But even so, the young man continued shouting. His screams joined the ones coming from the rest of the crowd.

Allen had obliterated Bell's lead and was visibly getting closer and closer, making all of the boy's supporters turn pale.

"——Nghhh!"

The wind made Bell's white hair whip around as he challenged the fastest runner in the city.

The rubble lining the road roared in silent cheers as the setting sun set the ruins alight like so many waving flags. The twilight sky glowed red, watching raptly to see who would win this race.

The golden glow and flashes of lightning drove the boy onward as he continued his lonely race. The lights granted him a full boost. But the fox and saint's contributions were still not enough to earn the goddess of victory's approval. Even with both of those powerful buffs, he still couldn't shake off the lone chariot.

*If I charge my legs...no, I can't! The recoil will hit the moment the acceleration stops, and then I'll be run through from behind!*

Tricks wouldn't work here. There was nothing else to do but keep running.  
Just like with Ottar.

Just like how even with so many broken buffs, he hadn't been a match for the city's strongest, and now he wasn't going to be a match for the city's fastest.

"You're not getting away."

"Ngh...?!"

Through the whistling wind, he could hear his pursuer's voice behind him and slightly off to the side.

The rabbit kicked the ground with all its might.

The cat gave chase, refusing to lose any ground.

The light and tracks that could only be followed with the perspective of the mirror dashed through the ruins. They were almost like shooting stars. The gold glimmer of level boost tailed off behind him, while the bolt of Laurus Hildr blazed its own trail through the ruins. And that path traced by the tail and arc were trampled by the track of the chariot that just continued to accelerate.

*I can't shake him...!*

It wasn't just the eyes, not just the presence, even the sound of footsteps was drawing close from behind.

The chariot didn't swing its arms like Bell. It calmly aimed for the moment the

spear in its hand pierced Bell's back.

His pulse was too fast. He was going to be crushed by the ferocious pressure.

*But...not yet...*

Even as he was pummeled by a massive impatience, Bell still hadn't met the requirements for defeat.

There were two iron rules for runners: never look back and never give up. The former went without saying: it slowed you down. There was also an element of tactics, since turning to look back created an opening that encouraged the pursuer.

And the latter also went without saying. Giving up even for a moment meant defeat.

Because he understood that instinctively—or rather because he had nothing in his head other than the thought of saving *her*—he was able to maintain his speed even in this difficult position.

*A third-rate runs with their legs. A second-rate runs with their arms. A first-rate runs with their heart. And adventurers run with their soul.*

Bell burned with renewed resolve. He was willing to turn his body to ash if that's what it took.

He could already see his goal. The situation was desperate, but *she* was almost within reach. All there was left to do was struggle for all he was worth.

Just like always. The ones who won were the ones who struggled until the very end.

Forget waiting around for the goddess of victory to smile. Victory was something to be won with your own two legs.

*Let's go—*

He had the stamina.

He hadn't run out of the breath.

His feet kept moving.

His heart, lungs, and legs were working in perfect unison.

All Bell had to do now was cross the finish line.

There was a click inside Bell as he kicked it up a gear. It felt like part of his back burned. And it sounded almost like he could hear Lilly's voice. Whispering *"Bell is here."*

And then the boy transformed into a being who did nothing but run.

"—It's on!"

Bell and Allen shifted into their final burst of acceleration at the same time.

*"It's the final sprint!!!"*

Ibly's howl was the starting gong.

The finish line was the house of the gods.

The boy and the chariot raced along the rough road running through the ruins. There was no one to get in the way. No one had a death wish. Like stars shooting across the sky, becoming light as they burned away to nothing.

"Useless."

Allen's eyes narrowed as the gap closed until there was hardly any distance left.

*Three steps.*

He coolly made his calculations as the cold wind hit his body. Like the distance until his silver spear would reach the rabbit. And how close the chariot needed to be to trample the rabbit no matter how much it struggled.

*Two steps.*

The distance closed.

His back was almost within reach.

Moving just behind the boy, he used him as a wind break as he caught up.

*One step.*

Just as he was about to thrust his spear, proving he was the fastest— "...?"

Allen felt something strange.

There was a minor miscalculation in the distance.

Had he read something wrong?

He quickly adjusted his calculations to close the last two steps.

“Grgh...?”

Allen felt something off.

The gap was growing.

Two steps became three, became four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten— *—It isn't going down!*

The gap that should not have existed was growing into an absolute distance!

*Hey—*

His silver spear trembled.

*Wait—*

A crack appeared in the wheels.

*This isn't a joke—*

The twilight sky trembled.

“—The fuck?!”

As he realized Bell was pulling away from him, his eyes widened in shock.

*“SO FAAASSST!!!”*

The deities exploded in shouts at the beam of light racing through the ruins.

A flash of speed. A roaring sprint that tore through the wind. Red eyes looking straight ahead, leaving behind even their own gleam as he accelerated again.

In that moment, Bell's top speed surpassed Allen's speed limit. The city's fastest was left in the dust by the fastest in the mortal realm.

“You have to be shitting me!”

The Record Holder—Rabbit Foot!

Allen's eyes were bloodshot.

It didn't make sense!

He couldn't understand!

The moment he tried to escape, Bell's speed jumped—!

"What's going on?!"

"I don't know! But!"

Loki and Hermes leaped to their feet.

"Gooo!!!"

Bete clenched his fist.

"GoGoGoGoGoGooooooooooooo!"

Tiona broke free from Tione's control and clung onto the mirror.

"Bell!"

Aiz shouted.

"Bell!!!"

Eina sobbed.

"Goooooooooooooooooooooooooooo! Belllllll!!!"

Hestia sent her last strength to the boy.

With her feelings, Bell's speed rose again, just to be sure.

"Motherfucker!!!"

Even with all the invective he could muster, Allen's full speed couldn't catch up.

Swinging his arms strongly, long strides, feet kicking up to his thighs. And a back moving into the distance.

Allen experienced a despair he had never felt before as the fastest in the city.

"A-Allen?!"

"And Bell?!"

Noticing the furious sounds of the sprinting, Freya's bodyguards had rushed

outside all at once.

As they came down the long stairs that led to the house of the gods, they were taken aback by the scene speeding toward them.

“Gh! Rask! Remilia! Spells now!”

Turning his despair into rage, the raging cat roared an order.

They were moments away from the house of the gods. He knew that the current Bell would easily blow through the guards, so he gave the order to use their magic.

*“Golden wheel, silver collar!”*

Cursing himself for having to give that stupid order, Allen threw away any semblance of pride.

Even if he lost the battle, to win the war, wading through a sea of humiliation, he started casting.

Glarinese Fromel—the fastest magic, which would allow him to ascend and become a true chariot. If he activated it, he could run even Bell down.

*“Run bearing the goddess’s will!”*

He was already less than fifty meders away from the house of the gods, but it would be enough.

Lowering his speed to cast, he still was prepared to burst through in one shot — *“Blasphemous burn.”*

There was a massive explosion.

“Gah?!”

“Kyaaaaa!”

Allen and the guards who had immediately prepared their magic had all transformed into bombs.

Ignis Fatuus.

Smoke rose from Allen’s blasted body, and as he was tumbled down, he saw the source of the heat haze that seemed to completely avoid Bell’s path.

“I made it...L’il E...”

In the shadow of the broken-down temple, the young man put all of his weight against a pillar, but still standing, holding his hand out toward Allen.

Welf Crozzo.

“\_\_\_\_\_”

After he had been beaten by Allen, the red-haired blacksmith had heard the girl’s message from the oculus. Spared by Hedin, before the sky grew red with twilight, Welf had slowly and humiliatingly crawled there.

And the reason he had found his way to Bell’s path was Mind Call. That was the skill that Lilly had developed when she leveled up. It allowed telepathic communication with people who shared the same blessing.

*“The island’s...west...the temples...near the house of the gods...someone...!”*

In place of the broken oculus, Lilly’s feelings, her pleas, and the critical information had connected her, Welf, and Bell. With the location and knowing when Bell would come, Welf had made it just in time.

“Your feelings...made it through...”

The blacksmith knew how she felt long before she became a commander, and he had answered her. Against *Freya Familia*, the bond shared between those three had created this chance.

“Get lost, loser...Isn’t that what you said?”

Welf flashed a wicked grin as a sheen of sweat covered his face.

As he saw the gleam of the magic sword the boy drew from his waist, this time Allen’s rage threatened to incinerate his body from the inside as he screamed.

“You’re nobodyyyyyyyy!”

Welf replied with a single slash.

“Kazuki!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”

The ferocious flame blew away everyone who stood in the boy’s way.





He kept running through the fiery path his partner had created and past the collapsed einherjar.

Once he reached the long stairs, he raced up in one burst.

“!!!”

Freya stood frozen in front of her throne.

He was coming.

The boy was coming here.

The one whose love the goddess desired had appeared in the house of the gods to stop her love.

“—*Ms. Syr.*”

There was a thump when the boy climbed the stairs and appeared before the goddess.

Freya’s face twisted, and she heard the girl’s name on his lips.

There was no one left defending the queen. The warriors, the prums, the fairies, the chariot, the boar—they had all been silenced. With the help of his comrades, the boy had overcome every possible hardship.

After weathering more punishment than anyone, he had finally reached *her*.

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

Their eyes met, and a brief moment of silence fell.

The red light streamed through the temple’s collapsed ceiling. The twilight sky filled the gap in the wall. In the west, the lake glimmered ethereally, reflecting the setting sun.

A slightly chill wind was the only thing that made a sound as Bell quietly stepped forward. He approached Freya, whose shoulders trembled like a sweet, young maiden’s.

“Bell...”

Freya smiled.

As the goddess’s yoke spurred her, she tried to deny the situation. The authority of beauty seeped unconsciously from her divine eyes, attempting to charm him.

But he didn’t stop. Bell’s feet didn’t stop. The boy who couldn’t be charmed by the goddess’s beauty closed the distance between them, even though it disappearing would be the end of their love.

Freya’s smile cracked. Her shoulder shuddered again, and she looked down and a lock of hair fell.

“...Why...?”

A single word fell to the stone floor.

The distance shrank until there were not even ten steps between them, when Bell stopped for the first time.

“...Why?!”

Freya looked up.

“Why won’t you be mine, Bell?!”

Her long, silver hair was disheveled, like a child throwing a tantrum. She was hugging her entrancing body, which was wrapped in a white gown, pressing her vibrant, alabaster hand to her chest.

“I am Freya! Beauty, wealth, honor, power! I could give you everything! And yet! You reject my love?!”

Like an arrogant queen, the witch cursed the knight who refused to do as she desired.

Even though this wasn’t what she wanted to say, the goddess who couldn’t get anything clung to her name and authority, revealing her wretched shame and her horrid weakness.

She was baring her heart.

“Syr wasn’t enough! That’s why I chose Freya!”

It was impossible for Syr. So she had no choice but to go back to being Freya. Because she had nothing but love. Because that was the only answer she could find.

“So then what should I do?!”

Freya didn't notice. That even though the boy's expression was unchanged, his fists were clenched, and blood was slowly tickling from them.

The goddess of love couldn't notice. That it was “ ” that was making her raise her voice now.

“Why...?!”

Her voice was trembling. Her eyes wavering.

Her silver eyes trembled with a blue-gray light.

“...Even I don't understand anymore...”

And.

“I don't understand myself most of all...!”

She picked up where she had once left off.

“Even if I confess my everything...it won't free me from this pain! Even if I whisper my love to you, it doesn't get any easier!”

Bell's expression fell.

He had tried to hold out, but it cracked.

“I was always saying, in my heart, that you were the one person I didn't want to love!”

She laid bare the contradiction she had always been hiding.

Because she didn't want to admit that the love she had even sacrificed her friends to get was one that wasn't wanted.

She couldn't accept that she was still crying in the field of flowers deep in her soul.

Like a lost girl, she couldn't help but arrive at that feeling.

“I love you, Bell...”

She clenched her hands to her chest and leaned forward.

“I love you. I want to be with you forever. Please choose me!”

Her silver and blue-gray eyes grew damp.

“It hurts! I want to be held! I don’t want to be worried about tomorrow anymore!”

Her eyes didn’t know why the tears were welling.

“I didn’t want to know this feeling, but I also want to know what lies beyond this feeling!”

The boy’s everything trembled as his ego tore at his body.

“I love you...Bell.”

The boy looked down.

Holding back the shout and the sympathy welling out like he had a gaping chest wound, instead the blood continued to trickle from his fist.

He quelled his trembling heart.

He pulled back the sound that had faded from his ears.

He said farewell to his eyes that could only see her.

The ashen gray that had blotted out the sky then was now so vivid and beautiful. And so ephemeral, as if their fates had long since been decided.

In a world just for them, Bell took a step forward.

“I...won’t be yours.”

He met her pain with his own.

“I can’t be your Odr!”

A tear trickled from her eye.

“I...!”

Pulling his legs from the ground, pushing forward, and bleeding every step along the way, Bell stood right in front of her. He answered the “ ” she had wanted to experience for so long with all of his hypocritical ego.

“...can’t do anything except end your love!”

To fall in love was what she wished for. That was the blank she wanted to fill in.

And to bring it all to a close, hurting her was the one and only way to save her.

“—Ah.”

The boy gripped his divine blade.

His arm swung upward bravely despite how heart-rending this moment was.

He could hear the sounds of petals rustling.

The blade didn’t touch her skin as it scattered the flower on her breast.

She looked up.

As the tears ran free, she saw it.

The lilac scattered in the red sky.

Her first love ended.

# ◀ EPILOGUE DOUBLE CAST



## EPILOGUE

### DOUBLE CAST

*—Have you finally realized your wish?*

The voice echoing in the distance that had perplexed me.

I stopped trying to convince myself it was Hörn and accepted the truth: it was the voice of Syr, who should have already been dead.

What I wanted wasn't love, it was to fall in love.

I had always longed for it. The thing I could never have, precisely because I was a goddess of love.

My beauty charmed everyone.

Those whose hearts had been stolen by me would offer me anything I desired, and if I rejected them, they would endure the tears and accept it. That was love. A twisted, almost unconditional love.

They were not in love with me, and the opposite was impossible, too. How could I fall in love with someone who had so totally submitted themselves to me?

No matter how much Hörn or Heith, or Ottar or any of those who strived to be pure, to be strong, to be beautiful might devote themselves to me, even if I found them adorable or darling, it was still love.

Everyone says that love is a higher emotion than mere puppy love, that it is a richer experience. It's true. There is nothing so unstable as that burning first love that drove me mad. But there also is no other feeling that makes the world feel so bright and vibrant.

Love is like the abundant, fertile land, while to fall in love is the field of flowers I always reached.

Instead of an eternal relationship with the land raising people and granting

them blessing while being plowed and enriched by their hand, the flowers brighten the world more than anything in the one moment they bloom.

I wanted to be a flower that lived for a moment instead of eternity.

...No, I should just say it.

I was tired of loving and being loved.

And so, I dreamed of falling in love.

Like a girl who knew nothing of the world, I yearned for an insecure emotion, one far more immature than all-embracing love. And I did fall in love. And it really did change my world. It ceased being a dream. It transformed into a wish.

Bell was the one and only person I could fall in love with. He alone was the only being in the mortal realm or the heavens above who could fulfill my wish.

I was drawn to him, and when I knew that my charm didn't work on him, I was truly happy. If it was him, I could experience falling in love and through it maybe discover a depth of love I had never known.

But that he couldn't be charmed meant that, as hard as it was to believe, he had someone for whom he yearned, another for whom he felt so strongly that he wouldn't bend even to my authority.

What tragic irony. I could only fall in love with someone who would never return my feelings. That tragic ending was always lurking in wait. And because I wanted to fall in love, I was destined to fail.

There was an unseemly goddess.

Even though it was me, now, after he hurt and saved me, I can admit it. I was an impossible-to-deal-with, difficult woman.

My wish...was a first love that could never be realized.

*—Is that all?*

...?

*Is there something else?*

Furrowing my brow at Syr's continued questioning, I heard what sounded almost like an exasperated sigh.



—*You really are difficult. Playing dumb, unable to give up your pride. After all this, it's terminal.*

The sigh became another voice.

That was strange, though. I'm Freya. This was the double role I had created, playing both Syr and Freya.

But then I noticed.

Who was the *one* playing both of those roles?

—Bell said it, didn't he. "Let me know the *true you*."

That was what he said when I asked for the war game.

The real me?

Who is the real me...?

—*Isn't your figure answer enough?*

A field of flowers appeared.

The sky was twilight; a big, red circle to swallow up the land.

The one sitting in the sea of flowers, crying not tears of gold, but translucent droplets...was me.

The one whose blue-gray hair swayed in the gentle breeze, was me.

Reaching that field of flowers, I opened my blue-gray eyes.

—Just be sure not to regret it.

The goddess passed.

The yoke disappeared.

I haven't seen the continuation of that dream since that day.



At the end of the first great familia war, victory went to the coalition.

When *Freya Familia's* defeat was announced, the world flew into chaos.

The balance crumbling, the power map being rewritten, and a new hero stirring caused a grand commotion in the mortal realm. Who was the newest hero candidate of this generation. Was it the gale wind's whistle or the roar of a great bell. The enormous feat of beating *Freya Familia* drew guesses and speculation from many people, and even mortals could feel that big changes were afoot.

And the epicenter for that earthquake of course lost its mind, too.

The adventurers who returned to Orario triumphantly from the Orza city ruins were greeted by cheers and deafening roars. The Labyrinth City, gripped by a fever that toppled Hestia over when the procession entered the gates, turning into a parade and a giant festival.

The people of the city hailed them as champions. The adventurers were fired up. Deities came out to greet them with thunderous applause.

Even after the battle ended, the reverberations of the furious fighting didn't die down, and the city celebrated and partied, forgetting all boundary between day and night.

And finally, exhausted by days of festivities, the city shut its eyes on the morning of the third day after the war game.

"Why did I lose?"

Freya ran her slender finger along the rim of an empty glass.

Early morning, before the sun had risen. The goddess was sitting at the counter in a deserted tavern, cocking her head like a confused child.

Mia heaved a sigh, having been dragged along rather unwillingly.

"Because you pissed off everyone in the city, obviously."

"I still thought I would win. Even if Loki's children joined, I thought it was doable as long as I handled it right. I should have been able to get my hands on Bell."

It wasn't so much that she couldn't accept the results of the war game as that she seemed genuinely to find it curious. Mia regarded her with no small amount of exasperation.

“Isn’t it just that there were more people who wanted to protect the kid?”

“Is that all?”

“...Also, didn’t the weirdos who are hung up on you really let their imaginations run wild?”

Freya closed her mouth for a moment, and then stopped playing with the glass, as if accepting it.

Honestly, she still thought she would have won even with Hedin and Hörn switching sides, but she had embarked on this war out of love, and so it would make sense that she lost because of love, too.

All sorts of loves, all sorts of wills, all sorts of emotions blended together, allowing them to arrive at their one in a million chance. That was how Freya decided to interpret it.

“Mia, this glass is on the house, right?”

“Of course not, you stupid goddess. You’re paying for it, plus a fee for waking me up at this ungodly hour.”

“But I don’t have anything anymore.”

Hestia hadn’t ordered it as the leader of the familia coalition, but Freya and her familia had been far too arrogant, especially with the walled garden incident. Many members of the coalition, especially the goddesses, had no plan to be forgiving. They demanded Freya be stripped of her followers that enabled her to be so arrogant and selfish.

The fans who made up her self-proclaimed royal guard and the cultist mortals who worshipped her immediately objected, but they were promptly shouted down and drowned out. Among those who hadn’t chosen a side, the general belief was that it was natural for the victors to do whatever they wished, and also many of the residents of the city feared the goddess of beauty’s power, so none of them raised a hand to stop it.

Royman, whose face had undergone an unsettling parade of emotions when Freya’s loss was confirmed, made attempts to protect her at first, but he ultimately failed to overcome the victors’ demands or public opinion. Pressing

the matter would have genuinely put him at risk of being stabbed in the back within the halls of the Guild, so he had no choice but to follow Orario's compulsory rules and announced Guild Headquarters' consensus: banishing Freya outside the city, but preventing the outflow of the city's strength—of the einherjar.

“Even though Ottar and them won't obey any master save Goddess Freya!!! Even though it's just going to end up like God Apollo all over again!!!”

That was the haggard, exhausted Guild pig's conclusion.

In accordance with the Guild's decision, *Freya Familia's* entire massive fortune was seized.

Folkvangr alone was placed under Guild management, but everything else was split evenly among the winners, the familias that had joined the coalition. *Ogma Familia* and those that had been almost funereal before the battle were apparently now jumping for joy. It was rather vexing for Freya.

She had expected to immediately be sent back to the heavens if she lost, and to her this felt like a half-hearted measure.

*Let her taste every humiliation and disgrace.*

That was probably what the Goddess Alliance was thinking.

The whole mortal realm already knew that she was a naked queen.

With her familia dissolved, the shame and ridicule would undoubtedly follow her for centuries.

In the Guild's proclamation, they declared that despite the outrages she had perpetrated, they had decided not to send her back in consideration for all the service she had provided Orario up to now. Apparently. Freya assumed that was some credulous fools' unnecessary interference.

“I was the one who said I was betting everything...so I can't help it that I'm broke now.”

All she had left were the clothes on her back.

She didn't have anyone accompanying her. She had told all of her followers not to follow her and to stay here and become heroes. Heith and the children

who had never once disobeyed her desperately tried to argue, but when she said she would use her charm to force them to stay in Orario if they didn't do what she said, many of them broke down and wept. Hörn, who had finally woken up alone among them, just looked down and endured it, as if believing she didn't have the right to mourn.

In the end, Royman had managed to avoid giving himself another ulcer.

After all, no one had died in the war game.

Freya had strictly instructed her followers not to kill anyone.

She had started this battle out of her own unsightly ego, so if someone else's child died over it, it would weigh on her conscience. And more than anything, she suspected Bell would never be hers if anyone died. She had expected the coalition to have no compunctions about killing, but she figured Ottar and the other first-tiers wouldn't die, and she trusted Heith and the andhrímnir to take care of the rest.

"...Then just make an honest living like you've done till now."

"No can do. I was told to get out of town by today, since no one wants a high-handed, troublesome woman around."

Mia stared at Freya as she stood up.

It almost looked like she was trying not to let her feeling show.

"...I heard some runt goddess running her mouth about how a bimbo goddess was no good, but she could overlook a neighborhood girl."

Freya froze right in front of the exit.

"...No. That would be pathetic." But, still, Freya smiled, her decision unchanged. "So...farewell Mia. It was fun."

As Freya pulled the hood of her robe over her head, she heard a heavy sigh.

Pretending not to notice, she stepped out onto East Main Street.

It was a lighter darkness, then pure night.

"How long have I been here..."

It was a familiar scene.

It had been a long time, and yet it felt like it had ended in no time at all.

The chill morning air.

How long had it been since she started being excited for the day to begin?

But the long fall, the season of fertility was over. So the goddess of fertility should leave before winter came.

Looking out at the empty city streets, Freya turned toward the city gate.

Or at least, she started to.

"Ms. Syr."

She stopped, seeing the boy standing there, as if waiting by himself.

On the street where they had first met, in the place she had given him that first basket.

"...What do you want?"

A voice that was a little stiff, and a little cool, escaped her lips.

Because he was the one person she wanted most not to meet right now.

"Are you leaving?"

"Of course. That was what was decided."

"But we..."

"What, want to run me around more? You rampaged to your heart's content and, for your own self-satisfaction, turned me down twice already, didn't you?"

"Gh...?!"

She shot back snarkily, as a final bit of payback.

But that wasn't what she really felt. It was her. She was the one who had rampaged to their heart's content, who had involved the entire mortal realm in her own smug efforts.

Compared to Freya, who had twisted the entire world to achieve her wish, Bell's hypocritical ego was almost cute.

"...It's okay."

“Eh?”

“Thanks to you ending it, I was saved.”

“!”

Looking into his wide red eyes, Freya smiled.

The cruel and uninhibited goddess and the witch who knew the poison and miracle of love wasn't there.

There was just a pure soul, like a girl who had learned the pain and heartache of a first love.

“Love won't drive me mad anymore, and I won't search for that love again. Because you, despite getting far, far more battered in the process, cast away all my lingering attachment.”

That was without a doubt what she really felt.

In exchange for the wound that Bell had given her, Freya wouldn't become a monster who twisted the world, wouldn't hurt others, wouldn't hurt herself. Because he had suffered, too, sharing in that pain.

It wasn't quite the end of a nightmare. And it was different from waking up, too. It was lonely and, in a way, refreshing.

The sense of loss that still made her want to cry was the greatest evidence that she had wanted him, and also proof that he had surpassed the love that she had cursed.

“I lost to you.”

It was vexing.

It was embarrassing, and she didn't want to admit it. But she had been saved. The goddess smiled, with no hidden meaning.

“I love you, Bell. I really do.”

“...”

“I care about you, exhaustingly, boringly so.”

Even though the day that love would be returned would never come for the

goddess who had searched for her destined companion for hundreds of thousands, hundreds of millions of years.

Carrying these feelings even knowing they would never come to fruition was Freya's greatest punishment.

"...Well, then..."

She quickly left, before anymore regrets could take root.

He still didn't say anything, even as she walked by him.

She thought it was strange. She even had a little bit of a childish thought that he should at least stop her for a moment, but the part of her that found it strange was stronger.

Considering it was him, she was sure he would have been unreasonable about it.

"Syr."

The answer to that question soon came from another angle.

"!"

Lyu.

And Ahnya, Chloe, and Runoa.

And the rest of the girls at The Benevolent Mistress.

The girls had appeared at some point, all wearing their uniforms, forming a wall across the street.

Freya stopped moving. After a few moments, she pulled her hood up and approached, trying to pass between them.

"Wait."

Of course that fastidious girl would never allow that. The goddess stopped at the rough tone that the elf had never once used with Syr before.

"Do you have anything to say to us?"

Standing there, Freya—no, *she* closed her eyes.

Lyu had called the girl's name, so the one to answer wasn't the goddess.



It was the player's final duty as her game drew to an end.

Ignoring her racing heart, she opened her blue-gray eyes and looked at the ground.

The goddess disappeared, and the one standing there became the girl.

"...I'm sorry."

*SLAP.*

There was a loud crack. Her hood knocked off, Syr opened her eyes and touched her stinging cheek.

"Don't play games with me!"

Lyu slapped Syr's cheek so fast that Chloe and Runoa winced.

"If you would apologize, then atone!"

"Eh...?"

"The one who saved me when I intended to die was you! Take responsibility for the fact that I'm here now!"

Syr recoiled at that.

Her heart wavered. Her selfish wish not to experience any more disgraceful thoughts, her desperate plea not to have to bear any more lingering regrets blended in her blue-gray eyes.

Lyu surely saw through what Syr was thinking. Her eyes flared angrily, and she got closer, as if to grab the lapels of her cloak.

"You don't want to be humiliated any further? Don't be stupid! Bear this shame for the rest of your life! Repay it for the rest of your life!"

"Gh..."

"Stay at our sides forever!"

This time, her blue-gray eyes opened wide at Lyu's tearful rebuke.

"Who cares about a goddess's pride, meow."

"Yeah. 'Sides, it's not like it's a goddess standing in front of us. Just a coworker, right?"

Chloe sniggered, and Runoa cackled.

““Did you really think you can hide the truth when your cooking’s that awful?””

Syr’s face flushed with shame at their follow-up.

Her mouth opened and closed several times, but pathetically, she couldn’t say anything.

The other girls all giggled. But finally, without any chance to recover. The abandoned cat stepped forward.

“...Lady Freya.....Syr...”

“Ahnya...”

She was stunned herself at how much she struggled to find the words to say.

What could she say after deceiving her, pushing her way, and hurting her inside the gilded cage.

As Syr stood unmoving, Ahnya’s eyes and tail twitched several times, as if she were cowering. She opened and closed her mouth, and then stared at the ground, before— “...Don’t go meooooooooow!!!”

She clung onto Syr while crying.

She froze as the cat leaped onto her.

“I don’t understand anything, but...! But I don’t want you to leave, meow!!!”

Ahnya couldn’t persuade her. She couldn’t say something tactful. It was even doubtful whether she really understood the connection between Freya and Syr.

So she just poured out everything she felt, deep in her heart.

Stunned by the reaction, slowly, the traces of a tear started to appear in her eye.

“Ms. Syr.”

Bell, who had watched all of it, was standing behind her.

While Chloe gently pulled Ahnya off, Syr immediately spun around, looking down to not let him notice her agitation.

She couldn't do anything when—*BAM!*

Ruona's palm forcefully pushed against her back.

Leaning forward, about to fall, she pushed Syr back in front of Bell.

“.....”

“Umm...aaaah.....”

Syr struggled to say anything, and for some reason Bell was behaving awkwardly.

Just as she started to think it was strange, the boy seemed to make up his mind and spread his arms wide.

*Eh, what?*

Syr's eyes widened at what looked like he might wrap her in a big hug at any moment, when Bell's cheeks reddened, and he clutched his head, crouching and groaning.

Finally, as if giving in, he stood up.

The next instant, his cheeks still red, he gently took Syr's right hand.

Her heart jumped at the sudden move.

And—

“Y...you've been a bad girl! I'm going to watch over you forever, so you never do anything bad again! So I hope you're ready for that!!!”

The wind blew.

There was silence.

Runoa and the others behind her watched with cold eyes.

Lyu in particular had a cold gleam in her eyes as she glared at Bell with a look that could kill.

“Ah...”

While the boy blanched and stared to draw back, Syr realized it.

*“If I ever started behaving strangely, what would you do?”*

During their Goddess Festival date.

When Syr had secretly been afraid of a future where she went mad from love, that was the half-joking response she had told him.

*“You wouldn’t squeeze me tightly in your embrace and whisper ‘You’ve been a bad girl. I’m going to watch over you forever, so you never do anything bad again. So I hope you’re ready for that’ and then take me home with you?”*

*“Of course not?!”*

They had laughed together like that.

Because he couldn’t hug her, he had held her hand.

“...Ms. Syr, I said it then, too. I’ll stop you, so you don’t hurt anyone.” Shyly, awkwardly, he continued, “Not even yourself. So...”

He took something out of his pocket, and while still holding her hand, he placed the object in her palm.

“\_\_\_\_\_”

It was a silver accessory with blue decorations.

The other half of the pair. The one that the goddess hadn’t broken.

The one with the knight, with Erlandr as a motif.

“I will be watching out for you, Ms. Syr.”

“Eh...?”

“So that you don’t do anything bad...So that you can always smile with Ms. Lyu and everyone else.”

Syr’s hand trembled.

“I can’t be your Odr.”

Her consciousness drifted, and she gripped the ornament.

“And I’m not Erlandr.”

Her lips quivered as the boy smiled embarrassedly.

“But I think I can be a knight who will protect you, even as we hurt each

other.”

Tears fell from Syr’s eyes.

“Ms. Syr. Please, keep your promise.”

And finally, as Syr cried, Bell gently, cruelly nudged her.

“I asked you...if we won, please show me the real you...”

Her throat quivered. It felt like she might sob.

*I can’t do that. I’m Freya.*

That was how she tried to tough it out in her heart, but the tears welling from her blue-gray eyes showed how she was really feeling.

She remembered the dream where she reached the field of flowers.

She realized who the real her was, and what her real wish was.

*She* had created both Freya and Syr.

The one who had always been in that field, the one who had always been crying. She was just a lone girl.

“...I want to stop being the goddess.”

So she laid her true self bare.

She shouted every bit of herself to the home that had freed her from the yoke of the goddess.

“I want to be Syr with all of you!”

Bell broke into a broad smile.

Lyu smiled as she cried.

Ahnya sobbed while clinging onto her, and Chloe and Runoa both smiled and put a hand on her shoulders.

The other girls from the tavern cheered. And the dwarf watching them from afar while leaning against the tavern’s column slowly beamed.

With their cheerful voices echoing in the early morning, the city gradually began to wake up.

The city wall in the east glimmered, and a sliver of the morning sun peeked over it. Its light burned the girl's tears, chided her, and also granting her a bit of a blessing.

"Sorry, Ahnya...!"

This was a punishment.

"Sorry, Chloe...Sorry, Runoa...!"

A punishment for a selfish and egotistical witch who was no saint.

"Sorry, Lyu...!"

She would burn with shame and writhe every time she faced them, atoning for the rest of her life.

"I'm sorry, Mama Mia...!"

She couldn't do anything bad anymore.

"Everyone...thank you."

Because there was a knight by her side who would always watch over her.

"...Are you satisfied now, worm?"

On the roof of a certain tavern.

As her followers watched the scene below, Allen looked sullen.

"I don't know."

"Ahhh?"

"I don't know if there's something better than this." Hedin's answer was blunt, but honest.

Not only Allen, but the Gullivers, Hegni, and pretty much everyone other than Ottar glared at Hedin. He, of course, just quietly smiled.

"But...it isn't bad."

That foolish boy hadn't become her companion.

And he hadn't become her hero, either.

The Odr he had chosen was a knight at her side.

The spirit was the girl.

The saint, the witch.

Syr and Freya's double cast. That was the true her.

She wouldn't be driven mad by love, and the rush of falling in love wouldn't kill her. Because to the boy who had rejected her love, she was just a girl. She had been saved by falling in love and could no longer be the goddess. But as long as he continued watching over her, she would be free.

Her true wish was there.

"Passing marks...Stupid pupil."

Dawn had broken.

The sun-kissed girls hugged each other.

It wasn't a field of flowers.

There was only the green of new leaves around them.

"You really are a horrible man..."

There was single murmur. That one piece of abuse came from Hörn, who was watching alongside the warriors. She flashed a tearful, ephemeral smile.

"Thank you for saving Syr...Bell."

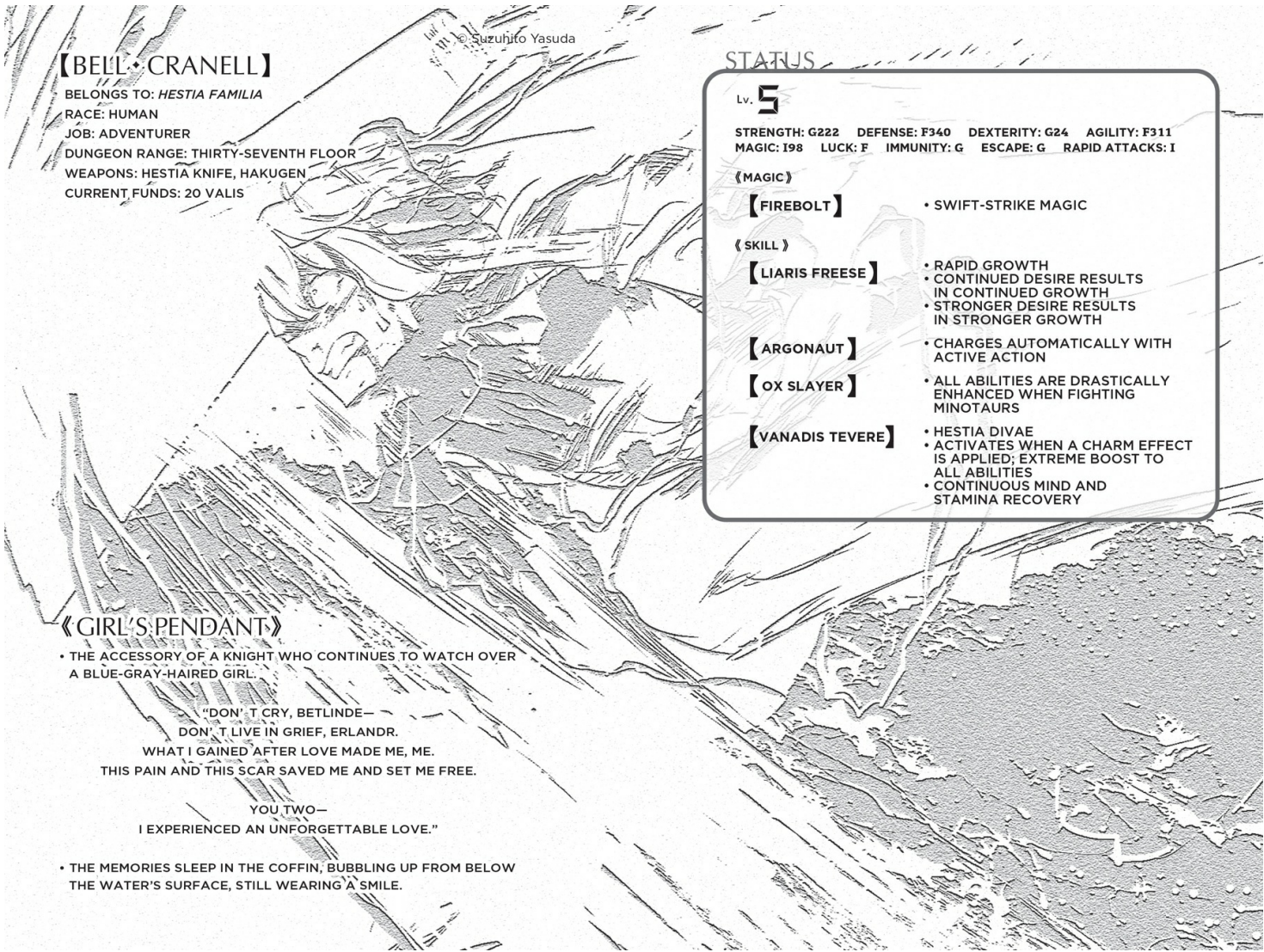
She offered what would be her first and only bit of gratitude to the rising sun.

The boy watching a short distance from the girls broke into a smile.

Fall ended.

The goddess of fertility left.

The girl freed from the shattered yoke smiled like a flower as she cried.



【BELL • CRANELL】

BELONGS TO: HESTIA FAMILIA  
RACE: HUMAN  
JOB: ADVENTURER  
DUNGEON RANGE: THIRTY-SEVENTH FLOOR  
WEAPONS: HESTIA KNIFE, HAKUGEN  
CURRENT FUNDS: 20 VALIS

STATUS

Lv. **5**  
STRENGTH: G222 DEFENSE: F340 DEXTERITY: G24 AGILITY: F311  
MAGIC: I98 LUCK: F IMMUNITY: G ESCAPE: G RAPID ATTACKS: I

《MAGIC》

【FIREBOLT】

• SWIFT-STRIKE MAGIC

《SKILL》

【LIARIS FREESE】

• RAPID GROWTH  
• CONTINUED DESIRE RESULTS  
IN CONTINUED GROWTH  
• STRONGER DESIRE RESULTS  
IN STRONGER GROWTH

【ARGONAUT】

• CHARGES AUTOMATICALLY WITH  
ACTIVE ACTION

【OX SLAYER】

• ALL ABILITIES ARE DRASTICALLY  
ENHANCED WHEN FIGHTING  
MINOTAURS

【VANADIS TEVERE】

• HESTIA DIVAE  
• ACTIVATES WHEN A CHARM EFFECT  
IS APPLIED; EXTREME BOOST TO  
ALL ABILITIES  
• CONTINUOUS MIND AND  
STAMINA RECOVERY

《GIRL'S PENDANT》

• THE ACCESSORY OF A KNIGHT WHO CONTINUES TO WATCH OVER  
A BLUE-GRAY-HAIRED GIRL.

"DON' T CRY, BETLINDE—  
DON' T LIVE IN GRIEF, ERLANDR.  
WHAT I GAINED AFTER LOVE MADE ME, ME.  
THIS PAIN AND THIS SCAR SAVED ME AND SET ME FREE.

YOU TWO—  
I EXPERIENCED AN UNFORGETTABLE LOVE."

• THE MEMORIES SLEEP IN THE COFFIN, BUBBLING UP FROM BELOW  
THE WATER'S SURFACE, STILL WEARING A SMILE.



## Afterword

This is the eighteenth volume, and without that escape ability, the chariot would have taken the last pieces on the board.

Allow me to say my thanks first.

To Editor-in-Chief Kitamura, who no longer works at GA Bunko, thank you for everything. I am truly grateful. I will never forget what we did, creating the DanMachi series up to this eighteenth volume. To my new editor Usami, I look forward to working with you going forward. Also, I'm sorry for being so bad at letting go of the manuscript again. Thank you to the illustrator Suzuhito Yasuda, who gave this work such beautiful illustrations again. The rush I got from opening up the color pages almost knocked me off my feet. Thank you. A humble thank-you as well to everyone involved with the creation and publication of this book.

And an apology to the readers. I am truly sorry for taking over a year and a half since the release of Volume 17. The blame lies entirely with me. It is Fujino Omori's fault that the page count more than doubled from the original estimate and that this book has gotten so thick and heavy. I really kept you all waiting.

Writing this afterword now, I can't really remember what I was thinking while writing this book. Maybe I just don't want to remember. Trying to think harder, wondering why I had such painful thoughts, ah, that's right. I remembered that I always wanted to arrive at the goddess's field of flowers. And so, I would like to remark a little on the Goddess Freya.

When I first considered writing this series, the first thing I did was research every myth I could, trying to learn more about the deities.

However, as I researched, things grew more and more chaotic.

The stories in this book are different from the ones in that book!

It was all over the place! Full of inconsistencies!

The scholars suggest that the differences in the legends passed down through various sources is due to different historical backgrounds of various peoples or religious circumstances. I didn't understand that at the time, so I kept reading and searching the net until I could make sense of it, but even as I didn't understand, there were certain deities who left a deep impression on me. And among them, the Goddess Freya was particularly special.

The peerless beauty targeted by friend and foe alike, licentious and uninhibited, and also a scary queen who gathered the souls of brave warriors who fell in battle. In my eyes, she seemed proud and possessed of the sort of mental fortitude to do whatever she pleased, and if anyone got mad at her, she'd just say, "So what? I'm Freya."

However, legends also said this goddess was known to cry.

When her husband Odr left her side, she traveled far and wide searching for him, and when she couldn't find him, she wept.

At the time, I immediately latched onto that. That had to be a lie, I thought. There was no way she was that sort of character. And so I grew more and more interested in this goddess.

A goddess of love who didn't understand love? Or had she made light of love precisely because she was the goddess of love, because she forgot how precious love was? Or was it that what she felt toward Odr wasn't just love, but a maiden-like infatuation?

As I thought about all that, I placed the Goddess Freya, together with the girl Syr, in a key place within this story.

There was a story from the legends involving her that I particularly liked.

On the long road back after she reunited with Odr, a great number of flowers bloomed from the earth.

I think that must surely have been a truly beautiful field of flowers.

Wanting to find that field of flowers myself, I wrote this story.

And I think I also sketched a little bit of what lay on the other side of that field of flowers.

The myths and legends are jumbled and full of inconsistencies, and there is no correct interpretation. The deities are truly outrageous and unkind. But that is precisely what makes them so interesting. There are times when they might cry like children, too—because they're deities. That's what I believe, at least.

With this volume, the fourth arc that began at Volume 12, the long arc that I have been calling the Fertility arc to myself, is finally at an end.

Next time we meet will be the beginning of a new chapter, the School District arc.

It will most likely be the shortest chapter in the entire series. And whatever follows will surely be a sprint.

That being said, I am sure that the volume will probably be hefty in its own right. I hope you will still pick it up when it comes out.

Thank you very much for reading this far.

Good-bye until next time.

Fujino Omori

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